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# The Last Exile

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Extract

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# PROLOGUE

THE woman was running. Running for her life. Small and sinewy, she moved at speed, twisting like a desperate vixen. But there was no escape. Not for anyone. She knew it. Tallis knew it. From the instant he and Stu barrelled through the automatic doors, he understood how it was going down, how it was going to be. All of them were ensnared in a dance of death.

Tallis didn't register the glossy-looking, brightly lit stores, or the homely sweet aroma drifting from a biscuit stand nearby. He failed to admire the display of brand new Minis parked at the mall's entrance. He didn't detect Paul Young crooning hoarsely through the centre's speakers. Sound, taste, smell, touch all disappeared. His focus was on the woman. Only the woman. The woman with the rucksack on her back.

Fuck, she was going down the escalator the wrong way. Tallis sharply elbowed a middle-aged man aside, and leapt on, feet skimming the moving parts, shoppers cursing his jostling form. Stu, close behind, snarled an order to get out of the frigging way. An acne-faced youth spat at them then, seeing the guns, recoiled and cowered, his bottle gone. Men with weapons in full tactical firearms

kit represented the visible arm of the law. Guys in plain-clothes, whatever their rank and standing, were scary, unknown quantities.

Women and children started to scream. Tallis, fearing it would force the woman to detonate her lethal load, bounded clear of the moving staircase, feet landing square, the fleeing figure still ahead, ducking and weaving. For the second time, Tallis shouted a warning. Again he used her native tongue, yet there was no break in step, no change in pace, no backward glance. Relentless, Tallis thought, but not nearly as relentless as me. Whatever the cost. Whatever the personal sacrifice.

People were fleeing now. Those who'd ordered morning lattes were dropping them where they stood, the contents spooling over a floor the colour of rancid butter. Boisterous school-kids already bored by the prospect of long summer holidays dived for cover. A security man too old and fat for the job looked clueless then slack-jawed then barked a *What the hell?* into a mobile phone.

Area should be cleared by now, Tallis chafed as a woman pushing a baby buggy almost cannoned into him. What the fuck was going on? Where was back-up? Two foreign-looking men selling cosmetics from a stand extolling the virtues of Dead Sea salt turned and gazed, the laconic expression in their eyes suggesting that they'd seen it all before.

Tallis's earpiece crackled. A designated senior officer had already confirmed the identity of the target, an Algerian woman with links to the recent failed bombing in Birmingham. Now he was upping the game, issuing instructions to prepare to eliminate the threat—code for execute or shoot to kill. Tallis tightened his grip on the Glock but judged the scene too chaotic and unstable to

take aim and fire should the final code word be given. Public safety, threats of criminal proceedings, phrases that tripped off the tongue in the aftermath but made no sense in the context buzzed round his brain like a swarm of demented hornets. Strained faces were everywhere, there seemed more shoppers than ever. And that was dangerous.

Tallis was subliminally aware of Stu drawing abreast of him, feet pounding the floor. They were gaining now but another escalator loomed ahead, ascending. Glancing up, Tallis saw two colleagues openly brandishing weapons, sealing off the exit. The woman's head lifted minutely in mid-pace. She saw it, too. Tallis caught his breath. His gut tourniqueted. This was when she'd do it. This was when she'd blow them all to kingdom come. He raised his weapon but a group of gormless-looking lads oblivious to the action wandered across his line of vision. Stu let out a yell, making them scatter.

Tallis picked up the pursuit again, speeding around a corner flanked with banks and building societies, the financial heart of the mall. The woman was only metres ahead, losing pace, through stitch or fear, the fight abruptly abandoning her. *Nothing left to lose,* Tallis thought, raising his weapon a second time, imagining the blinding flash, broken bodies, twisted wreckage, crippled lives. This time he took aim, homing in for a head shot. "I can take the shot," he radioed back to Control.

"Take it," was the response.

Then something happened, something more terrible than he could imagine. In that heart-charged split second, she turned, small hands spread in a defensive gesture. Young, her dark face was arresting rather than beautiful. She had a wide, noble brow and brown eyes wet with tears

and terror. Not that it mattered, Tallis thought coldly. An order was an order. Question the method, the timing, but never the command. Even so, Tallis experienced an ugly sensation, felt something he wasn't paid to feel. His earpiece crackled. Maybe they were going to be asked to stand down, he thought wildly hopeful. It crackled some more: the gold commander was giving the code word authorising the use of lethal force.

Before Tallis could act, two shots rang out from Stu's Glock, one winging wide, missing by inches a startled bank clerk taking a break, and ricocheting harmlessly off a pillar. The other felled the target. Tallis ran forward, saw the stain from a wound in the young woman's shoulder spread and dye her T-shirt a darker hue. In shock, she made no sound. Just fluttered a hand towards her body, a movement that, whatever instinct was stirring inside him, was to cost her her life. With the colour still draining from her skin, Tallis emptied five bullets into her head and neck, witnessing her final second of life, hearing her last breath, watching as her life-blood flowed freely on the floor.

An eerie stillness descended. People stood silent, in dread and awe and shame, all of them witnesses to something they neither understood nor desired. One woman was weeping. The bank clerk, white with horror, eyes drilling into Tallis, murmured, 'Murderer.'

"Job done," Stu said, the relief in his voice drowned out by the gathering clamour of local police and forensics in full cry.

Tallis nodded, feeling hollow.

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