

# **Arcadian Genesis**

**Alex Hunter, prequel**

**by Greig Beck, ...**

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„Some of us were made for war.”  
—Major Jack Hammerson

*An aeon ago it crashed into the frozen earth. Millennia later it was removed from the icy soil, still functioning. They opened it... they shouldn't have. Alex Hunter—in the mission that turned him from a normal man into the weapon known as the Arcadian—and the elite team of soldiers known as the Hotzone All-Forces Warfare Commandos must enter a hostile country to rescue a defected Chechen researcher from the center of a country at war. But the HAWCs are not the only ones looking for the rogue scientist and the mysterious package he carries with him. A brutal and relentless killer and his death squad are on the trail too—and they bring a savagery with them that Hunter and his team have never witnessed before in modern warfare. In this stunning prequel to *Beneath the Dark Ice*, the HAWC team must race the clock to rescue the scientist, prevent the package from falling into the wrong hands... and save the world from a horror that should never have been woken.*

## **Prologue**

### **97,000 BC – Yamalo-Nenetsk region, northern Russia**

The sonic boom made the herd of tundra mammoth pause momentarily in their slow march to the south. The group, several hundred strong, watched the small light in the sky streak toward them and then disappear in the near distance.

The second boom came as the object struck the earth. The vibration was felt firstly beneath their massive feet, then came the shock wave that made the huge creatures lower their heads as though bracing themselves against a gale.

After another few seconds, the calm returned, and the bull herd leader lifted his head to trumpet dismissively, and begin again the long trek to the warmer lands.

By the time they passed the massive scar, its center was still boiling like a cauldron, with its rim of hard-packed frozen earth cracked and crazed like a broken plate. Its edges were lifted in towering slabs, dozens of feet thick, and were already cool enough to allow a dusting of fine snow to settle. The immense crater

would flatten and fill and in generations of marches would eventually become buried by every season's debris.

The wound in the earth would heal and, for nearly a thousand centuries, be forgotten.

## Chapter 1

***February 4, 2000, Katyr-Yurt, Chechnya***

Denichen Khamid smiled as he held the phone to his ear. In his mind he could see them as clearly as if he were sitting in his old family sitting room. His mother, Amiina, would have on one of her many layered, colored skirts; the fire would be high and her cheeks rosy from its heat. He could almost smell the wood smoke, fried onions and tobacco.

Laila, his beautiful wife, would be smiling as she struggled to hold Timur on her lap, waiting respectfully for Amiina to finish with her introductions so she could have her own private words with him. In the background, he heard his son squeal and then laugh; his eyes welled up, the pain of the separation magnified by the familiar sounds of his former home.

'You will be rich and famous Deni, once you have top marks from the England's Bridge University.' Her voice cracked slightly with what he guessed was pride.

Denichen laughed softly at his mother's pronunciation. 'Cambridge, mama... and no, I won't be rich, but... comfortable. I look forward to you all being with me soon.'

'Smartest young man in all of Cambridge, then.' She laughed.

Denichen knew he had done well in his final exams, and expected to top his year in applied physics. Already several research facilities had been sounding him out and their offers were very generous. He would easily be able to afford to have all three of them move from the small Chechen village and come live with him. One of the firms had even told him they would arrange permanent residency for his family—no easy thing in these distrustful times.

'Put Laila on now please, mama.'

The old woman groaned and Denichen pictured the phone being traded for his well-fed four-year-old son. His wife's soft voice came on the line, slightly muffled as he imagined her hand cupped over the receiver and her back half turned away to avoid the critical gaze of his still over-protective mother.

'I miss you, my love,' Laila whispered. 'Timur has drawn a picture of you... in a rocket. He thinks you are a space scientist now.'

He swallowed a lump in his throat as he imagined his son's small fingers with the few colored pencils they had scratching on the paper, the tip of his tongue sticking out to the side in concentration.

'Soon, *zaichek*, soon.' It was his secret term for her and meant his little rabbit. Denichen was alone in his room, but still he whispered his words. 'I miss you terribly, both of you... and tell Timur I will hang his picture in my living room.'

His mood turned a little more serious. 'Are you and Timur well? Is the war staying away?' Calling it a war was very flattering for the Chechens. More David and Goliath, where David has only one arm. He had tried to follow events from England and had heard that the fighting was still centered in and around the capital, Grozny—only twenty miles to the northeast, and far too close for his liking.

'Yes, yes, do not worry. Life is good and quiet for us. Maybe a little too quiet for Timur.' She made a small noise, and then there was a brief pause as though she was remembering something. 'Um, there was this one thing...'

He frowned as he listened.

'Some Chechen fighters passed through the town just this morning. Most making their way to the mountains. It was strange—the Russians allowed them to travel without trouble. They never do that. Perhaps the conflict is over for us now, Deni.'

He was confused—the Russians *always* stopped the Chechen fighters, if not to kill them, then at least to capture or disarm them. It had been that way since 1994—even in ceasefires, the distrust and bloodshed continued. He waited for her to go on.

'It's all quiet now and the town is getting ready for bed—like Timur should be. First he wants to speak to you. He just—'

'Mama, lights. Look see.' He heard his son's excited voice, and then came the creaking of a chair as his wife must have gotten to her feet.

'Deni—you should see. There's a falling star—I'll make a wish for you. Wait, there's more.'

Denichen heard his mother in the background. 'Tell Deni, the Bagapshes next door can see it too—they've come out into their front yard to look. It's very bright.'

His wife spoke again. 'It's beautiful Deni. It's a good luck sign.' She went on but sounded slightly confused. 'Strange, there's more of them now and they're so bright...'

Denichen pressed the phone harder to his ear. A feeling of unease churned in his gut. *Get away from the windows.*

A deep thump and then a banshee howl burst from the receiver, causing him to wince and pull the phone away from his ear. He immediately jammed it back against the side of his head.

'Laila? Laila, please answer...'

There was nothing but a crackling of static. He hung up and quickly redialed, and then again and again...

Denichen had read the transcript from the European Court of Human Rights again and again, hoping to draw something from the words that simply would never be there. Russia had been held responsible for the civilian deaths in Katyr-Yurt during a secret operation codenamed *Red Sky*. Like every other time he looked at the lengthy document of facts, he had been left feeling sick and angry.

The twenty-seven vacuum bombs went off, as designed, when they were several dozen feet from the ground. Just like the others, the bomb over his mother's house would have exploded with a ferocious pressure front of fuel and oxidant that traveled outward at two miles per second and quickly reached temperatures of five

thousand degrees. The Bagapshes and anyone else caught in the open would have ceased to exist in an instant.

The blast's next effect gave the bomb its name—the explosion pulling all the oxygen from the atmosphere. The effect on living creatures that had managed to shelter from the initial furnace was devastating. Soft tissue organs like the eyes, eardrums and even lungs were ruptured or torn out. There was never a need for a second attack.

The evidence gathered for the courts was compelling. Still, no action had ever been taken.

At least not yet.

## Chapter 2

### ***Two weeks ago – Senate building, Moscow Kremlin Complex***

President Vladimir Volkov shook his head and laughed deep in the back of his throat. The pictures laid out before him were astounding, and if their content was real, it would be the greatest find in his country's history.

He fanned out the photographs on the table. They all showed a silver metallic object that had been uncovered in the Yamalo-Nenetsk region by local villagers looking for mammoth tusks. The refrigerator-sized metallic object was said to cause a tingling sensation in the hands when touched—perhaps a device, then.

Originally he had thought it might be fallen space debris—their own, or maybe a spy satellite that had at last dropped from its decaying orbit. But then he read the detail that had made his scientists so excited—the rock-like, frozen soil around the object was nearly 100,000 years old. A working device from that age—what was its power source? Unless this was some sort of elaborate American trick, he may have uncovered something that could revolutionize his country... and cost nothing.

Like many non-Western countries, they were very adept at analyzing and improving foreign technology. Whether it was the latest German super-mainframe, American spy drone, or sophisticated software system... all could be deconstructed and the most sensitive and secret inner workings drawn out and improved for their own production. If the thing was real, they could do it again.

Volkov narrowed his eyes at the image of the shining object. If it truly proved to be some sort of otherworldly technology, what secrets had it brought? What military advantage?

He pushed back his chair. The object was on its way to the laboratory in Dubna. He'd see it for himself. If it *was* a hoax, someone's head would roll—literally. He disliked traveling in the cold.

Dr. Gennady Millinov stood next to Volkov behind the thick, lead-impregnated glass. Volkov growled in his throat and turned to face the scientist, who, despite standing half a head taller, shrank from his gaze.

*Like a hungry wolf*, Millinov thought. The president was known to possess a ferocious temperament and his pale, unblinking stare fitted the name his friends

and enemies alike had bestowed on him—Little Wolf. Millinov swallowed—the ex-KGB enforcer only reached his chin, but he seemed to tower over him. Millinov steeled himself before responding. ‘It’s cold... maintaining a constant internal temperature of about minus two hundred degrees Fahrenheit; perhaps to protect some sensitive electronics. We... we think it is a probe, and... still functioning, or at least still active.’

Volkov stared intently into the scientist’s eyes, making the taller man lick his lips and smile weakly. Eventually, he turned back to the window. The metallic object was a simple silver tube devoid of screw holes or weld marks. Like the scientists, he surmised that whoever—or whatever—had sealed it had used a technology beyond anything known to man.

Using a combination of an industrial laser and diamond drill, Millinov’s team had managed to put a hole in its casing and peel back a four-inch segment of the still-shining material. A dull, green glow radiated from the hole.

Volkov turned his head to look once again at the lumps of clothing that now contained little more than piles of dust on the floor. There were a few metallic-looking fragments scattered amongst the grains. His mouth turned down as he spoke. ‘Still functioning, you say, *Comrade* Millinov? Sending data... A transmitter, or perhaps instead some type of weapon?’

The scientist flinched at the use of the old communist term. The word was used like a curse, and was probably to remind him of the president’s shadowy KGB background. He knew his next answer had better be a good one.

‘We don’t think it’s a weapon... and no identifiable signal pulse is being emitted. It seems fairly benign...’ He stopped and looked briefly at the empty clothing, swallowed, and continued. ‘The team... We thought... They thought they were protected. It seemed to be a low-level radiation released when the probe was opened, but—’

Volkov interrupted him. ‘But it wasn’t.’

Millinov spoke softly. ‘No, it wasn’t. To begin with, they seemed to work better, faster, smarter. Then we noticed the lesions, and then, in an instant, they just seemed to fall in on themselves. One minute they’re working brilliantly, then some of them looked surprised, as if they had received a slight shock, and then...’ He motioned to the grayish dust on the floor of the isolation chamber.

‘They just melted? Is that it? They rubbed the lamp and a genie came out and turned them all to powder?’

‘I’m sorry, Mr. President...’

Volkov waved away his apology.

Millinov gathered his thoughts. ‘It is... *like* severe radiation exposure. One minute it is destroying the epidermal layer of the skin, the next it desiccates the body’s cellular composition. It was as if the integrity of the human biological system just... decided to disassemble itself. It left nothing but their mercury fillings—it seemed to only target the flesh, and...’

The scientist stopped speaking as Volkov turned his cold eyes on him. His teeth were grinding behind his cheeks. ‘So, other than killing our entire team, what advances have you made?’

Millinov dreaded this moment. He needed more time. The analysis could take months... Years. But saying that to Volkov now could be a death sentence. His mouth opened and closed a few times before the words stumbled out.

'The probe's outer structure is mostly iridium. But it is bonded with some sort of alloy, which we believe gives it greater strength and density without losing its heat and corrosion resistance...'

*Think faster*, he thought as he wiped his forehead. '...If pressed, I would have to say the object was designed more as a protective casing.' Millinov felt a bead of perspiration run down his cheek. 'The emissions are not microorganic, and not radioactive, at least not as we understand it.'

'Casing? For what?' Volkov leaned closer, waiting.

Millinov knew he was guessing now. 'The... fuel, or power source... I think.'

'Power source.' Volkov said the words deliberately, as though savoring each syllable. His eyes narrowed as he looked back to the glowing hole in the silver tube.

'Yes, but it is more than that... it is my glorious future. Get the best people, whatever you need, doctor. But I warn you—I will not hear any more *maybe it is, I think it might be*, or, *as we understand it*. You have one month to *really* understand it.' He paused and half turned as he approached the door. He motioned to the sealed chamber and the remains of Millinov's team. 'And drop that mess down a mineshaft somewhere.'

Millinov nodded on every word. *A month?* It'd take him a week just to get a new team assembled, and he needed better shielding. He looked at the piles of clothing in the isolation chamber and the powdery remains scattered underneath them.

*Better than ending up down a mineshaft, comrade.* He headed for the phone.

Denichen Khamid reread the urgent letter in his hand. By the authority of the president he had been invited—or rather, summoned—to attend a month-long science project at Russia's prestigious Research Center for Applied Nuclear Physics in Dubna. By Dr. Gennady Millinov himself.

*Assholes!* He screwed up the letter in his fist and cursed again. *I'd rather see them all dead.* He raised his fist, meaning to throw the balled paper toward the bin—but stopped. His eyes traveled across the room to the cabinet where a few poorly focused photographs stood in wooden frames. Amiina smiled back at him from one, and in the others Timur grew from a baby to a toddler, his beautiful Laila looking eternally serene. Her eyes haunted him—*they killed us*, she whispered. *Burnt us down to ashes in our home, Deni.*

He missed her every day, and was racked by guilt because he hadn't been there, or hadn't done more to bring them to him when he had the chance. He had waited, to save money, but instead had failed to save them. He crushed his eyes shut and his jaw clenched so hard it ached.

Alone, and now based in London, close to the National Physical Laboratory where he worked, he was already regarded by his peers as one of the most creative physicists in Britain. His skill made him sought-after globally and he could have his pick of any university, research facility or corporate laboratory on the globe.

His fist tightened; but he didn't want their recognition. There was something he wanted much more.

Revenge.

Everyone involved in his family's death had been silenced, transferred away or even promoted... and no one ever asked the president a single question. Justice? Not for his mother, his wife or his son—not for all of Katyr-Yurt.

*By the authority of the president.* Denichen smiled without a trace of humor. *But sometimes fate intervenes.* He smoothed out the letter and reread it. *Sometimes fate creates opportunities.*

## Chapter 3

### ***Research Center for Applied Nuclear Physics, Dubna, Russia***

Khamid used the robotic hands to thread the snake-like camera into the tear in the cylinder's skin. The illumination from the ring of light surrounding its miniature lens was nothing compared to the glowing object inside, which pulsed like a miniature heartbeat.

Perspiration gathered on his forehead, and he was conscious of Millinov breathing heavily beside him. He tried to ignore the other's presence and concentrate on the strange small glowing thing instead.

He stared at the video screen; the cylinder itself was hidden behind many feet of lead shielding. They were taking no chances now. The effects of brief exposure to the contents of the device appeared to be negligible, perhaps even beneficial—it had seemed to act like some sort of energizer on the body. But after just a few minutes lesions crusted and dried, and spread quickly until every bit of moisture had been leached from the body—not just from the cells of the flesh, but right down at the molecular level. They were, in effect, super freeze-dried.

Over twenty men and women, who had first been involved in opening the device, were now just bagged contents in a containment freezer awaiting transport to the abandoned Kyshtym mines. They, like the thousands of other radioactive, biological or chemical mistakes made over the decades by brilliant Soviet scientific and military minds, would be hidden below the surface in a labyrinth that rivaled a vast city, beneath miles of dark, cold stone.

Khamid paused over the pulsing, luminescent disk, noting that the silver dollar-sized object seemed to be floating inside the cylinder rather than wired or welded into place. He brought one of the robotic hands around and grasped it, tugging gently—nothing happened. Whatever held the thing in place was not going to give up its prize so easily. He needed to use the other hand. He angled the camera lens around before wedging it into position, ignoring the other contents or mechanisms within the cylinder—primarily several dozen globes, like silken softballs. He expected these would be analyzed at a later date.

Using both of the robotic hands, and a significant amount of pressure, he managed to free the small disk. He lifted it—it was light, and beautifully made. Khamid compressed his lips in concentration as he maneuvered the object out of the cylinder and into the isolation chamber's stronger light.



He carefully drew the robotic arms back from the cylinder and into the work area in the front of the chamber—a long steel bench with cutting equipment, probes and a myriad of testing devices was awaiting their glowing subject. He set the object down and amplified the image. Under magnification, markings could be made out on its surface—writing perhaps, but none that he had ever encountered, or anyone else, he guessed.

He lifted one of his tools—a diamond drill—and tried to take a scraping. After several minutes, the only damage was to the drill tip—the disk remained unmarked. Whatever had made the symbols upon its surface must have been an extraordinary cutting tool, unlike anything known.

Millinov bumped Khamid's shoulder as he crowded in even closer, causing him to jerk one of the robotic arms. Khamid closed his eyes and held his breath for a second. He exhaled slowly and then lifted his gaze from the disk to the larger casing. They now believed the refrigerator-sized primary device had been some sort of probe, perhaps knocked off course by a meteor or just fallen out of a prehistoric geosynchronous orbit. Amazingly, when it was found it had still been active... at least until he had decoupled the disk from its internal housing. As soon as Khamid lifted the disk free, the low hum emitted by the object stopped, and its extremely cold internal temperature began to rise.

The humming sound had been run through the Lomonosov's exascale supercomputer, and the closest association it could make was with a drone of bees that had located a source of pollen. Whether or not the thing had still been sending signals could not yet be determined. If it was a probe, it was either lost or forgotten. But the power source contained in the disk was still fully functioning a thousand centuries later. If it could be understood and harnessed, its value was immeasurable.

Khamid maneuvered the robotic pincer-like fingers and turned the disk over. From beside him Millinov murmured, 'Easy, easy, Dr. Khamid. This is the president's most important and precious object—he called it his *glorious future*.'

Khamid winced at the man's oniony breath and could almost hear his old heart beating excitedly in his chest. But his own hands were steady—a greater purpose had already unfolded in his mind.

'What do you think it is?' Millinov still spoke in hushed tones, as if in the presence of a holy relic.

Khamid laid it on the small pressure pad, and together they watched as the figures climbed at only a nano-scale. The thing had nearly no mass, but all the measuring devices—radiation, entropy, voltage—indicated power of massive proportion. Strangely, the thermometer's reading was negligible, as was the electrolytic sensor's—the matter, whatever it was, was cool, and extremely dry. The thing seemed to absorb both heat and moisture and store energy in an unknown form.

Khamid snorted softly. 'What do I think it is? I think, for want of a better term, it's a battery.'

'A battery! You young scientists have no imagination—look at the power output, Denichen. A battery, perhaps. But what a battery! It is smaller than the most powerful enriched isotope, but with the energy of an entire reactor. This tiny thing could power a city.'

Khamid nodded and played along with the scientist's enthusiasm. 'Perhaps a *hundred* cities, and it's already been burning for a thousand centuries. This energy device is from a technology far in advance of our own. Inform the president immediately—he'll want to see this himself. Perhaps we can run a test for him.'

'Yes, yes of course, a test. We can do that.' Millinov, although the senior scientist, nodded vigorously, perhaps delighted at the opportunity to bring good news to his leader at last. He scurried from the room.

Khamid waited for him to go, and then used the pincers to grasp the object once more and place it in a purpose-built, squat, lead canister. The inch-thick casing was also molded into a thermal ceramic coat—it would be damned heavy, and lead didn't fully attenuate all types of radiation, but it would hopefully provide him with enough shielding... and enough time. He looked over his shoulder.

'Yes, run to your master, Dr. Millinov—and when you get back, I won't be here. Explain that to your dear Little Wolf.'

He used the robotic claws to place the lid onto the plate-like canister, and then twist it into a locked position. He then passed the canister through a series of airlocks leading to the laboratory. He stuffed it into a backpack, grunting as he slung it over his shoulder. At the door he turned briefly; the containment room was in muted light, with most of the illumination coming from the myriad sensors and data displays. The only one that caught his eye was the thermal monitor of the cylinder—it had already climbed to room temperature.

Khamid turned back to the door and opened it a crack, checking the corridor. He only needed to dash a hundred paces to the service elevator that would take him down to the car park. He often went home for lunch, so passing through security at this time of day would not be unusual. He gambled on Millinov taking his time with Volkov, as usual, wanting to drag out his brilliant accomplishments for as long as he could. By the time the scientist returned, Khamid would be miles away. He adjusted the crushing weight on his back.

*This is for my family*, he thought as he darted from the door, running hunched over to the elevator.

In the few seconds after he was gone, the temperature went up another few degrees, and a bead of moisture appeared on one of the globes within the strange, coffin-like object.

## Chapter 4

Alex Hunter sat in the rear of the black stealth chopper and cleared his mind. The swift, sixty-five-foot machine carried a modified rotor design that suppressed the distinctive percussive noise. To anyone below, it would have been indistinguishable from a breeze in the Chechen treetops. They came in fast, low and lethally silent—a ghost ship with deadly cargo.

Alex pulled on his gloves—night black and woven through with enough armor plating and Kevlar thread to allow a man to punch a hole through a door. The gloves were made from the same fabric as his suit, which changed from black to gunmetal gray before his eyes. They now matched the helicopter's cabin. He

flexed his hand—it was termed *active camouflage*, the latest adaptive technology that allowed objects to blend into their surroundings by use of micro-panels capable of altering their appearance, color and reflective properties. The suit didn't provide great thermal concealment, but if they were in snow, they'd appear white, in trees, green... and in amongst the freezing Chechen countryside or urban zones, it would move, change and dapple to provide as much camouflage as necessary.

He sat back, his fist starting a slow beat on his knee. He loved this part: everything was locked and loaded, and you were committed—everything out of your hands now—buckled up and waiting for the fun to start.

Like the suit he wore, his team's profile was also invisible. They were HAWCs—the *real* best of the best—Hotzone All-Forces Warfare Commandos. Above average physically and mentally, each one had years of field experience. There were no pictures of them, no glowing articles in the press, no medals pinned on their chests by a corpulent senator. Their group existed more as a break-glass strategy, buried somewhere in a secure military database.

HAWCs didn't volunteer or apply for the job; they were chosen. Each man and woman had a unique psychology that totally disregarded the physical self or even acknowledged a sense of mortality. In another field they may have been sent for psychoanalysis or discharged, but in the HAWCs they were prepped and then launched.

Each HAWC with him in the chopper was multiskilled, and usually with certain specializations—explosives, electronics, sniper skills, knife-work. When an imperative mission was deemed politically, militarily or plain humanly impossible, they went in.

Like Alex Hunter, everyone who sat with him in the chopper had been drawn from the Rangers, Green Berets, SEALs or DELTA Force. Alex had been a HAWC now for three years, and he was a damned good one.

This mission team, called Valkeryn, had a thirst for adrenaline only extreme combat could satisfy. Their missions were top secret, and no friend, family member—not even his girl, Angie—could ever know about them.

*Former girl.* The dark and brutal world he inhabited had never touched her, and never would. But he missed her—when he closed his eyes, he could still feel the strands of her long brown hair, carrying the scent of green apples.

*Focus, Romeo!* He could hear the old warhorse's voice in his head: Hammerson. Alex could imagine the Major now—crew cut and jutting jaw—staring into his face with an expression hard enough to crack granite. The man seemed to have a knack of zeroing in on him personally. Always checking he was fully briefed, had the latest kit or training. He'd probably resent it, if he thought the Hammer was ever wrong.

On this mission, Bronson was at point. Alex knew he would be given his own team soon... probably next mission. He knew his stuff; he'd done his time. He guessed that was why the Hammer was staying on his case: simple preparation—stress-testing the machine.

He could deal with it. He could deal with anything. In the HAWCs they had one clear rule—*we are right, and they are wrong*. It simplified a lot of things up front.

A single red light went on in the darkened cabin—seven minutes out. There were three lights. The next one would tell them they were two minutes out. The third meant it was time for the HAWCs to fly.

He ran his hands quickly over his suit, checking everything was secured and in place as his mind ran over the mission brief one more time.

*Dropping in for takeaway* was how Hammerson put it. They'd drop in, retrieve a double package—a man and an object—simple. Just a small thing about a heavy Russian military presence, and that they could expect the Federal Security Services, the successor to the KGB, to have deployed numerous death squads of Spetsnaz GRU to make things interesting.

Alex got to his feet, pulled his rifle from the rack and slung it over his shoulder. For this mission, he and most of the team had chosen a Colt ACR, basically a heavily modified M16A2. He liked its weight, optical sighting and hydraulic buffering system to remove recoil—it was tough, reliable and accurate. He reached around and pulled hard on the short barrel—secure—it needed to be. When they left the chopper, it would be traveling at speed. You didn't step out, or shimmy down a rope; you dove and rolled. The big bird just kept on going.

He smiled. The Russian ground forces were basically underpaid, enthusiastic young men, most with very old weaponry. The HAWCs would avoid them and only engage if absolutely necessary. After all, it was like shooting fish in a barrel, a waste of good ammunition. But the GRU, they were different; they were good—hi-tech psychopaths.

*Good*, he thought. Nothing like a real fight... and he liked to fight. Alex looked at the team. *They all did.*

Glancing down along the line of men and women in camouflage uniforms, tight against physiques that looked as if they had been cut from some sort of dark indestructible stone, he saw the same self-confidence, bordering on arrogance, on all their faces.

'Get off me.' It was Johnson, older than Alex by a few years, and ex-Delta Force. He'd been dozing, and woke to find a cigarette sticking from his ear. His heavy lidded eyes couldn't hide a formidable intellect, and his bull-like neck suggested all the power needed to back it up. He screwed up the cigarette and tossed it back at the man next to him.

Jack Kolchek laughed out loud. 'Oh yeah, blame me... peace offering?' He grinned and offered Johnson the same brand of cigarette. He batted it away, and Kolchek shrugged, tucking them in his pocket. He was a former SEAL like Alex, and the funniest man he had ever met. The guy could make you laugh even when the bullets were flying.

Next was Samantha 'Sam' Stozer, who was shaking her head, but trying hard not to smile. She was ex-British SAS and attractive in a brutal sort of way—blonde hair pulled back tight against her head, clear eyes and a flattened nose she always promised to get fixed one day.

To the rear an enormous man was on his knees with his back turned, head bowed and his hands pressed together. Bruda, built like a human bulldozer with fists that looked like they were designed for tearing apart artillery, rivet by rivet. He had the pleasure of carrying the AA12 rotating shotgun. The squat weapon was a Gatling machine gun that fired shotgun shells – it could push out three hundred

twelve-gauge rounds per minute. Bruda liked to call the big gun his front-door key. It opened doors, all right. It also cleared rooms, and would obliterate a squad of bad guys in an instant.

Bruda was the only HAWC Alex had known to wear his heart on his sleeve – in a manner of speaking. Before any mission, he would draw a crucifix in blackout paint on his chest. Then, on his knees with eyes closed, he would say his own private prayer—no one doubted the man’s faith, no one asked him what he prayed for and no one ever poked fun at him either. Bruda was no man of peace.

Last in line was Wild Bill Singer, part Cherokee, and a former Ranger like Hammerson. He was the only one of them with a kid, Arnold. He’d never admit it, but the man now had something valuable to lose—having a child altered his priorities—that’s just the way it was. Alex was hoping he’d retire after this mission. Soon as you had a life to care for other than your own your focus drifted, and then...

The second light came on, and as they got to their feet, a voice as deep and dark as its owner floated up the crowded cabin. ‘Listen up children—quick in and out—just like your first date.’ Bronson, their mission leader, stood holding the metal rail overhead, looking at each of them from under a lowered brow. ‘Mistakes make for dead bodies—not on my watch. Clear?’

In unison they repeated the word.

He grunted and looked again along his team, his eyes stopping at Alex. Bronson inclined his head and Alex nodded back. The man didn’t say much—didn’t have to. He could communicate an idea or command with just the twitch of an eyelid. His large body carried three bullet holes—nothing human could kill him, or at least that was how he’d put it when Alex first met him. Under Hammerson’s instruction, Bronson had been his guide and mentor. But this time, Alex was second in command—if Bronson went down, it would be up to him to step in and complete the mission.

They all formed up in a tight line. They’d be dropped a mile out from the town. The conditions outside were close to freezing—patchy snow and ice. The small urban centre should be shut up for the night when they arrived.

*Drop in, grab up their packages and pull out.* If it all went to plan, they’d be back on the bus and heading home in a few hours. A single night’s work—piece of cake. They’d fall back to a clean zone to the south, and call in a waiting chopper. They’d jog, grab a vehicle, or bobsled there if they had to.

If there was too much chop, or the Russian Air Force paid them a visit, then they’d simply break into two-person teams, and find their own way across the border into Georgia. It’d mean a nice winter holiday living off the land for a while—they’d done it before and could do it again.

But if things really went to shit, and they were encircled, or caught in a firefight and trapped, well... The HAWCs were a deniable unit—they didn’t exist. You didn’t let yourself get taken alive, because there would be no backup. Very few HAWCs would die old men or women, wishing they had led more exciting lives. As Hammerson, a military history fanatic, had said to them many times: *come home with your shields or upon them*—just like the Spartans. Never be taken alive, because it never ended like it did in the movies where you got slapped around for a while, and then were handed back in a week or two with just a single black eye

and a bad hairdo. Alex had seen what man could inflict upon man... He knew he'd fight to the death.

Alex looked over his shoulder and saw Stozer looking at him. He winked at her. She blew him a kiss in return. The woman looked slightly satanic in the dull red glow of the chopper's interior now that the blackout lights were on. She was pretty cool. *I might have to take her up on that one day*, he thought. She'd certainly dropped him enough hints.

The bird eased back a few knots, but remained so silent and stable it barely felt as though they were moving at all. Alex drew in a deep breath through his nose. He held the roof railing with one hand; the other was a fist that drummed a slow beat against his leg. He felt the explosive energy coursing through him—he was a thousand pounds of dynamite packed into a human shell, a warhead waiting to explode.

The cabin went black—the third light went on.

Major Jack Hammerson sat at his desk and linked his fingers behind his big square head. *The Hammer*, so named because of his uncompromising personality, fists like iron, and a head that looked to have corners... an impression not helped by his iron-gray crew cut.

On his computer screen a small digital clock had just started to count down from 24:00:00 hours—the mission was in motion.

He hadn't been in the field for years, but every time a mission started, he wished he was with them. The hardest part was letting go and acknowledging that the people he sent were the best in the world at what they did. That was why he had chosen them.

His teams, his HAWCs, would enter a red zone like a hot spike, burn a small hole to their target, and then withdraw, leaving little more than a cauterized wound. Unfortunately there were a lot of bones around the world that belonged to his people. Every one of them was his responsibility—not everyone came home—but that was just a fact of life in the HAWCs.

Hammerson leaned forward and clicked to a screen showing six boxes covered in graphs, peaks, troughs and pulsing dots—the life signs of the team members—all optimal with normal adrenalin and oxygen spikes in line with terrain touchdown. The team was spec'd up on weaponry and as armored as all hell. They'd get the job done, or die trying.

Hammerson looked at Alex Hunter's readout: slightly elevated endorphins. The man was probably pushing himself to be out in front. He was a natural competitor. Hunter would be given his first team soon. He'd watch him and get a report from Bronson when they returned.

Hammerson paused, thought for a second and then shook his head. The guy was so much like his dad, and would never know it. Hammerson had known Alex's father, Jim Hunter—he'd been a special ops sniper in the Rangers with Hammerson. Six confirmed takedowns, unparalleled hand-to-hand skills and competitive as all hell. The only thing he feared was that his young son would find out he killed for a living. No matter how many times Hammerson told him he saved lives, rather than took them, there was always a seed of doubt, that little

something inside him that burnt every time he pulled the trigger... and burnt even hotter at the thought of his son pointing at him one day, and saying: *murderer!*

Jim had confronted Hammerson before his final mission—perhaps he'd had a premonition of what was coming. It was strange; most special ops soldiers believe they're indestructible. But every now and then, a day comes when something whispers to them in the night: *tomorrow will be your last*. Some men and women resign immediately, others try to deny it. Jim was a fatalist.

He had grabbed Hammerson's forearm and stared into his face before they mission dropped. *Promise you'll look out for Alex*, he had asked. *And never tell him*.

Perhaps when Alex was old enough he would have shared what he did. Who knows now?

Talk about fate playing its hand. From a distance Hammerson had watched the kid go from the schoolyard to the military in the blink of an eye. Always pushing himself harder, never surrendering to pain or fatigue. He had moved on to advanced training and had been selected for the SEALs. There he had excelled, distinguishing himself with his drive and aggression, until his skills were impossible for Hammerson to ignore. It was as if karma had played a crazy joke on all of them. Hammerson snorted—*we all become our fathers sooner or later*.

Hammerson could never have promised Jim Hunter he could keep Alex alive, or safe, or even always be able to bring him home. But he could look out for him. That was one promise he would damn well keep.

He grabbed one of the folders from his in-tray, leaned back and looked up at the brass sign on his wall: *God, Guns and Guts* it read in heavy copperplate lettering. He drummed his fingers on the folder's hard cover—when traveling to hell, you needed all three.

He flipped open the folder. On the first page were three large words in red: *Classified—Arcadian Project*. Hammerson groaned. He liked Captain Graham; the military doctor was brilliant, and his team had patched Hammerson and his people up a hundred times using new techniques others only dreamt of. But it seemed these days, the man's interest had turned to yet another super-soldier project.

Hammerson flicked through the report, looking over the theoretical projections for physical improvement, tissue regeneration and stamina enhancement. He snorted – when were these guys gonna learn? Battle superiority came from training, internal fortitude, advanced weaponry and a certain type of psychology—fearless, determined, and maybe a little psychotic as well.

He paused on the last page, nodding in agreement. *Hmm, ready for human trials by year's end. I suppose, if the eggheads could give my HAWCs an extra ounce of speed, strength or stamina, I'd support 'em*. He looked at the data on animal test subjects—twenty-five percent catatonia, thirty percent motor neuron disorder, stroke, embolism, and all the rest... dead.

He'd heard the Chinese were working with reanimation—soldiers that didn't feel pain or fatigue—because they were already fucking dead. Only problem was, they fell apart after a week.

Hammerson went to throw the folder into his out-tray, then changed his mind and tossed it back onto his in-tray with a shrug.

'I doubt it'll be in our lifetime, Graham.' He went back to watching the screen.

## Chapter 5

Dr. Gennady Millinov tugged at the tufts of hair on each side of his head as he paced. That bastard Khamid was gone, the disk was gone, and now something was leaking from inside the capsule. Although leaking wasn't really the right term for what he was witnessing. Things that looked like big blobs of mucus were slipping from the split in the cylinder onto the floor. Some remained stuck to the gleaming skin of the capsule, quivering slightly, like a mound of jelly or grub-like insects in a larval stage, waiting to emerge for a first flight.

'Please be some sort of fuel or coolant leakage. Please be condensation, hydraulic fluid, or... or anything else. Please be *anything* else.'

He repeated the mantra over and over, but he knew better—reality kept breaking through. They *moved*—he was sure of it. Every now and then one of the shapeless blobs would slide one way or the other—just a fraction, but enough to draw his attention... and scare the hell out of him.

He swore loudly in the empty laboratory. Only hours after he had trumpeted his breakthrough to the president, he had lost his prize. Volkov was due to call for a full briefing, and this was happening now? It was a fucking nightmare.

He tugged briefly at his hair again. He shouldn't have left him alone with the disk. Volkov would shoot him. But it wasn't his fault. That bastard Khamid must have been working for the Americans or the English. Yes, he had checked his references, but he didn't *fully* security screen the man; that was the Security Services' job. Let the Little Wolf snarl and spit at them.

He leaned down and looked at the screen relay from within the isolation chamber. Another of the mucus blobs slid down the side of the capsule and plopped onto the floor.

*What else could go wrong?*

Millinov talked quickly into the phone. He was babbling, he knew it, but he couldn't stop if he tried. His heart beat so hard he could feel its pulse in the back of his throat.

'Shut up.' The president spoke with enough venom to make the scientist's voice catch in his throat. His jaw snapped shut.

'So, maybe not a probe after all, hmm, doctor? Have you taken a sample?'

'A sample?' Millinov swallowed. 'No, no, not yet, Mr. President.' He looked at the room on the screen, the strange new markings on its toughened steel floor—like weld marks—left behind as the revolting things moved aimlessly across the isolation room. They were either melting or digesting the minerals in the flooring. His fears over whether the things were alive or not had been manifestly answered.

He cleared his throat. 'We now think that the capsule either picked up some microbiological spores from space or else it's some type of incubator, with the disk inside acting as a combination of coolant and dry cell. The contents—or passengers—were being held in stasis by the extreme cold. But now?' He looked at



the screen image of the room's slimy inhabitants. 'Mr. President, I'm not sure it is a good idea to go in there just yet. Perhaps some more study before—'

Volkov cut him off. 'Send someone in, or go in yourself. The next time we speak, I want to know what it is you have in *my* laboratory, Dr. Millinov.'

Millinov sputtered before words formed. 'But Dr. Khamid is—'  
'Leave Khamid to me.'

## Chapter 6

### *Town of Urus-Martan, Chechen countryside*

Denichen Khamid looked at his watch for the tenth time. The Americans were coming; they said they would, they knew where he was. He rubbed his temples. Now, he guessed, came the hard part—staying sane. He needed to try to remain calm and be patient. He looked at his watch again.

He started at the sound of the floorboards creaking, and turned so quickly he made his neck crick.

'No, thank you.' He shook his head, now with some pain, as the steaming cup of sweet black tea was offered to him. He rubbed his neck. His stomach was in too much turmoil for him to consider eating or drinking anything. He smiled up at Zezag: *a good woman*, he thought, *just like his wife*.

*Laila!* He still felt the agony inside. From the laboratory he had fled to Katyr-Yurt, laying field flowers on the spot where his mother's house once stood. The town had been rebuilt, and he had recognized nothing in the streets of new concrete and fresh wood. All that was left of the centuries-old town was a layer of ash below the cold bitumen and new pine floorboards.

He lived on the run now, directed by the Chechen underground. Each day, he was moved from house to house, a new family taking turns to secrete him for twelve hours, putting themselves at risk for him—a Chechen fleeing from Russians would always find a bed in the Chechnya villages. Tonight it had been the Saidullay family. He tried his warmest smile on their small boy, who clung to Zezag's leg and stared at him as if he had just dropped from the sky. It didn't work and the child slid a little farther behind Zezag's ample bottom.

Khamid looked at his watch again. *Must stop doing that*, he thought. They would come soon, surely, before his luck ran out. The Russians would find him eventually, and if they got him back to the Ministry of Security, he fully expected to spend his last few miserable days being pulled apart—psychologically and physically. His remains would eventually be fed to squealing pigs in some remote farm on the outskirts of Moscow.

*Doubts, doubts, doubts—I did the right thing... didn't I?* He wished he had prepared more, and thought again of the package he had risked everything for—only the size of a large button, but its shielded container weighed as much as a large dog. He had carried it for many hours, and his shoulders had been rubbed raw. He rolled them; they felt better now the thing was off his back. If he had needed to move quickly, it would have been his undoing. An odd tingling

remained; he hoped it was just from muscle strain, and not from the strange radiation the object gave off.

He cheered himself by imagining the look on Dr. Gennady Millinov's face when he returned to discover the disk gone... straight after he contacted the president. *Serves them right*, he thought. He hated them all. They had vaporized his family and the entire village a decade and a half ago, and he had always dreamt of an opportunity to make them pay—to rob them of something as they had robbed him.

He wondered if they had worked out who he *really* was yet. In a way, the Russians' ability to make people and places disappear without a trace had worked in his favor.

Like most Chechens, he had two identities. His Russian one, paid for on the black market and cultivated over the years. This allowed him the ability to work and travel in and out of Russia. And his real one—his birth one, which was hidden from all except family and friends. For all Russia knew, he had died with Amiina, Laila and Timur and like them was now nothing but scattered ash beneath the Katyr-Yurt soil.

There would always be some record, perhaps buried in one of the Ministry of Security Service's databases, but for a science bureaucrat like Millinov, Khamid would be of pure Russian origin and anything else would be hidden from his superficial analysis. He doubted anyone would know of his links to the obliterated town, his destroyed family or why he would have such a volcanic hatred.

'Zezag, I will take my tea now.' The small boy's face half appeared from behind the door. Khamid smiled again; this time the boy's lips curled a fraction.

His original plan had been to use his physics expertise to create some sort of dirty bomb and detonate it outside the Kremlin, or at least as close as he could get to a large military base. He was glad he hadn't gone through with it. Time has a way of cooling hot blood. If he had killed a single innocent while blowing a hole in the corrupt beast, he would be no better than the president who ordered the release of the vacuum bombs over Katyr-Yurt. Besides, it may also have caused another crackdown on his people—they were stoic, but they couldn't endure much more.

But what he could not do, would not do, was allow a great power to fall into the hands of people who had proved that they could not properly manage such a responsibility. Using his scientific network, he had managed to get a message to a colleague in Turkey, who had passed it on to the NATO base in Incirlik, and then on to the Pentagon.

They would help—of course they would. He wasn't vain enough to think they valued him, but they would come for the power cell. And if the Americans turned out to be no better than the Russians? He groaned and rubbed his spine on the back of the chair, trying to relieve the itching tingle. The boy smiled a little wider at his antics. Khamid shrugged.

'We all have to trust someone, sometime, right?'

Khamid's small cell phone pinged quickly three times. *Three*: his heart pounded in his throat—they'd found him!

The night-black hunters moved silently through the village. With their single-lens night-vision goggles and exoskeletal armor, they resembled a horde of alien creatures, hunting for prey in the dark.

From time to time they stopped to listen to the instructions that flowed directly into their small earpieces, or simply to pause to examine their surroundings. Members of the Spetsnaz Vypmel death squads, this group were the *Wolverines*—a creature from the weasel family, known for its frightening ferocity and strength. The name suited these men perfectly.

The Wolverines were the most feared of all, simply because of who led them – a brutal assassin renowned for stopping at nothing in the pursuit of his objective—Uli Borshov. The black-bearded giant stood well over six and a half feet tall, and weighed two hundred and eighty pounds. The man was a psychopath, but a useful one, let loose by the Russian Federal Security Services on jobs that needed doing by any means.

The area around the town and surrounding forest was alive with standard Russian military forces. But they would keep their distance once they realized Spetsnaz GRU were in the area. More so if it were the Vypmel, rumored to think nothing of putting a bullet into the brain of any overenthusiastic soldier who got in their way.

At a signal the men darted forward another hundred feet and melted back into the shadows. Their goal was simple: find a man—just one, but one important enough to have a mission launched in person by the president.

Care had to be taken. The people of Chechnya hated everyone and everything of Russian origin, and Russia had given them good reason. As long as the mainly Muslim country was disorganized and fragmented, it was less of a threat—Russia expended significant and brutal effort keeping it that way.

The Spetsnaz sprinted another hundred feet. They didn't know or care what the man they sought had done. The president wanted him, dead or alive. Borshov was leading the infiltration and search, and Borshov preferred him dead.

The giant pressed one large blunt finger into his ear as he listened to the updated information—an address was received. He nodded, and then changed frequencies to talk to his team.

The net pulled a little tighter as the killers closed in.

Millinov walked slowly around his two assistants. Doctors Yelena Mutko and Anatoly Lavrov were dressed in thick, polymer contamination suits. The hermetically sealed outfits were extremely tough but lightweight, and their perspex face shields gave them good, but not unrestricted vision.

They both looked pale and nervous. *Good*, he thought—*keep them sharp*. He ran his hand over Yelena's back, feeling the huge metallic lump beneath the plasticized material. Each suit had its own oxygen supply, so they were effectively quarantined from gas, liquid splatter, radioactive dust, and even some spectrums of rays for a period of time. However, they traded mobility for safety in the cumbersome suits.

Satisfied with the seals, Millinov patted Anatoly on the shoulder, and rested his hand on the access panel that would open the outer door to the isolation chamber. Nodding at them, he pressed the recessed button. The door slid back with the

small sigh of sucking air—the negative air pressure was designed to draw anything in, rather than allow anything to float out.

Yelena hugged a large glass jar to her chest and Anatoly held a pair of large forceps. Millinov rushed back to the viewing screen and watched as the inner door to the chamber opened and his two assistants stepped in. They paused. He knew what they were experiencing; it was an unsettling sight—the things now infested the inside of the chamber. Ceiling, floor, walls, the capsule—everything was covered in the mucoid blobs. Some areas of the chamber looked polished, as though they had been scoured with an industrial solvent.

Millinov spoke into the microphone: 'Proceed.'

Anatoly looked toward the camera, his face still pale behind the visor. He nodded, a little jerkily, and then motioned with the forceps toward one of the shapeless blobs hanging from the side of the capsule. He paused again.

*I know... they're ugly, aren't they, my friend?* Millinov zoomed in on Anatoly's selection. Up close, the things were even less appealing, if that were possible—the gray glutinous mass had a darker center, like an internal organ or central nervous system.

Anatoly lifted the forceps and Yelena held out the jar. Millinov blinked. Did the darker inner mass of the blob shift toward them? It was as if it were focusing, like an eye. Anatoly shuddered.

He glanced questioningly at Yelena, who motioned with the jar. Millinov could imagine what she was thinking: *let's get this over with, and get out of here.* Anatoly reached forward with the forceps.

At that moment, the blob slid down the side of the capsule and oozed viscously to the ground. Yelena's *yecch* was clearly audible through the speaker. Millinov breathed hard as he watched them crouch for a second attempt.

'Careful.' He licked dry lips, swallowed. Anatoly reached forward again, and this time managed to grasp the edge of the blob. It lifted easily and he maneuvered it toward Yelena's jar.

The blob quivered slightly, but held fast. Anatoly shook the forceps as the thing clung to its metal tips. He shook harder, swearing as he tried to prise it free against the side of the jar. Instead, the blob balled up for a second before dislodging, oozing over the rim and down onto Yelena's hand and wrist.

Smoke rose from the polymer sleeve of her suit—and then, in an instant, the blob had disappeared through a hole in the material. Yelena screamed and dropped the jar, which shattered into a thousand pieces. Anatoly tried to grab her, but she danced madly, swatting at her lower arm as if there were a swarm of wasps underneath the thick plastic.

'It burns!' she screamed, and fell to the ground, where her body performed a sort of convulsive dance for a few seconds. Anatoly grabbed her bicep and squeezed, perhaps to stop the thing from climbing any higher, or to try and hold her still.

He turned to the camera, yelling for Millinov to get help, but all the scientist could do was recoil in horror, too shocked to react.

The screaming and violent, spastic movements ceased abruptly and Yelena lay still. Anatoly wiped at the visor over her face, and Millinov zoomed the camera in for a close-up, but both efforts were useless. The perspex was completely clouded

with perspiration, saliva and smoke. Millinov shuddered to think what the caustic blob had done to her flesh.

He pressed the comm. button. 'Is she... dead?'

Anatoly looked up at the camera briefly, then back at Yelena. Her hand shot out and wrapped around his wrist.

Anatoly's yell made Millinov jump back a foot. He scrambled forward and watched as Yelena rose slowly to her feet, dragging Anatoly with her, even though the much bigger man was frantically trying to pull away. By the way he scabbled at her fingers, Millinov guessed that he must have been in pain.

Yelena straightened, unnaturally at first, as if unfamiliar with the joints and muscles of her body. She reached up and started to pull the head covering from her suit. Millinov quickly pressed the comm. button.

'Don't do that! Don't... Anatoly, make her stop; we have no idea of the contamination...'

It was too late. Yelena tore free her head covering and let it fall, scanning the room until her gaze finally rested on the camera. Millinov squinted at the screen. Her eyes were strange, milky, as if covered over by cataracts. She opened her mouth, wide, and spoke.

'Let us out.'

Millinov blinked: her lips hadn't moved. She had opened her mouth and the words just . . . bubbled up and out. He pressed the comm. button again.

'Ahh, I can't do that just yet. Please be patient... Dr. Mutko.' He licked his lips. 'How... how are you feeling?'

Beside her, Anatoly grunted with pain, but she ignored him and continued to look around, slowly taking in every inch of the chamber. Her eerie calmness was a stark contrast to her panic just minutes before.

Again, Anatoly cried out, and it was as if Yelena noticed him for the first time. She turned in that slow-motion fashion she had newly acquired, and reached toward him with her free hand. Taking hold of the toughened polymer fabric at his throat, she tore it away like tissue paper and wrapped her fingers around the back of his neck.

Millinov watched, frozen in horror, as Yelena twisted Anatoly around as if he were a child. His arms flailed wildly, and he managed to grab at a tray of instruments, seizing a metal probe, pointed at one end, and roughly a foot long. He lashed out and buried it in her stomach.

Yelena didn't flinch. She continued to drag Anatoly across the floor. Millinov watched the probe fall from her stomach as though it had been pushed back out. There was no blood—only a small wisp of smoke, as though the wound was being cauterized.

Forcing Anatoly to his knees over one of the slimy blobs, she pressed his head down, face first, toward it. The thing on the steel floor quivered.

Anatoly shrieked with terror. He beat his fist uselessly against Yelena's legs as the blob, contracting and expanding, inched closer. The man's terrified eyes were as round as those of a startled horse, his teeth gritted in terror.

'Stop! Ms. Mutko, stop—this is a direct order. You must stop now or...' Millinov shook his head as he had no idea how to finish his threat. Anatoly grunted in either pain or exertion as Yelena finally pushed the bigger man down.

The thing's destination was now clear—Millinov reflexively placed a hand over his mouth. Anatoly must have also realized the threat, clamping his lips shut as the thing slid up over his chin.

'No, please no...' Millinov whispered.

The blob spread itself over Anatoly's mouth, his skin beginning to smoke. Shaking with pain and shock, he parted his now ragged lips to scream. The thing immediately disappeared down his throat.

Millinov retched into his mouth. He backed away from the screen, blubbing, his mind a mess of revulsion and confused thoughts.

The capsule was never a probe, and the things inside were no contaminants picked up from our own prehistory, or from space. The cylinder's arrival had been no mere accident. It had been some sort of incubator, waiting patiently for a hundred thousand years for the right conditions. For the right... hosts.

While his mind raced to try to make sense of it all, Millinov noticed that Anatoly now stood beside Yelena. The two stared milky eyed at the camera. Together their mouths fell open.

'Let us out.'

He needed to call someone—the president, the army, anyone. After all, what better way to invade a territory than to find a way to infiltrate directly into its center?

No, this was no accident; this was an invasion.

## Chapter 7

The HAWCs were spread in a thin line at the edge of the town. Kolchek crouched beside a tree and held the night-vision goggles up to his eyes. He scanned his target, room by room. The lenses made the skin around his eye sockets dark green as the optics captured the upper portion of the infrared spectrum emitted as heat instead of light.

Through brick and wood, he searched for thermal signatures. Finally, he shook his head. 'Cold as a polar bear's pecker. We've been stood up, boss.'

Bronson grunted. 'Does anything ever go to plan?' He pointed to Alex, Bill Singer and Sam Stozler, and then motioned toward the house. 'Check it out. Everyone else: eyes and ears—something's up.'

Alex nodded and turned to Stozler. 'Forward advance with me. Singer on close cover.'

The night was turning even colder, and a light sleet had started to fall. The streets were unnaturally quiet.

Alex and Stozler ran for twenty paces together before peeling away to each take a side of the single-level dwelling. Singer came up behind them, giving cover, watching the dark areas of the nearby trees, the windows of the secondary dwellings over the fence, inside parked cars, and anywhere else that could be used as an ambush zone.

Sprinting across the frozen sludge, and crouching beside the old wooden shingles, they waited for a few seconds and continued along the sides of the

house, peering in windows, until they arrived together at the back door. Alex placed an ear to it for a few seconds, while Sam waited beside him.

He checked around the doorframe; there was a small gap underneath. Reaching into one of his belt pouches, he removed a slim device with tubing wrapped around it. He unwound it, switched on the device, and the tiny screen lit up. Next, he slid the end of the tube under the door. The small screen showed the contents of the room—dark, no movement. Alex twisted the tube left and then right, looking back up at the doorframe and then toward its handle—no traps he could see.

Wrapping the tube around the device again, he slipped it back into his pouch. He stood up and motioned for Singer and Stozer to position themselves on either side of the house—they wouldn't all go in the same entrance. If there were some hard targets concealed inside, better to make it a little harder for them to take a HAWC down.

Alex pulled his shortest K-bar and inserted its tanto chisel blade in between the lock and doorframe. He pushed hard: the wood crunched and the door swung inward. He pulled his sidearm, a Sig-Sauer 226, and clipped a sound suppressor over the end. He came in low and fast, keeping the gun up in front of him.

The first thing Alex noticed was the smell: blood, burnt flesh and excrement—the smell of human torture. The three HAWCs, all in now, moved quickly through the rooms, noting the damage to the house and the bodies. Alex pressed a stud in his ear and whispered.

'Three down, all non-Package. Signs of extreme interrogation; assume our primary Package either taken or gone elsewhere.'

'Confirmed,' Bronson responded. 'Continue investigation for signs of secondary Package.' Alex pulled a small Geiger counter from a pouch and snapped it to a band on his wrist. This allowed him to keep his gun up in a two-handed grip while reading the signals off the small flat box. They were only slightly higher than normal; this suggested the secondary Package might have been there, but was now gone.

Bill Singer stopped over the smallest body. 'Jesus Christ.' The boy had probably been tortured in front of his parents. He was missing seven of his fingers—either he'd lost that many before they talked, or his small heart had given out, his usefulness exhausted. Not standard Russian military tactics... More like GRU.

*This is why we are right, and they are wrong,* Alex thought darkly. Anger boiled inside him.

He moved on past Singer, around the room, noting the blood-spray patterns and the disarray caused by the search. He put his finger to his ear again. 'Party's over; whoever was here has long gone.'

Bronson's reply was immediate. 'Pull back.'

Alex lowered his gun. Stozer appeared beside him and made a brief cutting motion across her throat—also nothing.

Singer was still kneeling over the kid. Perhaps he reminded him of his own son. He crossed himself and his lips moved in a silent prayer. Alex shook his head. The man definitely needed to get out of the unit; he had too much to lose.

Stozer holstered her weapon and shrugged. Alex was about to call the team to order when he saw Singer reach down and turn the boy... just a fraction, perhaps just to see his face, who knows... but it was enough.

Alex barely had time to yell: 'Stop—!'

The hook pinned into the flesh of the boy's cheek pulled tight on its wire thread. The high-energy explosion that followed carried enough percussive power to blow out every window, half of the walls, and lift the roof right off the old house. Alex found himself in the side yard, with Stozzer sprawled beside him. She spat out blood, but got up with her gun leveled. Their suits were tough enough to absorb most of the impact, but they'd be covered in bruises for weeks.

Alex worked his jaw, feeling rather than hearing a ringing in his ears. He rushed back into the smoking ruins. Singer's legs stuck out from under a pile of rubble, and Alex pushed aside the broken planks of wood that covered his upper body.

'Ah shit.' The body was missing its head—the only part of Singer not protected by the armored suit.

He mouthed the words: 'Singer down—place was fucking booby trapped.' With his ears ringing, he wouldn't be able to hear Bronson's reply either, but didn't really want to. He could guess what it would be: *you took them in; it was your job to bring them all out*. He should have guessed they'd set a trap for them. He knew Singer had a kid, and that gave the man a blind spot. He'd walked them right into it.

He switched the comm. off.

Blinding anger welled up inside him. Stozzer grabbed his arm and Alex pulled it away so forcefully she took a step back. Taking a deep breath, he held up his hands to show he was okay. He looked back down at the headless body.

'Singer shouldn't have come—he fucked up and now he's lost everything. He should have quit sooner. D'you think his kid's going to be proud?'

Stozzer frowned. 'Would you quit? Would it be that easy? We're not in some sort of pay-by-the-month social club, Alex. You know that.' She stepped in closer to him.

'I reckon if I had something important to quit for.' Alex thought of his own father and gritted his teeth. *One minute we're all happy family and the next Mom's so broken down she won't even talk about it*. His face was blank. 'Yeah, I could quit.'

Stozzer gripped his arm. 'Let's make 'em pay. C'mon.'

He nodded and knelt beside the body, sliding back a panel on Bill Singer's chest and entering a string of numbers into the small keypad. Immediately the suit began to smoke. Its camouflage effect ceased and the flesh inside began to shrivel.

Alex stood and turned without a word, kicking a hanging board out of his path—all reason for stealth having been ripped away. Stozzer waited for him.

'Let's go.'

Bronson withdrew them a mile to the south, keeping them running at a solid pace, before raising a hand and pulling them into a tight circle. His HAWCs' faces still showed commitment, impatience and plenty of anger, but no lack of clarity or frustration. *Good*, he thought.

When they first regrouped, he had spoken a few words for Bill Singer. *Was a good man*, was about all he said. There'd be time for eulogies later. They all knew they needed to stay focused or they'd all end up anonymous bodies on some deserted Chechen road.



He looked at Alex Hunter. His second in command was staring at the frozen soil; Bronson could tell he was still seething inside. Hunter was smart, unparalleled in combat, and had enough guts for ten HAWCs, but there was something inside him that was a little too turbulent. The man couldn't let go. In the HAWCs you had to be cool and clinical, not some bloody avenging angel. He'd put it in his report and let Hammerson have a think about it when they got back.

The packages were still in play, but now it seemed it might take a firefight to retrieve them. It also meant they were potentially a step behind the GRU. Tough bastards, but he knew they could go through them if need be. They'd taken a dent, but they were still fully functional. He looked at each of the HAWCs in turn as he spoke.

'Listen up, people: the torture means they were seeking answers in a hurry. Means when the bad guys entered the property, they did not find what they were looking for. Package is still in play; mission is still *go*.'

The team nodded.

Bronson placed a small electronic tablet against a tree at head height and opened its map of the area, pulling the image back to a higher orbit.

'This is where *we* are. Now, if I was Dr. Khamid, on the run and scared, where would I go?' Bronson used a finger to move the map image to the left, and then drilled down on magnification. 'I'd go home, of course.'

Bronson used two fingers to open the image. A town even smaller than Urus-Martan was displayed. He tapped it and turned.

'Katyryurt—about ten miles west-northwest, and still four hours until sunup. Let's move, double time.'

Denichen Khamid lay flat under an oily canvas sheet in the back of the truck. The old Kamaz bounced over ruts and fissures in a road that was more a river of shallow mud.

Yuri, the truck's driver, made a guttural sound in the back of his throat loud enough for it to carry through the open window—it was not one Khamid wanted to hear. It meant he had either spilled his vodka or there was trouble. A whisper from the cabin resolved the question.

'Roadblock—Russian.'

Khamid's stomach fluttered with fear and he tried to make himself as small as humanly possible.

The old truck whined to a halt and a barking voice ordered Yuri from the cabin. Khamid lifted one edge of the canvas just a fraction. He saw two young Russian soldiers walk Yuri around the front of the truck and then came the impatient click of fingers followed by a single word—*identifikacija*—they wanted his papers.

Yuri stepped back, felt in his pockets and pulled his wallet, making a show of dropping it. Khamid knew what he was doing—giving him a few extra moments. He slid out the back of the old flatbed and crabbed his way into the bushes beside the rutted road. Slipping over a small barrier of built-up branches and dirty snow, he rolled down the small embankment on the other side. He guessed he was still a few miles out from Katyryurt, but as long as heavy snow didn't start to fall, or a pack of wolves didn't take an interest in him, or if he didn't get hopelessly lost, he might just survive.

He hadn't thought through a long-term plan, but knew that as long as he had the disk, the Americans would come for him. He just needed to make sure he stayed alive long enough to make contact. *They will come, they will come*—his repeated thought was becoming more like a prayer.

He got to his feet beside the trunk of a tree frosted with snow, and paused to get his bearings. He looked up: no stars or moon—good for hiding, but he would have liked just a few stars to guide him.

'And now we walk,' he whispered to himself, confident if he kept in line with the old road, he should make it to the village by morning.

Khamid stepped out from behind the tree, and only took a single step before a blow to the back of his head made him finally see the stars he had missed. Everything went black.

Khamid was tied to a chair. The Russian captain stared into his face as he went through his pockets.

'Did you know you speak when you sleep?' He grinned and tilted his head as though expecting an answer. He went back to his search. 'Your language is good, but your accent... I think you are not really from here... Perhaps not even from Grozny.'

He tugged free wrapped packets of dried biscuits, and a small flask of water. He dumped them onto a table and pulled Khamid's jacket open and twisted the label around to read: 'Gieves & Hawkes? Hmm, very fancy... And a long way from London. Imported perhaps... Or maybe you are imported, my friend? People who wear expensive foreign clothes and creep around in the dark are usually rich men hiding from someone... Or maybe spying on someone, hmm?'

Khamid stayed silent, staring at the ground, wondering when the light would go on in the captain's head, and his identity would be revealed. While the soldiers guessed at who he was, he would be granted another few minutes. *Must get away*, his mind raced.

'Looks like a teacher, or maybe a dentist.' The thin lieutenant opened a packet of Khamid's biscuits and started eating them. His face lit up. 'Are you a dentist?' The man smiled weakly, showing a row of gray teeth, edged with black. After a few seconds his smile faded and he continued his slow chewing.

He grabbed one of Khamid's hands and turned it over. 'Soft; not a fighter. Perhaps you are a scientist bomb maker.' He lifted the hand and sniffed the fingers. He shrugged and turned away. 'No smell or staining from nitrates or sulfates, so perhaps not a bomb maker... or he was smart enough to wear gloves. He looks smart enough to me.'

The captain rounded on Khamid and planted one large hand on each of the arms of the chair.

'WHAT IS YOUR NAME? WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?'

Khamid shrunk and refused to meet the man's gaze. He hoped for the most part the aggression was a bluff, as the average Russian military person wanted to be in Chechnya as much as the Chechens wanted them there.

This squad was probably just performing a sweep as part of their peacekeeping duties—trying to root out rebels and extremists, and, most importantly, trying hard not to get shot in the back when they took a leak in the dark.

‘Ach, why do I bother? You are not my problem. We’ll let Moscow work you out.’ The captain pushed up off Khamid’s chair. His explosive theatrics of a few seconds ago had totally dissipated now he deemed the show was over. He picked up a towel and wiped his hands, perhaps wiping his hands of their captive at the same time. He turned to the skinny lieutenant.

‘We’ve avoided Moscow long enough; make contact and tell them we’ve picked up a possible infiltrator.’ He nodded back over his shoulder. ‘And seeing you’ve finished off his dinner, you will find him some food and water. Then lock him in the carrier. He can go back to base in the morning and they can send him on to the city.’

Khamid remained still, but his stomach churned. He needed to break free—once in Moscow, there would be no escape.

The lieutenant drew his pistol, and, holding it in one hand, untied Khamid’s hands. He tapped him on the shoulder. ‘Get up.’

Khamid got to his feet and stretched. He was glad he hadn’t brought the disk with him. Not that he could have carried it any farther; his back and shoulders were still screaming from the torturous weight. By now they would have opened it, despite his protests, and exposed them all to its strange effects. They would have all ended up as dust stains in the snow.

He was pushed out into the cold—he guessed that dawn could not be far away now, as the night seemed at its darkest and his body screamed out for rest. Even though his plan was unraveling, and fatigue was dragging on him, he knew he needed to be alert to any opportunity to escape. Being watched by one skinny, underpaid and underfed soldier presented the best chance he’d have.

The lieutenant led Khamid to a large military truck at the outskirts of the camp. Most of the soldiers now slept, and the troop carrier itself was covered in a tarpaulin of camouflage canvas. Shoving him into the back, the lieutenant ordered him to sit on one of the long metal benches that ran down each side. An iron ring was fixed to the support struts on the frame every few feet. The soldier pulled Khamid’s arms behind his back and fastened an iron cuff to his wrist. Its long chain was threaded through the ring, and then his other wrist was cuffed.

He closed his eyes. The truck was cold, and he felt his nose begin to run, snot freezing on his upper lip. The lieutenant reached into a storage cabinet behind the cabin and pulled a few blankets free. He placed one over Khamid’s knees, another over his shoulders. Khamid lifted his head.

‘Thank you.’

The soldier looked down into his face. ‘It is no trouble. You know, I wish you *were* a dentist. My teeth hurt.’

Khamid smiled. ‘Hot salted tea. Swill and spit. It will ease the ache for a while.’

‘Yes?’ He searched Khamid’s face for a moment, perhaps looking for signs of deception, and then nodded. ‘I’ll try it.’ He turned to the storage cabinet, again rummaging through its contents.

Khamid sagged in his seat and stared out at the snow-covered roadway and on to the impenetrably dark walls of the forest.

A movement caught his attention—a tiny creature that looked like a black worm with a single red eye snaked about half an inch into the back of the truck and reared up at him. It hung there for a moment or two, then pointed its red-rimmed

head toward his Russian minder. The lieutenant still had his back to the rear of the truck as he crouched over the cabinet, pulling out and examining different items from its shelves.

In an instant the worm withdrew and in its place a mountainous figure in a white uniform lifted himself into the truck. Khamid blinked; while he watched, the uniform turned dark gray to match the truck's interior. At six and a half feet tall, the figure moved with a speed and silence that belied his bulk. He crossed to the lieutenant in two steps, wrapping an enormous arm around his neck and chest.

The Russian gurgled and was still. The giant figure lowered the unconscious soldier onto the bench next to Khamid. Reaching into a pouch behind his back, he withdrew a squat set of pliers. He pulled Khamid forward and reached behind him.

Khamid saw the muscles strain in the man's arm; then there was a popping sound and he was free. The man put his finger to his lips; leaping from the truck, he crouched and looked back, motioning for Khamid to follow him.

Khamid hesitated for only a second. *What could be worse than where he was heading?* He eased himself down off the back of the truck and allowed the man to lead him into the trees.

'Dr. Denichen Khamid?'

The small man flinched as Bronson towered over him. He could see the fear in his eyes. Khamid sat mute, his body crumpled with exhaustion. Alex knelt beside him, placed a hand on his shoulder. Khamid hunched up as if waiting for a blow.

Sam Stozer pushed in front of Alex and spoke softly over her shoulder. 'Back off, Frankenstein. You'd be enough to scare anyone this time of the night.' She offered Khamid a small canister of water. 'We're American, sir; you contacted us, and we're here to help you.'

The Chechen looked up at her. 'American.' He visibly relaxed, as if tight wires in his shoulders had been cut. 'Yes, yes, I am Khamid... Dr. Denichen Khamid. I called for you.' He took the water and swallowed several mouthfuls, pausing to gulp air as if he had been holding his breath.

'Dr. Khamid,' Bronson prodded. 'Where is the package—the cell? Are you still in possession of the power cell you mentioned?'

Khamid nodded. 'Yes. But I hid it. I can't let them have it... They're looking for me; they're *all* looking for me. I thought that I would be taken back to Moscow to be tortured. I thought...' His eyes widened. 'You need to get me out. I need... I need...'

Bronson leaned closer and took hold of him, shaking him gently. Alex could tell the time for civil conversation was over.

'Please, tell me you didn't hide it in the house back in Urus-Martan.' Bronson's eyes bore into the scientist and Khamid shook his head.

'No, no, I couldn't. The Saidullays had already risked enough for me. I might have put them in even more danger. When I received word that the Russians were closing in, I took off and hopefully led them away. Did I?'

The HAWC team stayed silent. Khamid obviously didn't know that the family had been wiped out.

'Where, then?'

Alex answered for him: 'Katyr-Yurt.'

Khamid nodded.

Bronson straightened. Pulling his GPS from its pouch, he ran his fingers across the display. 'Katyryurt: seven miles, west—heavy terrain. We move, now.' He glanced back at Khamid. 'We'll be moving quickly; you *must* keep up, sir.'

He didn't wait for a reply but instead turned to Stozzer. 'Leave them a little surprise – courtesy of Bill Singer.'

She smiled grimly. 'My pleasure, boss.'

A weak sun was just turning the sky a cold steel gray in the east when Borshov and ten of his Spetsnaz killers entered the military camp, each of them still wearing their cyclopean night-vision lenses. The regular soldiers who were awake backed out of the way as the giant and GRU Special Forces strode amongst them.

Borshov walked toward one soldier who had been eating salted beef from a tin; the food now stuck in a throat suddenly gone dry. The soldier rose meekly, trying to stand to attention, but his knees trembled under him. His head only came up to Borshov's big, bearded chin.

'Where is your commanding officer?'

The soldier mumbled and pointed to the edge of the camp where a large camouflage tent was set up. Borshov turned and strode toward it.

At the entrance, most of his Spetsnaz formed up in a line, their backs to the tent, guns cradled in their arms. The tent might have once belonged to the squad leader, but now it belonged to them.

Borshov pushed into the tent with two of his men. Captain Serkargov was at a field table with two young officers; at a seat nearby, a thin lieutenant held a damp cloth to his throat.

Serkargov straightened with an audible intake of breath as Borshov loomed like a colossus in the center of the tent. His huge bulk dominated the space and he spoke slowly, almost as if bored.

'Where is the prisoner?'

Serkargov blanched. 'Escaped... He attacked one of my men...' He motioned with his head toward the lieutenant.

Borshov eyed the seated man for several moments before crossing to him, his huge body moving slowly. Low-pitched words rose from deep within his barrel chest.

'Sore neck, yes?'

The man nodded, lifting the damp cloth to reveal heavy bruising. Borshov placed a hand gently on his shoulder and moved around behind him. He grinned at Serkargov.

With startling swiftness, Borshov grabbed the lieutenant by the hair. Wrenching back his head, he drew a slim black blade across the man's throat, opening a second mouth, which vomited blood onto the floor of the tent.

Serkargov's eyes bulged and behind him one of his soldiers gagged. His braver counterpart managed to unclip his sidearm, before fear and indecision stayed his hand.

Borshov let the lieutenant crumple from the chair. 'There is no room for incompetence in battle. This man betrayed his country, his unit and his dignity when he allowed a civilian to overpower him. This type of fool loses wars.'

Eventually, Serkargov's head jerked into a terrified nod.  
'Good, now we understand each other.'

Borshov's Vympel moved like hunting dogs over the terrain surrounding the Russian military camp. After fifteen minutes their circular search pattern had coalesced into a narrow corridor heading northwest.

Borshov stepped onto the trail and watched one of his trackers picking through the mud, crushed grass and puddles of frozen water.

'How long?'

'Maybe... three hours. Five big men, one smaller, maybe a woman—all skilled at concealment. The scientist was with them.'

Borshov nodded. 'Which direction?'

The man nodded to the northwest. Borshov looked into the distance, his eyes narrowing.

'Where will you run to, little Chechen piggy, with your pack of wolves? And who are these wolves—Israeli, English, American?'

He hoped they were Special Forces; they took a long time to die, and he was yet to make one beg for mercy.

'Let's go, we have a wolf pack to catch.' He whistled and pointed at two of his men. 'Get out in front; pick up the trail.'

The men tore away like dogs let off a leash. Borshov watched them disappear into the cold mist that swirled amongst the trees. The big man closed his eyes and tried to place himself in the heads of his quarry. They were on foot—and moving into dense terrain. An airlift would be more difficult... so why there? Why northwest?

He lifted his dark bearded chin and sniffed deeply, as though trying to catch their scent. The scientist would slow them down. They would not be too concerned if they thought the best that would follow them would be regular army, but if they suspected they were being pursued by Special Forces and wanted to slow *them* down...

His eyes flicked open just as the explosion thumped deeply in the forest ahead. It was small, but concentrated, and the initial blast was followed by the whipping sound of tiny objects moving in a wave through the trees.

Like the rest of his men, Borshov dove to the ground as the shrapnel ricocheted around them.

In a second it was over. Shredded leaves floated to the ground, and the bark on the tree trunks was pitted and scarred. He got to his feet and exhaled, making a deep rumbling sound in his chest. He looked at the man next to him and motioned forward with his hand. The man trotted in the direction of the blast, this time with a little more caution. In a moment, he reappeared out of the mist and held up two fingers, drawing them across his throat.

Borshov nodded. 'So, now we are introduced.' He turned and clicked his fingers, pointed to his ear. A small phone was handed to him and he keyed a number into the pad. While he waited, he pointed to one of his agents.

‘Go back to our soldier friends. Get me some trucks.’

He turned away and spoke the code word, waiting while he was rerouted. He grunted his request.

‘Secure file search—the man I seek: tell me everything about him—open all databases. I want to know all, from when this *pushta* was born. His past, his recent...’ He grinned. ‘I already know his future.’

Borshov stepped back as the first of the broad, open-topped trucks crashed through the underbrush. He climbed into the front seat, some of his men jumping in the back. The rest clambered into the next truck as it arrived. Borshov held up one large hand, and the group paused while he received some further information.

‘So Khamid is also Khamidov.’ He grunted, nodded, then turned to the driver.

‘Katyr-Yurt.’

Alex smiled grimly at the sound of the explosion now many miles behind them.

‘That one’s for you, Bill—kick their asses in hell.’

In his gut he felt the anger again—it hardly ever left him anymore. His father had disappeared at an early age, just when he needed him. Then the fights had started—first at school and then just about anywhere he could find one. The military had harnessed that anger, given him an outlet, but it still festered like an infection below the skin. He hoped it would be different for Singer’s kid.

His jaw was clenched so hard it ached. He knew he should have been clinical, focused, but instead he wanted brutal revenge. He didn’t want to just engage the enemy; he wanted to seek them out, pulverize them, grind them down to shit and dust.

Alex shut his eyes, tried to calm himself. He should tell Hammerson... but then what? He’d likely be pulled from mission-ready status for assessment. *No way*, he thought. Instead, he concentrated on golden sands and sunlight on crystal clear surf. He could handle it; he could deal with anything. He just needed—

‘Hunter, you still with us?’

Alex’s eyes snapped open. Bronson frowned.

‘Focus,’ he grunted. ‘You and Stozer get out at point. We need to pick up speed and it’s getting a bit crowded.’ Since daybreak, the huge corridors of sunlight that streamed through the trees had closed in around them as the forest became denser. Having to check too many places for concealment would slow them down.

Alex nodded and turned to Stozer.

‘Fifty out front: double time.’ He started forward.

‘Yo.’ She followed him. They ran ten feet apart, slowing when they were fifty feet ahead of the other HAWCs.

She shot him a playful look. ‘Not getting any younger, Alex.’

‘I didn’t realize you were pacing yourself. You want to move faster?’

‘I was going to ask you the same thing.’ He could hear the smile in her voice. ‘If you’re ever going to buy me that drink, you’d better hurry; I’m fighting them off back home.’

He grinned. ‘You fight them off because you like to fight.’

‘And maybe you’re one of those guys who likes a woman to take control. I can do that too, you know.’

Alex laughed softly. 'I'm sure you could. Right now, I've still got some stuff to shake off, but...'

She groaned. 'Oh boy, still hung up on that kewpie doll, are you? What was her name, Angie? Wish someone carried a torch for me like that.' Momentarily disappointed, she then seemed to grab another thought from the air.

'Hey, jarhead, I'm still up for a drink. I'm betting one date with me, and anyone else will be history.'

He looked at her for a moment. The suit she wore, dappled in different shades of the forest, hugged her athletic figure; the woman looked formidable, strong, attractive. He might like that drink after all. Not like he was being unfaithful.

'Maybe just one, then.'

'Sure, to start.' She grinned—then froze. 'Company.'

Crouching, Alex held up his fist, and then flattened his hand—the HAWCs behind dropped out of sight. Holding his breath, he listened: there it was, the whisper of a word or two, the soft sound of a gun being handled, the lid of a food tin being slowly peeled back. *Good*, he thought, *not GRU, then*. Professionals would never have made that much noise. He lifted a small scope to his eye and moved the spectrum up to thermal. One... two heat signatures... with two bodies in each thermal grouping. The signatures were ten feet apart—a simple killing zone—and way too close together for an optimum ambush. Again, a good sign—amateurs, probably Russian military.

He turned to Bronson, held fingers to his eyes, and then pointed to the positions of the concealed soldiers. He then pointed at himself and Stozer, nominating their respective targets. He'd take the end team, the hardest to hit, having to pass the crossfire team to get to them.

Bronson nodded and made a downward stabbing motion with his fingers: no guns—knives only.

Getting down on his belly, Alex inched his way forward, slipping under logs, through the trees, his suit changing with the colors of the earth, leaves and wood around him. Stozer followed, keeping close. Alex knew that they wouldn't be able to make it all the way to the ambush zone without being detected, but they didn't need to. He just needed to get close enough to surprise and frighten the shit out of them.

He slowed when he was within forty feet. The soft murmur of voices continued. He reached down and pulled free his longest blade, the tanto edge K-bar—night-black and laser sharpened—it was more a cutting tool than a stabbing weapon, but with enough force it could be pushed through just about anything—and flesh and bone was easy.

Alex pulled one leg forward, tensing the huge muscle in his thigh, and counted down in his mind: 5-4-3-2... He exploded from his hiding place like a juggernaut, knife clenched in his fist.

He passed by the crossfire team on his left before they were even aware their perimeter had been breached. As Alex expected, once they got over their initial surprise, they brought their guns around on him. But Alex moved fast, and made a difficult target. Most importantly, he'd got their attention.

Before him, he saw two more barrels aiming at his chest—he had arrived at his own target group. Alex launched himself into the air as Stozer broke cover.



He landed hard, crushing one man flat, and swept his blade across the fallen man's throat, cutting it to the bones in his neck. Before the blood had time to spurt, he had already lunged at the remaining soldier who, whether by skill or good fortune, managed to fire off a round into Alex's upper body.

The sun burst through the trees. Everything went white.

Hammerson's voice yelled in his head, louder than the bloom of red pain he felt in his chest: *Never let them see you're hurt, never stay down... and make them pay. Make them pay*, he remembered.

The Kevlar armor had taken the impact and diffused it across his torso. He probably had cracked ribs, but it was better than being dead.

If it had been luck the first time, the soldier had used up his quota. As he struggled to unjam his gun, Alex came back hard at him. The blackened knife, shining with blood, flashed upward and buried itself in the soft meat at the base of the soldier's throat. It went in to the hilt. The man gurgled wetly as he sunk to his knees.

Alex took no pleasure in the kill; these men had been nothing but in the way. As he watched, the soldier's eyes became glassy and clouded. He ripped the blade free and wiped it on the dead man's jacket.

Stozer was using leaves to wipe blood from her chest and arms. Two bodies lay at her feet. She nodded to Alex. 'We make a good team.'

Alex looked at the slashed bodies. 'A bit untidy.'

Bronson brought the team forward.

'We need to pick it up—if you two have finished gossiping, that is.' He looked down at the circular burst on the front of Alex's armor. It stayed black; the dappling mechanics built into the weave no longer worked around the impact area. 'Medium caliber, and slowed down a little by the muffler. Still, that's one of your nine lives gone, Hunter.' He looked Alex in the eye and his own narrowed momentarily. 'Lift your game—no one comes back from the dead.'

Alex grinned. 'Only hurts when I laugh, boss.'

Bronson raised an eyebrow. 'You laugh? I've never seen it.' He pointed with his thumb along the trail. 'Take us out again; I got the Doc.'

Alex nodded and turned, building quickly to a jog once again. Sam Stozer ran beside him.

## Chapter 8

'Shut up, you fool!'

Millinov's mouth snapped shut and he almost dropped the phone.

'I, I...' He swallowed. 'I just need to know what to do, Mr. President.' Millinov glanced anxiously back at the video screen.

Once again one of the gray-looking blobs lumped at its center, its darker yolk-like core splitting into two in some sort of strange alien mitosis. Already the dozen or so that had dropped from the capsule had multiplied to five times their original number.

He had tried venting chlorine gas into the chamber. After it had cleared, the blobs still inched across every surface of the sealed room and Anatoly and Yelena were no more dead than before; instead, he discovered them vigorously piling alien blobs up against the chamber door.

‘Describe *exactly* what is happening... and slowly.’

Millinov licked his lips. Fear was making his stomach roil, and he suspected he would need to use the bathroom soon. He cleared the phlegm from his throat.

‘I think... I think they are using the creatures to dissolve the blast doors.’ While he watched, telltale wisps of smoke curled up from the inner door’s brushed steel surface, which was now only visible in patches between the quivering mucous blobs.

‘And your lab assistants—they are in thrall to these creatures?’ The president’s voice was icily calm.

‘I believe so. The things are inside them. The doors... they won’t last much longer. And they’re multiplying; there are so many more of them now. What should I do?’

The president smacked his lips as though he had just been sipping something. ‘Multiplying? Hmm, how long before they break through?’

‘I don’t know—how could I know? How could—?’

‘GUESS!’ The Little Wolf’s shout made Millinov cringe. He took a deep breath, tried to place one thought in front of the other: the steel was dissolving, but slowly. They would soon burn through the inner door, and that still left the outer.

‘I think... an hour, maybe two.’

‘Good, good. Stay where you are; call me—no one else—if the situation changes.’ Volkov paused. ‘Your bravery is noted, Dr. Millinov, and I will personally see you are rewarded for your work. Ensure that all personnel stay within the building. I’m sending help.’

‘Thank you, thank you,’ the scientist murmured, mopping his forehead with a sweat-soaked handkerchief.

‘Courage, Dr. Millinov. A team will be with you within the hour.’

He hung up. Millinov sighed with relief. *The Little Wolf... is tough, but he is a good man*, he thought as he sat down, oblivious to the nightmare unfolding on the video screen beside him. He smiled almost dreamily, ignoring the strange, bee-like humming coming from the chamber.

Volkov studied the ceiling-high map on his wall. The capsule and the technology it contained were now compromised. The things would break free soon, and probably overrun the entire facility. He thought briefly of the laboratory’s personnel, the population of the surrounding town. He had already made his decision: the disk was the real treasure. Its recovery was paramount. Unlimited power, and no more dependence on fossil fuels or nucleonics—it would reshape the nation. Russia would be the greatest superpower the world had ever known...

He turned away from the map. The laboratory was contaminated... diseased, and on the verge of infecting the rest of the country. There was only one real way to deal with a seeping sore...

He picked up the phone and called his most trusted general. ‘Time to cauterize the wound.’

## Chapter 9

The afternoon sky had turned slate gray—promising snow, or at least a freezing night. Alex and the team stayed low, watching, on the outskirts of the town, breathing slowly through their noses. This wouldn't hide the heat bloom if someone had a thermal scope, but it would cut down on the small ghosts of steam that escaped into the air from hot, humid breaths.

Khamid was kept at the rear; his puffing gasps made him look like a chain smoker.

Alex ran his gaze over the squat buildings. Even the Chechen capital, Grozny, had few that were over four storeys, and those were all decades old. Farther out in the countryside, many of the small houses and farms had been there for over a century or two.

But here, the buildings, the streets—even the trees were all new. He knew why; he knew the town's brutal history. They'd done their homework on the man they were sent to retrieve.

The original town had been burnt from the map, then rebuilt—a new wound plaster over an ugly scar—but still, something was wrong. Alex was reminded of those small towns built during the 1950s in the Nevada Desert, as testing sites for atomic bombs. Brand spanking new, and yet un-lived in.

Staying low, Alex made his way to Bronson, who was acting as Khamid's guardian and keeper.

'Looks empty. There should be people around—something. What do you think, Dr. Khamid?'

Khamid nodded grimly. 'Yes, yes. Katyr-Yurt should have a population of nearly five hundred – mainly young families. I was here only a few days ago and—'

'Did you see anyone when you placed the package, Doctor?' Alex leaned toward him.

Khamid looked up and his mouth worked for a few seconds before he spoke. 'I, I think... it was very late, so maybe...' He stopped and looked around, confused.

Bronson grunted. 'Forget it; let's get the package and fall back to our extraction point. We need a precise description, Dr. Khamid—I don't want my team coming back with someone's goddamn lunch box.'

Khamid nodded and made a shape with his hands. 'The disk itself is beautiful; only the size of a large coin, but glows even in strong light. We believe it is at least one hundred thousand years old, of extraterrestrial—'

Bronson cut him off. 'The case, Doctor. Describe the case.'

'Yes, of course. It is a ceramic-coated lead canister about eight inches by six. Be careful: it's heavy, over a hundred pounds, and I have no idea if the lead is really sufficient shielding.'

Bronson shook his head. 'Great. Potentially lethal, and we'll be carrying this thing for hours.'

Kolchek slapped his forehead. 'Shit, I just knew I should have saved some of my sperm back home.' He winked at Stozer.

Stozer snorted. 'They can get plenty of your junk off the magazine stack under your bed, asshole.'

'Cut it out.' Bronson leaned in close to the Chechen scientist. 'Now, where is it *exactly*?'

Khamid pointed down the main road. 'Second on the left, Surkhaiki Street, number fifteen... where my mother's house used to be.'

'Seriously?' Stozer shot him a disbelieving glare.

Khamid shrugged. 'They think I'm dead, so I am invisible to them... hopefully. It's under the front steps, wrapped in a towel. Be careful with it, and make sure you do not open it under any circumstances.'

Bronson looked briefly at his watch, then up at the sky. 'It'll be dark soon. Hunter, I want you to take Johnson, Stozer and Kolchek in on recovery. Bruda will trail you for backup.' He nodded at the AA12 rotating machine gun in Bruda's arms. 'If we hear that bad boy come into play, we'll know we've got a war on our hands. As soon as the package is secured, I'll call in the evac. chopper—we'll then have one hour to make it to a clear and secure zone for rendezvous. If we miss our bus, we walk home.'

Bronson looked slowly along the line of faces. There were no questions. 'Okay people, a few minutes until go time, so kick back and recharge.' He pulled out a small canteen. 'Dr. Khamid, you and I are just going to sit it out and enjoy the action.'

Alex and the remaining HAWCs took up positions where they could watch the town, the forest, and Bronson for any further instructions. Kolchek also monitored a small radar imager, which bounced a signal over the surrounding landscape. The device could cover a mile in any direction, and about the same overhead—not much, but it would at least give them a heads-up if anyone got too near.

Alex sat back against a tree and pulled out his own canteen. Ten feet farther down the line, Sam Stozer was on her belly with a scope to her eye. She turned to look over her shoulder at him, and smiled when she saw him looking.

Kolchek dropped down beside him, and instead of his usual wisecracks he was silent for a moment.

'You know, Hunter... You're going to make it today.'

Alex turned to him, expecting some sort of punch line. He sipped from his canteen, then offered it to Kolchek. 'Sure, it's my lucky day—I've already been blown up and shot. That's enough for one mission.'

Kolchek waved the drink away. 'No buddy, I mean: I *know* you'll make it today—I seen it in my mind.' He chuckled softly and without mirth. 'Not sure about me, though.'

'Come on, pal; if anyone is going to walk outta here with a smile and a shoeshine, it's you,' Alex said.

Reaching into a pouch on his belt, Kolchek held out a small, folded square of paper. 'Give this to Hammerson; he'll know how to get it to my—'

Alex batted it away. 'You're shitting me. No way I'm taking that.'

Kolchek pushed it back at him. 'For fuck's sake, just... humor me. You can always give it back to me later, right?'

Alex hesitated, then snatched the paper from him. 'Okay, but back home, the drinks are on you... for a week.'

Kolchek smiled. 'Sure, drinks'll be on me, buddy.'

Alex cast a glance at the sky: the lighter shades of gray had turned leaden now, and a cold, sharp breeze bit at his ears and nose. It was time.

'Muscle up, people—it's showtime. Bruda, stay at the tree line until we're on the street, then keep one hundred feet behind us. Kolchek, Johnson and Stozer: on my mark... Go!'

Alex started forward with Kolchek and Stozer at each shoulder, and Johnson close behind, in a simple, arrow-tip formation. Bruda crabbed along the tree line, keeping them in sight. He had the big gun set for semi-automatic and had pinned several of the double magazines to his belt for fast loading. The shotgun shells would come out fast and hard—each drum contained thirty-two twelve-gauge rounds. He would control his fire, but could get off a hundred rounds in under a minute. The thing kicked like hell, and would knock a normal man flat if he tried to open it up too quickly. But for a man like Bruda, who weighed in at about two-forty pounds, that wasn't a problem.

The HAWCs went down the street low and fast, their skeletal, black Colt ACRs held out in front of them. As they neared the corner, Alex paused, his gaze roving along the line of dark windows, over the rooftops, then down the darkening street. There was no doubt about it now.

The town was deserted.

## Chapter 10

'Fuck a duck!'

Hammerson's screen flared red as the emergency alert banner passed across it. They had just leapt from DEFCON 5—Normal Readiness, to DEFCON 2—War Readiness, in the space of an instant.

A one-megaton fusion device had detonated in Dubna. The seismic activity indicated that the blast had occurred on or below ground—a low-altitude earth-buster, and the fusion meant a lot of heat and power, but little fallout—a giant super-heated hammer blow to the Russian landscape. Hammerson could almost feel the earth shift under his feet.

An accident at the physics research lab? With that class of hi-tech, precision blast, it was more likely someone was cleaning house. And there was only one leader in the world who'd nuke his own soil—Vladimir Volkov.

Hammerson's heart pounded in his chest. Another thing he knew about Volkov: he would love to have a captured American Special Forces team as his scapegoat. Blame would shift from Russia to the United States. *Isn't gonna happen on my watch.* He reached for his phone.

'Secure line.' He waited. 'Dark Bird One, this is Overlord.'

The pilot of the chopper stationed at the Georgian border answered immediately.

'Acknowledged.'

'Immediate Valkeryn retrieval.'

'Acknowledged.'

He hung up the phone.

The mission was terminated, accomplished or not. He had been ordered to obtain the power cell. That brief did not include starting World War III.

## Chapter 11

The four HAWCs moved along the line of parked vehicles in Surkhaiki Street. Fifty feet farther down the road was number fifteen, their destination. Like most of the houses, it was a modern weatherboard on wooden stilts. Out the front there were three wooden steps, with a small shrub on either side shielding the area underneath from prying eyes—a good hiding place. Again, Alex scanned the line of roofs and black windows. Several were open a crack. He held up his thermal scope: cold as Jack Frost's tomb.

*I don't like this one bit*, he thought. He looked back at Bruda, who was at his designated point a hundred feet back at a corner. He nodded and shrugged—nothing in his line of sight either.

They'd maintain radio silence until they had something to report. Alex pointed to Kolchek, then to the steps. The man took off, staying low.

Kolchek knelt beside the steps and reached underneath. Almost immediately, he pulled free something wrapped in a dirty towel. The package looked monumentally heavy. He gave Alex the thumbs-up.

*Thank God*, Alex thought, and pressed the stud in his ear. 'Got it, boss—coming back.' He didn't expect a reply; Bronson's focus would now be on extraction.

Kolchek slung his gun over his shoulder, needing both arms to carry the package. As he turned, he grinned—but only for a moment.

His head kicked back.

Kolchek fell heavily, the leaden canister bouncing off his chest. Immediately, Bruda's booming gun shattered the silence, erupting like a thousand thunderstorms all around them.

Bronson frowned at the clipped instructions from the incoming chopper. They'd been pulled. He'd given coordinates that would set it down right on the main street—he doubted the average Chechen would come out to investigate a military chopper coming down in the center of their town. It would still take them an hour to arrive; he'd give Hunter a little bit longer to finish the job.

Khamid sat nervously, his eyes darting back and forth.

*Looks ready to bolt*, Bronson thought. 'Don't worry, Doctor; you'll be home soon.'

Khamid looked at him with a sort of weary gratitude, then suddenly jerked upright. His eyes widened. Bronson reached instinctively for his gun.

With his other hand, he snatched at the loop of razor wire that swung over his head and pulled tight. Even with his Kevlar glove, it bit deep into his fingers. A massive booted heel stomped down on his gun hand, breaking bones and pinning it to the dirt.

Khamid cowered in fear. There would be no help from the little man, but Bronson didn't expect any. He grunted with pain as the garrote sliced through to the bone of his knuckles. The force being exerted was enormous.

A deep voice whispered in his ear: 'Hurts, da, little man?'

Sweat and blood spat into the air as the first of his fingers fell away. The pain was nauseating, and he could feel himself sinking under it. With his last conscious breath, he croaked at the scientist, who was scrabbling backward, shaking his head as though denying what he was seeing.

'Run...'

Khamid staggered to his feet and fled. Bronson's assailant laughed as the HAWC felt his now fingerless hand fall by his side.

The wire at his throat didn't hurt at all.

From down the street, every window, every corner and rooftop seemed to contain a black-clad figure. The zip-zip of flying bullets sounded like a swarm of insects.

Johnson was across the road, firing up at the snipers, and Stozer had her back to the car beside Alex.

'Spetsnaz?'

'Have to be. They were there, concealed, but didn't show up on the thermal scope; must have been hiding behind heat shielding. I count about thirty. There could be more.' Alex ducked down lower behind the car. 'They were expecting us—so much for Khamid's theory on being invisible.'

'And we led them right to the package.'

Alex nodded, glancing across at the package beside Kolchek's body. 'And we're not going home without it.'

Stozer gave him a hard look. 'That's suicide.'

Alex seemed not to hear her. A hundred feet behind them, Bruda's Gatling gun ceased its roaring, the shell drum whirring at the back of its barrel. Alex gestured, palm down, then whirled his finger once in a circle: suppressing fire, total area. Bruda nodded and pulled the remaining drums from his pack and fastened them to his belt. Each of the big double drums together held over a hundred rounds, and he had plenty.

Alex turned back to Stozer. 'They've got thirty, maybe forty men. We've got Bruda with an AA12. I'd say we've got them outnumbered.'

As if to punctuate his point, Bruda stepped onto the street. A bullet smashed into his shoulder, making him grunt with annoyance. The big man didn't falter. He planted his thick legs and pulled the trigger; the whirring boom started again.

The Spetsnaz Vympel ducked for cover as splinters of wood, broken glass and chips of concrete swirled around in the AA12's hurricane of cordite and burning gunpowder.

'Time to fly.' Alex broke cover. Skidding to a stop beside Kolchek's body, he looked at him briefly, but didn't touch the fallen HAWC. He knew the small hole in the front of Kolchek's skull would be nothing compared to the exit wound at the back.

Alex grabbed the package. He grunted—damned heavy. Clutching it to his chest, he stumbled back to Stozer. As soon as he reached her, she gave Johnson and Bruda a thumbs-up. Both nodded, and the big man ejected another empty drum from his gun. He didn't have many left.

*We still have to pull back—better make it count*, she thought as Bruda opened up again.

The Spetsnaz were staying down. Alex nudged her with his elbow. ‘Let’s—’

Before he could finish, a dark metal object, like a small hockey puck, landed on the car with a clank, and stuck there. A ring of red LEDs winked out one by one. Alex grabbed up the canister, sagging under its weight.

‘Limpet: move!’

Stozer and Alex made it twenty feet back up the street before the mine exploded. It knocked them both forward, and they crawled into cover behind another parked car.

Across the street, Johnson emptied his magazine, then dove behind a car parked opposite. Though he moved quickly, he couldn’t avoid the limpet that sailed down and attached itself to something metallic in his backpack.

Cursing, Johnson tried to shrug himself out of his pack. The limpet exploded and flung him with a crunch into a brick wall. He lay still.

‘Fuck, they’re grinding us down!’ Stozer fired at the rooftops: as one Spetsnaz was punched backward, another took his place.

Alex shook his head—a nagging thought wouldn’t leave him. ‘They knew about Khamid and knew we were coming here... right here.’ He looked at Stozer. ‘They might have found the package long before we did. What if...’

Stozer fired again, but then spun quickly. ‘Alex don’t you dare. Don’t even think about opening that freakin’ casing.’

He gritted his teeth. ‘What if it’s empty? What if there’s nothing but C4 and thermite packed in here—just waiting for us to jump on the chopper, or get it back to home base?’

‘You heard what Khamid said that shit will do to you...’ She looked at Alex’s face, and groaned, seeing that his decision was already made. ‘Fuck.’ Stozer leaned back and banged her head hard against the car door. ‘Does anything ever go to plan?’

Alex laughed softly. ‘If it did, they wouldn’t need us.’ He gripped the lid hard and spoke through his clenched jaw. ‘You might need to back up twenty.’ He looked up briefly to where Bruda stood, just in time to see the big man turn quickly, as if something or someone was coming up behind him.

With night falling fast, Bruda couldn’t have noticed the shadow looming up behind him; the whirring of his Gatling’s empty drum masked the whistle of the rifle butt that crunched into the back of his neck. As he pitched forward, an enormous hand wrenched his gun from his grasp.

A lesser man would have been knocked cold, but Bruda’s neck was a thick column of muscle. He wasn’t so easy to fell. As he struggled back up to his feet, his assailant tossed aside both guns and waited.

‘Who the fuck is that?’ Stozer’s mouth hung open.

Without Bruda’s suppressing fire, the bullets had started flying again. Alex pressed the stud in his ear—nothing but dead air. ‘Bronson’s not answering. We’re on our own.’

He turned back to Bruda, who was trading bone-crushing blows with the Russian giant. Each man struck the other with enough force to crush a lesser man’s skull or ribs. Avoiding the other’s wild, lunging punch, Bruda delivered a



side kick that would have split an oak door. It caught the Russian in the ribs, but instead of staggering him, those enormous hands wrapped themselves around the HAWC's leg.

In one swift motion he brought his elbow down on Bruda's knee. The crack was loud, even louder than the sound of bullets tearing through steel, wood and concrete.

He released the leg, which now bent at an odd angle. Only adrenalin and his training kept Bruda upright. The Russian lunged at him then, and raised his arm to block the big HAWC's blow. As he did so, he dropped down and swept Bruda's good leg out from under him. Bruda tried to tuck and roll backward, but the Russian was too quick—so quick the knives seemed almost to materialize in his hands as he maneuvered himself behind the HAWC.

In one smooth motion, he buried both blades to the hilt in each side of Bruda's neck.

This was what they called a fight-stopper—the six-inch blades had severed the lateral cord containing the long pectoral nerve, the median and the musculocutaneous nerve, as well as several layers of muscle tissue. Bruda's arms hung uselessly.

Alex gritted his teeth.

Smiling over at them, the big Russian dragged Bruda to his feet. Pulling free one of the knives, he swung it with enormous force into the HAWC's temple. Bruda shuddered, and his eyes rolled back in his head.

Alex roared as both he and Stozzer fired. The Russian used Bruda's corpse as a shield as he backed into cover behind a nearby building. When he stepped back out onto the street a few moments later, his shield was the much smaller, cringing figure of Denichen Khamid.

Stozzer groaned. 'Where the hell is Bronson?'

Alex shook his head. 'No cavalry today.'

'HAWCs! It is over.' The big, bearded giant's accent was thick and his words mushed together as though he wasn't breathing through his nose properly.

*Hope Bruda did that, you asshole,* Alex thought.

'I am Colonel Uli Borshov, and I am in charge here.' He shook Khamid, making his legs dance in midair. 'Your comrades are dead; do not make me also hurt this one.'

Reaching into his holster, he drew a gun and held it to the scientist's head.

Stozzer sucked in a hissing breath.

They both recognized the big gun. It was a Gryazev-Shipunov, or GSh-18. It had been developed by the makers of aircraft cannons, and had been designed to fire armor-piercing rounds. Russia claimed it was more powerful than the .45 magnum—Alex agreed.

'Come out; there is nowhere else for you to go.' He waited another few seconds, then yanked Khamid's arm upward. The small scientist shrieked, but the Russian ignored him and instead pressed the barrel of the gun up against the flat of his palm.

'Ten seconds.' He waited five and then pulled the trigger.

The bullet blasted through the small hand, leaving a hole the size of a casino chip. Blood sprayed out, and the bullet continued on to explode bricks in a house across the street.

Khamid screamed and then sagged but Borshov held him tight. 'I think that hurt.' Borshov laughed and maneuvered the scientist around in his arms. Taking hold of the other wrist, he then held up the second hand. Blood from the small man's dangling hand dripped onto the road.

'Come out; last one time I ask.'

Alex and Sam stayed down, Alex's mind working furiously on his options.

Stozer exhaled beside him. 'He's gonna bleed out. I thought they wanted him alive.'

Alex kept his eyes on the brutal scene before them. 'I don't think they ever did... they want this.' He lifted the plate. 'They couldn't give a shit about Khamid now.'

'Okay.' Borshov pulled the trigger again. The effect was exactly the same on the other hand except this time blood splashed back onto the Russian's face.

'Ack.' Borshov's face twisted in disgust and he put the gun to the Chechen's head and pulled the trigger.

The bullet punched through the scientist's skull—small on entry and fist-sized on exit. Blood sprayed out, and the bullet twisted and spun down the dark street, a plume of gore following it for twenty feet. Borshov hung onto the body, like a hunter with a prized kill.

He laughed. 'It was worth a try, nyet?'

Stozer turned to Alex. 'We go out there we're as good as dead.'

'We stay *here* we're as good as dead.' Alex tapped the canister, still wrapped up in its dirty towel. 'But while we hold this, we've got leverage. They can't be sure it won't be damaged in a full-blown attack, or that we won't try to destroy it ourselves. Listen, when I give the word, you run, and keep running until you find a safe place to call in the evac. chopper, or cross into Georgia. Either way...'

'Either way, I miss out on that drink.' She shook her head. 'No way, hero.'

Alex rounded on her. 'That's an order—I mean it.'

'God dammit.' Stozer lowered her head. She spoke softly: 'No one lives forever, huh?'

'Only angels and devils, Samantha.'

Alex yelled over his shoulder. 'We're coming out!'

'Good, good, Mr. HAWC. My arm was getting tired holding this dead weight...' Borshov dropped Khamid like a bag of trash as Alex stood up, holding the heavy lead canister in front of him. A half dozen Spetsnaz broke cover and moved cautiously toward them, guns raised as the two HAWCs stepped out onto the street.

'You want this?' Alex held up the package. He whispered to Stozer: 'Get ready.' He closed in on the giant Russian, motioning over his shoulder. 'Keep them back.'

Borshov shrugged. He signaled for his squad to hold their positions.

Alex was now within ten feet of the man, who was even more imposing up close. He'd worked with plenty of big men, and he was six two himself, but the build of the Russian was like a cross between a human and a grizzly. Alex tensed his muscles and turned as if to check on the Spetsnaz behind him.

Borshov laughed deep in his chest. 'Don't be scared; they won't—'

Alex spun back fast, using the momentum and all his strength to fling the hundred-pound canister at Borshov. At the same time he yelled: 'Now!'

Stozer took off like a deer, jinking and weaving, flying past Borshov as the canister crashed into his chest. Caught off guard, the impact staggered him momentarily. Alex took his chance: rushing forward, he rained hard-edged blows on the Russian's broad face. The huge arms blocked his last few punches, but in that short window, his pummeling had split Borshov's cheek and flattened his nose.

Stepping back, Borshov reached into his mouth and fiddled with a tooth. It came away in his fingers. He pulled a face. 'Not so pretty now, da?' He grinned a bloody grin and wagged his finger. 'I will kill you slowly, little dog. If you are best America can offer, I think soon we will march down your Times Square.'

Alex glanced about warily as more and more Spetsnaz broke cover and circled the two combatants. With every passing moment, Stozer was getting farther away, but he had to keep them busy, make a fight of it. This guy had taken down Bruda, so there was no way he was going to outmuscle him. He had to rely on his speed... That was probably the only advantage he had.

Moving forward, Borshov feinted to his left, but instead of circling in the opposite direction, Alex lunged at him. Landing a flat-handed strike under Borshov's chin, he ducked under the Russian's swinging arms, delivering a side kick to the back of his knee. But the big man didn't go down; instead, as momentum carried Alex through, one of Borshov's fists slammed into his kidneys, the other catching him just above the eye.

The pain in his side was excruciating, and Alex could feel the trickle of blood from the cut that had opened on his brow. The eye would soon start to close. He staggered back a few steps, trying to clear his head.

Borshov laughed dismissively at his unsteadiness. 'Good punch, da? I boxer once—Borshov the Beast they called me.' He grinned again, and held his big fists up, circling them in the air.

Alex shook blood from his eye and moved sideways as a shout rang out from the corner.

Alex's fists fell by his sides; Sam Stozer was being led back into the street, her hands bound behind her back, her face horribly torn and battered. She shook her head at him, and mouthed a word—it might have been *sorry*.

It might have been *goodbye*.

Borshov shouted something in Russian to her captors, and the big man threw back his head and laughed. He turned and pointed at Alex. 'You get to live a minute longer. First we decorate the street.'

The men brought rope and made a noose at one end, throwing the other up over a power pole. They lowered the noose over Stozer's head.

Alex needed to buy some time—they must want something from him. He knew their modus operandi—they'd use Stozer as leverage; make demands. He wiped blood from his eye with the back of his hand. 'What is it you want?'

Stozer continued to stare at him—no fear, no tears. The men pulled and she lifted off the ground.

'No!' Overwhelmed with impotent fury, Alex drew his longest K-bar and rushed the big man. It was a tactical error, one he'd never have made normally. Easily

avoiding him, Borshov drew his own blade and drove it through Alex's armor, deep into his side.

Alex tasted blood. He hit the ground, hard, immediately followed by Borshov's boot, which came in fast, crunching into his chest. Things went black for a few seconds. When his vision cleared, he saw Stozer's legs dancing like those of a wild marionette, and a wet gargling came from her mouth. Her face quickly turned blue and her tongue seemed to fatten as it protruded. Alex watched in horror—there was no dignity in being hanged.

Then it was over.

Borshov shrugged and glanced up at the swinging woman. 'Too bad—she looked like good fuck.' One of the Spetsnaz tossed him his large GSh-18, and he checked it as he strode toward Alex, sprawled on the ground. The Spetsnaz laughed and jeered.

*I failed*, Alex thought miserably. He looked at Stozer's lifeless body, then turned away as her face swung toward him. 'Get it over with!' he yelled.

But the big Russian shook his head. 'Patience, comrade. First I blow off left foot, then the right. Then left hand...' He grinned. 'You ever seen man crawl without his hands and feet? Very funny thing.'

Alex gritted his teeth. In one hand he still held his K-bar; his other hand edged toward the lead canister lying on the ground beside him.

Borshov, satisfied with his gun, raised it and pointed it at Alex's face.

A sound from the forest made the big Russian frown. It was like a breeze kicking up, but localized in one small area behind the tree line. One of the Spetsnaz shouted something, and Borshov turned. Alex took this last opportunity and threw his knife—it buried itself several inches deep into the meat of the giant's thigh. Borshov cried out in pain and surprise, but his gun barrel remained steady. He squeezed the trigger.

With his last ounce of strength, Alex grabbed up the canister and held it out in front of him. The bullet tore through its inches of lead, splintering on the glowing disk inside. When a much smaller bullet fragment burst through the other side, it was now coated with a fine powder of luminescent fragments.

A bullet from the massively powerful gun, fired at such short range, would normally have shattered a man's skull. Now, it retained just enough mass and velocity to punch a hole just above Alex's left eye, into his brain.

Blue sky, crashing waves, salt drying on warm skin. And a girl with long brown hair that smelled of green apples...

...Then a whirlpool of darkness.

## Chapter 12

The almost invisible black chopper came up over the tree line and its rotating cannon sprayed the street below. Spetsnaz agents flew in every direction, fist-sized holes opening in their bodies. In a matter of seconds, the street was cleared.

The chopper landed and a figure jumped out, his suit dappling as he passed under streetlights, through pools of darkness. Another remained with the cannon, watching.

The one on the street cut down Stozer's body. After a quick examination, he simply slid back the tiny cover plate on her chest and let the suit take care of her remains. Bruda and Kolchek went the same way. Checking Johnson, he gave a thumbs-up, and dragged him back to the chopper.

He sprinted over to Alex. The HAWC lay still, and a pool of blood surrounded his head like a dark, glistening halo. The figure laid two fingers lightly against his neck.

With his other hand, he pressed the stud in his ear. 'It's Hunter... I've got a weak pulse. Probably won't make it, though—head shot.'

He waited. After a few moments, the instructions came back.

'It's Hammerson: he wants him—dead or alive.'

## Chapter 13

Jack Hammerson sat in his darkened office, the only illumination coming from the screen on the desk in front of him. The display showed only two weak life-sign signatures, one almost nonexistent—vegetative. Its blinking lights whispered: *mission failure*, over and over. Deleting the project files, he switched off the computer.

He remained, unmoving, in the dark. His body could have been carved from stone. As if finally remembering he needed to, he drew in a long, slow breath, then switched on his desk lamp. He picked up the folder and flipped it open.

*Arcadian Project—human trials not yet authorized.*

Closing his eyes, he sorted through his options. He thought of his promise to Jim Hunter all those years ago. But if he could have brought *him* back, *then*... Who knows how things might have turned out?

*Sorry, Hunter—some of us were made for war.* He'd decided. Hammerson picked up the phone.

'It's me... Ready the lab. I've got someone for you.'

