

STEALING FIRE EXTRACT IV: Andy and Xenia Go For A Ride

They rode along the Moscow River, racing towards the Baltschug down the long, winding rope of Kotelnicheskaya Road. She was an expert rider, Harris noticed, weighting the bike through turns, braking before and accelerating through the sharp, angular intersections they were riding through. They pulled up at some lights and Xenia nodded to the left.

Two men sat on a massive customised chopper with flame-red trim. Their bike was idling next to Xenia's Triumph, adding a low roar to her 'cycle's biting growl. The men on the chopper were dressed in full biker leathers and black helmets. As the lights turned green the driver gave a wave to Xenia and blared off in first, his fat exhaust spitting out smoke.

Xenia twisted the old Triumph engine into life. Good girl, thought Andy. She was going to give these bastards a run for their money.

Their Triumph quickly caught up with the chopper – but then Andy realised the other guys were playing them. The driver of the chopper kicked through the gears as they raced under the first bridge and on to Moskvoretskaya. Xenia did the same, all 500 ccs of the Triumph's engine screaming as she strained to keep up with the American machine.

Now they were burning past the Kremlin on the left. They shot under another overpass and on to Prechislenskaya. Xenia leaned over to the right, anticipating a corner, and Andy did the same. Still they were chasing the chopper, Xenia straining forward. Off in the distance, Andy could see the approaching hulk of Krymskiy bridge, beyond which lay Gorky Park.

Andy was just starting to enjoy the chase with these two jokers when the front rider slewed his wheel over to the left and hammered a boot in to the front of Xenia's bike. Andy lurched on to Xenia's back as she braked hard, crunching back through the gears and peeling off into the maze of streets that led up to Ostozhenka. She turned right again and they found themselves on a quiet road, almost a suburb in the middle of this huge city.

“Who the hell they?”, she shouted. “Friends of yours from England?”

“I've never seen them before in my life. I don't know anyone who rides a bike like that. I thought they might be friends of yours.”

“Not after what they did to bike. Look” – and she pointed to a huge dent in the chrome on her front spar. Andy looked down at the front wheel, then looked up again fast.

Xenia had turned left and was rolling slowly up towards Ostozhenka. Their friends on the chopper were in front of them again, coming up fast. Too late to turn round.

About a hundred yards out the driver slammed on the brakes and the ‘cycle skidded out in front of them.

Andy narrowed his eyes. That didn’t look like an accident to him. Looked like an expertly-managed “drop”, something he remembered trying after school with his friends way back when.

Xenia stopped the Triumph’s engine and they got off. The two figures lay on the ground near their bike. One of them was moaning – the other lay still. Andy put his hands on Xenia’s shoulders, trying to hold her back. She shrugged herself free.

She said something in Russian about “pomoc” or something. Neither answered. So she approached the two motionless bodies. Andy could see the chopper had taken a knock when the driver had tumbled it, its flaming gas tank scratched and dented from the drop.

Then she spoke to them in English. “You okay? You need help?”

She got closer to the two bodies. Still nothing.

Andy thought they were dead, or knocked out cold. But then one got up and grabbed Xenia, rammed a Glock 9mm under her chin. His black helmet and leathers made it impossible to know who the hell he was.

“If you want her to stay alive, you’d better follow us.”, said the driver to Andy.

What was that accent? East London? Europe? Hard to tell.

“She means nothing to me. I just met her. Go ahead and kill her – I don’t care.”, said Andy.

Xenia screamed at him in Russian – Andy didn’t need a dictionary to figure out what she was saying. Bastard, liar, cheat, thief, whatever. It was all the same to him.

“We’ll kill her – then we’ll do you. So come and listen to us, then we’ll let you go.”

Andy turned to the other guy who'd been lying there moaning. Only now he must be feeling better, because he had a Magnum Ten pointing right at Andy's chest. Realising there were battles you just had to accept you'd lost, Andy followed the men up an alleyway.

"All right. Calm down. Up against the wall. Face the wall. That's it."

Andy did as he was told. Then he remembered where he'd heard that voice before. He turned his face so he was looking down the wall of the alleyway, so he could half-see the bigger guy with the Glock standing behind him.

The smaller guy laughed. "Gotcha. Now listen to us."

Andy turned round and jumped the big guy, leaping on his weapon arm. But he was still wearing his helmet. He nudded Andy, who fell back in a daze. When he looked up the shorter one had Xenia in a headlock, the Glock pushed up behind her head.

"Mmm. Big mistake. Wouldn't do that again. Not if you want her to live."

Andy was on the ground. The big guy kicked him in the side and he reeled over in pain.

"Now listen to us. I don't know what this Russian bitch has been telling you, but what you're chasing has nothing to do with Afghanistan. It's your bosses, both of them. They're the ones mixed up in this – they're in it for the money, and they're using you to make it look like they're doing something to try and stop Sao Tome."

"Bullshit.", said Harris. "My boss couldn't even mix a gin and tonic, let alone an arms deal."

The smaller guy shoved Xenia down on the ground next to Andy. The big guy took off his helmet and then the smaller one did the same. It was the same two guys who'd hung him off the balcony in Paris. Surprise surprise.

"Remember us, sweetie? We hung you out to dry the other day, right? We're watching you. *Helping you*, if you prefer. So remember where we stand: four more days for you to figure out this crap and get those missiles back, otherwise you're getting it, and so's your boss."

"And you might be getting it too, young lady. Only in a different way.", smiled the smaller guy.

"What you mean? I have done nothing.", protested Xenia.

“Oh no, lady. I likes ya, that’s all I’m saying.”

He picked Xenia up and shoved her against the wall, his face pushed up hard against hers. “Feel my breath on your face and you know I mean business, lady. And I likes to eat my candy without a wrapper, you know? Just like we say in Africa. So I hope you’re clean – I don’t want no rash.”

Andy stood up and lunged at the smaller guy. The big guy grabbed him and whipped him with the butt of the Magnum. Andy fell against the wall. When he wheeled round he saw the guy had cocked his weapon three feet away.

“One move and I’ll split your head like a melon”, sneered the big guy, the scars on his cheeks gleaming with sweat.