**Chapter 1**

*Berlin, Germany*

This wouldn’t be a zero-hour operation. On the contrary, the hit would take place during the hum-drum, early hours of the morning—at the start of everyone’s work day at Germany’s Interior Ministry.

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Dimitri, Sofia Keller’s limo driver, woke up extremely early that day. First he hit the gym after he enjoyed a protein-rich breakfast of scrambled eggs and bacon. When he got back from his sweaty routine, a healthy shake waited for him in the fridge.

Feeling refreshed from the invigorating exercise and chocolate-flavored supplement he took afterwards, it was time to pad on over to the bathroom in the flat to clean up before continuing his daily grind.

Dimitri’s workout suit dropped onto the tiled floor in a haphazard, stinky heap. He stripped down to nothing then hit the button on the shower wall to start the jets.

Streams of water blasted out from the nozzles, pulsating against the back wall of the enclosure at irregular intervals. Dimitri stepped into the spray when he felt satisfied the water was warm enough, but not blazing hot.

The water coursed over the man’s muscular body. Before long it mixed in with the suds. Dimitri remembered he had a music player he could play with, too. His dripping wet finger dialed in his favorite playlist of songs. A surround sound system made the shower become an experience.

If anyone were to ever break-and-enter, now would be their golden opportunity.

Normally Dimitri was always prepared for the worst. He frequently conceal-carried a sidearm. His self-defense didn’t stop with a gun either, though. The German’s martial art skills weren’t anything to be taken lightly. He could dislocate shoulders, hips…put the hurt on a victim in a hurry in a myriad of ways.

At the moment an opus from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony chorused through the six speaker system in Dimitri’s shower. It made him linger even longer than he normally would have underneath the steamy streams of water which seemed to match the intensity to which the orchestra played.

Unbeknownst to the preoccupied man in the shower his dog had been barking for a few minutes. Its cries suddenly went silent after it let out the telltale whimper.

The double basses, cellos, and percussion came in strong during the climax to a particular opus. Each one of their distinct voices added to the hauntingly beautiful mastery of orchestral symphony.

Dimitri never grew tired of these scores of music written centuries before.

Just then the fan in the room automatically kicked in to purge the air which was thick with steam. The loud noise the ventilation system made when it switched on drowned out the far more subtle disturbance of the door handle turning.

The bows of the violinists went up and down a few more times--the screechy dissonance serving as the apropos death knell to Dimitri’s waning last seconds.

A black silencer-tipped muzzle appeared between the void of the cracked bathroom door. Three pew, pew, pews ended Beethoven’s Ninth…and Dimitri’s existence. The German lay dead against the back wall of his travertine tiled shower; his crimson blood funneling towards the drain in the center of the smooth stone surface.

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Seth parked his black sedan with fake plates a few miles away from the parking garage he needed to get to. It was a cool fifteen degrees Celsius out that morning. The sun hid behind partial cloud coverage, and a nippy breeze from the north would occasionally gust across the open areas.

   Agent Markov wore a grey wool henley top with light body armor underneath. Enough protection against small arms fire and most rifles. Although .50 Cal rounds would make things a little dicey for the Israeli.

   He had on black tactical pants that could resist tears, liquids…the harshest treatment you could put it through.

   His boots were special. They were equipped with springs in them for extra hop for clearing walls more easily. The level of traction in the insole was enough to allow Seth to nearly scale walls vertically. Nearly. Certain materials still proved difficult to climb like Spiderman though. That’s why he wore fingerless gloves which had a gecko-like skin on the palms.

   His whole uniform was tailor-made for the urban fighter’s environment. In the concrete jungle they gave their user an unsurpassed advantage over traditional mountain climber gear used by militaries and police forces for decades. Outfitted with the wonder gloves he wore, Agent Markov could go where most men couldn’t.

   Today, he would need to.

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   The U-bahn is Berlin’s heavily-traveled subway system. Its tunnels are so expansive and pervasive that even though the world in 2041 has primarily gotten around quicker with flying transport or speedy autonomous vehicles…subways still reign in the Fourth Reich’s capital city.

   Line U5 began to near a station three blocks away from the government buildings in the empire’s capital. It slowed drastically from a cruising speed of nearly four hundred kilometers an hour down to nothing in an eighth of a mile or less. That’s what you call efficiency. And millions of passengers in Berlin chose to ride it as their primary means of getting around town.

   Seth stepped off the middle car at the station the moment the doors opened. He remained obscured from the vision of cameras by staying very close to the throngs of people bustling to and fro in the cavernous plazas that connected the people of Berlin with ground zero.

   Many office buildings actually had their entrances in these plazas instead of on the street level, further eliminating the need to use the city streets. This was all by design to get cars off the roads and make Berlin more walkable. And when it got cold three out of four seasons in the year, it would be much easier to stay warmer down below than above the city where the elements got the best of anyone risky enough to hazard the cold.

   Seth moved with the ebb and flow of the traffic—now much closer to his end goal destination than ever before. Still, plenty could go wrong with their plan and he knew it. Knowing that gave him an adrenaline rush like none other, too. This would be one of his more important missions of many in the robust repertoire of the veteran Mossad man.

   His partner Baruch counted on Seth to be the linchpin of the whole operation.

   What he had to do?

   Get past security, learn the behavior of the motorcade crew—how many there were, their movements, etc., and most importantly communicate with Baruch the best time for him to slip in and assume chauffeur status of the interior minister’s limousine.

   Obviously nothing went according to plan in these scenarios; it was always good to leave room for mishaps and unanticipated actions or reactions.

   As he walked the busy terminals in Berlin’s U-bahn, he kept an eye out for a corner store where he could buy a ball cap at.

   Seth wouldn’t use DigiCoin because that tender tied the user with his born identity, defeating any aliases or other clever attempts at anonymity. However since there still was coin and bill currency in wide enough circulation, it wouldn’t be a problem for the Mossad agent to masquerade as an undercover Spanish terrorist that day.

   Once he had found a store with little trouble at all, it didn’t take him long to decide on a hat which happed to display the logo and colors of Germany’s Major League Soccer team. Simply wearing it would almost instantly engender him to the respect of the locals.

   Next up he needed a cup of coffee; everyone around him held one in their hands. It was cold enough too for the Israeli who was much more accustomed to an arid Mediterranean climate than the temperate German one he existed in at the moment.

   Seth was in luck. Soon as he left the one store wearing his soccer hat, he observed the place next to it appeared to be a coffee shop.

   The inconspicuous man with balanced measurements—six-one, two benjis—became the latest person to form the line that circled the dining room and went all the way out to the door.

   Seth looked down at his Swiss watch and measured how much time he could spend at such a place. Then he looked down at his boots and tensed a little more. Seth quickly made up his mind: he needed the darkest roast they had. And he needed it now. The mission’s success depended on it.

   That wasn’t a gross exaggeration at all from Seth’s end of things.

   Others who knew the man well, understood him to be a little too caffeine dependent; Agent Markov would neither confirm nor deny their claims, which only served to further validate them.

    “Five DigiCoin,” the lady with the fair freckled complexion politely requested when Seth said he wanted a medium coffee.

    Despite needing to be somewhere, on the most important mission he’d do in a while, Seth showed his gall to protest the price.

   Ein wenig hoch , oder?A little high, no?

   The woman shrugged, but said nothing. She wore the expression that said, “Just pay up and don’t give me any trouble.”

   Seth laid down his currency with a reluctance to underscore the point he passionately believed in: no cup of coffee should ever cost five DigiCoin.

   The barista appeared to judge the Jewish man for the bills he was offering her. However, she had a line. Expediency suited her better than haggling with a difficult customer.

   Seth had another thought coming after he finally was handed a to-go cup: I’m debating with a girl over the price of coffee when in a short while I’m gonna be taking lives. Odd.

Seth cupped his fingerless gloves around the rim of the lid and gingerly tipped it back to experience the caffeinated goodness and hopefully expel the chill from his body. He repeated these steps until a warmth gradually took over and his mind became extremely lucid from the beverage.

   Whatever Germans that were loyal to the flag that got in his way today? They’d perish.

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Tyrone Banks woke up feeling strangely refreshed. He didn’t anticipate getting any sleep, but the opposite came true. A good omen? Maybe.

   The fifty-something retired agent rolled off the spring mattress onto the carpeted floor. He had stayed the night at a local bed and breakfast on the Poland side of the border, a hundred miles from Berlin. Baruch and Seth both had gone their own separate ways after the brainstorming session at the restaurant the night before.

   You never actually retiredeven after you cleaned off your desk and walked out the front door of Mossad. In some ways, the work piled on all the more--post-Mossad. At least that had been the case for Tyrone.

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   Today didn’t feel like the morning of an operation. But it had arrived, nonetheless.

   The African-American didn’t bother hitting snooze either. Not today.

   He showered, ate--left his room the way he found it and paid at the front desk. Before he left the inn, he troubled the bellhop to help load up his vehicle. Tyrone thanked the youth for his services and duly tipped him.

   The young man didn’t expect to get anything in return; Tyrone’s smile and token of appreciation made the bellhop smile broadly and say at once in Polish, Mają bezpieczną podróż! Have a safe journey!

   Tyrone’s smile faded and turned frosty. Safe? His travels would be anything but safe.

   He slowly pulled out and got on the main road.

   That day he decided not to caffeinate, but rather just go with his smokes. He smoked one right now as he drove in silence.

   The ash dripped off his cig and landed on the soft synthetic materials of his dashboard. Tyrone didn’t notice, didn’t care. He liked smoking in his car. Passengers? No, that’s not how he got around. Tyrone’s vehicle never would be a carpooling service.

   The African American drove with a purpose. He headed to an underground parking garage in Berlin. It had been mutually agreed upon by the three men on a mission that Tyrone would be best close to the action and not directing the show from an arm chair in another country entirely. Additionally, he needed to be close enough to intercept the shortwave radio frequencies the police communicated on.

   Three hours later after fighting the morning rush hour headed into the city, Tyrone Banks finally found a place to stop and set up shop.

   The middle-aged man got out to stretch, survey his surroundings a bit, and finally return back to base. When he made it back to his parked mobile communications center, instead of hopping back in on the driver’s side he moved around to the back and activated a motion sensor which caused the tailgate to rise.

   It didn’t go up nearly fast enough though for Tyrone who was already ducking under it to mount up. He had more work to do than he felt comfortable with.

   No time to start like the present though.

   After his computer array booted up and he stared at his version of a start screen, the man quietly blew air into his palms before he briskly rubbed them together: a little ritual he did to relax himself before he did something big.

   Three screens had four quadrants on each which were carved up for various tasks like terminals, browser windows, and other various software. The back of Tyrone’s SUV would be the beating heart of the operation in Berlin. He had eyes and ears across the whole spectrum of where the operatives would be that day.

   Tyrone went into his Linux terminal and used a secure shell to initiate a conversation over an encrypted IRC (internet relay chat) client. He then typed in /msg CCGuy22 I’m ready and waited.

   A little pinging noise sounded in the quiet interior of his command post.

   Status?

Tyrone typed it out hastily: Alpha Centauri.The green cursor blinked away, awaiting the appropriate response from his contact in Spain.

   Cyberspace was restless for an answer from Carlos Castell, Spain’s Governor. You should see the file,he messaged.

   Tyrone looked at a different monitor this time after he read the words. An encrypted volume he had preemptively loaded now showed a new file that had made the journey from Barcelona to Berlin. He quickly accessed it…his heart rate beginning to run away a little bit.

The first thing he opened was the readme. It briefly explained in short text that the information and plans contained in the subsequent files were highly classified and obtained through secure channels. The document also referenced the torture of two Germans from the Interior Ministry by Mossad.

   Tyrone’s eyes fell across the line with the words Mossadand torturein it. His other contact in Barcelona, Agent Marcelo, had personally carried out the interrogation of the criminal Germans. What he wasn’t able to tell Tyrone before would now be revealed that morning.

   However, before he even remotely became interested in the bigger picture, Tyrone only engrossed himself in the directories of the attachment that related strictly to the Berlin mission.

   Near the top of the file tree a folder titled “Access granted” incentivized him to click on it first over all the rest. When he opened it his computer executed several commands which automatically blasted jpeg images onto separate windows in a shutter style effect where one window overlaid the other—similar to a deck of cards. His eyes shifted over to another screen on his right where he took in the new sensory data on display.

   The image in the forefront of the stack blew up to a larger size through the aid of an eyetracker which let the software know precisely what Tyrone stared at. When Tyrone’s hands spread apart in front of his computer’s cameras and motions sensors which tracked what his hands did, his machine then interpreted them into screen manipulations.

   What he was looking at were security clearance credentials supplied by the Germans who had no choice other than to give them up. Not only that, separate images underneath the first one correspondingly tied in with it: Full 3D retinal and palm scans were captured and recorded in a digital mold in order to make it easy to replicate for anyone who wanted to get into the German Interior Ministry campus as Wendel or Amalia (the government officials captured in Barcelona).

   Tyrone knew just the thing too for how his operatives Seth and Baruch would accomplish this. Using 3D scanners and printers, the Israelis would be able to print out tissue for their hands and contacts for their eyes to enable the two men to clothe themselves with the Germans’ distinct identities.

   The deception would work perfectly, too. As far as Tyrone knew, the German government hadn’t put out a bulletin yet on any missing diplomats. If the operation’s luck could hold a little longer, it would stay that way. The last thing Tyrone and his crew needed was for there to be unrest in the Fourth Reich over personnel disappearing on an inspection to Barcelona…which is precisely what didhappen.

      Tyrone rarely did it, almost never, in fact, yet somehow some way it now seemed appropriate to crack his knuckles. The brittle bones of his going out of joint then back in satisfied his ears with a sound similar to a log crackling under the intense heat of a campfire.

   Tyrone continued to slave away at the sets of data. He slowly but surely moved his way on down through the data until he had opened every last directory, every last file in the attachment.

   Now suddenly the scope of his assignment just got bigger with his aided enlightenment.

   Tyrone instinctively looked down at his pack of old-fashioned cigarettes. The stress brought on by the new information made him crave the cancer sticks like never before.

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How could a room look so cool? All the elements were so disparate, yet they worked in the space. The color pallet wasn’t monochromatic either. Tapestries died in vivacious reds hung from purple colonnades.

Workstations were more conservative than their non-conformal surroundings however. Cubicles had never looked so modern before until now. They still retained their four-sided box, yet somehow managed to shed the cramped feeling that notoriously came with thanks to their ingenious arbor design with bars that went across at the top to hang whimsical decorations down from.

Esther reclined in a zero gravity chair with her body parallel to the ground. Three monitors hanging in the balance on an elaborate scaffolding kept the information she needed to see only a comfortable glimpse away—no neck strain whatsoever.

Silence and tranquility were the unspoken rules to working in the very much controlled environment. Those two things were what tricked the young cadets into thinking what they were accomplishing wasn’t hard work at all, but merely another day in the office.

Music with a foot-tapping rhythm to it played through Esther’s headphones. She chewed on a nail while simultaneously taking in a message from just the person she didn’t care to talk to right now: a guy who had graduated from the program a year prior.

*What do you want dude?* her agitated brain mulled while she read the message’s contents, and then read it again for any underlying nuances she may have missed beforehand. This guy didn’t talk in riddles, nor did he ever give it to her straight either; there was always at least a little pretext though. That was one thing she could be sure of.

“What kinds of assignments are you doing these days?” he asked.

Esther fired back, “Whomever do you mean? Team Muskateer, or me personally?”

The slowness in his reply told on him: he felt stupid for speaking in such ambiguity. Especially since he had moved up in the agency where clear communication was cornerstone to anything that happened.

“And besides, friend or not, you know I can’t give you an honest answer on my activities. I’d have to kill you if I did,” she typed out. No winking smiley face followed her last message, leaving it up to him to determine what she had really meant. Esther flipped up a tussle of hair that had accidentally floated down into her field of vision; she smiled big—more or less because it made her smirk wondering what her old secret admirer was thinking right at this moment.

An icon that previously was lit up green to indicate his presence in the chat room now turned gray. Something had come up on his end necessitating an early exit from an otherwise typical back and forth between a girl he swore still loved him.

Esther sighed. He had retreated, again (!) she concluded from the clues he had left her. Flipping that switch back to work mode came easy for her after a talk like that.

Today she trudged through simulated worst-case scenarios the agency had cadets go through in order to bring them up higher to the next level. This process repeated itself over and over to develop reflexes, mental toughness, appropriate tactical decisions when under duress…and the list of reasons stretched on and on.

Since it was still the morning though, her routine consisted mainly of setting up the mission profile through her terminal and obtaining Intel on the threats she would face in the virtual reality environment she’d suit up for later after she had lunch.

The excitement wouldn’t cease until her head hit the pillow at the end of the day: just the way she liked it.

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And then something unexpected happened to her world.

*He* showed up. Not the dude from the chatroom either. A face she failed to forget.

“Esther, that you?” the young boy with the bouncing black curls called out from a long ways off.

*This is all in my head. I’ve got to see a guidance counselor about these day dreams I’ve been having.*

He asked another question as he drew closer: “What are you doing here?”

*Crap. This is real.*

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