

Experts say the best way to kill someone is from the other side of the world. The closer you are to your target, the worse your plan is. I'm an expert. My plan sucked.

The 8.59mm bullet would leave the barrel of my L115A3 rifle at 936 metres per second. The busy London street wouldn't hear the shot because I'd be on the roof of a skyscraper. The bullet would travel along the corridor of buildings until it reached my target's head. I don't need to tell you what would happen next. But there are things I couldn't control. What if a van passed at just the wrong moment? What if someone walked in front of the target? I could take the shot before he left the building, but then I'd shatter a window. Even in the best possible outcome, there would be a dead person missing half their head lying on the street. I preferred to wait till after lunch to make myself the target of an international manhunt.

So I wasn't on the other side of the world, and I wasn't on the roof of a skyscraper. I was drinking overpriced coffee in the Grand Plaza Hotel's cafe. It was a tough job sometimes – I mean, instant coffee? I'm not saying instant coffee was the worst thing I'd ever had to endure, but pain is pain, and I did *not* like pain.

I sat on my own table, reading a book. Most people think of a newspaper – a big one to cover themselves with. I see the logic, but the only thing more suspicious than a big flashing neon sign above your head with the words "Contract Killer" is trying to hide yourself. Stealth has a place, but it's rarely in the middle of a hotel. It would only draw more attention to me. But an average looking face on an average looking person blends into the background.

The choice of book is also important. You can't go Machiavelli – attracts the kind of person that likes to talk to strangers about how amazing they are. Art of War – too obvious. War and Peace – too thick, looks suspicious. In fact, anything related to killing is right out. It's all about blending in. The latest thriller makes sense, right? Only if you've read it. A few years ago I got caught out by a target that had read my dummy book and struck up a conversation. It made killing him awkward, to say the least.

Pyramids by Terry Pratchett. An unassuming book, respectable enough to not raise any questions in most social situations, and just thick enough to fit the kit I needed. The inner of all the pages had been stuck together with a machinable resin, then milled out and replaced with a series of prisms and cameras all pointed at different angles with different levels of magnification. I could hold the book in almost any position and manage to see my target. To them, I was just enjoying an acceptably quirky book.

I turned one of the few loose pages in the middle of the book and looked at the upper right prism. Three business men sat in the lobby, still talking loudly enough that everyone now knew

their stance on pumping shares into the yen. A bellboy stood at attention by the entrance. Apart from that, it was empty. My target must still be in his room. I checked my watch. Still within parameters for his schedule. Nothing out of the ordinary.

A waiter came over to me and asked how everything was. I wanted to tell him that this coffee was a war crime and I'd be reporting their kitchen to the UN, but that would be a memorable comment. I nodded and mumbled something passive aggressive.

'I didn't know you could still get coffee like this. Thank you.'

He kept his face carefully neutral, and left. Quite why the upper echelons of the serving industry schooled their servers to somewhere between neutrality and disdain, I'd never know. The kid couldn't have been more than twenty and he was treating me like that? *Me?* If only he knew. I could follow him back into the kitchen, push him into a closet and garrote him.

I took my hand out of my suit jacket's inner pocket where I kept my garroting wire. See, no. This was exactly what my therapist had been talking about. I hadn't even realized I'd gone for the wire. I wasn't that guy any more. If I wanted to be a better person, a better *man*, then I needed to control those impulses. They'd served me well the past twenty nine years, but that didn't need to be me now.

I took a deep breath, held it for four seconds, then exhaled slowly. Calm. The kid hadn't done anything wrong. Calm. A friendly smile or apology for the terrible coffee wouldn't have actually changed my day. Calm. Mindfulness was the way forward.

I picked my book up from the table, leaned back, crossed my legs, and began to "read". I enjoyed Pyramids, but there were only ten loose pages in the middle, and even they began to wear thin after a few months.

'Anything?' The smooth, sultry tones of my operator chirped in my ear-comms.

'Nothing ye—' The elevator doors opened, and a tall man wearing a black, skin tight tank top and tracksuit bottoms stepped out. My target. 'Standby.'

Harold Usilov. Leader of the Usilov Ring, a splinter group of a large Bratva family. He had made some dangerous enemies and ended up with an open contract on his head. I decided to break my recent abstinence for several reasons. Firstly, this guy was scum. I mean, real scum. He was worse than me before I tried out this whole mindfulness, positive thinking thing. I could list what he'd done, but it was a bizarre concoction of drugs, animals, and children. Old me would have said that death is no big thing, and it comes to everyone, deserving or not. New me would say that death should be avoided. New me would also say fuck this sick motherfucker. I'd try and make his death slow and painful – curb stomp his family while he watched, burn his

favourite book, piss in his drink and force feed him marmite – but I'd met his type before, and he had no emotions. He was a full blown psychopath. The best thing I could do, was end his existence in this world.

The second reason, as if I needed one, was that he was defecting to a rival crime syndicate, and his main bargaining chip was the identity of undercover operatives, turncoats, and other such undesirables. I knew a lot of the special forces that he'd be unmasking. His little bit of knowledge would end up with a lot of good people dead. I'll admit that I took a special interest in this because one of those "good people" was myself. I'd crossed paths with one of Usilov's Lieutenants a while back, the Russian Spetznaz had moved in early, a mess happened, and somehow my identification had been leaked. We'd jammed the target location, but Usilov had a very savvy tech guy working for him. It involved proxies, relays, spoofing, remote servers, and my MI6 file being sent to Usilov's phone.

Usilov had leveraged the ability of his technician against rival gangs for the past two years until finally one of them offered him enough cash to hand over all his information. The meeting was taking place this week, and I'd been tracking him for long enough to feel confident enough to make the hit today.

Really, this rival gang would be getting access to Usilov's technician. Usilov himself was just part of the deal. I hadn't managed to find out who the tech was, but we knew he wasn't Russian. Not much to go on.

Through one of my book's optics I could see Usilov lighting a cigarette as he strutted through the lobby.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the bellboy walk forwards and say, 'Excuse me sir, I'm very sorry, but you can't smoke indoors.'

Usilov stopped and stared at the boy. I'd seen that stare before. It was a predator realising that he could kill his opponent, and then deciding if the social repercussions were enough to stop him from doing it. It was the look I'd given the server just a few minutes ago. After a few seconds, in which the bellboy continued to apologise and refused to meet Usilov's eye, he took a long drag on his cigarette, blew it in the bellboy's face, and flicked the cigarette in the kid's chest.

He coughed at the smoke, and hurried to clear the cigarette. Usilov strode through the lobby, his sneakers squeaking on the polished marble. He walked through the revolving front door, and I made my move. The book went into the pocket of my suit jacket, and I followed him out.

It was a windy day even without the funnels the buildings created, but it was bright and the sun lit the street and surrounding buildings, allowing them to shine as they really should. Every window shone silver and the white washed buildings glistened. I took in a deep breath of the London air, trying my best to ignore the smell of diesel a black cab had left behind. I waved off one of the valets who was trying to usher me into a limo, and headed after the figure of Usilov as he went out of sight round the corner of the hotel.

A chirp in my ear, followed by a voice. 'Eagle sighted leaving the roost.'

I spoke softly as I walked. 'Target has left the hotel. Following. No more codewords.'

'Affirmative,' the voice in my ear said. 'Do you require assistance?'

I smiled. I always got a kick out of the idea of my assistant helping me. She matched me for average traits. Average height, brown hair, brown eyes. Spoke the Queen's English, but could leverage a passable East Londoner if required. Usilov was a mountain of a man, and the thought of calling in a five foot three tech geek amused me. Appearances can be deceiving, and I'd seen her pull some impressive martial feats that by all laws of physics she shouldn't have been able to do. Like how a bumble bee can fly.

'Negative, Bee. Stay on cams.'

Bee was nearby in a truck, patched into London's robust CCTV network. Good for keeping tabs on innocent bystanders *and* killing criminals it turned out.

I crossed the road, and walked past where Usilov had turned. The first thing you learn on surveillance is how to follow someone. Ideally you want three people to tail a single target, but me on foot and Bee on cameras would have to suffice. First lesson is corners. If the target has figured out you're there, and you follow him round a corner, he's got you dead to rights. So I crossed the road, and kept walking, glancing down the street he'd taken. He hadn't stopped and pulled a knife to stab whoever came round the corner after him, and wasn't checking over his shoulder. I was probably safe. I crossed back to his side, and walked along the pavement across from him about twenty metres back. I was on a crowded street, having to weave through people to keep up with Usilov. He'd never see me even if I was right behind him, but I couldn't ignore the basics.

I'd been tailing people for the last decade, so this was hardly anything new for me, but I still got that old familiar thrill. The chase. Something primal inside me enjoyed it. The capture and the kill had lost its lustre, but the chase... I rolled my neck to work out the excitement, the thing inside me that wanted to throw stealth to the wind and just run after the guy.

He walked for several blocks, before taking a side street. I did the same as before, made sure I had distance between myself and the corner, sped up so I didn't lose him, slowed down again as the street he took became visible, and crossed to continue the chase. The very slow, walking speed chase.

'Bee, move up, just in case.'

I heard her sigh. Her signal that I'd be hearing about this later. She was no amateur and knew what to do, but I couldn't stop myself from giving the basic instructions. I just knew that the one time I didn't give them, she wouldn't do them, and then one thing would lead to another, and I'd be having my fingernails pulled out by a Brazilian torture artist.

'Stay in range, affirmative.'

He took another corner, and like a lot of London, the streets became small and winding, a bizarre warren known only to locals, filled with grime because the lack of tourists meant there was no reason to clean it. I stuck with him as best I could, but I had to close the gap. The more corners Usilov took, the more the surrounding crowd thinned until it was just the two of us. Time to make my move.

'Block cameras,' I whispered. Bee knew what that meant I was about to do. I doubted there would be any cameras down here to take off the grid, but better safe than sorry.

'Cameras blocked.'

The streets were too narrow now for there to be a point in crossing the road, so I took this corner slowly. I peeked to make sure he wasn't waiting for me. If he had been, he'd still have seen me, but at least I wouldn't have ended up with a knife in my gut. He hadn't been waiting for me. But he had walked into a dead end. That was never good.

A woman stood in the small courtyard wearing a fashionable red jacket with the hood up. I couldn't see her face. She was taller than myself, but shorter than Usilov. She stood confidently, unafraid of the beast in front of her.

The two began talking, just close enough that I could hear most of what they were saying. They exchanged pleasantries. So, the woman was Russian as well. Usilov didn't seem taken aback, meaning it was expected. My conversational Russian had gotten rusty from lack of practice, but I could keep up.

The woman asked if he brought it. He called her something I'd never call a woman, and said of course. She ignored his casual misogyny and asked where it is. He said... a metaphor? A riddle? That was beyond my limited Russian ability. He reached into his back pocket.

A glint of metal from Usilov, and I'd drawn the silenced pistol from my underarm holster.

He slashed at her with the knife, and she whirled around, her hood falling back. Usilov charged into her, his huge bulk flooring her, and he followed her down, dropping to his knees.

I aimed for his head. I'd have preferred to get the location of the USB stick, but a dead Usilov would have to do.

He pulled his arm back, ready to strike. Then slumped to the side. What the... I know I hadn't shot, and I was close enough that if the woman had shot, I'd have heard the noise through a suppressor. A fourth agent, far enough away that the gunshot was masked. Shit. The woman on the floor had pulled a gun from nowhere, and she was looking around frantically trying to find out what had happened, tracing the small courtyard with her gun.

I would have loved a bit more time to figure out what was going on, but then the woman who had just had a man killed on top of her, was pointing her gun at me.

The dull thud of a silenced barrel expelling its bullet, and the showering of brick on my head as it barely missed me. I pulled back round the corner.

'Bros' eto!' she shouted in Russian. 'Drop it!' she repeated.

Shit. A shoot out with an unknown Russian. Wait...

'I'm not here for you,' I shouted back. Not because I wasn't. I mean, maybe I was if she knew where that stick was, but I just wanted some small talk.

'You killed him. Meant to?'

It was so hard to tell, but I thought... was it her? I'd recognise that voice anywhere, but why would she be in London?

'Natalia?'

No response. I heard feet crunching on gravel. Probably getting into a better position.

'Who wants to know?'

I peeked back around, and she was now behind a dumpster.

'It's—' I tried to remember which name she knew me as. It was when I seconded to the Spetznaz, so I would have been calling myself... 'John Fisher. From—'

'John? Show your face.'

She was always direct, I'd give her that. 'Don't point a gun at me.'

'No deal.'

I shrugged to myself. I couldn't really fault her logic. It was definitely her, but I'd lost contact the last few years. She could have swapped allegiances. I could just walk away, Usilov was dead, the contract was complete – by someone else, but still complete. But damn it, curiosity would be the death of me.

I stuck my gun out first, holding it by the barrel to show I was unarmed. I followed it out, hands in the air.

Seeing me unarmed, she removed herself from cover, standing in the middle of the courtyard. As beautiful as I remembered. A soft and small face, marred by a small scar under one eye, and razorblade thin. She didn't have the low centre of gravity that let Bee work her magic, but if you could put a sharp edge on it, she could cut you with it.

Her gun was still pointed at me. It's not like I wasn't used to having guns pointed at me, but it was never a good feeling. It did serve to sharpen the mind, though.

'Why'd you kill him, John?'

'Wasn't me. Check my mag, still fully loaded.'

She squinted at me, trying to decide if I was telling the truth or not.

She nodded. 'Why let us both stand in the open when an unknown gunman has a bead on us?'

A good question. Easy enough to wriggle out of if I'd wanted to, but a bit of truth would do the trick. 'I figured if they wanted you dead, you'd been stood here for longer than Usilov, and if they wanted you both at the same time, you were lying down defenceless for long enough that they'd have done the job.'

She nodded slowly, and then magicked her pistol back underneath her coat. The threat gone, I holstered mine.

She walked to within arm's reach and stopped.

'Why are you here?' I asked.

She thumbed at Usilov's corpse. 'To meet him.'

'In London. Are you still with our old friends?'

She narrowed her eyes, deciding something. I knew that look. She was beautiful and smart and far too clever. She was also deadly and sharp, with the sense of humour to match. Along with the language barrier it made for some interesting conversation. I could never tell if she was joking or not. But she'd made her decision.

'You know my price for this information.'

I grimaced. 'Fine. We meet tomorrow night. Scalini in Kensington. At eight.'

She smiled at me, and walked off, letting her hand run across my chest as she went. I watched her go, trying to puzzle out what I was getting myself into.

Bee spoke. 'What the hell just happened? Who's John?'

'Blast from the past,' I said, pinching the bridge of my nose, the premonition of the headache this was going to cause already welling behind my eyes. 'But we've got bigger issues. Usilov is dead, and I don't know who killed him.'

'So you missed out on the contract?'

'It's more than that, Bee.' I hadn't told her about Usilov being one of the few people that knew who I really was. 'We'll talk about it back at base. Bring the van round, I need to make sure I haven't left any of my DNA here.' I probably had on the wall I'd leaned against, and the MET were sticklers about scouring gun crime scenes. 'Bring the bleach. And we need to find where that shot was taken from, there's only a few buildings it could have been.'

'Gotcha. Anything else to scrub the DNA?'

'DNA? That's to get the taste of instant coffee out of my mouth. We're stopping for a builder's tea on the way back.'