

Dead Minus One
Chapter 10
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She dreamed as the plane charged across the darkening sky. There was a field of grass, maybe barley, her uncle's farm? small plants waving in the air anyway, and she stood in the middle of this never ending field. She wasn't alone. Before her and then suddenly next to her was Ivana Turgenev, dressed in drab Communist era clothing. Her face looked tired, then long, and then longer. She was melting, turning into a globule of flesh and green collapsing at her feet. She watches Ivana become just a pool of goo at her feet, feet she could not move. The mass that was Ivana started to slink on to her shoe, clinging to it and then growing on to it. She could not move. She could not talk. The mass moved up her leg, staying to the outside of her clothes, but caressing as it moved up her, past her thigh, and chest, and finally becoming like a mink stole around her neck. First just sitting, then surrounding her neck, and her vocal chords, and the joining her to become part of her. She had no control over her mouth! This thing that was Ivana did and it was going to make her talk. She refused but she opened her mouth and said:

"I comply."

"What?"

Melissa opened her eyes. ohmygod!minajetplanegoing500milesanhour. All right, all right, take it easy, the last hours came back. Get a grip. She took a deep breath and heard a voice over her intercom.

"Melissa, you OK, yes?" Natasha asked. "Anya, please check to be sure American not dead or gone wacky."

"She's fine," came Anya's calm voice, as if she rode in a MiG-29 every day, and maybe she did.

And I'm sitting here trying not to throw up, Melissa thought. I am a useless pile of - The plane flipped left.

"Oh, God da-"

"Use the bag."

XX

The Vladivostok airport is located some forty miles from the city of the same name, which is home to over 600000 Russians, hearty souls that were not phased by twenty below zero Fairhenheit temperatures and howling winds, and that was in autumn. Today, in late November, it was a balmy four.

The landing, in an area some distance from the airport, was a strip of tarmac cleared of snow, and was followed a short ride to a heated hangar took four minutes.

"What do I do with the bag?"

Natasha laughed.

"Not your problem. Have toadies for that. Get out."

The canopy raised and the two women scrambled out, down the ladder. Men in dark jumper suits came to the

plane and started moving the craft deeper into the hangar. Natasha, Anya and Melissa stood alone by hangar door.

"I must leave you here," Natasha said. "The Russian government can't be involved in this. You are on your own."

"Fourty miles from the city? And zero degrees out?"

Anya sighed.

"We'll make it. We can walk if we have to."

"Have fun, gals. Be careful. This is a bad business. Go with God."

Natasha walked into hangar and the blackness took her. A door opened and clanked shut. Gone.

"Bye," Melissa said to the dark. "Thanks."

"That's Natasha. Come on."

Melissa followed Anya into a side office. Two lockers were filled with uniforms for the cold. Russian cold.

"Who says we lost the Cold War?" Anya laughed as she scrambled into heavy pants, boots, and jackets. "We'll be warm as hell."

Melissa couldn't deny it. The camouflage was an artist's palatte of dark green, black and white. She could fit into anywhere. There was a spot for her gun. This was beautiful, she as freakin' warm. She could even forget that she was about to go on a fourty mile trek. But there was no way they would talk about it here. So she tried something else.

"I wonder where Natasha goes, when she goes like that."

Anya pulled on the left boot.

"Natasha is from a different world. Just be glad she is on our side this time."

Melissa wanted to challenge that, thought better, and finally concentrated on squeezing herself into her suit and wrapping the coat around her. For some reason the words "I can't put my arms down" and "looked like a tick ready to pop" came into her head.

Anya who was just shoving her boots on. "Are you ready?"

"Like Randy with a Glock."

"What?"

"Nevermind. Let's go."

They returned to the cold, which hit them less hard. As they walked away from the hangar, the creeping night took the building into itself, enveloping it, hiding it from anyone interested enough to look for it. They could hear their boots crunching down the snow, but otherwise, the world was their own.

"Where to now?" Melissa asked, her breath preceding her in the night.

"40 miles that way, but we'll get a ride. Or we won't. Either way, we'll get there."

"Just sneak up on them,huh?"

So they trudged on silence, neither one wanting to be the first to complain, but hearing within themselves the complaining muscles. Anya's Spetznatz years had been in the 1990s, and despite the best Russian army training, age always wins. But on they pushed. They used the time to talk about what needed to be done in Vladivostok.

"We only have the name of the city, and the speculation about the port."

"Da," Anya said. "it's my own country and I can't believe how little we know, aside from people dying that were involved in the old Soviet experiments, and of course, millions in Saudi Arabia dead by a missile sent from a base in northern Russia by men who all went insane and then basically melted. Just another day. Shit is hitting the fan."

Melissa tried her cell phone and got the NSA "call-in" line.

"Trown?"

"Ye-"

"Password."

She gave it.

"Incorrect. Traitor."

The line clicked off.

"The fuc-?"

"You must be stressed. Dirty words and all." Anya said as she stepped back toward Melissa, having actually given her some privacy.

Melissa ungloved her hand and quickly pulled the phone from her ear. She shoved the device in a pocket and gloved back up.

"Nice toy." Anya said.

"That's never happened. That line is always clear. I've never not had a correct password. General Claggart himself gave that one to me. Traitor? He called me a god damn traitor."

Anya tried her cellphone. She got through to Moscow, thanks to the clear night, and a wandering satellite.

Yevtuschenko had news, apparently. Melissa hugged herself and stomped her feet while Anya tried to listen, then she put the phone away.

"The connection was cut. But a lot has happened. You may not believe this, but-"

And in five sentences, Anya told Melissa what had occurred in the United States since they took off. Things had changed. Drastically.

They both stood in the cold for a moment.

"Apparently the US government does not approve of my being here anymore. Or Claggart was warning me to stay away."

"This is why we never had Vice Presidents in Russia. America has certainly had some interesting ones recently."

"I'm alone," Melissa said, keeping the worry she felt for her family deep deep down. But something told her keep them out of this. Don't call.

"Yes." Anya said. "And no. Let's go."

They moved faster into the Russian night. Anya finally spoke.

“We had nothing to do with it, Melissa. Those nukes. Nothing. This is beyond us.”

They walked a little faster. If it could have gotten any colder, it did.

XX

After a while they'd talked themselves out, and just moved along the road, stepping off and into the woods at any sign of traffic. It was the third drop from the road that Anya saw the building in between the trees.

“Sanctuary,” they both muttered, and ran into the forest.

The house was old but intact, windows and doors in place, in fact in good repair. What seemed to be the main door had a wooden handle waiting to be touched and pulled to the right. Both women pulled their weapons, and Anya opened the door. The snow built up against the wood so the door slid slightly and stopped. Good enough for Melissa to slither in. Anya, after checking outside, followed her in, and pulled the door shut

They knew the routine of room to room searches but since there were only three rooms, it was fairly easy. Dilapidated furniture, faded rugs. Rock posters on the walls. A fireplace in the wall by the couch.

Anya went right back out, and then came back with an armful of firewood.

“This is a safe house. I've not seen these but heard about them from friends in the Army. Soldiers use these places for I think you can guess.”

A good deep breath was the answer. Old booze and sad sex. Melissa helped with the fire, and both women sat on the couch, albeit delicately.

“It's a rule of these places that they be kept up so that the romantic partner will feel comfortable,” Anya said. “Time is fairly short here before others need them. There's a waiting list, I heard.”

“Amazing we walked into to it.”

“Sometimes God smiles,” Anya said as she loosed her coat. Both stretched out their legs toward the quiet flames, and enjoyed the silence. Or tried not to think. Twenty minutes? A half hour?

When you're an agent of the NSA, you looked for patterns in communications, that a stray e-mail here or a phone call there could mean the destruction of thousands of lives or mean we had a great time in Baton Rouge. It was constant listening, waiting for the right sound, and not be deterred by the wrong sound. Like the crackling of the fire. Right sound. The creak of a door, a locked door as if it was being tried, was a very wrong sound.

“Anya.”

Her friend mumbled.

“We have guests.” Melissa said between tight teeth, with a quick slap at her friend's arm.

Both agents leaped up and flattened themselves against opposite walls, Anya on the floor shielded by the couch, Melissa in perfect stance. Glocks out. Anyone coming into the fireplace room would have to have to step into it from the right of the door, sheilding both agents for a second or two. They both thought about how to react.

Just before the door was ripped of its hinges, snow or not.

Two sets of boots could be heard on the floor. No visual sighting. They knew where to stand.

“Good evening ladies,” said two voices in unison. “Anya, Melissa, we're hear to welcome you. Welcome you to Vladivostok and the new Russia.”

Boots moved fast across the opening into the next room. Black shapes moving too fast for a human, a normal human, to track.

The first shotgun blast hit the couch mid-section, exploding what little stuffing the couch had left o give into a fast blizzard. The shotgun was cocked again. Both women stayed where they were, Glocks up.

Only one voice this time.

“Surrender, Dorothy.”

XX

Well, it was an option. That shotgun blast came from something like a, all that came to Melissa was the sound of the shutgun the Terminator used in the movie, a Winchester. OK, that took time to load...and there were two of them...Come on Anya be thinking the same thing.

From to doorway came two more steps. There, in the doorway, a polished black boot.

Melissa aimed. Fired. The boot leaped back. Anya got off two shots. Bang. Bang. The couch leaped up, mortally wounded. The wall over Anya's head took the next shot.

Why aren't we dead? Melissa thought. But who cared? They were loading.

Both women moved. Melissa first, then Anya, each side of the wall by the couch room entrance.

Click. Click. Clack. Clack. Chagunk. Chagunk. Locked and loaded.

“Ladies, let's not prolong-”

“All right then.” Melissa mouthed. From each side of the opening they leaped low, guns blaring. Shotgun shells blaring above. In the firefight, both women saw their attackers. The men stepped back into the night, and then out of the house as if being reeled in by a fisherman in the night. Both women laid on the floor near the entrance waiting for the wrong sound. All they heard was the wind.

“Come on,” Anya said.

They got to their feet, and scrambled to the front door, waiting there for a count of three and stepping back out into the Russian night. Nothing, except in the distance, the sound of snowmobiles.

“Back inside,” Melissa. “I think they know we're here.”

The fire had faded in the cold, and the spies opted to let it die fast, finding the dark was their friend again. They stayed close to doors and windows, not close enough to be target. It stretched on for a few hours.

“They could pick us off anytime. We should have kept moving.”

“Mel, we never heard them. They came right up to the door. They could have just blown us away with those Terminator mothers they're carrying anytime. On the road, here, hell, they could have been at the hangar. You're right in that they could have done what they did anytime. No, this was more of this weird plan, of whatever this is. They're just toying with us.”

“Teasing us? Keeping us moving?”

Anya came into the couch room, and plopped on what was left of the furniture.

“That's all that was. A tease.”

“I really could have done without the bullets. Really.”

Anya smiled with a sympathetic look at the former couch, and sighed. She held her Glock, safety on, laying it on her leg. Time to say it.

“OK, you saw it too, right?”

“Two identical men shooting at us. They had the same voice, spoke and walked in unison, pulled out of here in the same “me and my shadow” fashion.”

“Twins or clones?”

Melissa didn't have to think long. A second.

“Clones. Clones that knew what the other was thinking.”

Anya looked over at the waning fire, maybe willing some heat.

“The strange thing is that murder occurred at Red Square, you've seen the pictures...”

“Same guy pulled the trigger. Same guy killed people all over Moscow.”

Anya nodded.

“He gets around, they do.”

The sound of the snowmobiles got closer. They assumed positions on both side of now broken front door. This time two drunken soldiers came in. They were somewhat disappointed by the greeting committee.

But at least they got to enjoy the rest of the fire that night since they were duct taped to the furniture. It would take the soldiers some time to loosen their bonds as they were naked.

The night was disturbed by two snowmobiles heading toward Vladivostok.

XX

The highest point in Vladivostok is Kholodilnik Mountain, which literally means “refrigerator”. From that point you could gaze down upon the city and out into the harbor. Mikhail Vasiliev had looked out at that view every five minutes for nearly four hours now, and wished he was up there. Or on an island in the Caribbean, or maybe in San Paulo. The Antarctic would do. Anyway but here. Just waiting for the god damn-

His phone rang.

“We're here. Is she ready?”

Vasiliev looked over on the bed.

“Yes. We've been ready for hours.”

“We were delayed.” Click.

Vasiliev closed the phone. He moved to the bed where Ivana Turgenev had been sleeping for those four hours. Not that she'd had a choice. The moment the train had bucked to a stop at the train station, Vasiliev had grabbed Ivana's arm and injected her. She was stable enough to seem just drunk through the train station and into a cab, and then to the room. Then out cold as she was laid upon the bed.

“Why didn't you struggle? You must have known.”

Ivana said nothing, of course.

A knock on the door.

Vasiliev drew his gun, stood by the door, and reached for the knob. It would swing in and he would get first shot. But when the door opened, no one entered, at first. Then slowly two ambulance orderlies entered the room with an ambulance gurney. They were dressed in hospital greys with caps low on their heads.

"The patient is where?" said the first one in the door

"Wait a minute."

The first orderly whipped a Winchester shotgun from the gurney in a blur of motion.

"The patient is where? Drop your weapon."

Vasiliev dropped his gun to the carpet, indicated the bedroom and then followed the men.

As they approached Ivana, both orderlies removed their caps with their left hand, while their right hands still held the Winchesters. They gazed at Ivana as one would a piece of art.

"Mama."

Vasiliev took in the tableau.

"She's your mother?"

Two Winchesters came up.

"Yes, and she is the mother of Russia, the new Russia. She has one more task before she can sit and rule with us. We will take her now. You will not move for the moment."

"Wouldn't here of it. By the way, when do I get my money?"

"When your job is done." They lifted Ivana daintily off the bed, with reverence, and placed her on the gurney. She was strapped in. One of the men, who looked strikingly like each other, Vasiliev noted, brushed at Ivana's hair.

"We shall learn from you, Mama. You will make your sons perfect."

"Yes", said the other. "Perfect." And he giggled, just a little.

They turned to wheel her out, one rifle hidden under the blankets of the gurney, the other in the arm of one orderly, and it was that orderly that peered at Vasiliev.

"Get your things. You are coming too. You have one more job to do and then the rest of your fee will be deposited per agreement."

Since Vasiliev's things were still in a gym bag, it was easy enough. He followed them to the hall way, after making sure he had everything he needed. No point talking about the job until they were free from the public. They received deference from people waiting for elevator, and departure from the hotel was easily arranged.

The ambulance was at the door and the orderlies placed Ivana in as professionally as possible. Vasiliev knew he could make a run for it any time, but that he might get about five minutes away. It would be very difficult considering one of the two orderlies was watching him all the time. So he got in the car.

"Buckle up now", said the orderly who was driving. "We wouldn't want any accidents."

The other one, sitting with Ivana, giggled.

Vasiliev did as he was told, the doors were locked and the ambulance began moving.

"Now, the next job?"

The driver nodded.

“Two women need to be removed. We tried, but we are too compassionate. That's why we have people like you.”

“Two women?”

“One Russian Special Forces, the other American.”

“Where are they?”

“We will meet soon. All of us. Even the one following us.”

Vasiliev looked in the rear view mirror. Occasionally an old Datsun appeared far back.

“We have minimal information on this man right now, but we'll give you a bonus if he dies as well.”

“What's our destination?”

The driver smiled.

“Home. We are bring Mother home.”

XX

Rashad al-Hazzan could not believe that human beings lived in weather like this. He had his coat bundled as much as possible around him, gloves on, hat low. The heat blasted in the Datsun, which wasn't much, considering the time it had taken him to steal the car. But that made no difference now. He knew the woman in the van, and even the man who was with her.

What he didn't know was what was going on now, and why they were in an ambulance.

He shifted into a lower gear, taking the corner faster than he thought. What this road was not was the way to the hospital at the University. Rashad slowed down more, much to the annoyance of the students in the car behind him. They blasted their horn, but it wasn't enough to drown the rock music of Mumiy Troll, the band you can not get away from. Rashad hunkered down in the seat, leaned toward the wheel and remembered his mission to just kill them all before that woman did anything.

They continued down roads that brought them toward the harbor. Rashad could see the Russian Pacific fleet sitting at anchor.

“Good, Allah's hand at work.”

Rashad pulled over near some woods as the ambulance approached a chain link fence that surrounded buildings left from the Cold War days. Security guards opened the fence, allowed the vehicle through, and then closed and locked the fence. Barbed wire sat atop the old chain link that went a full half mile in each direction around the compound that held offices and warehouses within.

The Datsun shook in a rush of wind, frigid air infiltrating the rust spots and numbing the Saudi to his bones. It was going to be a long night.

But it would also be the last night. For everyone.

Rashad leaned back in his seat, after figuring out how to jiggle the handle. And he waited for the night. He closed his eyes.

He opened them when there was a tap on his window. His first sight was a Glock pointed right at his head. The second sound was a smash of the passenger window and another Glock pointed.

“Excuse me,” Melissa said. “I was wondering if you'd like to go to Fridays?”

