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Overkill

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Prologue

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Vicinity of As Salamiyah, south-east of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Most of the time they didn't fuck about with the executions. A bullet in the back of the head or a blade drawn across the throat and the body left pretty much where it fell. But when Rashid was there it was different. Rashid liked to play.

Bizarrely, Rashid looked more like a caricature of an accountant than anything else – small and slight, hunched, with thick pebble-lensed glasses – but nobody smiled when he was around. He had learnt his trade in the back streets of Baghdad and Basra, and refined his skills working on Russian prisoners seized by the Afghans. The smell of death was on him.

As Sadoun Khamil's enforcer, he would do his master's bidding without question and without compassion. To him it was just work, and he was very good at it. His speciality was the lingering death, what he called *'shwai shwai noum'* or 'sleep slowly', slicing through the victim's spinal cord with a thin and extremely sharp knife. He always knew when he had cut enough, because the body would slump as the nerves were severed. Then they would prop the limp body against a wall or tree and leave it. The man could take days to die, usually of thirst, but occasionally

Rashid would enliven the process by making shallow cuts on his arms and legs. The fresh blood and total immobility of the body would attract the birds and the rats and the stray dogs and the insects, and the victim would be literally and slowly eaten alive.

Hassan Abbas hated to watch, but Khamil usually insisted. Knowing what would happen to them if they betrayed or otherwise offended him, Khamil believed, would keep all the members of the cell firmly in line.

Today was different. Khamil had instructed Rashid to make it quick, but painful. The man wasn't part of the cell, wasn't even a full member of al-Qaeda. He was just a courier, a low-level mule, one of the hundreds of thousands of Arabs who shared a hatred of America and an admiration of Osama bin Laden and everything he stood for.

But the courier had committed the unthinkable – he had disclosed the location of Khamil's cell to a friend, a friend who the courier hadn't known was actually a cell member. The friend had immediately informed Khamil, which was why the group was now skulking around a deserted building a couple of miles outside As Salamiyah, instead of their previous and more comfortable quarters in Riyadh itself. Though many Saudis privately – and some even publicly – supported al-Qaeda, the vast majority did not, and Sadoun Khamil had had no option but to move his base as soon as its location had been compromised. For that inconvenience, the courier was about to pay.

The man was lying flat on his back behind the building in the full glare of the early afternoon sun, spread-eagled, wrists and ankles lashed to the corners of a

hastily assembled square frame of stout poles. He was naked, and his chest, stomach and thighs bore the bloody stripes of the whipping one of Rashid's 'assistants' had already administered as a taster.

Khamil emerged from the building and strode forward, his white *djellaba* flapping as he walked. He stopped a few feet from the courier and stared down at him. The fresh blood had attracted the flies, and the open wounds bubbled and glistened with their bloated bodies, blackening the man's torso and legs.

The courier appeared to be unconscious, but at a command from Khamil one of the guards strode forward. A sharp crack of the red-stained whip across his chest momentarily scattered the flies which rose in a black circling cloud, buzzing in irritation, before settling back on the body to resume their feast. He forced his eyes open and wailed with the pain, then looked up at Khamil, and fell silent. He had already pleaded his case, and knew that nothing he could say or do would alter his fate.

Khamil stepped back, looked around and nodded to Rashid. The short figure walked forward, stopping in full sight of the man on the ground. In his right hand he held a clasp knife, big and bulky, with a scalpel-sharp six-inch blade. He opened the blade slowly, taking his time, watching the courier's eyes. Then he stepped close to the man, knelt down beside him and began his work.

Eighteen minutes later Rashid stood up, carefully wiped the blood off the blade of his knife, smiled at Khamil and walked away. Khamil glanced once more at the bloody red mess in front of him, nodded in

satisfaction, turned and walked back into the shade of the building, Abbas following behind.

In the largest room of the derelict house were a couple of chairs and a battered table. Khamil led the way into the room, sat down and looked up at Abbas, who remained standing respectfully in front of him. After a few moments, Khamil spoke: 'I do not like it. Even now, before we start, before we have any contact with them, I feel uncomfortable about it.' Khamil fell silent, his almost black eyes beneath his red and white checked *keffiyeh* – a potent and visible symbol of his unswerving allegiance to Osama bin Laden – troubled and concerned.

Abbas dropped his eyes, but stood his ground. 'I, too, am unhappy at the implications, at the prospect of working so closely with them, *sayidi*, but we must face facts. We cannot develop this technology for ourselves, at least not within the foreseeable future, and if we buy what we need we will still have the very difficult problem of delivery. My analysis suggests that co-operation is the only option which offers us even a chance of success.'

Hassan Abbas stopped and waited. He had, he knew, staked not only his career but also his life on this single moment. Despite his Western appearance – the light grey suits and glistening black Oxfords he frequently wore, and his fluency in English and French – Sadoun Khamil was still at heart a sand Arab. That meant, amongst other things, that he was accustomed to meting out summary justice to anyone who displeased him.

And what Abbas had suggested was hardly likely to please him. It was, however, nothing less than the truth, and Abbas hoped he knew Khamil well enough to

believe that he valued the truth more than anything else. Abbas waited, hardly daring to breathe, staring intently at the floor in front of him. His eyes traced patterns in the dust, concentrating on the insignificant, as he waited to hear what Khamil would say next. Waiting for the words that would either reinforce his position as Khamil's chief of staff or perhaps lead him to the waste ground behind the building to join the courier. Hideous images of Rashid at work span through Abbas' mind while he waited, immobile, for whatever would come.

Khamil stirred slightly in the creaking wooden chair behind the table, then stood up and walked across the room to the small and glassless window. The view was of no interest to him, just dunes and rubble, but Khamil put his hands on his hips and stared out for nearly two minutes. Then he turned round and walked back to the table. He sat down, looked across at Abbas, and uttered a single word: 'How?'

Abbas breathed again, and raised his eyes. 'Money, *sayidi*, money. Always they have needed money, and now more than ever. We have the hard currency they crave, and they have the devices we need. It will be a simple exchange, the one for the other.'

'Hardly simple, Hassan,' Khamil murmured. 'And how long will it take?'

'For everything to be in place, four to five years, *sayidi*.'

Khamil looked up, surprised. 'Why so long?' he demanded. 'Surely the devices are available immediately?'

Abbas nodded. 'The American weapons, yes, *sayidi*, but the devices we require will have to be specially made. But that is not the principal reason for the delay.

The problem is the delivery. It is essential that all the weapons are positioned in total secrecy, and that means we must take time, and take care. We will have to lease suitable premises, arrange the proper power supplies and communication systems, all before even one of the devices is positioned. And the devices themselves will have to be delivered piece by piece. If knowledge of the plan leaks out before we are ready, the scheme will fail before we can even begin to implement it.'

Khamil considered this for a few moments. 'I will have to consult my colleague,' he said finally. 'He wanted action sooner than you have suggested is possible.'

Abbas nodded again. He knew, as everyone who worked for Khamil knew, exactly who his 'colleague' was, but nobody ever so much as breathed his name. This was in part respect, or more accurately fear, and in part simple security.

It is no secret that the West's two most important Communications Intelligence monitoring stations – the American National Security Agency at Fort George Meade in Maryland and Britain's Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham in Gloucestershire – monitor communications of all sorts, worldwide. The NSA has a weekly output of over two hundred tons of classified data based on communications intercepts alone.

This prodigious 'take' is principally derived from the highly classified Echelon monitoring system, and comprises mobile and satellite telephone calls – probably the easiest of all to detect – radio and signal traffic, internet data-transfer and electronic mail intercepts derived

from the Carnivore programme, and even calls between landline telephones where any part of the transmission involves a satellite or microwave link or passes through a 'friendly' nation. The British Foreign Office, for example, as part of the joint GCHQ/NSA agreement, monitors every international telephone call which originates or terminates in Britain.

With this degree of intercept capability, human monitoring is clearly impossible, so computers do the job instead, listening out for any mention, in any language, of certain names and words. The words are fairly obvious, and are specified by the agency which will be the ultimate recipient of the product, but the names change as the political situation alters. Since the early 1990s, and following the suicide bombings in Jakarta and Lagos, one name in particular has been right at the head of every Western nation's 'most wanted' list with respect to terrorism. For that reason, neither the name Osama bin Laden nor al-Qaeda were ever spoken aloud by any of his followers.

'I have,' Abbas began deferentially, 'another suggestion.'

Ten minutes later Khamil sat back in his chair. The plan Abbas had proposed was outrageous, alarming, stunning in its concept and fraught with logistical and other problems, but it had an undeniable simplicity which he knew would appeal when he proposed it, as he had known immediately that he would, to bin Laden. 'And how long before this could be implemented?'

'Within two years, probably within eighteen months. Some of the assets are already in place. Ready for this, or a similar opportunity.'

Khamil nodded in satisfaction. That was more like it. 'They are fully trained and committed?' he asked.

'Their commitment is not in doubt, *sayidi*, and the training they require is not extensive. In fact,' Abbas added with a slight smile, 'several of them are receiving instruction even as we speak, in America.'

Khamil smiled – the irony was not lost on him. 'What are the chances of failure?'

Abbas smiled again. 'None, *sayidi*. It will succeed.'

Khamil nodded again, then looked sharply at Abbas. 'How do you know? How do you know it will succeed?'

Abbas looked momentarily at a loss for words. 'A figure of speech, *sayidi*. I meant that the plan was almost certain to succeed. The chances of failure are extremely small.'

Khamil shook his head. 'No. I have known you for many years, and you are always exact in what you say. You said you know this plan will succeed. So, I ask again, how?'

Abbas stood silently in front of the desk, his mind racing. He knew Khamil, knew that he wouldn't be satisfied by a vague discussion of semantics. Khamil had an uncanny ability to sniff out truth and falsehood, and infinite patience and persistence in the search. He would, Abbas realized, have to tell him the truth, embarrassing though it would be. 'There is a book, *sayidi*,' Abbas began.

Five minutes later Khamil leaned back in his chair and laughed. 'So, Hassan, now we know where you receive your inspiration: from the ramblings of an infidel who scribbled down his visions five hundred years ago. What nonsense!'

Abbas shook his head slightly. 'You mock me, *sayidi*, but in truth this Nostradamus does seem to suggest that our plan will succeed. And,' he added, 'other prophecies he made have been fulfilled, such as the downfall of the Shah.'

Khamil continued to smile, but shook his head. 'It's all nonsense, Hassan. The future is not pre-ordained, as well you know. If you wish to rely on the obscure words of a Frenchman dead half a millennium, that's your choice. But it does save me the trouble of choosing a code-name for you in our communications. I shall simply call you "The Prophet".'

Chapter One

Present day – Tuesday
Lubyanskaya ploshchad, Moscow

In the Lubyanka Prison a man lay dying, and he had no idea why. No medical practitioner in the world could have diagnosed his ailment, for he had none, but he was nevertheless dying, and there was nothing any doctor could do to save him. At four fifteen, he had perhaps four hours to live. He knew it. His jailers knew it. And the white-coated technicians preparing the table and equipment in the soundproof interrogation room knew it.

He knew, without the slightest doubt, that he would never see the sun again, never see a blue sky or the waves breaking on the rocky shores of his native Northumberland. His future, short as it was, would be tightly constrained, limited to the four discoloured concrete walls that imprisoned him, and to whatever colours the KGB had elected to paint the basement interrogation room where they were going to kill him.

When they came for him, he was sobbing in despair, but when the guard put a hand on his shoulder to drag him off the stained mattress and on to his feet, he screamed and lashed out blindly, using fists, feet and teeth. The struggle was short and pointless. The captive lapsed into unconsciousness when the blackjack

descended on the back of his head, and when he awoke the short journey to the interrogation room was over, and he was strapped naked on the table.

An elderly grey-haired man with twinkling, innocent blue eyes and a short white beard leaned over him, looked down and smiled. 'Good. You are awake. No, don't try and talk yet. You will have plenty of time for that later. First I want to explain things to you.' The Russian's English was fluent, the accent faintly American. He leaned closer. 'I am what you British would call of the old school. I am an old-style interrogator. I do use drugs, the truth drugs, scopolamine and sodium pentothal, but they are unreliable and people can be taught, as no doubt you were taught, to resist their effects. And they can just as easily kill, if they are used in too large doses, or cause such great brain damage that we are left with a gibbering idiot. And we don't want that, do we?'

He chuckled, looking a little like a benevolent Santa Claus, and sat down on a stained plastic chair next to the table. 'So, I only use them if I can take my time, and increase the dosage slowly. But now we need answers quickly, and the best method of persuasion, I believe, is pain. Pain is my profession. I will start with a little pain, to show that I am serious, and then I will ask you some questions. If you answer those, I might not hurt you again, but you will probably lie, or I might think that you are lying, and then I will hurt you more, a lot more, and then I will ask you again. And I will go on like that until I decide that you have nothing more to tell me. If you have helped me, I will kill you quickly, and it won't hurt. But if you have not told me what I

wanted to know, then you can take a long, long time to die and you will suffer pain that you will not believe possible.'

He paused and looked down at the Englishman. 'The point, you see, is that I will get the answers I need. I always get the answers. How much pain it costs you is up to you, but I will get the answers. Now, I am going to leave you for a few minutes while you think about what I have said. You must choose, not me.'

He stood up, walked over to the two white-coated figures waiting in the corner and spoke softly to them, then left the room. As soon as he had gone, the technicians moved two trolleys over to the table, and left them in the clear sight of the captive. Each displayed an array of medical equipment – saws, knives and scalpels – as well as more utilitarian tools – pliers, screwdrivers, soldering iron, bolt-cutters and a blowlamp. The Englishman had no doubts about why they had been left there, just as he had no doubt that the interrogator would use any or all of the equipment to obtain whatever information he wanted.

About five minutes later the door opened and the interrogator entered, followed by a white-coated figure carrying a small black bag and a stethoscope, and walked straight to the table. 'Now, to business,' he said. 'I enjoy my work, and I am very good at it, but I would still rather avoid all the unpleasantness of the physical side.' He waved his hand at the two trolleys. 'So, what have you decided? If you help me, I, or my medical friend here, will end it all for you with a simple injection. If not, well, you know what will happen.'

The Englishman was no coward, but neither was he stupid. Faced with a terminal situation, from which

there was clearly no possibility of escape, there was only one choice. 'I'll answer any questions you ask,' he said, his voice choked with fear.

'Good, good.' The interrogator sounded gratified. He sat down on the plastic chair, picked up his clipboard, selected a particular page on it and began the questioning. Two minutes later he sat back, then stood up. He did not look pleased. 'That is not what I wanted to hear. I do not think you realize the gravity of this situation. I have explained the options to you, but I must have the information I want.'

The captive shook his head desperately. 'But I don't know the answers,' he shouted. 'I'm trying to answer your questions, but if I don't know the answers, how can I?'

The interrogator looked at him coldly, then smiled again and resumed his seat. 'Well, let's try once again, shall we? But this time, you really must help me.' Again the questions began, but again the answers did not satisfy the interrogator, and after a few minutes he stood up and shook his head sadly. 'I thought you were going to be sensible about this, but I was wrong. I told you that I must have this information, and you will tell me – now or later.'

The Englishman shouted again, naked terror in his eyes. 'I'll tell you anything you want – everything that I know. But these questions – I don't know what you're talking about.'

The interrogator looked down at him and patted his shoulder gently. 'We shall see,' he said softly. 'We shall see.' He stepped across to the wall next to the interrogation table, reached up and clicked on two switches marked, in Cyrillic script, 'video' and 'audio'.