

New York City – Gabriel has called me over to his apartment. We haven't taken a case in a while so I'm hoping it's for work. I wish I could say that the lack of assignments is why we haven't spoken much in the last month, but it just wouldn't be true. I screwed things up pretty well about two months ago and people I hold dear were hurt¹. If I were anyone else, I'd just be talking about a little emotional damage, but I'm not like many other people. My co-workers, who I count among my friends, were kidnapped and tortured because of me. One of those friends, Victoria "Street" Calle, is Gabriel's daughter.

The man who did it is Mansfield Christensen and I've been looking for him ever since. Maybe Gabriel is calling me in to let me know I'm being relieved of my responsibilities. This private op gig is a very special opportunity and I'm thankful that Gabriel picked me to take over for him – it really is an honor. But if I'm no longer the field operative for Archangel Security Consultants, that won't stop me from hunting down Mansfield Christensen. There is no justice to be had for what he's done, so I plan on delivering cold hard vengeance.

"Sit down, Hammond."

"How are things, boss?"

"Don't be cute. You know how things are with me. Just like I know how things are with you. You're in no shape for casework because you're fixated on this Christensen guy. I've got people on the trail, people with more resources than us."

"I'm just not like you, Gabriel. I can't be detached and thoughtful all the time. I need to do something, be involved."

"You are not helping, plain and simple. So I called you here to tell you a story."

"Are you serious?"

"It was 1993. The Iron Curtain had rusted and crumbled as a result of the Cold War and I was sent to Nicaragua. It was believed that some former KGB hard liners were in South America, hoping to destabilize the region politically with an increased drug trade."

Gabriel gets up, walks around to where I am seated, then leans back on his desk, folding his arms comfortably. He's dug in now.

¹ Read "Razzle Dazzle" for more on these events

“I’d built a reputation in the Eastern Bloc so I was seen as somewhat of an expert, and was embedded with a platoon of Marine Intelligence officers. We spent most of our time spying on the local drug lords but we would also play a key role if the US decided to invade Cuba – which was a real possibility what with Communism on the decline in Europe.”

Very rarely does the old man wax nostalgic about “the old days” but he should. The man is full of astonishing stories and he tells them with the reverence and gravitas of a Greek mythologist.

“Clinton was playing political hardball with Castro using increased economic sanctions, but kept the option of military aggression in his back pocket, just in case.”

Then he winks at me. And then he reaches back for the crystal decanter of Talisker 10-Year Old on his desk. I swear he does this for dramatic effect. He pours himself a glass and, without offering me one, goes on with his story.

“After a couple months I met a girl. She told me her name was Dawn, but who knows if that was her real name. She was a dancer², down in Nicaragua for God knows what. There were a few American girls there at the time. Maybe they were thrilled by the idea of being a modern day gangster’s moll, Hell I don’t know. But Dawn was beautiful. She had a great personality too. The only thing was she had this terrible stutter. It drove all the other guys crazy, but it never bothered me much. In fact, I’d say it drew me to her even more.”

It would be around this point in the movie when *Elegy for Dunkirk*³ starts playing (the Jeff Beck version⁴, of course, for that added edge).

“Anyway, the Marines and I spent most of our days at the radio equipment, listening for chatter. We spent our nights at local bars, listening in for vital information. We could never let on that each of us was proficient in Spanish so we could eavesdrop with little molestation. One evening, our group was confronted by a bunch of drunken locals. The leader-type broke a bottle on the bar and pointed it threateningly at each of us. He said in Spanish ‘We know who you are. We know why you are here. You must leave!’ We continued to feign confusion but were ushered out of the place anyway. Nothing else happened, but we were all a little shaken up.”

² Read “stripper”

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVuRWdu_lfg

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yoHztn5J-4M>

Gabriel takes a sip of the scotch and ponders for a moment.

"I took it harder than the rest. It felt too personal. I thought that I was being given a message from the Russians there that I should watch my back. I didn't like it. And being full of piss and vinegar back then, I felt like I could do something about it too."

Did he say "back then?!"

"At the time, we knew there was at least one Russian outfit in the area looking to prop up the next big drug kingpin. So I decided to do something about it."

"Don't tell me you went all Rambo out there in that South American jungle."

Gabriel shakes his head gravely then knocks back the rest of his drink.

"After identifying the location of the Russian operators, I took some of my Marines to the designated spot and we took out the Russians."

The last part comes out so matter-of-factly, as if it didn't actually happen to him. Gabriel Sexton is one of the most dangerous men I know. I say that because he is one of the smartest people I have ever met. He is systematically calculating all the time. So when he tells me that he murdered a camp full of Russians in South America, I know there is a depth to his understanding of the situation that I will never comprehend. But even though he'll never show it to me directly, I can tell that the moment he has just described changed him forever. And then he lets out a big sigh.

"But there is a reason why I told you that story, Hammond."

"I get it, we all have our dark moments and I shouldn't let mine consume me."

"While that is true, it is not the point of the story."

"There's more?"

"Only for you would that be the end of the story."

"A little unnecessary but not altogether unfair," I say.

"It happened while we were cleaning up the Russian camp. There were only about seven guys there and we got the drop on them, so made quick work of the whole thing. After all the wetworks, we had to clean the area. I found a young soldier hiding while we ransacked the place. I couldn't bring myself to end him then and there, so I left him in his hiding place. Eventually I got the Marines out of there and we reported back to our base camp."

"So the young soldier you found, he didn't try to kill you?"

“Oh no, he didn’t just try. He succeeded.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means that I don’t know what happened to that kid but, whoever he is, he’s the person who killed the man that Gabriel Sexton used to be.”

“And how did he do that?”

“I got shipped the hell out of Nicaragua not long after that little stunt I pulled. But before I left I got word that Dawn had been murdered.”

I’m on my way to a meeting and I can’t get Gabriel’s damned story out of my head. The point definitely hit home. I’ve gotten enough people hurt over this thing already. I have to step back for a moment and let it all play out. Luckily I’m going to meet up with Holden Matthews, my cousin on my mother’s side. Reacquainting myself with the other half of my family is part of what brought me to New York seven years ago. Both of my parents were movie stars but they came from very different worlds. My mother, Jillian Howe, was a Manhattan socialite and comes from a long line of blue bloods. The Howes have been successful in New York City for generations; lawyers, bankers, architects - you name it. The Howe name carries influence and they have a genuine legacy around here. But it’s hard to think of myself as a Howe, since I was raised as a Hammond in Oregon with my father’s parents.

I arrive at Keen’s⁵ a little late and am surprised to be the first one here. Recalling Gabriel’s stinginess with his Talisker, and not one to be outdone, I order a Lagavulin 16 to sip while I wait. Sitting in our usual private booth in the back of the restaurant, I can almost feel my blood getting bluer. Come to think of it, I actually feel disconnected from everything at this moment. Perhaps this is how the rich separate themselves from the rest of society, after all, I can see how being ushered about from one private room to another in a private car could put one in a bit of a bubble. Or maybe it’s just me.

Cousin Holden arrives 15 minutes later, making him only about 35 minutes late for our reservation. I stand to greet him and, as always, come

⁵ <http://www.keens.com/>

away impressed at how perfect his handshake is – firm enough to dominate the grip, but it doesn't feel like he's got your hand in a vice.

“Lunch is on you, right,” he says. “I'm just a lowly civil servant, you know.”

“Okay, pal. So how are things at the *DOJ*?”

“Don't think I don't notice how you refer to my job like that, cousin.”

“What? Is it obvious? I mean, come on, though. I work for a real ‘Justice Department.’ You just work for the President of the United States.”

“Oh, you are so paying for this lunch.”

“But seriously, how are things?”

“I'll put it this way, in a case I read today were the words ‘You'd better pull it out if you want your fried chicken and spinach tomorrow’ and the context is nowhere near what you'd think it is. There may not be bullets whizzing by my head but there is certainly never a dull moment in the U.S. Attorney's office.”

“That's good,” I say. “But when times do get tough, just ask yourself, WWRFKD?”

“RFK? I like it. But at this point, I'd be happy with ‘JFK Jr.’ status. Ambition may not have been his specialty, but that guy was really trying to do something different.”

“Almost pulled it off too.”

“That's right. He was definitely an inspiration.”

“Yeah, well, at least the Howe family isn't cursed.” As soon as the words leave my lips, I think about my mother.

“While we're on the subject of our family, let's talk about something that has come to my attention recently. You're familiar with Trevor Howe, right?”

“He's our uncle. I've met him a few times but we aren't what I'd call close. Though, he's the one who made it possible for me to afford places like this.”

“Ah, that's right. He turned your parents' 80's movie star money into Millennial movie star money.”

“Something like that. Is he in some kind of trouble?”

“He isn't, no. But a friend in the FBI told me about an investigation into a possible Russian spy ring, and one of the suspects works for Bernard & Lautner.”

He stops talking after that and I feel like he expects me to respond. I open my mouth and that's when the food arrives. My jaw slacks a little more.

"I took the liberty of ordering for us while en route," he says with a grin before taking the first bite of his perfectly medium rare rib eye.

"Who the hell is Bernard Lautner?"

"Bernard & Lautner is the accounting firm that handles Trevor Howe's money. And yours."

"You have my attention."

"Trevor doesn't know about the investigation yet, but my mother was recently approached by a group of Russians looking for capital to start a business here. Naturally it seems like no small coincidence that my mom was contacted by Russians when her brother's accounting firm might have a Russian mole in it."

"You want me to look into it?"

"If you can."

"I happen to be available now."

"Great. I already told mom not to take the meeting and that I'd check it out first."

"Well, I guess since you're officially a client now, lunch should be on you."

"I understand. Besides, you may not be able to afford places like this if all your money gets converted to rubles."

"We'll just have to make sure that doesn't happen then, won't we?"

After lunch I go home⁶ to try to digest this whole situation and wait for more details from Holden. When I walk in, the first thing I notice is that Street is using the pool room. She's been coming here a lot more often to use the pool since we got back from London. And that's when it dawns on me that Gabriel likely hasn't been taking on jobs because of her. She's our resident computer specialist and he's been working on establishing a relationship with her ever since she came on board with us. To call this a

⁶ [214 Lafayette St](#)

setback for them doesn't even begin to identify what I have created. He's trying to protect her and that's admirable. Then I realize that I've been standing here staring all this time. Though, in truth, I didn't really see her. All I see, whenever I look at Street these days, is the expression on her face that day. That day that I found her bound and gagged with every bone in both her hands broken. She and Smith were also each tied to homemade explosive devices. And it was all my fault.

Street hasn't been able to forgive me yet and I understand that. Even if she does see her way to moving past this someday, I never will. I collect myself and retreat upstairs unseen. Seeking the solace of my private patio garden and finding none there, I rack my brain for a solution.

The answer lies in the MMA studio down the street. I've come here to build up a sweat and blow off some steam. There's always someone willing to tangle here, after all these guys are looking for a career beating the snot out of each other. Me, I'm just here for a little catharsis - nothing quite clears your head like getting your bell rung. I once overheard someone make a "Tyler Durden" reference about me. I'll take that as a compliment.

I end up in the ring with a new guy, but it doesn't really matter who I fight. In this place they're all basically different variations on the same theme: -young -tattoos -hair gel -childish nickname which I immediately forget. This one is bulky, though not as slow as he looks. He practices Muay Thai and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, so there are two more checks for the list. Savate is a kick-based street fighting style and, since I use it for actual fighting I don't have the same approach as a competitive savateur. I'm more of a purist like that. These guys are younger and stronger than me with more training, but I usually win because few of them know what Savate is - so have no idea how to defend it.

Still, I'm at a disadvantage if I let this guy get in close because all I'd have is my wits at that point, and he'd have technique on his side. I picked up a little judo in the Corps, but definitely not enough to hang with a trained fighter so I have to use my quickness and strong kicks to keep him at bay. He's catches on to my strategy pretty quickly and is now actively looking for opportunities to get in close for a takedown. Luckily I don't need big sweeping kicks to keep him at a distance, which would leave my inside open. Now he's getting upset. He's tired of thinking and reacting, so patience is out the window now. Okay, time to finish this. I lure my opponent in with a big roundhouse kick (or **fouette**) with my right foot. He

dodges it and comes in close, but I catch him with a **chasse bas**, a hard strike to his thigh with my left foot⁷. The chasse bas is enough to disorient him, so I overwhelm him with fists to the face, forcing him to back up to avoid my assault. Now I can go in for a sweep with a nice kick to his Achilles tendon. The next thing he knows he's on his back –and hard.

Walking home from my Savate therapy session, I feel like a new man. I'm excited about this case from my coz. I don't think there's something nefarious afoot but I'm curious to see how the whole thing turns out. I'm looking forward to just having something to do. Nancy would know exactly what I should do. Too bad I haven't spoken to her since Bangladesh⁸. I've been so caught up trying to forget London that I forgot I'm supposed to be trying to not think about Nancy Pierce.

Back at home, Street is sitting on the sofa watching some action movie starring Andrew Dice Clay. She doesn't turn to greet me. Dunior is in the kitchen behind her, preparing a kale, carrot, and beet salad with goat cheese and pine nuts. Uh-oh, he's bringing out the big guns. That's the type of thing he uses on the girls from his yoga class when they come over for a yoga date. I give Dunior a hearty grip on his shoulder.

"Yeah, man, so that guy from Google called me back."

"Oh? So what's the deal?"

"He said that no matter how much of your money I offer him, they just won't install one of those Autopilot devices in the Hummer. Dammit! I tell you, man, those fuckin' cocksuckers with their 'moral ambiguities' and shit! We put so much work into rebuilding that fucker! There's no way I'm not getting to drive it!"

After he's done with his rant, I give Tim the good news. "It's time for some action," is all I have to say.

"Fuck that shit, man. You need some action."

I give him the "confused dog" head tilt before remembering that he's blind – because I'm dumb like that sometimes. Never one to be underestimated, the man we call Dunior (Dude Junior) responds by vigorously humping the cabinets in front of him while wearing a grin the Devil himself would admire.

"When are you going to grow up, Dunior?"

⁷ If I were to do this in a real fight, my goal would be to destroy his knee, but that isn't on the menu today.

⁸ You've obviously already read Razzle Dazzle, so you're all caught up on that score...

“When you no longer need me to be your clown, man. Now go work on gettin’ laid!”

Looking over the information that Holden sent over, this company that reached out to his mom is a pretty interesting one. They run a website called AuctionHouse.com where they use proprietary software to auction off US properties to wealthy Russian citizens. Having a condo in NYC is a status symbol no matter where you are but, with the economy going into the tank all over the world, there are plenty looking to tie their money up in an investment here that could also end up being a golden parachute down the road. A lot of the Russian oligarchs have already done just this in London, but the younger, nouveau riche are looking to NYC. I’d certainly consider investing if there wasn’t this huge red shadow hanging over the whole thing. Hell, if I’m right and these guys are legit, I think I will buy in. I fire off a quick email to the person who contacted my aunt Avery, letting him know that she isn’t interested at the moment but that I am. It isn’t long before I receive a call from Leonid Dubrovin and we arrange a getting-to-know-you in Manhattan where we can get more acquainted.

The fact that we’re meeting in the Flatiron Building in Midtown is comforting. It adds a bit of legitimacy to the whole proceeding. If we were gathering in the back of some restaurant in Bay Ridge, I would be concerned. Their office is in one of those office share environments where different companies all occupy space on the same floor. According to the names on the Directory, there are mostly technology start-ups here – which means they’re in the right neighborhood. Walking through the joint, the Auction House space is one of the largest ones I see. Maybe that means something and maybe it doesn’t. It strikes me that I haven’t yet come across anyone that I would immediately stereotype as a computer programmer. That is odd. Maybe that means something and maybe it doesn’t.

“Mr. Hammond?”

“Ya got me.”

“Very well. I am Leonid Dubrovin. A pleasure to meet you.”

Dubrovin brings me through the labyrinthine office share space, ultimately arriving at a conference room. He makes me a cappuccino with ones

of those k-cup machines. Before I can take my second sip, we are joined by four more people. One of those four people is a gorgeous redhead. She is introduced as Katya Demyanova. Another of the new people in the room is a man in his mid-to-late fifties who gives the rather distinct impression of a former KGB agent. Beyond his stern demeanor, the man's eyes are everywhere. By that I don't mean "looking around the room constantly," no, this man is observing the situation. I see his focus hold for just a moment every few seconds, as the cold blue eyes scan the room. He's taking stock of everything seen. I should know what this looks like, since I'm doing the same thing. Well, it looks like I have my work cut out for me today after all.

"Everything sounds good, Leonid. There's certainly a market for your service and there are a few companies operating profitably with a similar business model, but let me ask a stupid question. Where is your programming staff?"

"That is an excellent question, Mr. Hammond. As you may know, it is becoming increasingly difficult to run a new business in Russia, due to the recent US sanctions. This is part of the reason we are here."

"Yeah, that whole thing with Crimea was already pretty bad, but the debacle with Poland was disastrous."

"Devastating, actually. So, while our programmers will continue to operate out of a modest office just outside Moscow, a large part of our operation must be in the US."

"I see."

"Katya will be responsible for running the New York office and we are relying on her to establish the connections we need to grow our business here."

"Ah, interesting. You know, real estate has always been big business in New York but it's also closely tied to the social scene.

"I know," Katya interjects coyly. "My job is to be popular."

"And I have no doubt that you will have great success with that."

"So many parties and celebrities, it is like a dream," she says with a glint of mischief in her eye that is irresistible.

"Next week, I'll be hosting a party at my townhouse, which is one of the most unique spaces in the city⁹, to debut a friend's new art collection.

⁹ [my awesome place](#)

Let me get your contact information and I'll be sure to invite you. I think I know some people you may want to meet."

Back at my place, all I could think about is Katya Demyanova. I started thinking about what Tim had said earlier then came up with an idea. So here we are, on a plane to Las Vegas - me and Katya Demyanova. There is a big part of me that needs this. I literally need to escape for a breather and this also gives me the opportunity to dig a little deeper into this case. With almost daily on-the-job training from one of the most successful counter intelligence agents the US has ever produced, I think I have a good chance to ferret out whether or not this woman is a spy. Still, something about Katya is magnetic.

She doesn't fit the stereotype of a Russian femme fatale. Ms. Demyanova has curly red hair instead of the typical straight and blonde. The blue eyes are there, although I can't recall ever having met a Russian with freckles before. Her skin is relatively tan but there is still a cluster of red dots you can see on her cheeks when you get close enough. I've gotten close enough and it's like a little secret.

On the flight we mostly talk about London although I pick up a lot about her past as well. If she does turn out to be a Russian Foreign Intelligence agent, then it is all likely smoke and mirrors. So if it is bullshit, at least it's fascinating bullshit.

From what I can gather, Katya has had quite the international upbringing. Her father was the Russian ambassador to Kenya, where she was born and spent the first few years of her life. She eventually went back to Russia at some point, but graduated from the Sorbonne in Paris eight years ago. With a history like that and a degree in International Business & Languages its little surprise that she has a relatively unnoticeable accent. After the Sorbonne, Katya lived in London for a while, so we talk a lot about pubs, football, and proper fish & chips. It turns out she's a Liverpool fan, which is almost unforgivable, but at least it isn't bloody Tottenham.

Once we're off the plane the lesson is pretty much over. The one thing I did learn from the flight is that this woman has a girlish quality that I really appreciate. We spend three days in Vegas and the trip can be best defined by sex, magic, and gourmet food. Katya particularly loved the magic acts. Case in point, on a day that included flyboarding¹⁰ on Lake Las Vegas, I think the highlight for both of us came that night, which found her running down the strip (with me in tow) chasing a dove that had been released into the air by a street magician. The pure glee she exuded in that moment, and others like it, was palpable. It was positively captivating.

Back in New York, terrible news awaits me on the tarmac at LaGuardia Airport this evening. While I was off gallivanting in Las Vegas with Katya Demyanova, my cousin was poisoned at some football player's charity fundraiser. I don't have any details yet but am on my way to the hospital now. Katya and I go our separate ways at the taxi stand – she gets a cab to the Trump Hotel at Columbus circle with a head full of vague excuses and a couple of outright lies. I head over to the garage and pick up my BMW i8¹¹ to make my way into Manhattan to see how Holden is doing.

I slip in to the Lenox Hill Hospital from the roof just to avoid family members in the waiting room. I cannot face them right now. Not to throw a pity party or anything but I don't know if I have room in my life for any more guilt.

Standing over Holden, laying there in that hospital bed with the IV in his arm and tubes up his nose, I don't even know what to feel anymore. Machines beep and hum all around this room that reeks of ammonia and cheap lemon scent. A nurse enters and starts to scold me for being where I shouldn't. I pay her no mind, but let her go on a bit more. All of a sudden it dawns on her that she should be afraid and she stops talking, yet is frozen in place. She must see it in my eyes –that I'm restraining, stemming the emotional tide building up to something indescribable inside me. She's

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4Bm3cs9TFo> & <http://www.flyboardlasvegas.com/>

¹¹ http://www.bmw.com/_common/shared/newvehicles/i/i8/2014/showroom/videos/BMW_i8_Launchfilm_mp4-neu.mp4

seized with terror at what I may be holding back. (Frankly, so am I.) I didn't anticipate this, though it is a welcome relief from her agitated threats. Though it certainly wasn't my intention to frighten her, I won't miss the opportunity to use this to my advantage. I don't tell her to relax or say that I won't hurt her. I just quietly tell her that she needs to bring the attending doctor right away. The nurse backs out of the room slowly then walks down the hall at a rapid pace. If there was any hint of menace in my tone, she'll be back with security, but if I played it right, the doctor will be here shortly.

"There are extremely high levels of nicotine in your cousin's system," the doctor explains – about two minutes later.

"Number one, Holden doesn't smoke and number two, how does this have anything to do with his current condition?"

"It has everything to do with the current situation. He appears to be suffering from nicotine poisoning. There are trace amounts of nicotine on his skin and very high levels in his blood and his urine."

"Nicotine poisoning? I just don't get it. So, what's the prognosis?"

"Well, it looks like we got to him just in time. If they'd waited much longer to bring him in, the outlook could be severely different, but I'm expecting a full recovery."

"Okay, I can breathe a little easier now. Now talk to me about nicotine poisoning."

"We found over 3000 milligrams of nicotine in Mr. Matthews' blood."

"That sounds like a lot..."

"It is quite a lot. In fact, 1000 milligrams of nicotine is considered a fatal amount but, again, we were lucky to be able to administer treatment in a timely manner, and that, together with your cousin's excellent physical condition, are contributing factors to his recovery."

"How does someone get that much nicotine in their system?"

"In my experience, which is admittedly limited in this area, one would have to be literally eating tobacco or rubbing large amounts of it on the skin in order to have that much nicotine in their bloodstream."

I call Gabriel and get nothing but his automated "unavailable" message. I need to clear my head and get a good think on so I plug in the Ultrasones¹²,

¹² <http://www.cnet.com/products/ultrasone-signature-pro/>

turn up the Bassnectar¹³, and walk the streets. Ten minutes into the think walk, my phone rings.

“Intermission just started, so you’ve got 10 minutes to get up here and buy yourself a ticket.”

Gabriel hangs up and I check his GPS location on my phone. He’s at the 92nd St Y¹⁴. As luck would have it, that isn’t very far from where I am, so I jog up to the theatre to go over what I’ve learned with Gabriel.

After I buy my ticket and rush inside, I catch Gabriel out the corner of my eye. He’s leaning against a wall to the far left of the room. He’s just standing there alone with a “92nd St. Y” sippy cup of scotch in his hand. Nothing about his demeanor changes as I turn to walk towards him. And I know he’s seen me. I wonder how many people here realize he’s even in the room.

“Glenlivet?”

“18?”

“12.”

“No thanks.” I have my dignity.

“Elitist snob.”

“That may be, but I can still blow a hair off your balls from half a mile away. So no hard feelings. Come on, your next one’s on me.”

“Didn’t you hear the chimes? Time to get back to our seats.”

And, with that, he just swallows his scotch, lazily tosses his cup into a nearby trash can, and walks away.

I go up to my seat in the balcony and get settled for whatever it is I just paid to see. It’s clear I’m in for some piano music, as evidenced by the Steinway dominating the small stage like a shiny, obese panther in a taxidermy display. As the show begins, it dawns on me that I’ve ever sat through a proper piano recital before. The performance is both boring and engrossing at the same time, but the mind of the performer intrigues me. Outside of my camera work, I’m not a big participant of the art scene, despite living in the center of the art world in this country. I just don’t get the people. And after sitting through the performance, I’m filled with questions about what must be going through the mind of the pianist throughout the whole thing.

¹³ <https://itunes.apple.com/us/artist/bassnectar/id2900657>

¹⁴ <http://www.92y.org/Uptown/Concerts.aspx>

Meeting Gabriel in the lobby, I keep my questions to myself, asking the only one that matters at this moment.

“So what was this all about?”

“Piotr Andreivich, better known as **Tovarishch Dymok.**”

“And he is...?”

“He’s a Russian assassin with a very specific method. He smokes cigars laced with Blackleaf40 to deliver lethal doses of nicotine to his victims.”

“Sounds like something out of a James Bond movie.”

“If you think that sounds crazy, then I won’t tell you that we tried to do something similar to Castro back in the day.”

“I heard something like that on one those conspiracy theory websites Tim is always reading.”

“I’m certainly not surprised about that. We were lazy about the whole thing,” Gabriel drifts off into memory for a moment, then grimaces. “Several people lost their life to deliver a box of cigars to Fidel, each one of them laced with Blackleaf40. Death would have been almost instantaneous for The Beard, but it didn’t work. Our friend, Piotr, takes a decidedly less direct approach. His victims usually die hours later, with little in the way of explanation, other than a very confusing toxicology report.”

“So you think this Piotr Andreivich guy is the person who poisoned my cousin?”

“Yes and no. Andreivich should be dead by now, most likely of nicotine poisoning. He must have some sort of tolerance built of, but his is basically a suicide mission. It’s only a matter of time before it all catches up to him.”

“So you think perhaps a copycat?”

“Yes and no.”

“I hate you, Gabriel Sexton.”

“Well, be that as it may, I expected you to come out of there with a fresh set of eyes and a clear head. I know I always do. For some reason, which I have yet to put my finger on, when I walk out of a piano concert, I’m as sharp as Otto von Bismarck.”

“Swimming usually does the trick for me, but Street is always in my pool these da--”

“I know. Look, what I’m trying to get at is that, one way or another, Andreivich has likely been replaced with a younger version by now. I don’t know who the new Tovarishch Dymok is, but I’d wager a tidy sum that someone

with a Russian accent sat with your cousin for an extended period of time tonight. That's who you need to find."

"At the party, I met a Russian woman who works at Bernard & Lautner; her name is Anna. She was there with her uncle, who had the most foul-smelling cigar I've ever encountered," Holden tells me the next day, in between hacking coughs. His skin has a yellow pallor that's hard to ignore. The smell of cleaning chemicals is now gone - replaced, unfortunately, with the harsh odor emanating from cousin Holden.

"This uncle, was he looking around all the time?"

"I couldn't really say. I was trying my best to avoid the guy. That cigar of his was just awful."

"Makes sense. Did his demeanor strike you as particularly, I don't know, rigid?"

"I'd say he was pretty stiff."

Holden has another coughing fit that temporarily drowns out the beeping and whirring from the machines surrounding his bed.

"Okay, that's great. What about Anna? You think she's the one, don't you? That's why you spoke with her."

"Yes. I thought maybe I could get something from her. At the time I did think it was odd that I bumped into her at a charity fundraiser, though now I'm convinced she was there just for me."

"You're right about that. Last night was an attempt on your life, not just some warning."

"Then I must be doing something right."

"Have you gotten in touch with Uncle Trevor?"

"That's what I was trying to do when I collapsed."

"Well don't worry about it. After last night, I don't expect our Anna, if that is her real name, to be reporting in for work today. I'll go over to B&L to see what I can dig up on her."

145 Reade Street is where I can find the offices of Bernard & Lautner. This is, of course, a very important place in my life, yet I have never been here before. My financial advisor is Sal Bisegna, so I just think of him as "Sal." Plus, he is more than happy to come to my place whenever we need to

meet, since I live across the street from the best taco joint/speakeasy in Manhattan¹⁵. The place is a five-story townhouse with the offices of Bernard & Lautner comprising the first three floors. (The secret love child of some used-to-be starlet, whose name I can't be bothered to remember, rents the duplex apartment above.) Sal hasn't been picking up his phone, nor has anyone else in the office on my last seven calls.

So even if the place didn't smell like gas the moment I push the front door open, I'd still be suspicious. Almost every cell in my body is telling me to turn around and make a run for it. And then there are my little grey cells, as Hercule Poirot likes to call them, which say to go in, because there are answers inside.

"Come join me," says a powerful, if raspy, voice from within.

I know who it is instantly before I see him, sitting there in a small glass-walled conference room. He's grinning at me when I step into full view. How long has this smug bastard been sitting there with that stupid look on his face? He's fiddling with a vintage lighter which turns out to have that Nazi eagle symbol¹⁶ on it.

"Tovarishch Dymok," I say. "I am honored."

"Bah! I am not Tovarishch Dymok anymore. This is last mission."

"As I said, I am honored."

"Fine. Be honored. Soon you be dead anyway."

"Fair enough. Is it just the two of us going on this trip?"

He shrugs, "I did what I could."

I'll take that to mean that he has cleared the building. There's no need for unnecessary wetworks on a job like this.

"So, you're going out with a bang, eh?"

"More like a boom."

His little chuckle turns into a big cough. It sounds nasty and full of phlegm. It's a reminder of who he is – and that's when it strikes me.¹⁷

"I'm sure this is the hardest time you've ever had lighting a match."

"Da. But is only way for me."

"So, you've been waiting for me?"

"Niet. Was wanting your boss, Gabriel Sexton. He is CIA but you are not. It is shame to die for other man's war."

¹⁵ <http://www.esquinanyc.com/>

¹⁶ [The Parteiadler](#)

¹⁷ Pun intended...

"Says the man about to kill me."

"Is war," is all he says, punctuated by a casual shrug.

"How do you know I'm not CIA?"

At this, he smiles, "Because I am still alive."

He's baiting me. There's enough natural gas in the air that pulling my trigger would be enough to ignite this whole place. The silent killer pulls a cigar out of his jacket pocket with all the ceremony of a samurai unsheathing a brand new blade. Taking a moment to inhale deeply of its aroma, he sighs heavily.

"Is Cuban. The absolute best."

"Going out in style, eh?"

"You should leave now."

I'm out the door like a shot. On the street, I'm trying to get people away from the building. Then there's the sound. It's like a sonic boom in my ears. I instinctively crouch and leap to the side. Windows from the neighboring building shatter violently, but with the ringing in my ears they are seen and not heard. The smoke and the flames don't even register, even as they lick past me. I feel the sudden rush of heat but am untouched by it. While scanning the area for injured people, out of the corner of my eye I see movement. A car parked next to me flies straight up into the air with a burst of flames beneath it, like a rocket. The car lands upside down, in the middle of the street, with what I can only imagine is a huge crashing sound.

I've got an address for Anna Sinelnikova, so that's my next stop. This is a beast, great power but can be a bit unwieldy at times, so as I'm navigating my way across the Brooklyn Bridge, I go over everything in my head. If she was at the party with Holden and the smoking man, then either she was a dupe who's also been poisoned or she's now Madame Dymok. The trip to Brooklyn is not a short one because I have to go all the way to Brighton Beach, so I have plenty of time to wrap my head around this case. If you're not familiar with "Little Odessa," I could basically swim to Staten Island from there, because it is at the southern edge of Brooklyn.

Anna works for Bernard & Lautner, so she makes enough money to live in a more convenient neighborhood, so the fact that she chooses to live here and trek half a day, each way, to work is telling. Certainly she should be able to do better than an "Archie Bunker" style house on Brighton 6th St. This is a predominantly Russian neighborhood so I understand the cultural connection, but looking around, I see very few people in Anna's tax bracket here.

I don't know if my slog through the narrow, congested streets could legally be called "driving" but I eventually make it to the right place. Parking is basically non-existent, so I leave the i8 in front of the nearest fire hydrant. The moment I step out of the car, I smell food cooking, the aroma of which is completely unrecognizable to me. But, hey, if I can't read the signs, why should I be able to identify the smells, right?

Because it's better to ask forgiveness than permission, I go through the front door with extreme prejudice. My Glock 18 drawn, I bust in the door and my mind automatically switches back to Iraq, circa 2003, when the Marines were going house to house, kicking in doors, looking for insurgents. In the kitchen, I'm yanked back to reality as I see that Anna is using Katya Demyanova as a human shield, at gunpoint. In the last 48 hours, this has woman poisoned my cousin, fire bombed the offices of Bernard & Lautner, and is now kidnapping the woman I spent the weekend with. This tying up of loose ends, though worthy of Michael Corleone, is feeling kind of personal right now.

"Ashiel! What's going on? She said she's going to kill me!"

In reply, Anna jams the gun into Katya's side, which makes her scream out in terror. She then whispers something into her prisoner's ear. Katya stifles her crying to a whimper, but the tears flowing from her eyes seem to make her even more upset. With her gun jammed squarely into Katya's side, Anna pulls the trigger. Katya crumples to the ground and I take a shot, but Anna isn't there. She'd ducked down when Katya fell and scurried for the back door. I run to catch Katya, and let off a few shots in the general direction of the backyard. But I have to be careful; letting off automatic weapon fire in a residential neighborhood is never a good idea. Catching my freckled redhead, I realize that there's no blood. Anna pulled a fast one, she must have let off just behind Katya. Damn she's good.

"You're okay. She didn't shoot you. Just lay here on the cold linoleum; it will actually help relax you. I'm going after her."

I leave Katya with a kiss on the forehead and make for the back door. In the small, paved over backyard, I catch a glimpse of Anna running down a shared driveway, heading south. She'd just scaled the large fence that separates her yard from the driveway. Making my way over the fence, I see Anna finishing off the even larger wrought-iron gate which is the opening to the driveway. Now on the street, Anna takes aim at me and smiles before whipping her arm to the left and firing.

What the hell was that?! And then I hear it. Running down the driveway, I'm confronted by a large grey pit-bull with a full head of steam coming right at me. He's barking and salivating and his eyes are locked on me. I can't afford to lose traction. I shoot the dog, then shoot the lock off the gate. By the time I get through, Anna is nowhere to be seen. She's already melted into the crowd on the very busy Brighton Beach Avenue.

Good thing I carry a Simmons pistol scope with me at all times. I catch sight of her a block away, running in this direction. She must be doubling back to try and throw me off. I take off down Brighton 6th Street and turn on to Brightwater Court, heading west. Anna's conditioning is good, but she stops, thinking herself safe. Apparently her eyesight is pretty good too, because she sees me barreling toward her on a cursory look back. She takes me down a few more blocks, before making a left which leads onto the boardwalk. More people; children, teenage dirt bags, people in wheelchairs – if you can name it, I had to dodge 'em.

I have got to check the report on this woman! I'm no slouch in the conditioning department but Anna Sinelnikova makes me feel like Neo in that scene on the street with Morpheus¹⁸. If she played running back for some Russian Lingerie Football League team, I wouldn't be surprised. After a few minutes, she makes a sharp right turn to get off the boardwalk. Then she's at it again, scaling yet another fence.

By the time I get over, I've lost sight of Anna. Now is the time to start taking stock of the area so I don't get too lost. Wait a minute. Where the hell am I? There is a sign that says Luna Park¹⁹. It certainly doesn't feel like Brooklyn anymore²⁰. All around me are spires, minarets, and domes. And in the middle, is that a lagoon? It is, and there's a giant chute leading down into it. There are also a few stages suspended above it. The architecture is breathtaking, definitely old world European²¹. It feels out of place, even displaced in time. I need to start getting a move on because this place is way too bizarre for me.

Walking around, it becomes clear that this is some sort of amusement park. I see rides called "Trip to the Moon," "Helter Skelter," "Drop the Dips" and all sorts of colorful names for slides, bumper cars, and other

¹⁸ We've all seen the Matrix, right? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqxwtEdxOCw>

¹⁹ Which I'll find out later is Russian for "Luna Park."

²⁰ <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3f/Nyc10795u.jpg>

²¹ http://ibytes.es/images/content/postimages/AtraccionesPasTS/Helter_Skelter.jpg

rides. There are giant statues of white dragons, a pool, a ballroom, and a fun house as well. I've never seen anything like this before, and I'm sure the goal is for this place to be one giant maze of distractions, and I'll be damned if it's not working.

As a sleeper agent who's just graduated to an assassin, Sinelnikova is a dangerous woman, so I've got to keep a level head and get to her before she can get to me. The only reason I believe she hasn't left this place yet is that the smart play is to kill me here and then lay low for a bit. She'd have better luck evading the police than Gabriel and I, and she's got to know that already.

Ho ho ho - now she has a machine gun. I'm dragging myself up off the ground after having been attacked and disarmed. The blonde came at me like a spider monkey and, in a flurry of kicks to my groin and punches to my solar plexus, managed to relieve me of my automatic pistol. From the ferocity of the attack and the fluid disarmament that followed, I'd say she practices krav maga²² -and well. I was able to protect myself with a well-placed sweep of her leg, but then Anna rolled into the shadows, most likely to regroup and mount another assault.

I've still got Pat²³ up my sleeve and I find it highly unlikely that Anna's got clips for my Glock 18, so she'll be judicious with her spray. Still, Anna has options now, since her weapon is most effective at a slight distance but her fighting style is better suited to quick strikes at close-quarters. I can be quite effective in space with my feet, but to use my Keltec P3AT, I need to get up close. Her Israeli street fighting style against my French street fighting style²⁴ would be a cool match-up in some Philadelphia pit fight, but in this place, I don't like the notion one bit.

The sun is going down and I haven't been shot yet, nor have I found Madame Dymok. I'm starting to think that her plan all along was to keep me here until dark. Assuming she's already familiar with this place, Anna really has me at a disadvantage, and the longer she keeps me here, the more fatigued I get. Plus, now there's the added bonus of darkness. So, patience is her play. If she can exhaust me mentally and physically, it'll be easier to pounce. I am tired. I am pissed. But I am not giving up. I am here for

²² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krav_Maga

²³ https://www.keltecweapons.com/our-guns/p-3at/pistol/?hc_location=ufi

²⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Savate>

justice. Let Holden bring the full weight of the law to bear on everyone else. But Anna Sinelnikova is mine.

As the last bit of twilight dies over the horizon, my eyes adjust quickly. So much has happened recently, from Cameroon to London²⁵, and I've definitely been feeling the effects. I spend hours wide awake in the middle of the night. I'm constantly on edge, therefore hyper aware and jumpy as well. What luck that the symptoms of my nervous breakdown would actually come in handy now!

CRASH !

POP-POP-POP-POP-POP-POP-POP-POP-POP-POP-POP-POP-POP-POP-POP-POP-POP

What the hell was that? Heading in the direction from which the sound came, I can't help but be a little excited. I've been walking around this place for hours and, excluding being mugged for my gun, nothing of note has occurred. Now I'm in front of the Fun House, which is where I think the sound came from. I've avoided going into this place because death by cliché is not something I'm looking forward to. I refuse to meet my maker in a room full of mirrors, after having been run through by Anna Sinelnikova wearing a glove with claws.

Now, rather suddenly, all of the lights in the place are on. And when I say "all of the lights," I mean all of the lights. There are thousands of lightbulbs everywhere²⁶. The towers are all lit up - each structure perfectly outlined with light bulbs, even the pink one on the opposite side of the lagoon. Light bulbs are strung from one spire to another as well. Now I understand what that commotion was about before. Anna must have bumped into something and gotten spooked. I don't think she unloaded the clip, but she definitely cost herself a few bullets on that one. She must not have expected it to be as dark as it is around here. But this is going to attract attention.

The next thing I hear is the sound of one of the rides creaking, and then roaring, to life. It's the one called Dragon's Gorge. There are two enormous dragon statues on either side of the sign with some sort of rock formation between them. Now the beasts' wings are lit up with lights, giving them an even more other-worldly ghastliness. A short ten-car roller coaster

²⁵ Read [Razzle Dazzle](#) for all the details

²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHSiOmjBE8k>

streaks by me amid the rocks, disappearing behind one of the dragons. I climb up onto the rocks and jump on the tracks.

Following the empty cars, I walk into a small indoor roller coaster. It's basically a glorified kiddie coaster but, considering how old this place looks, I'm sure Dragon's Gorge was quite the scream machine in its day. The peaks aren't too high and the turns are pretty wide but this bad boy does sport a pair of twin loops. Cute.

Examining the place as I go, I hear the roller coaster cars rumbling toward me from the left. Turning to judge the distance, I see Anna Sinelnikova in the first car, aiming my own gun at me. I leap out of the way just in time to avoid the hail of bullets that comes my way. The bitch almost caught me off guard on that one. She turns around to fire at me again as the coaster continues on its way. I dive backwards, then tuck and roll to one of the dragon's feet, actually clinging to it for safety. Hurdling myself over the dragon's foot, I crouch down and wait. Eventually Anna comes back to finish me off, expecting me to be standing out in the open, like an idiot, I guess.

I reach up and grab her gun arm, then fling her out onto the ground on my side of the ancient carnival ride. The Glock goes flying off into the distance. Now, here we are, squaring off face-to-face for the first time. I can actually look her in the face now. She's tall for a woman - about 5'9" and square shouldered. By the fact that she's effortlessly climbed or leapt over anything in her way, I'd guess she's a former gymnast who hit a growth spurt early. And then there's the scars, she's got what appears to be a Glasgow Smile²⁷ on the sides of her mouth. So she's been tortured and lived to tell the tale. She removes her small leather jacket, leaving herself well prepared for a fight in a roomy gray sweater, yoga pants, and black combat boots. Her blonde hair is already pulled back in a ponytail.

One of our lives is going to come to a violent end soon and I think we both know that. As we lock eyes, I have no idea what she's thinking about me because, whatever's on her mind, it doesn't show on her face at all. Her style is krav maga, which is ideally suited for self-defense, so she's likely sizing me up and waiting for me to attack. Almost every fiber of my being wants to just gun her down right here and be done with this. Is it more chivalrous or savage to beat her to death instead?

²⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glasgow_smile

Fuck it. Let's do this. I go at her with a volley of front and side kicks, with the intention of knocking her off balance and then going in for the kill once she tries to get in close. Krav maga is basically a good mix of judo, quick strikes, and grappling so I know what to expect. She sticks to straight up defense and doesn't try to bring me in for a body lock or anything yet. Fine. I cock back for a roundhouse punch, dropping Pat into my grip as I bring my fist forward -with bad intentions.

Stupid. Anna swats my hand away just as I pull the trigger. The gun goes off near her ear. She isn't prepared for that. Lucky for me, as this prevents her from finishing her takedown. If Anna hadn't been caught off guard, she'd have simply broken my nose and that would have been the beginning of the end for me.

She's staring me down now, holding her ear with her right hand. With the other hand, my opponent jerks something from around her neck. Her glare is cold. I glance down at her left hand and see a punch dagger²⁸ protruding from her fist. I'm trying to keep my composure so I don't act stupidly. This woman is very capable of killing me. (I don't think I've ever had that thought before.) I'd been able to hold on to Pat, so I'm just going to end this now.

As I lift my arm to take care of business, Anna dodges right with ridiculous speed and jams her punch dagger handle-deep into my forearm. Pat falls from my lifeless hand, which Anna grabs and uses to flip me onto the ground. The deafening pain shooting through my body is muted after a few hard tags to the face that have me seeing stars. Anna lets go and assumes a fighting stance. I think she's enjoying this. She's got some type of reverse rope-a-dope going on, where she roughs me up to tire me out²⁹. She's in great shape, but I've got a good 25 pounds on her and only need to land a couple of homeruns to take her out of the game, so she's playing it smart. But if I've learned anything from being in the spying and lying game with Gabriel, it's that I'm too stupid to know when I'm beat.

Fisticuffs ensue. I go at her with a barrage of punches - too many for her to block. I just keep swinging. The goal is to get her on her heels, and it works, just as she's getting frustrated, I clip the back of her leg and give her a good shove. She's pissed. Good. Two can play at this game.

²⁸ http://www.trueswords.com/images/prod/c/xf_punch_dagger_neck_knife_540.jpg

²⁹ She learned from the best - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_nNdl1K6Q0

Anna won't come at me because she knows I'm good with my legs and she can't afford to absorb the damage I can inflict while she tries to get in close. I can tell she really wants to though. Now it's time to take the fight to her.

Competitive savate is very tactical, punches to set up kicks and whatnot,, due to the way it's scored. I learned this martial art for its original purpose, kicking someone's ass in a street fight. But now it's time to employ a bit more strategy. Once Anna is on her feet, I go at her again. Nothing too aggressive, just enough to keep her on her toes; I want her playing defense, not working on bringing the fight to me.

Kick-kick-punch.

Punch-punch-kick.

Back away.

Repeat.

I bombard her with bullshit a few more times. Her frustration is growing but her guard is good. This girl is patient, I'll give her that. During my next assault, I see an opening and take advantage. After a hard kick to the liver using the point of my shoe, Anna Sinelnikova is writhing on the floor. If you don't know, a liver shot is very debilitating because it is extremely painful and the body does not react well when the liver is contacted with force. (And I put a lot of mustard on that one.) She's crying and coughing hard trying to get her lungs to work again. Her body is in shock and all the pain doesn't help. Anna will recover in a minute or so but I'm sure the two shots from Pat feel like a mercy to her.

The walk back to get Katya from Anna's house seems to take forever. I don't regret what I've just done but I don't like it either. Katya is sitting on the steps in the back of the house - fast asleep. I figure she fell asleep waiting for me to come back. She looks so peaceful now. After the waking nightmare she experienced earlier, I hope her mind is as restful as her body. I don't disturb her. It's been a long night and I'm not ready for it to end seeing the longing and pain in her eyes that I saw from Street in London. There's police tape all over the place in the alley. The police have come and gone about the dead dog. Damn, I'd forgotten all about that.

END