

Dead Minus One
Chapter 5
By Thomas Martin
solarpons@mac.com

Dead Minus One, Chapter 5 is copyright 2007, Thomas Martin Based on 7th Son, created by J.C. Hutchins. Dead Minus One, Chapter 5 is released under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 license. For more information about 7th Son, visit www.jchutchins.net

The room in the dacha would have been a quiet study had this been an ordinary time. Yevtuschenko had used it as such on other occasions. Now he stood in the middle of the room with two other people, two of the few he trusted.

Andrey Brazhnikov was explaining what the Federal Security Service (FSS) knew about what was going on, which was as little as it seemed everyone did. What he had gained came from Counterterrorism Unit, which was constantly vigilant against radical groups. Some said at little too vigilant, and that the FSS had not strayed far from the old KGB days. Brazhnikov had little time for the criticism.

“The Border Service is preparing for an onslaught of refugees coming from the south.”

“How many people do you have?” asked Yevtuschenko.

“Not enough. We will be overrun. Unless we fortify the borders.”

“Military.” said the woman. “The Defense Minister will stand proud, pointing out how he is saving Mother Russia.”

“God save us from our savior.”

The woman smiled. Her name was Anya Kolyatov, and she had worked with Yevtuschenko for a number of years. Tall, with black hair flowing over her Western cut suit, Anya was the unique member of this strange trimvirate. She was a double agent in Russian intelligence. When the Soviet Union was broken up in 1991, what was left of the intelligence services was split up into two areas, internally the Federal Security Service, and internationally the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR). Kolyatov worked for the FSS, but would be sure that intelligence flowed where it needed to go. Brazhnikov was glad to have her. So was Yevtuschenko.

“I need to get back, “ Anya said. “My mother can only be sick so often.”

“Then tell me what you have. But let's be comfortable.”

They moved to the kitchen. At an old table were three well worn chairs. Tea was already set out, an ancient samovar, reported to be Stalin's, sat in the middle of the table. Yevtuschenko went to the ancient stove and turned on the gas.

“Anya must have her coffee. We have instant.”

Anya powered up her laptop computer while the preparations were made. The machine had direct connectivity to Russian communication satellites.

“Where would you like to start, Minister? I have pictures from – damn it – damnit! No access to

GRU information. They've blocked my password.”

Yevtuschenko tried his. Nothing. He sighed, made a mental note to yell at someone, then gave her Anya her cup of coffee.

“Let's see what we do have then”

Anya tried another site and was able to sign in.

“This is SVR, Ministers. Tetachevo.”

They looked at the pictures of the launch site, some more in depth pictures of Saudi Arabia.

“This is horrible. Those men who launched the missiles are dead. No one to talk.”

“Exactly,” said Brazhnikov. “This is too much like the old days. Worse.”

“I must do something.” Yevtuschenko said. “This is too much.”

He couldn't his hands shaking. What had they done? What had those bastards done? Worse, I have to remember, to the world, I'm one of the bastards.

“You could get a bullet in the head, sir, if you do the wrong thing.” said Anya, her grey green eyes softly settled on her mentor.

“For all the good I've done over the past two days....”

“That's why other days are made,” said Brazhnikov. “Show him.”

Anya nodded. She moved to another site, and set up her password.

“This is FSS video. I'm going to show you something that just came over the hill, right after your call. This is about the murder at Red Square earlier today. These are taken from camera around the Square. Now you see the couple walking, a man pulls up, shoots the other then kills himself. The car drives away. The woman starts running, and, changing to another camera now, heads toward Nikoskaya and just before she gets there, another man takes her by the arms, talks to her and they quietly leave. The rest of the footage would be police and army and the investigation, but there are some very specific things here. First is who these people are.”

Yevtuschenko sat down, sipped his tea. Too hot. He made a face and concentrated on Anya. She moved her chair to sit between the men, placed her laptop on the table, the samovar moved delicately toward the far end.

“First dead man was Leonid Aleskovich. He was 67 years old, a Party member for many years when it mattered, worked in the Soviet Interior ministry doing was called classified work. Left at the time of the breakup and has been doing consulting work ever since. Mostly for Bukov.”

Both men tensed at the mention of that name. Yevtuschenko folded his hands on the table.

“Praying to him?,” asked Brazhnikov, unable to hide a smile “He's not God yet, Valery.”

Anton Bukov was, to many people, the Russian economy. Sprung from the communist apparatus following the fall of Communism, Bukov and others liked him used the free economy and few rules to acquire businesses from media to gas to consumer goods (and the smuggling operations) to oil. While many of the oligarchs had been jailed or fined out of any real power, one look at Russian Forbes magazine will find Valerian Bukov at the top of the list of the nation's richest

men.

"That is not all," continued Anya. "The woman Aleskovich is with has been Ivana Turgenev, presently with the Interior Ministry."

"Show me her face," said Yevtuschenko, curious. Anya adjusted the video and made it as clear as possible. The plain face, hair turning grey and pulled back, the mole near her lip. Plain white blouse.

"Do you know her?", Brazhnikov asked. His own curiosity was reflected in Anya's.

Yevtuschenko cleared his throat.

"No."

The Minister had spoken and the other two could do nothing but move on, whether they believed him or not. Anya clicked on another part of the video.

"And here is the strangest part of all. The murderer's body. He had no identification on him, and it was impossible to acquire fingerprints. The body had already begun to decompose."

"In that short a time?"

"I know. It was unbelievable. Police brought in their best people, and none of them could explain it. They tried to, forgive me, scoop up what they could. No verification through DNA searches yet. Also we are searching for diseases that would do this, also if it is contagious."

"Red Square should be sealed off", Brazhnikov said. "I'll make sure that has happened. Excuse me."

He took a cell phone out of his pant pocket and walked to the den, dialing as he went. Anya and Yevtuschenko sat for a moment while he left.

"We may be in serious trouble, Anya." Yevtuschenko said quietly.

"More than a nuclear attack?"

"That is death. There is also something very much alive. I need you to-"

Brazhnikov returned.

"Already talking and then stopping when I enter the room? I'm disappointed. Anyway, the Moscow police have a cordon around Red Square. We're there. We have another problem. The Defense Minister is dead."

"Dead?" the other two said.

"And the President is missing."

The three sat there for a moment, and for once the only sound was birds quietly calling to each other.

"Does this never end?" Yevtuschenko said. "Dear God."

"We've got to get back, Valery."

“Yes. Anya, anything else? “

“Unfortunately we could not make out the man who talked to Ivana Turgenev. I'll keep trying.”

“Good. Andrey, please keep in touch.”

“Of course, Minister. And be careful.”

“I will. Anya, ride with me, would you?”

“You're going to steal her from me, aren't you Valery?”

The Minister nodded.

“I need her again. We all do. Let's go.”

They got up from the table, leaving the mess for minions to take care of. They could see their drivers still outside, smoking and talking by the autos.

“I'll see you soon, Valery.” The two shook hands, and then he reached for Anya.

“Be careful. Come back to us.”

“You know I will.”

Andrey Brazhnikov stepped over the transom and moved quickly to his car. His driver stepped away from his compatriot

The first shot went wide. Brazhnikov dropped to the ground. Yevtuschenko and Anya fell from sight, Anya grabbed her gun, a .22 minirevolver, and slowly raised her head to the window. Two more shots were right at the car, pinging off, the bullets ricocheting into the woods. The birds exploded into the air. The next shot rang out and Yevtuschenko's driver tumbled back, part of his head missing.

“Can you see anything?” Yevtuschenko said.

Anya guessed where the shots rang from. A copse of trees fifty yards away, just a lead off of deep woods. Had there been time security would have been much deeper. Hell, there would have been more than two chauffeur guards, now one. Stupid, stupid. Anyone could troop in from the highway, especially now.

“I'll go out the front,” Anya said. “I'd appreciate some cover fire.”

Yevtuschenko crawled quickly back into the den, and return with a Kalishnikov rifle. He moved quickly across the floor, came up at Anya's side. He assumed the position, trying to aim as close as to where he thought the shots came from.

“Hey, out there, “ he called, “ BE READY!”

The second drivers pulled his weapon, quickly glance at his dead comrade, then crouched and waited for the next barrage. Anya moved silently away from the window. Brazhnikov had moved up next to his car between the doors leaning back. He was talking on his cell phone, screaming orders, and in the distance already sirens could be heard.

“Andrey, get away from the car! One bad bullet-”

"You watch too much television, Valery. " and back to the phone.

Anya moved through the kitchen and then out the back door. She took a step down and ran to the woods, twenty feet away. One shot behind her. The others opened fired. Not a place for heels, she dumped them. No stockings. Things get caught in stockings. She moved into the darker tree coverage, the smell of the woods rich with spring life, pleasant if not for the killer shooting at them. She moved as quietly as her training taught her, staying to the shadows that the lush trees blessed her with, moving quickly. The woods were quiet, just the occasional bug. She was focused on the shooter. Calculating distance, she knew she was about fifty feet away.

Where? Yes, there. Beautifully done. Completely hidden from the house. She reached for her cell phone. Shit, she'd dropped it someplace. Else, well, never mind forty feet. She stayed low. Thirty feet, now she could see him. Full army garb, and camo as she sat on his perch in the tree, the leaves giving him a hidden home from everything.

Unless you were looking from the back. Now ten feet away.

"Drop the gun."

"Wait, " he said, his voice gravelly. "One more shot."

The crack of her gun was louder than his. His back convulsed as the shot went off and bullet went in

FOOM. Brazhnikov's car went up in flames.

"Drop the weapon."

The man continued to face forward, but Anya heard the quiet klop of the gun on the grass.

"And now?" the sniper asked.

"Climb down, very slowly."

The man laughed.

"You know that one of us will be dead soon. Would you rather be shot or knifed?"

"The police will be here. There are guns trained on you."

"So what? I'm too far away, and your lirrle twenty two is a toy."

"Climb down." she said in her best command voice

She pointed the .22.

"You're bleeding already." Shots had stopped from the house. The sirens were closer.

The man started falling backwards from his perch. Anya pulled the trigger, blood spurting from man's head, side shot at his left ear. He continued to fall backwards, grabbed a branch with both arms, twisted his body up and then came down directly in front of Anya. While his face was bloodied, his ear hanging like string cheese, it didn't impact the shine of the Glock that he pulled from the holster under his left arm.

"You could have chosen the knife."

He raised the pistol. Anya's small .22 was no comparison. She was dead.

"Why did you do this?"

"We all work for some-"

Now his head did explode. Another shot to the back and he went down. The Glock bounced on the ground once, nearly joining the rifle in display set.

Valery Yevtuschenko walked up to Anya, his rifle pointed down. Anya couldn't help but smile.

"Normally you clean up my messes. I thought I'd return the favor. You kept him distracted so I could approach. Never thought I'd use one of these again. Did you get anything out of him?"

She shook her head. "Is Andrey all right?"

"Yes, he's fine. He crawled away from the car just before it went up. Lucky shot, whoever you are. We'd better get back."

She walked across the grass in her bare feet, the man who would have killed her lying in the puddle of his own blood beneath the tree that hid him.

XX

On the ride back, with a new driver, Anya kept her shoes off. She wanted to only relax, watch the scenery, and replay in her mind how she had handled the situation. She hadn't told him to drop all his weapons. She's never seen the Glock. What if he had fired? What if he had a knife, which he said he did? How would she have dealt with it? Her training had been so long ago, no, ten years or more behind a desk, little or no field work. But now, and with this she turned to Yevtuschenko, who was on the phone to someone somewhere, now there was a change coming. Valery had asked her if she would do something, and with everything going to hell, she'd better do something. There was something about this old man, all right older man, that had always charmed, which is why she-

"Yes, fine, goodbye."

He hung up and turned to her.

"I've got a press conference in forty five minutes but I want you with me when I get to the Defense Minister's office. That's where they found the body."

"Suicide?"

"So far. Still no sign of the President. And of course, just to make this day more insane, the Defense Minister's body began to liquify as it quickly decomposed. Just like your killer in Red Square."

Anya took that in. And then said "Whatever I can do, I will."

Yevtuschenko nodded. Reached a hand over and touched hers for a second.

"As I said, serious trouble."

The Kremlin came into view. The sun glistened off the domes, light dancing from one onion top to another. She worked around those buildings on and off for many years, she – What the hell is wrong with me, she thought. I could have been killed back there. I tried to play hero, like I was 20,

with a little twenty two against a trained killer. I was lucky. I should be dead. I should be dead.

Her eyes filled for a second, then she breathed deep. Never again. I'll stay in my world.

"What?"

She turned and smiled.

"Nothing, sir."

XX

The press were held back from the doors by police and Army. Yevtuschenko and Anya moved through the crowd without giving them any notice. They entered the Kremlin and went up the stairs to the Defense Minister's office. Soldiers and agents with phone jacks in their ears lined the hallway. Their steps were absorbed by the thick rug, making the place seem funereal. Anya wondered if it was like this at the White House now.

The office was being guarded by two soldiers who watched them approach as if they were the most vile things on the planet. Yevtuschenko and Anya slowly, very slowly, reached into their jackets and took out ID. They showed their pictures to the soldiers, who took their sweet time looking at the picture, then them, then the picture again. Then as one they stood aside. The one on the right pulled opened the door out toward them.

First was the glitter of the sun through the four wall length windows, and then the stench. Or maybe the sweet smell of decay stuck to every piece of furntiure, the crimson curtains, the white walls with the blue trim, the desk, and especially the area behind it. The blood splatter on the wall arced to the left. Police tape surrounded the desk, Yevtuschenko took a small knife from pocket key ring that was returned to him by Security downstairs, and cut the tape.

"I'm sure there's been a thorough investigation. They won't mind. Besides, I have the press conference. Come."

They walked behind the desk and could see traces of blood and this other substance, a clear matter that fell in a pattern if something, like a stationary body, was melting. The Defense Minister, who had risen to power with the President, had turned rogue, and maybe taken the President with him, fired off a nuclear weapon, set off a worldwide panic, and then blew his brains out. Then started liquifying.

"This place smells like a charnel house, and fittingly so. There's not much else to see. I have to speak to those jackals. And I hope to get the story out we're not warmongers. And come up with some story about the President."

"I'll see what I can find out." Anya said as they closed the doors, and were once again examined by the soldiers, who had been watching the entire time. They hadn't changed, or only slightly. A good whiff of death will do it.

They parted at his office. Yevtuschenko met his staff, got what passed for the latest news, and then went down the hall to talk to the press. The cameras and shouting voices stunned even an old politician like him. Where is the President? Why did you fire off the nuclear weapon? What happened to the Defense Minister? Who is in charge? Where's the Prime Minister? Over and over. He held up a hand.

"Ladies and gentleman of the press, fellow Russians, citizens of planet Earth. President Salgutov is ill, and I have been given the authority to speak for him. The Defense Minister is dead – yes-please, let me continue, and his death, by his own hand, will show the world, I pray, that the

Russian government is not responsible for the launching of the nuclear weapon upon Saudi Arabia. It was the act of a man insane. Words can not express the sorrow, the regret, the-

He stopped for a moment and took in the scene. Behind him other members of the government had appeared, but no President. Everyone was jostling for position so their faces could be seen with a leader, someone who actually would take the reigns of responsibility. He had no use for them, nor for the people before him, with their tape recorders and cameras at the ready. I'm too old for this, too much....

"the shame we feel for this man's folly, and for the people who followed him. They seem to have paid a price of their own. Yes, there'll be a more about that soon. But Russia is a great country, with a great history and people. We do not do such things. Not even during our darkest hours."

"We will work hard to rejoin the world community. We will be there for the people of Saudi Arabia, and the Middle East as never before. I will, with the President's guidance, do all I can. I'm sure he'll be speaking with you soon. God bless Russia. God bless the people of Saudi Arabia."

With that, he did an about face, walking past the so called me too leaders, and away from the jackals already screaming for more blood. He'd send some people, fodder for the mill.

He went straight to the President's office. Soldiers stood again by the doors. No secretary at the ornamental desk.

"Am I the only one who works here?"

Apparently, he thought. The soldiers seemed to agree. They snapped to attention.

"Anyone in there?"

First there was no response. Then the one on the right, one who was so clean shaven that facial hair would not even think of showing up, shook his head.

"May I go in?"

The two soldiers looked at each other, and the clean shaven one made a move for a walkie talkie. The other stopped him, and reached down for handle. Again the doors open out. Yevtuschenko walked into a barren office. There were the great seals of Russia on the wall behind the oak desk, and sewn into the carpet. Couches and chairs were scattered about the office, over to a fireplace. Places for quiet conversation. There had been enough of that over the last few days. Despite having been in these rooms for so many years, for so many leaders, Presidents or General Secretaries, so much history, it nasueated him now. He thanked the soldiers and went back to his own office. The jackals were still demanding blood, he saw.

His secretary was still there. Her hair was grey and pulled back, glasses too large, skin wrinkled around the eyes and the harsh knuckles of arthritis in her hands, she stood as he approached.

"Didn't I tell you to go home?"

"Didn't anyone tell you that you shouldn't play with guns?"

She handed him a slew of messages.

"Do I call you Mr. President now?"

Just the thought of that made him nauseous. She saw her joke had fallen flat, and looked away. She said she'd make tea. Yevtuschenko flipped through his messages.

Brazhnikov was first.

"Until the Duma does something, I'm considering you the leader of Russia. The Prime Minister is useless and is the President's toady. You will have agents at your door within minutes if they are not there already, as it's our job to protect the President. Also we have the evidence from the Defense Minister's office. There was a slight disagreement with Moscow police, but it's here. Anya and our best people are looking everything over."

"Good. Thank you. Are you recovered from your ordeal?"

"I've had a few things blow up now and then, and been shot at a few times, Valery. Part of the business. I'll get incredibly drunk later. We're working on getting an ID on our sniper, but the military has shut down since its beloved leader has died. We'll get it. The autopsy was just done. We've only got a partial bullet, but if you'd like a souvenir..."

"Andrey, enough. How about autopsies on the others?"

A long sigh came over the line.

"There was nothing to autopsy. They literally fell apart. I'm sorry."

Even the perfectly made tea just placed on his desk did not stop a shiver.

"Thank you, Andrey. Please keep me posted."

He hung up. On the right hand side of his desk was his phone with direct lines to many departments and agencies. The one line he wanted was in a compartment on the side of the phone. He fumbled with the knob, and got it open. Inside was a bulb, and a switch that could be moved left or right. The bulb was on. Yevtuschenko could not resist a smile. There was a message. He toggled the switch, which put him on another phone line, a mostly unknown line used rarely, except earlier today. He dialed. In perfect Russian was the following.

"Valery, help is on the way. This conversation never happened."

He reached to the phone again, flipped the switch back, and slid his hand around to the back of the instrument, finding an inset slit. He pushed on the slit, which gave slightly. Then a small disc was ejected. He stood, walked to the fire and tossed the disc in. For over forty years Soviet, then Russian forces had spoken to each American administration through "hot lines", first phones and then electronic media. While politicians blathered, they kept the true balance of power. Help was rarely asked for or given, unless situations were dire.

Like now. Yevtuschenko was proud of his people, especially Anya (no matter what happened with that sniper – just out of practice), and he would place them up against American or British forces anytime, and had. Until the nuke. And these strange deaths. I'm no fool. I wouldn't be the almost President of Russia if I wasn't. He went back to his tea.

His phone rang on the direct line. Anya.

"Andrey has sanctioned my sharing this with you. Off the minister's secretary's desk was his appointment book. Normal appointments until late last week. Down in the lowest corner there was an appointment with the commander of the military district of Sevastopol. This is crossed out, thank God for the old fashioned ways, and one name is entered. Devlin."

"That's it? Devlin?"

"What's more, for the next five days, he canceled all appointments, just came in, stayed in his office, left for lunch, came back and left for the day around six. Until the launch. Except once. Three days ago he told his secretary he was going to see the President, evidently did from the records, and returned to his office. Spoke to no one, but was on the phone a lot."

"You've got the phone records."

"We're getting them. I bet if we asked the Americans, they'd have them already."

"I'm shocked you would think they spy on us. But I'll bet the phone calls were all to Tetachevo. Any information on this Devlin? American? British? Irish?"

"Nothing, sir. He appeared at the secretary's desk, said he had an appointment, and walked in. Carried a briefcase. Did not stay too long, came out, gave the secretary a big smile, and went on his way. And as he went down the hall, she said he whistled."

"What song?"

"Whistle While You Work. It's an American song. Disney."

"I know that. I'm the Minister of Intelligence. I know Disney."

"Decadent bourgeois claptrap," she said in a pretentious voice.

"Don't tell my grandchildren. But they wouldn't know what you were talking about anyway. We have a good description of the man?"

"Yes, plus security pictures. Blond hair, good features. It's very easy when he looks into the camera and waves."

"The bastard has guts, I'll give him that."

"We've got his face out there. Check your television."

Yevtuschenko was loathe to do so. There is a difference between intelligence, actual information, and pablum. But he turned to the television, turned it on, and saw himself pleading with the planet. He leaned forward in his chair, pulled slightly on his lip. He turned back to the phone

"He's not on yet, Anya." He sighed. "This is far from over you know."

"So you were hinting at the dacha, and when snipers are after you, it's rather hard to miss the implication."

"People do not melt when they die. And this woman being taken is very serious."

"I'm sure we'll investigate that kidnapping, sir, but right now..."

"No, you must trust me. You need to get her back. I can't say right now what she's got to do with all this, but .."

His other line rang. He put her on hold.

"What?"

The secretary was quiet for a second, and then said "The Prime Minister is here."

Yevtuschenko held the phone away and swore. The Prime Minister was the next in line of Russian Presidential succession. He was no doubt somewhat annoyed about the press conference. Not that he'd showed up.

"Anya, I need to call you back. Remember what I said. Find her first. Find Ivana Turgenenv. She is the key. Then maybe we can stop it." He hung up, finished his tea, and stood. He made sure his hair was in place, and turned to the door.

This would not be pleasant. He got out of his chair, went to the door. There stood the rotund, balding Prime Minister, his suit ill fitting, his smile also. In his right hand was a briefcase, his left hand held a handkerchief up to his face.

"Damn bloody nose." he said. "Come, Valery, let's talk."

XX

“