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Runaway Minister

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Extract

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March 1st
09:35
Croatia Airlines, Flight OU 312

THE CABIN crew made their way down the aisle, collecting empty meal trays. As they moved, the cheap fabric of their uniforms rustled against their legs. It was funny, Javor Milos thought, how the airlines made so much effort dressing their staff like soldiers.

Milos wondered how the crew would cope if someone pulled a gun. They were trained, he supposed, but they weren't prepared. Not that guns were Milos's style, not any more. He certainly wasn't stupid enough to try and smuggle one on board. Nor was he about to blow the operation by going berserk at thirty thousand feet. Going berserk wasn't his style either. Patience was. He'd waited over thirteen years for this. He wasn't about to destroy his chance of revenge for the sake of another hour or two.

A blonde stewardess took Milos's tray. She had to lean over him to reach the tray of the man in the window seat. Her hair smelt of apples.

'How long until we land?' asked Milos.

'Not long now, sir,' said the stewardess. Her smile was bright and plastic, like the food. 'The captain will be making an announcement shortly.' She moved on, brisk and disinterested.

Milos looked past the stranger beside him, through the little window, out across the wing of the Airbus. England was lost beneath a still sea of cloud. As Milos watched, the plane dropped towards the cloud. Tendrils of vapour started streaming past the window. The Airbus began to vibrate.

The blonde stewardess was heading back towards the executive seats at the front of the plane. As she opened the curtain dividing the two compartments, one of her colleagues whispered something in her ear. Milos tensed. But the women were laughing. Sharing a rude joke, maybe, or planning what to do during their stopover. The second stewardess had dark hair; otherwise they might have been twins. But Milos wasn't interested in them. He was interested in the way the blonde hadn't closed the curtain properly.

The gap she'd left gave Milos a clear line of sight to the man he was planning to kill.



March 1st
10:03
Croatia Airlines, Flight OU 312

LIKE Milos, Hazbi Dunja was sitting in an aisle seat. Beside Dunja, next to the window, sat a woman. Milos wondered who she was—not a bodyguard, otherwise their positions would have been reversed. Anyway, Dunja always boasted that, as a former soldier, he didn't need security. Milos wondered if he'd still be thinking that in a few hours' time. The woman must be Dunja's latest protégé, he guessed, some diplomatic lackey—probably an assistant—sleeping her way to the top.

Only the back of Dunja's head was visible, but it was enough to arouse the old anger in Milos. Dunja's hair was thin, combed over in a vain attempt to hide the growing bald patch. *Typical of the deceitful bastard,* Milos thought. *Even tries to deceive himself when he looks in the mirror.*

For a second or two Milos was back in Zrmanjagrad. The whine of the Airbus's engines became the rumble of M84 tank tracks on the deserted streets. He closed his

eyes, heard the crunch of Croat boots on the gravel outside the house, the eerie sound of enemy soldiers shouting into silence. The soldiers were there to 'cleanse' the town. Only the whole town was deserted. Except for one house. The house where Milos and his family lived.

The boots came closer, then stopped. Somebody kicked the door in.

Milos opened his eyes. Before he knew what he was doing, he'd latched the drop-down tray against the seat in front and stood up. Now he was walking up the aisle, towards the executive seats. Towards Dunja. Nobody looked up. Nobody moved. How could they ignore him? Couldn't they hear the blood thumping in his head? Couldn't they feel the fury emanating from him? But the other passengers were oblivious, hypnotised by the Hollywood movie playing on their tiny screens. Cabin crews called the passengers sheep; Milos could see why.

He slipped through the curtain just as the dark-haired stewardess turned to close it.

'Have I got time before we land?' said Milos, indicating the door to the executive toilet. His head felt clear again. The anger had faded. The stewardess flashed him the same fake smile her colleague had used. The smiles probably came with the uniforms.

'As long as you're quick, sir.'

The toilet was positioned directly opposite the seat occupied by Dunja. It was also engaged, which was exactly why Milos had asked to use it. Now he had the perfect excuse to loiter in the aisle, barely a metre from his target.

Dunja was leafing through the pages of *Croatia,* the in-flight magazine. He seemed unaware of Milos's presence. Absently, he pulled a tissue from his pocket, blew his nose. His eyes looked tired, rimmed with red.

Hazbi Dunja had a cold.

I could just reach out, Milos thought. *Reach out, put my hands to your throat and squeeze the life from you.*

Milos felt his fingers tingle. But he didn't allow them to move.

Besides, after what Dunja had done, the bastard didn't deserve a quick, clean death, nor a public one. This was a private affair. He would die slowly, in agony, away from the world.

Hazbi Dunja had found an article in the magazine that interested him. He flattened the magazine with his right hand, the hand that was famously missing the last joint of its index finger.

'Taken off by a Serbian bullet during the siege of Dubrovnik,' was the story Dunja usually told the press. The media loved printing pictures of Dunja waving with his deformed hand. It made him look like a war hero. Milos was the only man in the world who knew how Dunja had really lost the end of his finger.

'Excuse me, sir,' said a woman's voice in Milos's ear, 'but I'm going to have to ask you to return to the economy seats.'

Milos swung round, fists curling. The blonde stewardess met his glare with her paper-thin smile. He saw himself take that smile and smear it into a bloody mess. Saw himself snap her neck and toss her like a doll to the floor…

One by one, his muscles unbunched.

'I'm waiting for the toilet,' muttered Milos under his breath. He didn't want to make a scene. Even though he'd shaved off his beard, he couldn't risk Dunja recognising him. Not yet.

'The economy class toilets are back that way, sir.'

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'All the toilets back there were engaged. I knew we were landing soon, so I didn't want to leave it too late.'

'I understand, sir,' said the blonde. Her voice was hard and glassy. 'But I see the economy toilets have become vacant while you've been waiting here. And this one is still engaged.' She paused. 'So, if you'd care to make your way back to your section of the plane?'

'Yes,' said Milos. 'Of course.'

He turned to go. To his relief, Dunja was still absorbed in the magazine. But the woman at his side was staring straight at Milos.

Their eyes met only briefly before the woman looked away. Milos carried a snapshot of her all the way back down the aisle. *A dancer,* he thought. Even sitting in the stiff Airbus seat, the woman had seemed somehow poised. There was a kind of strength in her face, a muscular quality to her body.

Her dark eyes had danced over his.

I'll bet you make her earn her promotions, Hazbi Dunja.

Milos decided he'd take the woman, as well. He'd make her watch while he dealt with Dunja. By the time Milos had finished, she'd be bending over backwards to please him. Literally.

Everything now depended on Anton and his team. By now they'd be deployed in the terminal building at Heathrow, preparing to distract the security services. Anton would have positioned a suspicious-looking holdall behind a column at the north-east end of the terminal. The minute Flight OU 312 landed, he'd make an anonymous call to the airport police. Just as Hazbi Dunja and his athletic translator left customs, they'd find themselves caught up in a full-blown security alert.

At first Milos had been doubtful about the plan. He preferred to keep things low-key. But Anton had persuaded him.

'Since 9/11, everything's on a hair-trigger,' he'd said. 'You shout "jump", everyone hits the ceiling. Plus, you know how it goes. They'll assume they're looking for Islamic extremists. A few grubby Serbs should be able to slip right through their net.'

Milos had warmed to the idea. The positioning of Anton's fake bomb meant any in-bound passengers already cleared through immigration would be evacuated through the main entrance. Dunja would be among them. There'd be crowds, jostling. There'd be a bottle-neck at the doors.

The bottle-neck would give Milos time to catch up with Dunja. The confusion would allow him to hustle Dunja into the car Anton would have waiting, leaving the police to scratch their heads over a large leather holdall containing four beach towels and a pornographic magazine.

The British government would have arranged an escort for the visiting Foreign Minister. But right now the security services were more interested in the Middle East than Eastern Europe. They wouldn't be expecting trouble. They'd send a couple of fresh-faced officers with pop-guns, just to show willing. These officers, too, would be caught up in the confusion.

So confident was Anton that the plan would work, he'd even suggested they scrap the idea of tailing Dunja on to the plane.

'Nothing's going to happen until Dunja lands at Heathrow,' he'd said. 'Why risk being spotted just so you can watch him dozing in his seat?'

On that point they'd argued. Milos had won. Anton

had orchestrated the mission, but Milos was the conductor. His word was final.

'I go on the aircraft with Dunja,' he'd said. 'This discussion is over.'

Anton couldn't understand that Milos wasn't just an assassin tailing his target: he was a predator stalking his prey. Over the years, anticipation had become a drug for Milos. He sometimes wondered what he'd do when Dunja was dead and it was all, finally, over.

That was the difference between them. To Anton it was just another operation.

To Milos it was everything.

There was a chime above Milos's head. He glanced up: the FASTEN SEATBELT light had come on. Outside, cloud had enveloped the Airbus completely.

Another chime, this one from the PA system. The pilot, getting ready to calm the sheep before bringing them into the fold.

'Ladies and gentleman, this is Captain Bakalar. I'm afraid the fog over London has thickened considerably since we took off this morning. Unfortunately, Heathrow is cutting back air traffic, which means we must divert to Stansted Airport, where weather conditions are a little better. If you have any concerns about your onward journey within the United Kingdom, please speak to a member of our cabin crew, who will be able to advise…'

Milos tensed in his seat and ignored the remainder of the announcement. His fingers closed on the arm of his seat, gripping hard. The veins on the back of his hand bulged. The man beside him stared. Milos uncurled his fingers, one by one. He smiled at the man.

'I really hate the landings,' he said, 'don't you?'

The man smiled back, reassured.

Milos pretended to relax. But his mind was racing. So much for Anton's assertion they didn't need to follow Dunja on to the plane! Now it was all up to Milos. By the time Anton realised what was happening—and found out which airport they'd been diverted to—Hazbi Dunja would be down and in the clear.

Unless Milos could get to him first.

Milos continued to smile. It seemed poetic, somehow, that it came down to just the two of them, as it had been just the two of them, in the end, in that house in Zrmanjagrad, all those years ago. Still, it would be a hell of a challenge.

Like the pilot easing Flight OU 312 through the fog on to its new approach path, Javor Milos was now flying blind.

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