

## **Prologue**

*Mira watched the kids playing in the muddy street.*

*They grew up so fast these days. Here in the highland borders of Kazakhstan they were left mostly to themselves, running around all day. But at night, no mother would risk leaving her children out of doors in case the men came down from those snow-tipped peaks that towered above them like angry guardians.*

*The men came to steal healthy children, spiriting them away on horseback in the middle of the night. The people in the village said the men all looked the same, swathed in dark turbans like Iskander or Saladin, moving silently as darkness fell, catching the children whose mothers let them stay out after the fires were lit and the wooden shutters were drawn in the mud-walled houses.*

*One night some of the men from the village had gone out to challenge them armed with Kalashnikovs and ancient sub-machine guns. And those village men were never seen again. But things had gotten worse now. Now babies were being born sick in the village. So many with swollen heads, bulging eyes, weak necks lolling against their mother's breasts. Most of them died in infancy – and death was a blessing for these misshaped, Godforsaken souls.*

*They said it was the radiation from the nuclear tests that did it. But that was twenty, thirty years ago. Mira couldn't understand how that could turn so many children into twisted changelings no-one wanted. Not all these years later.*

*She put her hands nervously on her swollen belly. She hoped her baby would be healthy. She hoped her baby would live...*

## **Gabon, West Africa. 6AM local time.**

Andy Harris woke to the smell of his own blood.

He pulled his head forward from the pillow. The clean reek of antiseptic. The pale, faceless walls.

He was still in Gabon. In the sick bay of the Russian embassy. Outside, the leaves of the tropical forest swayed, the air tanged thick with rain.

He'd been dragged here by the Russians, half-dead and bleeding in pints, after he'd killed those terrorists. All because of that Russian girl, Xenia, who lay dead in the morgue somewhere beneath him.

He had to get out. Kill the bastards who'd set them up. But first he had to find out who they were. He felt like he was going to throw up. Two weeks ago he's been a corporate suit, mooching around at air shows, bored, looking to sell missiles to people who disgusted him. Now he was in the capital city of a country he'd never heard of, trapped as a "guest" riddled with wounds. Some guest. Wonder how they treat their enemies round here?

He leaned over the side of his bed and retched, but nothing came. Wincing in pain, he turned his body to the left. The knife he'd rammed up under the Arab's jaw lay next to his bed, still dirty with dried blood. And his wallet, its contents ruined by the sea when he'd jumped from the freighter before those missiles exploded and turned the ship into shrapnel.

Where was he going? What was he going to do next? Every time he asked himself questions, only one answer came back: revenge. Get the guys behind this and take them out. Well, that was the plan – just a little different from the one he'd had before, which was the company savings plan, fifteen more years shilling missiles to the third world, then golf and gin til he dropped.

Andy picked up the knife from his bedside table and stuck it under his pillow. Obviously the Russians trusted him more than he trusted them. Either that, or they figured he was so badly injured he wouldn't be moving a muscle for a couple more days.

He lay back against the cool pillow, watching with curiosity as a thin line of blood seeped out from the bandage across his chest. The pain grew slowly from a dull nub at his breastbone, rippling across his chest.

That was where the Arab had slashed him. It was all coming back. The Russian launch bouncing across the waves towards the freighter. The RPGs coming in from the Russians as they tried to sink that lurching ship before the terrorist's missiles launched themselves over the water to London. And those missiles primed and ready – built from the designs the terrorists had stolen from Andy's employer, Luxor Systems.

Better make that his former employer. No chance he'd be making the Christmas party any time soon. Not now that his boss, Bob Stone, had been killed by someone unknown. As for Andy himself, he'd probably ruined his firm's chances of selling weapons to Africa for the foreseeable future. Who gave those terrorists the designs? How did they get the skills to make them?

A million questions and no answers. That was all he wanted – answers. Answers, and a chance to avenge Xenia's death however long it took. But first he had to get out of here.

He heard a noise in the corridor and closed his eyes. If the Russians came in, he wanted them to think he was still so badly injured that he was on his way out. At death's door. Which he was, of course, some time soon – only out the window or out the doors, rather than dead. Hopefully.

The bland-panelled door to his room opened and a pretty blonde nurse came in and smiled at him. She reminded him of Xenia a little, so he closed his eyes harder. Xenia. He remembered his mouth on hers, his tongue pressing, searching, their bodies clasped together on the cool marble floor of a hotel bathroom in Dubai. A million miles and a lifetime away – that’s what it felt like now.

“You are awake?”

Andy opened his eyes as slowly as he could, the gauze around the wound on his forehead stretching as he did so. He grunted and tried to sit up.

“Be still. You have lost lot of blood and were operated on twice. You have total of seventy-three stitches in chest, arm and head. In two days, stitches should be completely dissolved and we can start rehabilitation. Meanwhile, you need plenty meat and eggs. Protein to rebuild.”

Andy reached out and pulled gently at her hand, wanting to make it look like the last wish of the dying. She hesitated and pulled against him.

“I suppose a glass of bourbon’s out of the question?”, he croaked, giving her a weak smile.

He thought he was going to get a slap. But she pulled her hand away and turned to her tray of medicines. No bourbon, but more morphine injections he didn’t want or need. She turned to face him again, a syringe filled with golden-brown liquid in her hand.

“Maybe Piotr was right – you are nice man, but weak: drinker, smoker and gambler. And you never know when to stop. But now you are sick: you must rest.”

Andy tried to remember who the hell Piotr was. Never met the guy. Not so he'd remember, anyway. Harris tried another guilty little smile, like a schoolboy caught skiving off lessons. Her features softened and she relented a little.

“Maybe if you eat everything I give you today, we see about giving you a little drink tomorrow, OK? Now back to sleep. You almost died, you know.”

“And when I woke up and saw you, I thought I'd gone to heaven.”

Idiot. That kind of comment came from the self-satisfied arse he used to be. Still, not so happy now, huh? Or so pleased with himself. God knows what he was going to do now.

The nurse blushed and turned away, busied herself with tidying the room. She drew the curtains and turned out the light before closing the door. Andy listened to the hum of the overhead fan in the darkness, heard the curtains whispering in the tropical heat.

Seconds later he had fallen asleep again.

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### ***Dubai— 24 hours later***

Nesta Macfarlane flipped his phone shut in frustration and looked across to the other side of the plush hotel bar. He'd been in Dubai for four days and found nothing. Not a trace of the man he'd been sent here to track down.

Still, Head Office were being kind to him. Six months to find out as much as he could about Kalle Farien, international arms dealer and cheating scum. The man they suspected of all kinds of tomfoolery – including that business last week in Africa with the freighter and the missiles. Only Head Office also thought he was up to worse. Much worse.