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Summer Olympic Games, Munich, Germany
September 5, 1972

Yakov Freidman felt the skids to the Bell helicopter touch down, and knew they had reached the first leg of their destination. Next stop: Cairo. Seeing only darkness behind the blindfold cinched to his head, he rubbed the leg of the Israeli athlete next to him, using the rope around his wrists to make contact. A small effort at solidarity. A reassurance that everything was going to turn out okay. That they would all be released alive from the maniacal Palestinian terrorists that had captured them.

He didn't believe it. And neither did the man he rubbed. The Palestinians had already killed enough people to prove that wouldn't happen.

The engine whine began to decrease, the shuddering of the frame growing still. He heard the terrorist in the hold with them shout at the German pilots, screaming in English to keep their hands in sight. He only assumed the pilots had, because the shouting stopped.

He sat in silence for an eternity, waiting, straining his ears to hear something. Anything to indicate what was transpiring. He hunched his shoulders and rubbed the knot of the blindfold on his back, causing it to shift a millimeter. Enough to let in a sliver of light and a small piece of vision.

He saw two of the terrorists walking to an unlit Boeing 727, parked off to the edge of whatever airfield they had landed within. They went up the stairs, took one look inside, then began running back down.

He felt a cold fist settle around his heart, his body tensing at the sight. The athlete to his left shifted, understanding something had occurred, but not knowing what. Yakov wished he were still in blessed ignorance. He knew they were dead. All that remained was the action.

The two terrorists made it halfway back to the helicopters before the first round cracked through the air, sounding like a pop from a child's firecracker. It was followed by another, then another, until at least four rifles were firing from the roof below the airport control tower.

The terrorists began screaming and firing back in a wild display. Yakov saw two crumple to the ground, flopping grotesquely in the harsh mercury lighting. The remaining killers hid underneath and behind the helicopter he was in, firing back toward the roof.

Pushing through the noise of the gunfire was the low groan of a diesel engine. Yakov saw two armored personnel carriers splice through the darkness, rolling toward the helicopters and the terrorist hidden underneath. He knew the armor would force an endgame.

He yelled to the bound men in the helicopter and began to frantically chew through the rope bindings on his wrists. He saw a terrorist rise up on the other side of the Huey, his face a mask of rage. The terrorist raked the inside of the cabin with an AK-47, puncturing the Israelis inside. Yakov ripped off his blindfold, shouting at the man to stop. He was hit twice in the leg, snapping him upright in pain.

The terrorist tossed something inside, then began running across the tarmac, firing at the men spilling out of the armored carriers. Yakov focused on the device the terrorist had thrown, his vision coalescing on a spinning round metal egg. A hand grenade.

Yakov screamed, and the grenade exploded, sending fire and shrapnel throughout the cabin, igniting the Huey's fuel and turning the helicopter into an inferno. Incinerating all inside.

The world received the news in horror and shock but managed to recover soon enough, not even stopping the Olympic games from continuing. For Israel, it was much, much worse. The 1972 Olympics already had them on edge, as it was the first time Germany had hosted the games since the fateful ones in 1936, when Hitler was the chancellor. For the fledgling state, returning to the land of the Holocaust held special significance, and now it was met with special horror.

The earth continued turning, and, like all sensational stories that have no concrete linkage with the person listening, after a couple of weeks the images of death faded from public consciousness. But that hand grenade had special significance to some. A terrible line had been crossed, and, as often happens in the toil of human events, the Israeli reaction was a precursor of things to come.

It would be three decades until 9/11. But the grenade's pin lit more than just the fuse. It ignited the original Global War on Terror.

2

Beirut, Lebanon

January 22, 1979

“I have a birthday party to go to, then off to Damascus. I don’t have time to sit here blathering on about the revolution with you. Was there something in particular you wanted?”

Vladimir Malikov leaned back from the steering wheel, wondering if the Palestinian in the passenger seat had grown soft. Possibly fatally so. Vlad glanced out the window, seeing the land rover full of hired guns. Men with bandoliers and mirrored sunglasses, but little skill. Ali Salameh’s protection. Aka the Red Prince. Aka Abu Hassan. The Palestinian went by many names, but none worked as a cloak to protect him. He was the most wanted man on the planet, and had been since September 5, 1972.

Vlad said, “You really should take your protection a little more seriously. The Zionists have long memories.”

Salameh scoffed and said, “Not since Lillehammer. Not since they killed an innocent man. The world hates them more than me. Besides, I have protection from my new friends. Friends who seem to care more about our cause and less about just causing trouble. They would tell me if the Jew dogs were planning something.”

Vlad felt a slow boil. He knew exactly whom Salameh was talking about. Knew Salameh was now playing him.

“Don’t fuck with me,” he said. “I’m the man who made you who you are. I’m the one who gave you Munich. I got you the passkeys to the Israeli dorm. I’m the one who provided the layout, provided the clear path, reduced the police presence. You’re the one who screwed it up. You sit here now, convinced you’re a celebrity, but it’s on the sweat of my country, and you’d do well to remember that. Black September would not exist without the USSR.”

Salameh studied him for a moment, clearly feeling secure with the Land Rover full of muscle in front of them. He said, “Perhaps I should let the Zionists know that. Maybe such information would help my future. At least get them hunting someone else, since you seem to fear them so much.”

The words raised a warning in Vlad’s mind. A sense that he was losing control of his most valued asset. He’d been working the backwater of the Middle East for more than a decade, and had achieved many, many successes, but few were higher than Salameh. He was the heir apparent to the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and Yasser Arafat’s number two. Because of it, Vlad considered him the crown jewel, but only as long as he was worth it. Talking with enemy intelligence agencies or threatening to reveal secrets was a step on the road to destruction.

Maybe he’ll have to be dealt with.

Vlad shook his head, the weariness creeping out of his voice, “Salameh, believe me when I say this: We help you because you help us, but the people I work for are just as vicious as the Zionists. Why do you insist on antagonizing us? Why are you talking to the CIA?”

Salameh laughed and clapped Vlad’s knee. “I’m just teasing. You Russians are so serious. I understand how much you have helped my people. Arafat understands. But the CIA can help us as well, and that is all I care about. Don’t be jealous. Be more helpful.”

“What have you told them?”

“About you? Nothing.”

Vlad sensed a niche. An angle that could prove helpful in the future. “How long have you been talking to them? I know it’s been years, so don’t pretend.”

“It *has* been years, but they’ve done nothing to help me, unlike your people. Don’t worry. I use them for information only. You don’t have an inroad into the Zionist state, and they do.”

“Do they know about Munich?”

“Of course. Everyone knows about Munich. It’s why I have to live with such security.”

“No, no. I mean, did they know about Munich before it happened? Were you talking to them then? Did they know and do nothing?”

Salameh remained quiet, understanding the answer was critical, but not understanding why. He chose to ignore it. He opened the door to the beat-up Datsun and said, “I’m late for my niece’s birthday. We can talk again next week.”

Vlad clamped his hand on Salameh’s arm and said, “Did they *know*?”

Salameh said, “Yes. They did. And they did nothing to stop it.”

Vlad let him exit the vehicle, spinning the ramifications in his mind. Wondering how he could use the information for the USSR. He glanced once more at Salameh, watching him talk to his security, then enter the drab station wagon, sandwiched between two bodyguards and followed by the Land Rover full of meat. Israel wouldn’t be getting him today, but it was good for Vlad to study his security. In case Israel would need to be blamed for something in the future.

He put his car in gear and jumped ahead of them, not wanting to be bogged down with the circus that always surrounded Salameh. In his rearview mirror he saw the two-car protective detail pull in behind.

He drove down Rue Verdun, barely conscious of the ebb and flow

of life in Beirut. Even with the nascent civil war, this area maintained an image of calm. An island of protection in a land splitting apart at the seams, this section had yet to feel the effects of the fighting.

He passed an apartment, glancing at a woman on the balcony, painting the setting sun with a bevy of cats walking to and fro. Erika Chambers. A British eccentric that the KGB had long ago dismissed as a reclusive nut. All she did was paint on her terrace and feed her pride of felines. Day after day.

The sun caught her hair and he saw her drop her paintbrush, opening her mouth as if she was screaming. Confused, he focused intently. When she brought both hands to her ears, he knew exactly what she was doing. Opening her mouth to equalize the pressure.

A bomb is going off.

He saw Salameh's convoy draw abreast of a parked Volkswagen Golf, and he floored the engine, his little Datsun jumping forward with a complaining whine.

He saw the light of the explosion before he felt the heat, a brilliant flash that caused him to swerve to the right and lie down on the seat, opening his own mouth like the little old lady on the balcony.

The shock wave shattered his rear window, coating him in sparkling glass and causing his ears to pop, then ring from the noise. He sat up in a daze, shaking his head to clear it.

To his rear he saw twisted metal and flame, the explosives in the Volkswagen crushing both the station wagon and the Land Rover following. He saw a body in the street, lying inert, then another staggering about on fire. Running and screaming, his face a mass of melted tissue, he no longer resembled a human visage.

He put the Datsun in gear, not even considering checking on Salameh. He knew the man was dead, and he knew it was Israel who had done it.

Their dedication was astounding. Munich had happened more than seven years ago, and yet they hunted still. If they found out about his

help to Salameh, he knew they would come after him. They held nothing sacrosanct. Being from the USSR meant zilch.

Driving away, he reflected that it was a good thing the Zionists preferred to kill instead of capture. Had they interrogated Salameh, he would be next on the target deck. He regretted losing his finest asset, but maybe it wasn't such a bad thing that Salameh was dead.

The trail of Munich would end with him.

3

Plovdiv, Bulgaria

Present day

Confused by all of the Cyrillic street signs, Aaron Bergmann folded his map and sighed. Why was it that a town predicated on attracting tourists did nothing to help them navigate? The damn place was a maze. And he thought Jerusalem was bad. This town was worse.

He grinned, knowing that wasn't really true.

He continued in the same direction, following the crowds walking down the large promenade. He hoped to see something that would trigger in his mind from the research he'd conducted before he left Tel Aviv. An historic house, church, mosque, or other landmark he would recognize. He saw a circular hole in the ground, about a hundred feet across, and walked toward it. Getting closer, he sighed with relief, recognizing the remains of an old Roman stadium. Only a small piece had been excavated, with the rest running a hundred meters under the pavement of the modern streets, but it was a landmark he could anchor against.

He got his bearings and took a left on Saborna Street, entering the cloistered cobblestone of the old city. He picked up his pace, seeing he'd burned his entire time cushion wandering around trying to find his location. He passed other tourists out sightseeing, but didn't ask

for any help. Very few spoke English, and none spoke Hebrew, but he was fairly sure he could find the remains of the old fortress on the tip of the hill. From there, he'd locate the beer garden with the man he was paying to meet.

They'd had some success penetrating Hezbollah and the Syrian opposition forces, but no stone would be left unturned. The Mossad looked everywhere and anywhere for intelligence, and when an oligarch from Russia had made contact, claiming he not only had information on Russian geopolitical history and future goals, but on the Syrian government's intentions with WMD, he'd been launched to investigate. The oligarch—code-named Boris—had picked the place and Israel had brought the money. There was little risk if he ended up being a bust, but the potential for payoff was great.

Aaron wound his way through the cobblestones, knowing as long as he was headed uphill, he was going in the right direction. He passed a youth hostel, seeing a tent and a clothesline in the courtyard behind an open door, wondering how they washed their clothes before hanging them up. Did they have automated washers, or do it by hand? For that matter, did they have a shower in the compound, or did they simply pay for the security of a lock on the gate?

He would have liked to experience the world as they did, freely tramping about, no worries and no greater ambition than to explore, but that had been taken from him in the first Intifada when a suicide blast on a Tel Aviv bus had shredded his parents.

He had been fourteen, and his childhood had disappeared. He had worked to contain his hatred at the same time he had worked to find an outlet. He'd shown a fierce drive and an uncommon intelligence during his mandatory military service, striving for and being accepted to an elite Special Forces unit known as Sayeret Shimshon—or Samson—tasked with clandestine penetration of the Gaza Strip, the hardest counterterrorist missions in the IDF.

He'd learned to blend in as a Palestinian Arab. Learned to harness

his fear while walking in the belly of the beast, to succeed against all odds, locating and eliminating terrorists in their own backyard. He'd lived through many missions that he would have considered suicidal before, and had had the art of the impossible hammered into him.

In 1994, right about the time he'd begun to grow comfortable with the mission, the Gaza Strip had been given back to the Palestinians, and because of it, his unit had been disbanded. For about a day.

Before Aaron could even wonder what he would do next, the Mossad had called, wanting Samson's skills and promising future missions.

Now the commander of the unit, he'd made a deal with the devil and found his team doing more Mossad tasks than manhunting. A necessary evil to keep the support. He, as the Samson commander, was not immune, which was why he was in Bulgaria attempting to glean intelligence on Syrian intentions.

Aaron turned a narrow corner and saw the cobblestone run up to the ruins at the top of the hill. To the right was a smattering of picnic tables perched on an overlook two hundred meters above the town.

Must be the place.

He went down the steps, purchased a bottle of Kamenitza beer, then casually surveyed the deck. Full of students and backpackers, he focused on singletons and found his contact fairly quickly. A large, overweight man of about sixty-five or seventy, he was sitting at the very edge of the overlook, next to a small trail leading precipitously down. He had a porkpie hat on the table to his front, and a tourist map laid out. The map was the identifying bona fide, and the hat was the safe signal. Had he been wearing it, Aaron would have taken his beer elsewhere and simply reported back, letting his higher command in Mossad reinitiate contact and determine what had gone wrong.

Aaron took one more look around the deck, checking for anything out of the ordinary, once again searching for singletons who didn't fit in. He found none, but that didn't mean there was no threat. Just that if there *was* a threat, it was well trained.

He approached the man known as Boris and said, “Sure is pretty up here.”

The man said, “It is, but I prefer Moscow. Have you been there?”

Aaron sat down opposite of him and said, “No, but I’ve always wanted to go.”

The correct words exchanged, with both men satisfied they were talking to the correct person, Boris wasted no more time.

“Did you bring the money?”

“Yes. Well, I brought a card and a PIN. You can draw the money from any ATM or bank, but the card won’t be activated until I get what I came for.”

“How do I know you aren’t tricking me?”

Aaron smiled and said, “How do I know you have any information that’s worth a shit?”

Boris said, “The Americans thought it was good. They have paid me handsomely.”

“You’ve already sold this to the CIA?”

“Yes. Perhaps you’d like to wait on them to pass it to you.” Boris smiled again.

“What am I buying?”

“Have you heard about Edward Snowden?”

“The American traitor? The one who gave all the secrets to you people? Is that what this is about?”

“No, no, I just mean are you aware of the large cache of documents he stole from the American National Security Agency? I am like him. I have a treasure trove of documents, from the KGB’s help of terrorists against your state in the 1970s to what they’re planning to do today. Russia is worse now than it was under the USSR, and the KGB is alive and well in the FSB.”

Aaron knew that Boris was prior KGB himself, and understood that he—like many, many KGB agents—had made a fortune plying his skills for less-than-savory individuals before returning to the new fed-

eral security apparatus—the FSB. He was no saint. No white knight out to expose Russian corruption. No, he'd been turned out into the cold for some transgression, and now he was looking for a final golden parachute. An augmentation of his retirement fund to be earned by selling the souls of the people he'd worked with for decades. It made the Israeli sick to his stomach.

Aaron said, "Let's just get this done. How do I get the information? You'll earn no money until that happens."

Boris said. "I figured as much, but a man can hope. I didn't bring the information here with me. Bulgaria is easy to get to, but very, very dangerous for me to operate within."

He smiled, his teeth cracked and yellow from a lifetime of tobacco. "If you'd walked up with an umbrella, I would have jumped off the cliff. The KGB may be gone, but they can still kill pretty ingeniously."

Aaron knew he was talking about the death of a Bulgarian dissident named Georgi Markov, assassinated by the Bulgarian secret police in London in 1978. While waiting on a bus, a man had approached and injected a ricin tablet into Markov's leg using a spring-loaded umbrella. Markov had died three days later.

Aaron said, "I have no weapons. I have a card I'm willing to activate if you have information."

Boris nodded and said, "Taped underneath my chair is a key. It opens a lockbox held by a man at an Internet café in the main bus station in Istanbul. He's waiting for you. You give him the key, and he'll call me. You'll give me the PIN to the card, and I'll have him pass you the thumb drive. I get the PIN and I'll give you the password to the encryption. Fair enough?"

Aaron started to reply when Boris slapped his chest with both hands, his eyes squeezed shut in pain before popping open wide in shock. He swayed a minute, then fell out of his chair. Aaron raced around the table and grabbed his shoulders, saying, "Hey, hey, what's wrong?"

Boris said, “Heart. Heart. Pacemaker. Stop . . .”

Aaron propped him up with one hand while sweeping his other under the chair, retrieving the key. He cloaked the movement by shouting, “Is there a doctor here? Anyone have medical training?”

A crowd had gathered, but nobody moved forward. Aaron looked into Boris’s face and saw his eyes go flat. Something he’d seen many, many times.

Boris was dead.