

Aleutian Rogue

WITH

The Amanat

SERIALIZED

Chapter Sixteen

1.

Drumming her fingertips on the countertop of the helicopters service's customer desk, Tanya impatiently watches the clock's second hand slowly circle its face. 1:30. She has already waited a half-hour—the manager still isn't back from lunch—and she mutters profanities. She is here to check on her second machine, not to become a permanent feature of the office furnishings.

Her drive from Seward was uneventful. Except for the rural East Road, the highway ends at Homer. Beyond the spit is Cook Inlet, the Gulf of Alaska, and a vast land not connected to the United States by road. Then Siberia.

The sales manager enters the posh waiting room, but before she realizes who he is, the receptionist hands him a memo which he reads carefully. He then turns to address Tanya: "You're here about the Bell Ranger shipped from Renton. It's on its way. Shipped this morning. Flying Tigers."

"I'll have it tonight, then?"

"Oh no. Maybe first of next week."

"Three hours from Seattle to Anchorage. Why next week?"

"Lots of reasons. Time off-loading and reassembling. Flying here, then to Kodiak, and we're short a pilot." He turns away from her, and starts for his door. But he pauses a step outside his office, looks over his shoulder, and says: "Your machine's been shipped. That's all I can tell you."

It's been shipped, the curse of the North. She hates that phrase. She heard it in Siberia too many times.

"Perhaps Kenai Air will lease a machine."

Turning to again fully face her, the manager raises his voice ever so slightly. "Look here, we don't make a cent until you take possession of the unit so we're as anxious as you for that damn machine to get here. But that oil, or whatever your exploration is for, has been in the ground for centuries. It'll still be there tomorrow or the next day or the day after that. And we just received the paperwork on your pilots at noon. You haven't been using that other machine. Don't tell me how much of a hurry you're in."

"Tomorrow never comes." She starts for the door.

"All right, all right. No sense in going off half-cocked. Everybody's just a little touchy here. We lost a pilot, one of the family."

"How did he die?"

"Police aren't saying. Wasn't flying...they're calling it murder, though."

"Any suspects?"

"They're holding his girl friend."

"Oh, was she involved?"

"Evidently the police think so. Hey, you might be who they are looking for. Did you meet Fred in Kodiak?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Police want to know if Jane rode down on the machine with him."

"I didn't see her, but I assumed he had someone with him from what he said....Why? Would a passenger violate regulations?"

"It would, but that isn't why the police want to talk to you. But you might not be as much help as they'd hoped."

"I doubt that I can help."

"Probably not."

The prospect of risk again excites her, but there is little to link her to the pilot. "So I have no choice but to wait for that second machine?"

"We'll get it to you as soon as we can."

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If her conversion of miles to kilometres is correct, the East Road is thirty kilometres long. Her directions to Reibeck's cabin aren't explicit, but they need not be. She will find it. She is certain McPhearson and Reibeck think themselves safe, but the remoteness of his cabin gives her the advantage: they can be questioned and disposed of without worrying about witnesses. Then, she will be free to take care of bivouacking the two special squads. She intends to put them where they can't be found. She might have been compromised, but she doesn't have to be cooperative.

Where the pavement ends and the ice begins, an oncoming pickup passes her. She glances at the driver. He doesn't match Reibeck's description.

The road climbs and narrows, with snow berms piled high to either side. She passes mailboxes with Russian surnames, and feels pride in the names. If, she reminds herself, it wasn't for the Amur treaty and the Tsar's fear of British encirclement, Russian-America, Bolshaya Zemlya, would be a Soviet state today. That has a pleasant ring about it: the Democratic Socialist Republic of America. A proletariat state. And she almost hits a Subaru stationwagon. In the middle of a blind corner. Both cars dive for their own side. Hers slides. She steers out of it. By millimetres, they missed crunching fenders.

Her heart still races when she reaches the end of the road. A mailbox with Reibeck's name. Good. She parks across the front of the lane nearest the mailbox. After she questions McPhearson, she will kill her. But she doesn't intend to take chances. Not after Anchorage. And she checks the chamber of her PPK, a habit she has no intention of breaking. She saw a KGB officer have his unloaded pistol kicked into a storm drain by an old woman. The officer had to wrestle the woman to the ground, and had been lucky. Without his gun and with no one coming to his aid, he might have been killed raping the woman if her husband would have come by while the officer had his pants down. No, she has no love for their ugly sister. And if she is to be burned, there really is nothing she can do.

Slipping and sliding down the icy lane, the soles of her fashion boots flat as skis, she falls twice before she has gone half a kilometre. The lane levels out. And she comes to a two-story house, definitely not a cabin, not even in America.

The house is on the right side of the lane. Open fields are to the left. She sees nothing that looks like a cabin. She will have to ask directions, something she had hoped to avoid.

An older man with a white beard and striped pants opens the door and asks, "What can I do for you?"

"Where's Jerry Reibeck's cabin?"

"Straight across the draw," says the old man. "You another reporter here for an interview, him being hero and all?"

Surprised, she asks, "Interviewed?"

"That fellow taking pictures told me all about it."

Beginning to understand, she plays along. "What did he tell you?"

"All about it, Jerr rescuing all those people. And him not even saying anything to me about it when he got in yesterday."

"So my colleagues have already been here." Who is she behind? Obviously someone who likes stories.

"The picture man just left in a little foreign car. You know the kind, tin can with wheels. I saw him parked. Asked what he was doing. Told me everything. And another reporter landed out there in the field not over an hour ago. Flew in by plane. Took a helleva chance. I expected the plane to groundloop, but the pilot was damn good."

Reibeck is no hero, of that she is sure. But reporters? No, they weren't reporters...she can't believe her luck, or rather, lack of it. She shouldn't have stopped to check on the helicopter. But now, there isn't much she can do other than smile. "I had hoped to be first." Then with a shrug, she says, "Thank you for your help."

"That's his truck." The old man points to a pickup parked across the lane. "Just take the trail. Follow it. It goes right to his cabin. He should be home. Was earlier."

"Is the young woman still with Reibeck?"

"Nice girl. Bible name. Sarah, I think...met her yesterday when I was bringing in a sled load of wood."

She wonders if he will remember her later. She stands in the unlit yard; he, in the lighted doorway. If she could, she would erase this meeting from his mind. She might have to kill him later. She feels it. The paranoia that comes after every killing. It will rob her of initiative if she isn't careful.

Going so long without calling Viktor bothers her. Soviet agents don't free-lance as the CIA does sometimes. Rather, all decisions are made at the highest levels. And that is what bothers her about two special squads being sent to do the job of a three or four man mobile squad. Too many people are involved. Neither Alden nor the ivory warrants this latest turn of events. What is it that she can't know? And why can't she focus when in the icon's glare?

Darkness has settled over the field, bringing with night a glacial breeze that blows towards the bay. Her breath freezes on her cheeks. Her lips are instantly chapped. And she wonders who was here ahead of her. Eric of Justice? Who else?

Cold penetrates the thin leather of her boots. In Siberia, she would be wearing felt boots and foot rags, and have warm feet. She remembers the winters, black, frozen, everything covered with snow. She no longer looks her thirty years. Those winters have taken their toll. Her career has taken her almost all the way around the world; yet, she still hikes snow-packed trails in search of enemies of the State. Is there no end to the enemies? She ceased being naive years ago. Counter-revolutionaries and anarchists are necessary for the State to justify its existence. To some extent, the State even encourages banditry; for banditry promotes the same kind of job security in the Motherland that planned-obsolescence does in the degenerate Capitalistic West.

The field is five hundred metres wide. When she steps across a lone strand of sagging barbwire, she smells wood smoke. Despite tired legs, knotted calf muscles and numb feet, she pushes on. Dark sky. Everything is black, except the snow, granulated like white sugar.

Entering the timber where even the snow is dark, she gropes from tree to tree. Her night vision isn't what it was. She has been in cities too long. And her numb feet feel like blocks of wood at the ends of stilts.

When she is fifty metres from what she believes are two small cabins, both dark, a huge light and dark husky with one light colored eye charges. The glare of that one eye, fearsome, terrible, like a lance, like that of the icon—she shoots the dog through its light-colored eye.

The dog drops. Kicks violently.

The barking and her shot echos through the draw long after the dog lies still. Dark blood runs from its mouth and out its ears, turning the snow darker and melting an apple-size crater beneath the husky's head. She steps over it, and on wooden feet, sprints the remaining distance to the first cabin.

Empty.

She jerks open the door to the second cabin, dives through and rolls to her feet in a shooting crouch. The fire in the stove burns nicely, but the cabin is deserted. She flips on a light. A ceiling light glows dimly until the demand switch starts the generator.

Making a quick search, inside and out, she finds the snowmachine tracks. Damn! Where is the helicopter when she needs it? In Kodiak where it is needed to locate a bivouac site for a bunch of troops she doesn't need. And she curses the trash-eating zhopa who ordered Red Army troops to do wet work.

There isn't anything more she can do here. Experience tells her that McPhearson won't be returning.

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She has one name, Eric, of the American who was likely ahead of her by a hour or less. How many Erics can there be in Anchorage who are employed by Justice? She thinks only one.

By midnight, she has Pettersen's name, address, and taps on his telephones.

By noon, she has the time for when Sarah McPhearson will turn herself in. The specifics of the location are vague: all she knows is that the drug dealer will meet Pettersen in the Anchorage airport. She, too, will be there.

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Since she picked up her basket of red carnations and tracts about the name of Jesus Christ being the only name through which salvation can come, she hasn't been able to think about what she must do—

Within her thoughts, the glare surrounding the icon that sits in the corner where the ancient household god sat: that glare has been so bright since she picked up her basket that she can only grope arriving passengers as she waits for the drug dealer. She has to get real close to the passengers before she can see them well enough to pin a carnation on their lapel, the pin intended for Sarah secure within her basket. On the end of that pin is a tiny ball, porous and filled with poison. A prick near an artery close to the heart, then three minutes, maybe four, just enough time for her to escape if she hurries, and death—

She pricks the drug dealer, apologizes, and hurries towards her waiting car, not seeing any of the confusion behind her.

* * * {tc "Chapter Three"}