

HATE



Stephen William ROWE

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Biography:

Doctor Stephen William ROWE has worked for most of his active life as an industrial research scientist. His speciality, the physics of ultra-high voltage electrical arcs and electrical insulation.

He is a Fellow of the both English IET and the French SEE and is author and co-author of almost a hundred scientific and conference papers.

An accomplished musician, Dr Rowe is also a prolific songwriter.

Born in the UK, he now lives in in the French Alps, not far from Grenoble

Authors Note:

Photo galleries illustrating many of the places described are available on my website.

Maps, photos, illustrations and internet links are also included for those interested in discovering more.

Website: <http://www.stephen-william-rowe.com>

Chapter 1

Lida Niemela grunted and banged the plate held out to her, onto her tray. One thing she had learnt during the first six months of her life term was that, however bad the food was, it could always get worse. She wondered idly if this wasn't the primary motivation behind most attempted escapes from prison.

She down sat on one of the faded yellow plastic chairs and, ignoring her neighbours, picked up her fork.

"God! Christ this is disgusting" she snorted.

The guard nearest her turned his head, "One of Chef's masterpieces again?" he asked ruefully.

"Watch out for your balls funny boy. You'd be surprised what damage, strong fingernails can inflict." She illustrated this by mimicking a pincer-like movement with her free hand.

The guard sniffed bravely, but he knew only too well what this ruthless woman was capable of doing. Every morning and afternoon, since her arrival, she trained for at least an hour. The night wardens had even reported that when she couldn't sleep, she would get up and do push-ups and knee bends until she was running with sweat. If anything, she was in better physical form now, than when she had arrived, which was saying a lot.

The guard knew that a physically strong and mentally agile life-prisoner always spells trouble for any prison staff, and Lida was a perfect example of this. When burdened with prisoners of this calibre, many prison governors had secretly regretted the abolition of the death sentence.

Sighing, Lida took another mouthful and swallowed it fast to avoid the taste. God! This time it was disgusting. "Hey!" she sneered, "do they have a competition to recruit cooks here, or do they just pick up the tramps from under the bridges to give them a home?"

She washed it down with a glass of milk, "Christ". Even the milk was foul today.

She sniffed the glass. "Hey, someone's pissed in my milk."

The guard turned once more. "No more than usual."

"Oh, go and get stuffed you!"

The guard did not answer, knowing only too well where it would lead if he did. He wouldn't be able to have his own lunch until this lot had finished and were out in the exercise yard.

The last thing he wanted was trouble. Why was it that Saturdays were always the worst? Maybe, because the regular weekday kitchen staff were more careful with the cooking. He suspected that the weekend staff had some scam to make money by getting the ingredients on the cheap, but he was not interested enough to investigate. Eventually, though, the twenty or so "lifers" filed out of the room and the staff were allowed in to clean up.

Outside in the exercise court, Lida spat on the earth, "God! That was terrible. And the milk!".

Five minutes later a cold sweat broke out all over her, and in five more she was unconscious on the ground.

Two minutes more and she was in the infirmary, and the nurse diagnosed food poisoning.

Five minutes later the nurse called the governor, Lida Niemela was dying.

For an instant, the director relaxed and went as far as sighing, (if only they would all die). He shook himself out of this state, "OK. Call the anti-poison ward at Helsinki and get her over there double fast."

A prison death was always big trouble for a governor especially when it concerned an inmate of one of the very few high-security units such as this one at Turku.

If food poisoning were the cause, then he would be directly responsible, whatever the origin. The press would have a field day, questions to the government, etc.

The opposition party and human rights activists would then all jump on the bandwagon. They'd highlight the lack of ministry investment, the shortcomings of the government decisions, and the general inadequacy or even incompetence of the countries prison staff. If they did their job well, the minister would be forced into action, and that inevitably meant firing the prison governor.

At just over sixty, this was not an outcome he was keen on embracing. "No. I'll call them myself. Get the woman ready, and jump to it."

An emergency ambulance crew arrived, siren wailing, in less than ten minutes, and discovered an inert and grey-skinned young woman unconscious, but still breathing. It took them only a short time to diagnose something considerably more potent than common food poisoning.

During the transport, they managed to do a stomach pumping and called ahead for the ward to prepare a full blood transfusion.

The team at Helsinki was a top-notch one, and they saved Lida without too much trouble.

In a few hours, she was out of danger.

That evening the hospital's chief consultant made a discrete call to the prison director. He said that she was alive, but added, off the record, that Lida had certainly been intentionally poisoned. He concluded that the dose used had been too low to cause rapid death and that she would probably have few side effects if any at all.

The Prison governor relaxed but asked for her to be kept isolated, in the special ward. He would organise for guards to be on duty at the door for the duration of her stay there.

He neglected to inform the Hospital director as to just how dangerous Lida really was. He mused, however, that if she were to escape, or if some other accident was to occur to her, then the blame would fall on the hospital and not him.

In any case, he had already decided to keep quiet about the poisoning. If this point were to leak out, it would mean no end of trouble, and he would have to prove that he was taking all the safety measures required.

He would be forced into showing action, which meant setting up a full-scale official enquiry and interviewing the entire staff. The newspapers would then hound him, and he would undoubtedly be called in to explain the incident to the minister. "God no!" He was not going to allow *that* ball to start rolling, because stopping it again was almost impossible.

A wilfully poisoned Lida was almost as inconvenient as a dead one and would in all probability lead to the same results, i.e., getting the sack...

And so, it came about that the general public never heard about the attempted murder of Lida Niemela at Turku Prison in Finland.

Chapter 2

Lida Niemela did eventually learn about the attempt on her life.

However, before this, she had a few extremely rough days. During this period of semi-consciousness she felt like death and she looked like it too. Because of this, the staff, assumed her to be too ill to be able to pay attention to their discussion and consequently, freely exchanged their opinions about the case.

But whatever the state of her body, Lida's brain and her hearing worked perfectly and she learnt much more than she would otherwise have done.

"So," she mused. "Someone laced my food, did they? That's interesting." Thinking back, she guessed that it must have been in the milk.

She knew that getting the small amount of poison which would have been necessary, into the prison must have been an easy and low-risk task. She also saw that the main difficulty would have been to make sure the right person got it. This observation meant it had to be the woman behind the counter — the one who had handed her the glass. In all probability, the same woman had also smuggled the stuff through the security check.

Lida tried to conjure up the image of that woman in her mind but failed.

All the same, a detail was niggling at the back of her mind. Such a poisoning attempt would have needed meticulous planning and timing.

The kitchen staff were all uneducated people and certainly not capable of this. So someone outside must be behind this. Someone with brains. It was also plainly evident to Lida that someone with brains would never have gone to all that trouble, and then have got the lethal dose wrong. He, or she, would undoubtedly have put much more than the lethal dose. The person would want

to make sure that, even if she didn't die, she would have some permanently handicapping side effects.

What was more, to ensure that the poisoning would be a success, an intelligent person would have planned it for the end of the evening meal. He or she would know that, after eating this final meal, the life prisoners were always quickly put back behind their bolted doors. In this case, by the time she was discovered, it would have been too late.

The mid-day meal was the worst possible choice, because it was invariably followed by a period in the outdoor exercise enclosure.

She reflected that the explanation could only be one of two things. Either someone wanted to give her a big fright or wanted to get her outside the prison walls to organise an escape.

The latter seemed the more reasonable of the two. However, in that case, the escape must be part of some other larger scheme.

In that case, who was likely to be behind this? No doubt someone who wanted her out for a good reason. This pointed to a person who needed a very unpleasant job done, no-questions-asked.

These thoughts and reflections came in a rush during one of the few moments when she didn't feel three-quarters dead. She had been lying prone for several days and had had ample time to take stock and see that she was in a room with barred windows. She had also noted the guard, sitting on a chair against the wall of the corridor, facing her room door.

She guessed, therefore, that if an escape were being planned, the organiser would want to make sure that she was out of danger before attempting anything. On the other hand, maybe they were counting on her acting on her own.

Lida decided that the crucial point was to build strength and above all to avoid being sent back to the prison too early. She thus prepared herself to play at being far

weaker than she was while keeping an eye open for some signal or other.

Two days later, Lida received a 'Get well quick' card from, "Your very dearest aunty Hatty". It contained a message saying she hoped to be able to see her very soon.

The guard at the door checked the card before handing it to her, but he knew nothing about Lida except that she was not to be trifled with, even when ill. The message ended, "Sorry not near enough to be able to help, but you'll no doubt be able to manage on your own as usual. Love from all of us here at Vaasa."

There was a PS. "Your brother now lives just around the corner from the hospital, but you know him too well to expect a visit."

Lida read this with considerable interest and thanked the guard. She then sat the card on her bedside table and smiled to herself.

She hadn't got any aunts, let alone one called Hatty. She didn't have a brother either or any family at all for that matter. The sender's address, printed on the back of the envelope was utterly unknown to her.

Anyhow, this was the signal she had been expecting.

It proved that the whole thing was a setup, as she had guessed. The message also confirmed that she was expected to escape by her own means and go to the address given. The latter must be nearby, just around the corner no doubt. She reflected that the person behind this did not intend to get his hands dirty.

At this point, one of the nurses pushed open the door and entered carrying a pile of clothes. Lida pushed herself up on her elbow and scowled at the young girl. A little over twenty at the most she thought.

"Here are your clothes Miss Niemela. All nicely cleaned and pressed."

"Thanks. Like that, I'll look my very best in the police car."

The nurse set the clothes neatly on a shelf in the cupboard and turned to Lida. "Sister thinks you'll soon be well enough to leave us."

Lida looked over at her frowning. "Well, I don't feel like it." She retorted. "My guts still feel like they are full of bleach." The girl smiled over at her, "Sister says you're lucky to be alive Miss Niemela."

Lida glanced back at her and frowned again, "Does she now? I wonder what makes her think that."

The young nurses' eyes opened wide with surprise at this unexpected reply. Finding herself unable to think of a reply to such a statement, she turned her back and pretended to be tidying the cupboard.

Lida, let herself fall back onto her pillow. "Sister has probably never been in prison, on a life sentence," she added.

The nurse, finding nothing to say replied, "Anyway, sister thinks you're much stronger now, and I suppose that's some comfort..." her voice trailed off.

"If that comforts Sister," retorted Lida, "then that's no doubt good for her morale and what's good for her morale is no doubt good news for the rest of you."

The nurse turned back and smiled. "You're right there, Miss Niemela," and turning left the room. She was unsure of how to interpret all that had passed between them in that brief period. In any case, it would be good fun repeating those incredible remarks to her friends that evening at the restaurant.

The nurse had become increasingly in demand since people had learnt that she was the nurse to an international criminal who was moreover a ruthless murderer. The young woman wasn't innocent enough to believe that the invitations she received meant that the people liked her. All the same, she was quite happy to enjoy the passing celebrity and the free meals and drinks that went with it. It had also enabled her to meet some very handsome young men, the girlfriends and wives of

whom would soon learn that it had been an unfortunate error to have invited her.

In most cases, these wives and girlfriends had not realised quite how much their old friend's figure had developed since their school days together. Figures always tended to prove troublesome where men were involved. Furthermore, some men had a thing about nurses. She, for one, did not intend to try and show that their fantasies were unjustified.

Once alone again, Lida sat up against the pillows and looked around her. She guessed that she would only have a few days left before being sent back to that damn hole unless she could work something out.

However, she knew that the sister must have carefully compared the daily analysis results with her apparent physical behaviour and have come to her own conclusions. Ward sisters in big hospitals were employed in such positions because they were very good at their jobs. Being good at this sort of job included getting patients out quickly to free up the beds, as soon as was reasonably possible.

That being said, no patient likes being shot out of a hospital to fend for themselves. Lida guessed that it was thus standard practice for them to try to appear in need of a few more days of peace and quiet than they actually did. She would thus have to act faster than she had planned.

Lida was entirely correct in her analysis. The ward Sister could not understand why Lida still seemed so weak, while all the indicators were improving even faster than she would have expected. She was also starting to ask herself the same questions.

In particular, she wondered how someone with enough determination and brains to organise a poisoning inside a high-security state prison, would get the dose so far wrong.

Over the years, she had had to deal with numerous criminal poisoning cases but had never known this to

happen before. The objective of the poisoner was always to reduce the chances of survival to a strict minimum.

Being well aware of the unpleasant background and ruthless character of her patient, she was not surprised that someone should want to remove her permanently. However, that person would make sure to get the dose right. She rejected the idea that this had been a failed suicide attempt. Lida Niemela was far too hard-headed for that.

Following up this line of thought, she began to wonder if this was not a scam or part of a plan to organise an escape.

She thus decided to mention her concerns to the consultant during his visit the following day and see if he thought it wise to talk to the prison governor about it.

That evening when the Sister did her usual evening rounds, Lida noticed her stern countenance and questioning looks. When she mentioned that the consultant would come around to have a look the following afternoon, Lida cursed silently, realising that she would have to work faster even than she had expected. She would have preferred an extra day or two to gather a little more strength, but she would now have no choice.

Now, during her trips, back and forth to the toilets and the shower, Lida had taken pains to check out the floor plan and above all the details of the fire escapes and other exits. She had spotted that a glass door in the floor-nurses room opened onto a fire escape and thence directly down into the car park at the back.

She had also noticed that it was on these stairs that the nurses smoked. The women must have found some way of disabling the alarm that such exits always had, and this was perfect for Lida.

Lida had noted quite early on, that this room was almost always empty, and especially so at about ten thirty, just after the morning coffee break.

So, the next morning, at ten fifteen, Lida put her plan into action. She first rolled up her clothes in the shower towel. Then, holding this in front of her, she hid her trainers, that she had slipped under her loose hospital blouse. Calling the guard to follow her, she made her way quickly to the shower-room before any of the nurses could spot her. Once inside, she turned on the shower to create background noise and in less than a minute, she was fully dressed.

She then triggered phase two of her plan.

She turned off the shower and called the guard.

"Yep!" he called back through the door. She then asked him if rules and safety regulations permitted him to brush her back for her. When this was met with a weak refusal, she added that there were probably other places which needed a good brushing as well.

The guard felt a stirring in his groin. He had seen her body while she had been training out in the exercise court, so he knew it was more than worthy of interest. However, he also knew only too well about her reputation for ruthlessness and violence.

Lida had naturally counted on him refusing. Had he accepted she would have had to put him out of action. This would have taken her only a few seconds once he had opened the door, but would have wasted valuable time.

This risk was just as clear to the guard himself, who much preferred to retain the full use of his testicles and his eyes and to avoid having his head bashed against the tiled wall. "Sorry, Lida. Against the rules."

Lida forced a mocking laugh. "Ah! They don't make guards like they used to. In any case, I suppose you only have a tiny little dick anyway."

The guard tried to laugh this off, but she went on.

"Instead of standing out there with your dick sticking out like a ducks' beak, how about going and getting me my clothes from the cupboard in the bedroom. I was planning

on making a run for it before they take me back to that dirty hole."

Now this was better, and the guard much preferred this sort of behaviour. It was closer to normal, and he knew how to deal with it.

He leaned closer to the door. "Trouble is, you might just find a gun between you and the exit door."

"Oh," said Lida in a silly voice. "But you wouldn't shoot at an innocent frail woman now, would you?"

"Try, and you'll see. Where's the stuff?"

"Cupboard behind the door."

"OK. Now be careful not to slip and bash your brains out on the floor."

"I'll do my best, tiny," she scoffed her fingers already on the door handle.

The guard shook his head with amusement and turned away smiling to himself. He then strolled off slowly, with the unconscious objective of all those who have nothing to do all day, of making each little activity last as long as possible. This strategy helped to stretch out the few activities of each new day to fill the tedious hours before going-home time.

As soon as she heard his boots squeaking on the polished lino floor of the corridor, she opened the shower room door and skipped barefooted and silently across the passage into the nurses room. Closing the door quietly, she locked it from inside.

A few seconds later she had laced up her trainers.

From a corner, she grabbed an old carrier bag and quickly emptied into it the contents of the five handbags the nurses had abandoned around the rest table.

By the time the guard had reached Lida's room at the end of the corridor, she had finished this and had pushed open the glass emergency door leading onto the fire escape. The nurses had overridden the alarm contact on it with a lump of now rock-hard chewing gum.

By the time the guard had gone through the cupboards and not found the clothes and was on his leisurely way back, she was down the back of the main building and out into the car park. The attendant in the booth at the door didn't even bother to look up as she slipped past into the road.

The shower was still running when the guard returned. When he got no reply from his repeated shouts and had pushed the door open gingerly, his gun drawn and levelled, she was already showing a bent old Indian woman the address on the get-well-quick card.

By the time the guard had found the number of the hospital security on the wall list, she was halfway there. When eventually the day officer troubled to put down his coffee and take the annoying phone, Lida was safely behind a closed door, staring at a peculiar old woman.

The woman pointed to a chair and with a heavy accent said, "Not feeling too good eh!"

Lida was not. Her breath was laboured, and she felt sick and dizzy. The woman leaned forward and, taking her hand, felt her pulse, she then looked in Lida's eyes and gently pulled down the lower lid.

She then smelt her breath. "Not so bad, not so bad. You need to rest. I'll get you a drink."

"No milk please," smiled Lida.

The old woman nodded and bought back a glass of orange juice. Lida drank it and leant back in the sticky leather armchair in the small dark room and closed her eyes.

The old woman glanced over her shoulder at her and nodded to herself.

At half past five on a devilishly cold Sunday morning, a dented and dirty van, pulling a long, market-dealers trailer, pulled up at the frontier post at Vaalimma on the Russian border of southern Finland. The driver and passenger were typical stocky market stall-holders. Their dark

glasses were perched on their hair, and their anoraks and shirts were open displaying showy imitation gold chains on tanned skin. The driver turned off the motor and waited for the customs official to finish with a similar vehicle in front of him.

Since four-o'clock that morning the official had already checked twenty or so vans on their way to the market just outside St Petersburg. This was his regular Sunday morning job.

The driver handed over the papers, and the customs official glanced into the back of the van where a pile of plastic clothes dummies occupied the entire space, their arms and legs locked together in an intricate knot, like a scene from an orgy.

"Market?" asked the customs officer in Russian.

The driver nodded and, drawing the bunch of keys out of the ignition, handed them to the customs official, "Want to have a look at the caravan?"

The customs man shook his head, "Have a good day."

"You too."

"Thanks." The driver fitted the keys back in the ignition, started up and drew slowly and carefully away.

Ten minutes' later they drew off the main road and turned in at a dingy road-side café. They backed in between two Finish lorries and jumped out. Unhitching the caravan, they transferred the "dummies" into it and locked the door.

They then jumped back into the van and drove away leaving the abandoned caravan hidden between the two lorries.

Back on the main road they drove southward for an hour, took a smaller one between fields of stubble then into a forest and eventually turned onto a side track leading directly into the forecourt of a small farm.

Driving the van around to the back, they parked it inside a rusty, tin-roofed building and closed the door on its complaining hinges.

Only then did they lift the grey mat on the floor at the back of the van, to draw out the inert body of Lida Niemela.

Chapter 3

Vladimir Falin rolled over on his camp bed and groaned.

He felt terrible.

He also knew by experience that he was about to discover a blinding headache.

Struggling in the sheets and blankets, which had knotted themselves around him, he turned with difficulty to face away from the skylight. He then tugged and tugged until he got the thick army blanket from under him and up over his head.

Lying there in this pre-hangover phase, he gradually became aware of two unusual things. The first was a strong smell of freshly brewing coffee, and the second was the sound of voices, voices nearby.

This was unusual because it was rare that anyone made an effort to come up to his fifth-floor studio in the morning. Not even his few friends.

But then again, coffee didn't brew itself without some form of outside assistance. Of course, reasoned Vladimir, he might very well have put it on the previous night and forgotten about it. However, in that case, it wouldn't smell so invitingly. It wouldn't explain the voices either, which was decidedly uncommon.

Vladimir was not at the best of his form, and rarely ever was until about mid-day, when hangovers had often abated a little. However, he struggled, all the same, to twist around and investigate the goings on in his room.

Continuing stubbornly in the same direction of rotation on his camp bed, he ultimately became entirely knotted up. With one last struggle, he eventually pushed the cocoon-like form into a more or less upright position.

He now resembled a mummy, and, if anything, he looked even less healthy than his Egyptian predecessors. Screwing his eyes up, he scrutinised the direction from which the voices emanated.

In the far corner of the vast studio, which was, in reality, the attic of one of the old places in central Moscow, he saw two broad backs. The owners of these backs were carrying on with their occupations around the gas stove, apparently oblivious of his presence. They kept up a continual flow of conversation, clearly feeling quite at home, as if they had lived there all their lives.

Vladimir screwed his eyes up even more and tried to think back. It was true that it was not at all unusual for him to have difficulty in reconstructing his activities of previous nights, but more unusual to have part of them still around.

From time to time, it must be admitted, that he had woken on the cold floorboards to find naked females sleeping in his narrow bed, but never men. However, the presence of Broad-backed men wearing dark suits and making coffee together was a new experience.

He sat up with difficulty in his cocoon of bedclothes and swung the feet end to the floor.

The creaking of the ex-government camp bed alerted the two men who exchanged glances. Without turning one of them nodded to the other.

"Looks like our friend is awake at last," he said in Russian, "Do you think he'd appreciate a cup of coffee?"

The other smiled. "He might, and then again he might not."

The first poured coffee into a big mug and the two turned towards him.

Vladimir froze. He was a tall, muscular man himself, priding himself in his fighting abilities, but these two were obviously in another league. These men were professional thugs, their professions written clearly over their faces.

They smiled at him and approached slowly, their massive shoulders blocking out most of the light.

Now, in these parts of Moscow, everyone knew instinctively that when this sort of personage appeared, it meant trouble for the host. Usually painful trouble. The

biggest one held out the cup to him with a huge hand, and the two then pulled up the only clean chairs in the room and sat looking at him from about six feet away.

"Get some of that down you. It looks as if you need it." He smiled. "No one can think clearly with a head as you have. Come on. Get it down."

Vladimir did as they requested, while frantically trying to remember what he had done wrong or what he had forgotten to pay.

The bigger of the two leant forward and smiled again, "Your art friend, Our Employer, asked us to pop around to see you".

Vladimir relaxed and sighed. "Thank God!" he thought, "it's just about those damn paintings again." He felt that he could deal with this. Had he forgotten to honour some debt or other, however, it would have been quite another matter.

"You see," went on the man, "it appears that you are slipping behind with the job. This delay is causing your friend a certain amount of concern, you see."

Now, this sounded worse, and he recognised it as a typical prelude to getting beaten up. This was never agreeable, even at the best of times, but worse when one was already feeling somewhat under the weather.

The second man pulled his chair a little closer and looked Vladimir in the eyes. "Our mutual employer has already paid half the sum and is anxious to be able to complete his transaction. He says that this is difficult to do without the finished painting."

He nodded. "So, he asked us to pop around and see what was causing the delay. Perhaps you have run out of paint?"

Vladimir was in reality nearly three weeks late, but he could not pin down the reason for this to a single detail. "No, no." he hesitated. "No, I've got all I need, it's just..." his voice trailed off.

The bigger of the two smiled. "Yes. It's just that you got side-tracked, eh?"

"Well, yes. I suppose so."

"But our employer has paid you, and he is not very happy about your getting side-tracked," he said.

"So, he asked us to pop around." added the other man.

"Yes. And give you a pep-talk."

Vladimir did not like the sound of this at all and sipped his coffee, nodding understanding, but completely unable to move, still being twisted up tight in the sheets and blankets.

"But our employer is a nice understanding man. He explained to us that artists are often a bit like that."

"Yes" put in the other.

"He also pointed out that to be able to continue their work properly, they needed at all times to retain the full use of their hands and arms," he smiled.

The other man nodded. "Their eyes also," he added.

"And of course, their brains, Which goes without saying," finished the other.

He then looked down pointedly at the lower part of the cocoon of sheets and blanket. "But of course, legs and feet and most of the other stuff under the waist, are less important, for an artist. Don't you agree?"

Vladimir felt terrible. So, that was what was about to happen — fractures to both legs. That would be painful. Perhaps even bruised testicles, which would be even worse.

The biggest one stood up and stepped towards him. "But that would be inconvenient too, to our employer that is. You would no longer be able to climb up all these stairs, now would you?"

Vladimir agreed to this analysis and nodded, sipping coffee at the same time.

"SO... our employer said that we should be very careful, and look after you properly. He said he wouldn't like any

unfortunate accidents to happen, as they so often do nowadays in Moscow."

Vladimir nodded understanding.

"Yes" added the other man. "Keep an eye on you. That's what he asked us to do."

"He said that it would be a pity if you were to trip over and fall all the way down those five stories and end up with all your members smashed and mutilated".

"Yes," said his companion. "And never able to paint or draw again. He said that that would be a great pity."

"A loss, I think he said," added the other.

"Yes, that's it. A loss."

Vladimir didn't know how to reply to this, so he nodded and sipped his coffee.

"So he said that we should keep an eye on you while you finished the painting, to make sure that no unfortunate accidents happened to you."

The other man smiled and stepped forward placing a massive paw on Vladimir's' shoulder. "Now that's what I call a considerate man eh!"

Vladimir agreed with an exaggerated nod.

"Our employer wondered if you might find it possible to finish the painting by the end of next week."

Vladimir's eyes opened as wide as saucers at this. That left him with only ten days. He was in the process of opening his mouth to discuss the difficulty of the task, but the bigger of the two rose.

"Good. That's perfect then. We'll pop in every two days to make sure that you have all the supplies you need."

"And that you are in good health," added the second.

The other man tapped him in a friendly way on the shoulder. "If you weren't able to finish in time, that would put our employer in a very awkward position, you understand."

The other man hesitated on his way to the sink. "In that case, he might even consider that it was our fault and

decide not to pay us for our services, and we wouldn't like that at all."

"No," said the other, we would have to pop back and discuss the matter with you."

Vladimir was quite sure that such a discussion would not leave much of him intact and roused himself. "Ok, ok. Ten days is more than enough. I'll get it done don't worry."

"We'll pop back in two days, just to make sure that you're in good health," said the biggest.

"Our employer has asked us to take the picture to the laboratory directly after you've finished. As you know, they are also very busy men, these research people," said the other. "They don't like being kept waiting either."

Vladimir tried to stand, but his cocoon would not permit this. "Yes! Of course, of course. In ten days, it'll be ready."

"Good," said the first, "it's always best to do everything in one's power to avoid accidents."

"Thanks for the coffee," said the first turning away.

The two broad backs moved to the sink deposited their mugs and walked to the door to take their leave. "We'll leave you to do the washing up if you don't mind, we have to get to work now."

Vladimir stared for a few seconds at the closed door then let himself fall back onto the bed.

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