

OUT OF THE

SHADOWS

**(Akira and Deane Thriller Series
Book 1)**

Tim Jopling

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Author Note

Out of the Shadows is book one in a series of novels and tells the story of Akira and his quest to make his vision become a reality.

Acknowledgements

My biggest thanks go to my wife Hannah who has been a tower of strength for everything in my life, but has also had to listen to me talk about all the variations that this novel could have been over the years and the end result would be nothing without her!

Thanks also to all the test readers who have been so supportive and provided such valuable feedback!

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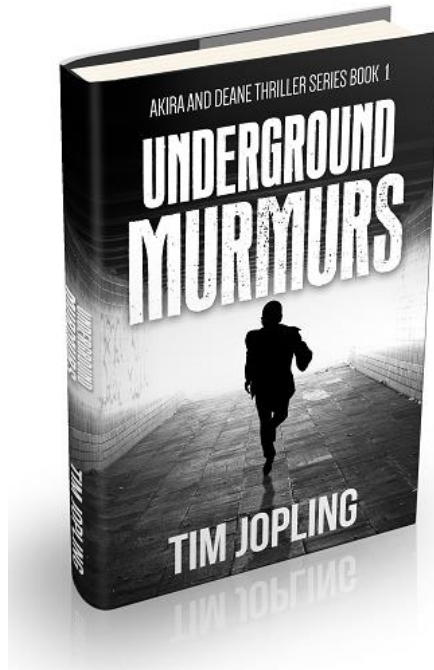
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With MI6 de-stabilised by an attack it's forced to re-activate S.U.C.O. (Special Undercover Covert Operations) who together must prevent an attack on home soil. Masterminded by two of Akira's closest allies, Jozef Kiprich and Zoltan Ferec what lines will S.U.C.O. have to cross to stop them? Sam Olsen leads his team into the depths of the London Underground network and its many abandoned stations. Deep beneath ground level in tunnels not touched for decades are the clues they need to stop another attack.



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PROLOGUE

**Saturday, December 24th 02:00,
Moscow, Russia.**

In the shadows, along the banks of Moskva River in central Moscow, Akira closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind. As he did so, he thought of his future and the destiny he had envisaged for himself. He had come through so much in his past, and so many changes, but there was more to come.

His vision of the future had become the driving force of his life. A vision of what the world could be if he proved successful. Ever since he had left his old identity behind and forged Akira, he was determined to rid the world of the corruption that held it in such a vice. The West had to be conquered, there was no way to save it. It was time to start a new journey and Akira would be at the forefront. Nothing and nobody would stand in his way, not after what he had endured in the past. Russia would form the core of the change. Political control of the former superpower would come in time, as would his access to their nuclear capabilities. Akira had always favoured Russia, every corner of the country brimmed with power. A power that needed to be harnessed if his vision were to become a reality.

The December gloom didn't affect him as thick flakes of snow fell from a darkened sky onto a silent Moscow. Dressed all in black, Akira waited in the undergrowth for Martin Braga, the Moscow based British MI6 (Military Intelligence Section 6) agent he had tracked over the last two months. From his surveillance, Akira knew the man's habits, and where his contacts were located around the city. The longer he waited to strike, the more chance there was of his presence being detected.

Along the banks of Moskva River, with the famous GUM department store in the distance, Akira saw his prey approach his position. Seconds passed and Akira leapt out from the undergrowth. He smashed into Braga, who reached for his weapon but Akira kicked it out of his hand in one swift motion.

The two men fell back and faced each other. Snow continued to fall and with it came eerie silence as the tiny flakes settled on the ground nearby.

Akira calmed his mind and his racing heart. There was no room for error, his first real test had begun and he was not about to fall at the first hurdle. With his hands outstretched, he made his first move in San Shou. Akira had always preferred the ancient Chinese hand-to-hand fighting style. With it came confidence, knowing that his opponent's attack would be based around the fallible Savate style of fighting. Just like MI6 themselves, it was so one-dimensional.

That knowledge gave Akira all the confidence he needed. His past ensured he knew everything there was to know about Martin Braga and yet, to his opponent, he was an unknown quantity.

Akira moved forward and lashed out repeatedly. With his greater speed and power, he made sure his attacks did the damage from the start. The first blow struck hard into Braga's neck, and the second broke a cheekbone. A heavy blow to the chest forced Braga on his back and though he hit back, Akira parried the blow and lashed out at his temples. With his prey dazed, Akira moved in for the kill. His hands locked around Braga's neck and with all his strength he applied the force necessary to end the fight. For Akira, it was as personal as it could be. In all the years that had passed, he had waited patiently in the background, but the time had to come to emerge from the shadows.

Braga struggled to break free and started to contort his body.

Akira resisted and slowly felt the neck start to give way. When it finally snapped, the body of Martin Braga went limp. The snow continued to fall, and the silence gave him clarity on what he had done. It had been a necessary kill. There had to be sacrifice for change.

As he pushed the body away, Akira didn't look at the lifeless face that stared back at him. Many would call him a cold-blooded killer, but was he? The West had betrayed him all those years ago. Had their failure forced him down this path? His memories of back then, in what seemed like someone else's life, were inconsistent. Only fragments came back to him from time to time. As he closed his eyes, he tried to remember the finer details but instead, images flashed by. Static and grainy images of friends who should have helped him rather than turn their back on him in his most desperate hour. Friends he had once trusted with his life had betrayed him with devastating results. He had lost his soul mate and the only person who mattered, his beloved wife Madeline.

A vivid memory took over his thoughts. It was the sound of the machines that had kept Madeline alive in her final days and the smell of a hospital room. Akira shuddered at the memory but it would not fade. During those final moments, Madeline's voice had been so weak, and her smile so faint as she had stroked his face. That day, Akira had been born but even he sometimes wondered whether his soul was still there in that hospital room waiting to take in what had happened.

Amidst such grief, Akira had begun to hear Madeline's voice in his mind. Doctors had said he had suffered some form of a mental breakdown but he had dismissed it. His desire to have some connection with Madeline had been so strong he didn't want to consider any other possibility. Over time, her voice had grown stronger and when he needed her most she would come to him. In the years after her tragic death, he had become convinced they had both witnessed the vision they had been given and in some way, she could live on and help make it a reality.

Memories burned the remains of his heart and a single tear ran down his face. It didn't matter how often he thought back to those dark times, he still felt the sorrow and the heartbreak. All he had wanted was a life of happiness with Madeline. Why had they not helped him when he needed it most? How could they betray him after everything he had done for—

Do not go back to that place, my love. Time has passed and everything has changed. Our revenge starts now; do not doubt our vision of the future. They will pay the price for their betrayal.

Madeline. Whenever he needed support, she would come to him. Her voice sounded as clear as it always had. He closed his eyes and fought back more tears. 'I wish you were with me. This is proving...difficult.' His own voice broke for a moment.

Take control of your emotions and remember what they did to me, what they did to us! The West took away our future. They stole our happiness...

Akira nodded. Every word was true, but it was proving harder than he had imagined to start the journey alone.

The vision, my love, remember the vision. What we saw could change so much, and do so much good. You must stay the course. Don't forget what we lost, what we could have been!

'I just wish you were with me. I need you.'

I will always be with you, my love. We will be on this journey together, always.

Akira tried his best to remember the vision, and with it came a sense of hope and strength. The knowledge that only he and Madeline were aware of it somehow brought them closer together. That day had been unforgettable. The idea of a world without corrupt governments and their deceitful foreign policies had given him a ray of light, in what had been the darkest days after losing his wife. A world of change.

Show no mercy and do what must be done.

In his mind, he felt her presence as if she were next to him. Seconds passed until he heard no more and he walked away from the body of the dead MI6 agent. Within minutes, he had leapt from the riverbank into the nearby Alexandrovsky Gardens. Every inch was covered with snow and a cold wind rustled the branches of the trees. With each step, Akira made a silent promise to himself and his dead wife. His destiny was somewhere in the future and on that day, the West and its hypocritical governments would fall. The world would change forever.

This was just the start...

Chapter 1

**Wednesday, February 1st 05:05,
New Cross Gate,
London.**

Thomas Deane accelerated the Audi A4 and swerved the car past a double-decker bus. Time was running out to board the 05:09 train at New Cross Gate station and with it any chance of success for Operation Concealment. He shifted the car into fifth gear and went through another red light as he powered the car down New Cross Road. 'Location!' His voice had an air of tension, as he barked at his partner.

Sam Olsen checked the map on the satellite navigation that was built into the dashboard. 'Stay on this road, and it's a left turn.'

'What time was that train again?' asked Deane as he kept two hands on the wheel and weaved in and out of the traffic.

'We've got four minutes.'

'We'll make it.' Deane sounded like he was reassuring himself rather than stating a fact. 'We have to make it.'

Thomas Deane and Sam Olsen were arguably the most effective partnership MI6 had to offer, and had worked together for almost a decade. Deane was a veteran of over twenty years of service while Olsen was the younger of the two and more likely to take risks to get the job done.

Deane accelerated the car past a bus and weaved through the small amount of traffic. The orange light from an overhanging lamp-post lit up his dark blue eyes. 'There's the turning for the station!'

Olsen held on as the car swerved around the corner and narrowly missed two people that were crossing the road at a pelican crossing.

The car came to an abrupt halt. Both men sprinted towards the station.

Deane dialled Operations Command, the nerve centre of MI6, and used the Bluetooth attachment so he could run and talk. 'Train location, Patrice!'

On the other side of London, French Special Agent Patrice Marraud stood in Operations Command at MI6 headquarters. In an area roughly the size of three tennis courts, he was surrounded by several groups of computer desks, terminals with scanning booths, analysis tables and other specialist workstations. At one end of the vast space was a large digital wall of screens which detailed the latest updates on each individual operation around the world. A large circular table below the wall of screens looked out on Operations Command.

Operation Concealment had been a joint operation between French and British Security Services, and Marraud's friendship with Deane had helped ensure the collaboration had been a success.

Marraud stood behind the on-duty manager and watched the feed from Network Rail that showed the train and its progress as it closed in on New Cross Gate station bound for London Bridge. 'It's pulling into the station now on Platform five. Confirm your location?'

Deane saw Olsen leap over the ticket barrier first and followed his example. 'We're closing in on the platform now. Order the train to wait!'

'Copy that. We're still waiting for confirmation from the train driver. Do your best to get on board!' Marraud gritted his teeth in frustration as he watched the CCTV.

Deane pumped his legs as fast as he could and saw Olsen, who was at least fifteen years younger, pull away as they ran down the access ramp that led to the platform. He glanced to his left and saw the train on the platform begin to close its doors.

Olsen made it to the bottom of the ramp and threw himself at the nearest set of closing doors. There were shouts of panic from some of the commuters but it was enough to stop the doors from closing as he blocked them with his legs. He saw his partner run down the platform and catch up.

Deane stepped onto the train and made sure his Spitfire G1 pistol was in its holster, inside his faded dark-blue jacket. It was a jacket he had worn for many years and Deane liked the fact he had survived many operations wearing it. Not that he thought of himself as superstitious, but he couldn't deny it was a comfort. Beneath the jacket, Deane wore a white buttoned-down shirt that had been ironed an hour earlier, paired with black trousers and shoes.

Olsen looked around the carriage. 'Now we need to find Baynes.'

Marraud had heard every word in Operations Command. 'CCTV shows he boarded the train in carriage four. It's an eight-carriage train, so I'd say it's likely he has moved to the front.'

Deane nodded. 'Agreed. We're in carriage five.' He scanned around his position. There was no sign of Robert Baynes.

Operation Concealment had been ongoing for months and had primarily focussed on how terrorist cells communicated with each other rather than direct capture. Baynes was a low profile data encryption expert and appeared to have been recruited and radicalised over time by a Middle Eastern terrorist group which had cells in London, Paris and Madrid. These cells were on several watch lists but the encryption level they used for communication had proved to be so complex, no agency had yet to make a breakthrough.

It had been Patrice Marraud who had identified Baynes after he had monitored a cell in Paris for several months. When they had found that London was to be his next destination, contact was made with MI6. Deane and Olsen had been mobilised and despite a failure at border control to track Baynes when he had arrived in the country, he had been identified via CCTV when he had boarded a train for London Bridge.

Deane slowly made his way through the sixth carriage, near the front of the train. As he did so, his eyes scanned and processed every individual and detail that he saw. The train wasn't busy at that time of day, which helped Deane, he was only looking for one target.

Sam Olsen followed and saw Deane indicate the public toilet that was at the end of the carriage. As he approached the dark green door, he reached inside his light brown jacket and placed one hand on his silver Beretta 92G Elite II 9mm pistol. As the door opened, he moved forward quickly.

The toilet was empty.

Deane frowned and looked through the double doors that led to the next carriage. 'We've got two more carriages to go. Let's keep moving.'

Olsen nodded. 'If he's not on this train, we'll have to deploy agents to the surrounding area.'

Deane gave the doors a push and stepped onto the next carriage when there was a big enough gap. 'He'll be here, I can guarantee it.'

The two men had been partners since Olsen had joined the service eight years ago. They were very different characters, and the older Deane was a stalwart of the service and valued rules and procedure above everything else. Olsen had a reputation for getting the job done but could be reckless. Despite their differences, their partnership was looked on as the best that MI6 had to offer and they were often found at the forefront of the latest threat.

The two agents moved slowly through the carriage but there was no sign of Baynes.

'The last carriage is up ahead. Be ready.' Deane looked back at Olsen to reinforce his warning. In the years they had worked together, Deane had come to think of Olsen as the son he never had, or never would have. His role at MI6 was now one of a senior agent and

mentor, and though he would never admit it, Olsen meant more to him than anything else in the world and he would do anything to protect him.

Akira lurked amongst the shadows of London Bridge Train station. Even though it was early, there was a constant flow of trains that passed overhead. Dressed in a long black trench coat and the same coloured trousers and shoes, he took out a black balaclava from his pocket and pulled it down over his face. His short brown hair was covered by the balaclava, leaving two slits for his almond coloured eyes.

As he watched some maintenance staff leave the station, his thoughts turned to Russia and his plan to conquer the country in the not too distant future. It had not been easy to travel to the UK, especially with the balance of power so unstable in Russia, but he was keen to take what he could from his base in the UK and attempt to keep the Security Services guessing, at the very least. With some hard work, he had managed to recruit ten loyal Russian FSB agents to his cause. They were in the process of planning and executing several bomb attacks to destabilise the Russian capital and highlight the weakness of the current government. With that in place, it wasn't essential he was there and his time could be better spent elsewhere even if he would have preferred to carry out and witness the attacks personally.

His thoughts returned to the present, and the no show of his contact Robert Baynes. Though he couldn't be trusted, Baynes was never late. Much to Akira's annoyance, Baynes had carved out a niche for himself within the cell and had insisted on coming to London to carry out his work personally. His attitude wasn't welcome and Akira did not plan to tolerate it for long. From the moment Baynes had got involved, it hadn't taken Akira long to realise it had been a mistake. There was no dedication and his insistence on coming to London had only proven to Akira he had become a liability rather than an asset.

A red London bus passed his position and Akira watched closely as to who departed, to make sure he tracked the movements of any possible threats. After a few minutes, he felt satisfied he was safe and went back to his thoughts. Akira felt his phone vibrate and read a message from Baynes's replacement. It had been critical to ensure the data encryption work continued. The text was word for word what he wanted to hear and it made him smile. The meeting he was waiting for had now become nothing more than a formality.

Thomas Deane crossed from one carriage to another. The shadows fell across his face and the greying hair at the sides of his head stood out from his black hair on top. As he opened the connecting door the light fell onto a scar by his right temple, one that had come from a knife fight early in his career. Deane had taken one too many risks that day and he had no intention of making the same mistake again. As he entered the last carriage, it didn't take him long to locate the target near the double exit doors at the far end. In any operation, it was critical to keep a low profile where possible and find a way to apprehend the target but that changed when he saw him look in his direction.

Baynes knew the train would pull into London Bridge within the next few minutes and had been waiting at the double doors to make sure he was the first to leave. At the sound of the connecting door opening from the previous carriage, Baynes had seen the two men enter and didn't like what he saw. His stress levels were already high, as they were for any meeting with Akira, but he felt his heart rate quicken when he looked at the two men. Over the years Baynes had caught the attention of police, and the Security Services, and he felt he had a good eye for identifying them. He saw the two men scan the carriage, look straight at him and then away again. It was the way they carried themselves and absorbed everything around them. Baynes trusted his instincts and knew he was in trouble. He felt cold sweat dampen the back of his shirt.

Deane and Olsen started to move down the aisle towards the last set of double doors at the far end of the carriage.

Panic set in and Baynes tried to think of what he could do to escape. He saw a door to the driver's cabin but knew that would be locked. Could he use the gun in his backpack to take a passenger hostage? He could think of no way to survive such an encounter, and Akira would kill him regardless of the outcome. Baynes stepped closer to the double doors and decided he had to take the only option available to him. The start of the platform at London Bridge began to pass by the doors as he flicked open the protective plastic on the door override controls above him.

Deane had picked up the pace and instinctively drew his gun at the sound of the alarm. For a moment he wondered what had caused it but then saw Baynes pull the double doors apart. 'BAYNES!' he shouted. 'Don't make this any harder! Step away from the doors!'

Olsen had also drawn his weapon and stepped closer. 'I have a shot. We can't let him leave.'

Deane shook his head in disagreement and furrowed his brow in frustration. There was glass all around Baynes, any shot would be high risk. 'Hold your position. I want him alive.'

Baynes was panting hard as he desperately tried to open the doors wide enough so he could escape.

'Stay on the train, Baynes!' Deane bellowed at the top of his voice and ignored other passengers who ran past him to the other end of the carriage in panic.

Baynes knew what was at stake and threw himself out onto the platform. Despite the train travelling around twenty miles per hour, the impact took its toll, and he felt searing pain in his right shoulder. He forced himself to his feet as quickly as he could and ran along platform thirteen towards the ticket barriers.

Deane restrained Olsen from jumping out onto the platform and then saw the doors slam shut when the alarm ended. He pressed a button on his Bluetooth headset to talk to Operations Command in MI6 Headquarters. 'Patrice, Baynes has left the train. I repeat he has left the train. Confirm the location of Alpha Team!'

'I saw the commotion, Tom. Alpha Team are on the station concourse and are moving to intercept.'

Deane nodded with relief. 'Copy that, Patrice. We'll be there to offer support in a few minutes, the train is almost at a standstill.'

Olsen looked frustrated and tried to locate Baynes through the nearest window. 'If you'd let me take the shot, we wouldn't have to take the chance.'

'We need him alive and there were too many variables. He'll be in our custody soon enough.'

Olsen said nothing and tried not to let his frustration get the better of him.

The train slowed and then came to a stop on platform thirteen.

Olsen pushed the button to open the doors and stepped out first onto the platform. In the distance ahead he saw Baynes and then tried to locate Alpha Team on the concourse.

Baynes scaled the barrier and started to run across the concourse. Out of the corner of his vision he saw two men shout and then start to run towards him. Panic spread through him as he frantically looked for another exit. If Akira discovered he had been captured, his future would all but disappear. His only hope was to strike a deal as best he could and use his knowledge to bargain with his life. As he passed a large WH Smith store, his body couldn't take any more pounding. The pain in his lungs was unbearable as he came to a halt, and he was breathing so hard he could barely raise his arms in surrender. Within seconds, he felt the strong grip of the two men on his shoulders and slumped in defeat. He had no energy to fight his arrest.

Danger was never that far away and in the darkness, just over a hundred metres away, Akira stalked his way through the shadows. With every step, he moved closer to the station entrance. There weren't many people around so it didn't take him long to locate Baynes who was on the other side of the concourse flanked by two men. In one swift motion, he took out a black pistol and lowered himself as he took aim. Two bullets blasted out of the silencer attachment towards their targets. He watched Baynes fall to the ground first and saw his head split open on impact. The two agents drew their weapons to respond, but Akira had already fired and he saw both men stagger and then collapse to the floor. Some commuters had begun to scream and run to safety but Akira ignored them and calmly walked back towards the exit.

Deane's eyes were wide with shock as he jumped down from the ticket barrier and tried to locate the source of the attack. Commuters had run in fear and cleared the concourse so it didn't take him long. 'Baynes and Alpha Team are down, I repeat, they are down!'

Olsen fired off one shot but then saw the target begin to run at speed and set off in pursuit.

Deane followed and loaded his weapon as he tried to stay with his partner. 'Stay together!'

Olsen wasn't listening and picked up the pace. Despite his muscular build, he was young and fast and left behind as he continued the pursuit. As he reached the station exit he tried to locate the target and then saw sparks to his left as a bullet ricocheted off a metal door frame. He stepped back and then returned fire.

In Operations Command, French Special Agent Patrice Marraud felt the others around him jump with shock but he was used to surprises and forced himself not to think about the loss of Alpha Team. 'We're trying to locate him on CCTV. I'll mobilise Unit Two to intercept. We're doing our best to track him from here.'

Deane sprinted hard to keep up with his partner. 'That's a negative, we'll handle this!'

'There was nothing we could do about Alpha Team, Tom, we need to close down his exit points!'

Deane wanted to go back and help Alpha Team in the vain hope one of them was still alive but forced him to continue pursuit. 'Just get those paramedics here and we'll find him!'

Akira didn't stop and pushed himself that extra yard as he came onto St. Thomas Street. He gave a quick glance behind him. There! One of the MI6 agents was in pursuit but he couldn't locate the other. Akira fired again and then changed the magazine on his pistol. He didn't have another so he knew he would have to make those eight bullets count.

Deane left the station and felt rain begin to fall from the sky. When he caught up with Olsen, he indicated for him to take the left-hand side of the pavement as he took the right. Both men used parked cars for cover.

Akira saw a sign that read 'STAMFORD STREET, FIVE MINS'. He would soon be back at base to co-ordinate his escape and with it another victory over the looming British Security Services. As he continued to run, a nearby shop window blew out under the force of gunfire and Akira immediately darted behind a parked car for cover. He returned fire and saw two agents take up offensive positions.

Sparks flew around Olsen and then Deane.

Akira fired again and then heard the empty click of the pistol as it exhausted the magazine. He dropped it onto the ground but didn't panic. His eyes surveyed his surroundings and found hope in a group of youths who had come out of a shop further down the road to investigate what was happening.

Deane saw the target move and fired again but he evaded his fire and reached a parked car. He signalled to Olsen to join his move forward.

Akira smashed the palm of his right hand into the face of the largest boy amongst the group, knowing it would give him more cover. The rest of the group screamed in panic and

moved away quickly. Akira dragged his prize down the road and ignored the constant struggle from his prey.

Olsen swore loudly and took aim as he crouched next to a parked car. In his sights he saw the eyes of the hostage were white with fear. Crucial moments passed until finally he lowered his pistol. Deane joined him and both men watched intently.

Akira came onto Blackfriars Road and deliberately dropped the motionless body which must have fainted, into the middle of the junction. What cars were around, screeched to a halt which caused a standstill that gave him more time.

His dream was what mattered, a world that wasn't led by the West. For what seemed like an eternity, he had waited in the shadows and now there was no one that would stand in his way. Since he had created his identity and left his past life behind him, Akira had been forced to kill several individuals from all walks of life that had become a threat. The agents tracking him would be no different.

As he pumped his legs harder and harder, his head snapped back for an instant and he saw the two agents fight through the panic-stricken scene he had left in his wake. Just before he turned away, he caught sight of one of the men. Memories flashed by in his mind until finally he recognised that Thomas Deane was one of his pursuers. Anger and pain consumed him. In his broken mind, he couldn't stop the pure rage that reached every part of his body and he had to stop himself from turning around and engaging him head on. The dream was what mattered, he told himself.

As he ran, his mind continued to work at a frantic pace. Did the agents have a clue as to who he really was? Out of the question. Akira was looked upon as another dangerous visitor to the UK and he couldn't help but feel the irony. In Russia, only weeks ago, he hadn't seen the world as clearly as he saw it now. There was not a doubt in his mind that the West could not be saved. The corruption and endless red tape that had drowned it year after year had destroyed it beyond repair. It could never be saved. The changes would be devastating and would start now. Akira gritted his teeth and stepped up the pace, determined to find that extra level of speed to make sure he would have time to end the pursuit.

Deane heard Marraud in Operations Command talk via the Bluetooth headset but he ignored it as he tried to catch up with Olsen.

Olsen turned into Paris Gardens, and the sight ahead made him stop in his tracks. The target had gone. He raised his pistol as a reflex and slowly walked along a path that was lined with trees and bushes.

Akira put every muscle on alert and waited. As he did so, anger surged through his body as he recalled patchy memories from his previous life when he might have held some deep reluctance for what he was about to do. The years had changed him however, and there was no turning back. Everything was so clear. He felt Madeline inside of him and with her the confidence that readied him for the final act.

Olsen slowly moved past several oak trees and took one step at a time. Not for one moment did he realise that he had already passed his target.

Akira slowly rose from the shadows and then leapt forwards towards Olsen. His hands wrapped around Olsen's body and then he forced the gun to drop to the ground. A feeling of raw power consumed Akira as he held the man's life in his hands. That feeling was now all that Akira lived for. He seized Olsen's neck for the kill.

Olsen slammed his right elbow back with as much force as he could muster. He spun around but felt a shoe slam into his jaw and he staggered back.

Both men attacked and although Olsen was the more powerful, Akira's speed of attack gave him the edge as he repeatedly landed successful blows.

Olsen was a master of Sambo and had spent years mastering the Russian fighting style. He moved closer to the target and made several hand attacks as he tried to prevent him from escaping.

Akira smashed into a park bench behind him and felt blood run from his nose. He glanced to his right and felt outnumbered.

Deane came to a stop in Paris Gardens and aimed his pistol but before he could fire, Olsen blocked his view.

Akira had already identified Olsen's fighting style, and though it was polished, it was not without weakness. As they traded blows, Akira allowed him to move closer and knew Deane wouldn't fire if there was a risk he would hurt his partner. Eventually Olsen was within his reach and one well-placed jab to the temple was enough to knock him off balance. Akira didn't miss his chance and grabbed Olsen around his neck. He held firm and slowly turned to face Deane, using him as a human shield.

Deane's jaw tightened as he gripped the pistol tightly. He glanced at Olsen who looked alarmed but pushed away his thoughts of concern. 'There's no way out of this. Release him!'

'Shoot him!' Olsen shouted.

Akira jabbed his hostage in the ribs and kept one eye on the man ahead. He desperately wanted to tear Thomas Deane limb from limb but he pushed it from his mind and tried to maintain control. Madeline was in his thoughts and she too wanted him to engage. Akira stayed calm and slowly stepped back, taking his hostage with him.

Deane tried to find a shot, but the risk was too high. Olsen's head was too close to the target and the rest of his body was obscured.

Akira took another step back and stepped on what felt like a gun. As he stood behind Olsen, he glanced down and confirmed it was the gun he had knocked out of Olsen's hand during their initial struggle.

Deane took a step to his left and tried to find an angle for the shot.

Akira had one chance, and he wasn't going to let it go. He released Olsen and smashed his fist into the back of his head and then dropped to the ground to find the gun.

Deane saw the move and fired once but then turned to move when he realised what the target was reaching for. One shot clipped him across his chest as he dived for cover.

Akira fired again but missed. He tried to find Deane's partner, but he too had found cover. Madeline screamed in his mind to run.

There will be another time, my love. Go!

As he ran, he dismantled the gun and ran towards Stamford Street. Despite the scare, his arrogance and belief in his dream remained. The Security Services were close but they would be no match for him and his followers.

Thomas Deane slowly got to his feet and felt the damaged part of his bulletproof vest under his white shirt. His chest felt bruised, and it was only then he realised Patrice Marraud, had been trying to get in touch with him. 'Stand by, Patrice.'

Olsen felt groggy but saw Deane emerge from the bushes. 'We lost him. Are you OK?'

'It was a close call.' Deane put one hand on Olsen's head. His military-style buzz-cut of dark-brown hair had blood running through it. 'You're injured.'

'I could say the same for you.' He looked around for his gun.

Deane's mind wondered exactly who they had encountered. 'Patrice, are you there?'

Patrice Marraud exchanged a look with the on-duty manager in Operations Command at MI6 Headquarters. There had been widespread panic when they had lost contact with Deane and Olsen. 'Report, Tom, what's your status? We lost you on the CCTV.'

'We located the target, but he escaped. We're in Paris Gardens, not far from the building in Stamford Street that we've been monitoring. Order all teams to converge on that location,

we'll meet you there.' He locked eyes with Olsen and loaded his pistol. 'This operation is a go.'

Chapter 2

Wednesday, February 1st 07:45, Empty office building, Stamford Street, Central London.

A storm had taken hold over London and heavy rain could be heard coming down on the roof of the empty office building. Olsen and Deane stood firm and took cover behind two upturned tables. When they worked together, they were an effective partnership, and they were slowly overcoming the terrorists.

Several of the remaining attackers broke away from the reception area and sprinted down the corridor towards the stairs, in an abandoned damp and murky office block in Stamford Street.

Deane, a man who regularly defied his four decades, had seen it all many times before. In one quick motion, he loaded a fresh cartridge into his choice of weapon, a British made Spitfire G1 silver pistol and looked back to his partner. 'Hold this position, I can handle them from here!' After what had happened in Paris Gardens, he couldn't repress an urge to keep Olsen out of danger.

Olsen, in his late twenties and far more headstrong, saw his partner clear the table and give chase but he wasn't about to miss out on the glory. He reloaded his Beretta and joined Deane as they both continued the gunfight down the corridor.

Under cover at the bottom of a silver steel staircase, Olsen knelt close to his mentor and waited for the next move. Behind him, a mixture of police Special Branch, MI5, MI6, and French agents spread out into the winding corridors to flush out any remaining threats.

Deane didn't take his eyes off the men at the top of the stairs and was confident he could make the shot and storm the staircase to prevent their escape. How they were planning on leaving he didn't know but one thing was certain, none of them would escape. He felt his partner's presence behind him and saw Patrice Marraud, his old friend from the French Secret Service, take up position on the other side of the staircase. 'Take charge down here, Patrice. I'll deal with those upstairs.'

Marraud nodded and mobilized the other agents to sweep the rest of the ground floor.

'Don't you mean we'll deal with those upstairs?'

Deane didn't look at Olsen and readied himself to move. 'Stay here with Patrice!'

Olsen watched him go and cursed to himself. He knew how much Deane cared, but he didn't need protecting. With his gun blazing, he set off in pursuit.

Akira, on the ground floor and barricaded into a room, looked up as another attack came from above. His thoughts turned to his loyal followers who were sacrificing their lives to guarantee his escape. It couldn't be helped, it was vital that he got away. The diversion would keep the attackers busy so he could leave with several USB memory sticks full of data that was vital to the cause. Transferring the data, which included contact details for some of his key financial partners, was too risky, and he didn't trust anyone else to take the data out of the country.

He covered his face with a black balaclava and took great care to open the nearby window. Escape was not going to be easy. It didn't surprise him to see a man patrolling the side alley of the building. He would have felt uneasy if it had been deserted, as anyone from MI6 always followed protocol.

Akira leapt out of the window and dropped his considerable weight onto the man's shoulders. There was some resistance but not enough to threaten him. Akira considered

killing him but decided to let him live to tell the tale that someone had escaped. It was a risk, but the thought of leaving a clear message that the operation had not been a complete success appealed to him. Whenever Akira toyed with MI6, it made him feel even more powerful. *Maybe then they will realise this was just a small battle. The war is on its way.* He cleared the nearby fence and disappeared into the darkness.

Deane felt the blood on his left arm but told himself to ignore it and get the job done. He took cover behind a wooden beam and assessed the situation.

The odds were not in his favour.

Behind the adjacent beam, Olsen had made that same assessment but, as ever, was defiant in his belief he would succeed as another round blasted out of the chamber of his pistol.

At the sight of such a precarious scene ahead, all Deane could think about was his partner. They had been together for almost a decade and he would gladly give his life to save Olsen's. Every mission together had been a joy, despite the inevitable disagreements. It was no surprise Olsen had disobeyed him, it was becoming the norm with each passing day. The thought of losing Olsen, as he had lost other partners before, terrified him to his soul. He fired his pistol again and snapped himself back to the present. 'Hold this position!'

Olsen watched his partner deliberately draw fire away from his position. Once again he felt he was being protected, which meant he missed out on the excitement.

Deane took down another two terrorists but four more lingered at the doorway and protected a fifth who had a mobile phone to his ear. Gunfire rained in and Deane stood behind a pillar for cover. As he did so, the fifth attacker ran to the fire escape staircase. Deane gritted his teeth in defiance and fired his weapon again.

Olsen saw his partner attack and took his chance in between the gunfire, determined not to miss out. He helped disarm the remaining terrorists, and barely heard an order from Deane to stay where he was, as he saw him run towards the emergency fire escape staircase. Olsen wanted to go after him, but saw movement out of the corner of his vision and turned back towards the terrorists, to make sure they were no longer a threat.

One of the attackers tried to move his right hand towards a rifle that was just inches away on the floor. He heard Olsen step closer but even in the midst of defeat, he still felt he could somehow gain the advantage.

Olsen saw it immediately and slammed one of his size eleven shoes down on the man's throat. The barrel of his gun loomed over the head of the fallen attacker. Olsen's trigger finger quivered. The powerful pistol almost begged to be fired as dark whispers circled in his mind.

Seconds passed, and the pistol started to shake in his right hand.

Olsen blinked several times and started to come out of the darkness. He kicked the rifle away and spoke in a tone full of contempt. 'Just be lucky you're still alive...'

A large rumble of thunder made him look towards the fire escape staircase. Torrential rain poured down as dark clouds encased the night sky. To his right, he saw more agents emerge from the staircase. Olsen made his decision and ran out onto the slippery metal staircase that led to the roof.

Deane felt his left foot give way as rain continued to fall in a deafening downpour. Despite the threatening clouds that surrounded him, his steely blue eyes wouldn't budge from the target who had stepped onto the next level of the staircase. That left just one flight of stairs to reach the roof. *He's faster than me, somehow I have to slow him down!* With one desperate move, Deane lunged and grabbed hold of the man's right foot.

Both men fell back onto the staircase and grappled with each other.

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