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LEGACY

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Eric Van Lustbader



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In Memory of Bob

PROLOGUE

Khalid Murat, leader of the Chechen rebels, sat still as a stone in the center vehicle of the convoy making its way through the bombed-out streets of Grozny. The BTR-60BP armored personnel carriers were standard Russian military issue and, as such, the convoy was indistinguishable from all the others rumbling through the city on patrol. Murat's heavily armed men were crammed into the other two vehicles – one in front and one behind his own. They were heading toward Hospital Number Nine, one of six or seven different hideouts Murat used to keep three steps ahead of the Russian forces searching for him.

Murat was darkly bearded, close to fifty, with a bear's broad stance and the fire-lit eyes of the true zealot. He had learned early on that the iron fist was the only way to rule. He had been present when Jokhar Dudayev had imposed Islamic Shariah law to no avail. He had seen the carnage wreaked when it had all begun, when the Chechnya-based warlords, foreign associates of Osama bin Laden, invaded Dagestan and executed a string of bombings in Moscow and Volgodonsk that killed some two hundred people. When the blame for the foreigners' actions was falsely put on Chechen terrorists, the Russians began their devastating bombing of Grozny, reducing much of the city to rubble.

The sky over the Chechen capital was blurred, made indistinct by a constant flux of ash and cinder, a shimmering incandescence so lurid it seemed almost radioactive. Oil-fueled fires burned everywhere across the rubble-strewn landscape.

Khalid Murat stared out the tinted windows as the

convoy passed a burned-out skeleton of a building, massive, hulking, the roofless interior filled with flickering flames. He grunted, turned to Hasan Arsenov, his second in command, and said, 'Once Grozny was the beloved home to lovers strolling down the wide tree-lined boulevards, mothers pushing prams across the leafy squares. The great circus was nightly filled to overflowing with joyous, laughing faces, and architects the world over made their pilgrimage to tour the magnificent buildings that once made Grozny one of the most beautiful cities on earth.'

He shook his head sadly, slapped the other's knee in a comradely gesture. 'Allah, Hasan!' he cried. 'Look how the Russians have crushed everything that was good and fine!'

Hasan Arsenov nodded. He was a brisk, energetic man fully ten years Murat's junior. A former biathlon champion, he had the wide shoulders and narrow hips of a natural athlete. When Murat had taken over as rebel leader, he was at his side. Now he pointed out to Murat the charred husk of a building on the convoy's right. 'Before the wars,' he said with grave intent, 'when Grozny was still a major oil-refining center, my father worked there at the Oil Institute. Now instead of profits from our wells, we get flash fires that pollute our air and our water.'

The two rebels were chastened into silence by the parade of bombed-out buildings they passed, the streets empty save for scavengers, both human and animal. After several minutes, they turned to each other, the pain of their people's suffering in their eyes. Murat opened his mouth to speak but froze at the unmistakable sound of bullets pinging against their vehicle. It took him but an instant to realize that the vehicle was being hit by small-arms fire too weak to penetrate their vehicle's sturdy armor plate. Arsenov, ever vigilant, reached for the radio.

'I'm going to order the guards in the lead and tail vehicles to return fire.'

Murat shook his head. 'No, Hasan. Think. We're camouflaged in Russian military uniforms, riding in Russian personnel carriers. Whoever is firing on us is more likely an

ally than a foe. We need to make sure before there's innocent blood on our hands.'

He took the radio from Arsenov, ordered the convoy to a halt.

'Lieutenant Gochiyayev,' he said into the radio, 'organize your men into a recon. I want to find out who's shooting at us, but I don't want them killed.'

In the lead vehicle, Lieutenant Gochiyayev gathered his men and ordered them to fan out behind the cover of the armored convoy. He followed them onto the rubble-strewn street, hunching his shoulders against the bitter cold. Using precise hand signals, he directed his men to converge from the left and right onto the place from which the small-arms fire had come.

His men were well trained; they moved swiftly and silently from rock to wall to pile of twisted metal beams, scrunched down, presenting as small a target as possible. However, no more shots were heard. They made their final run at once, a pincer move, designed to trap the enemy and crush them in a blistering cross-fire.

In the center vehicle, Hasan Arsenov kept his eye on the place where Gochiyayev had converged the troops and waited for the sounds of gunfire that never came. Instead, the head and shoulders of Lieutenant Gochiyayev appeared in the distance. Facing the center vehicle, he waved his arm back and forth in an arc, signaling that the area had been secured. At this sign, Khalid Murat moved past Arsenov, stepped out of the personnel carrier and without hesitation walked through the frozen rubble toward his men.

'Khalid Murat!' Arsenov called in alarm, running after his leader.

Clearly unperturbed, Murat walked toward a low crumbling stone wall, the place where the gunfire had emanated. He caught a glimpse of the piles of garbage; on one was a waxy white-skinned corpse that had some time ago been stripped of its clothes. Even at a distance the stench of putrefaction was like being hit with a poleax. Arsenov caught up with him and drew his sidearm.

When Murat reached the wall, his men were on either side, their arms at the ready. The wind gusted fitfully, howling and whining through the ruins. The dull metallic sky had darkened further and it began to snow. A light dusting quickly coated Murat's boots, created a web in the wiry jumble of his beard.

'Lieutenant Gochiyayev, you've found the attackers?'

'I have, sir.'

'Allah has guided me in all things; he guides me in this. Let me see them.'

'There's only one,' Gochiyayev replied.

'One?' Arsenov cried. 'Who? Did he know we're Chechen?'

'You're Chechen?' a small voice said. A pallid face emerged from behind the wall, a boy not more than ten years old. He wore a filthy wool hat, threadbare sweater over a few thin plaid shirts, patched trousers and a pair of cracked rubber boots far too big for his feet, which had probably been taken off a dead man. Though only a child, he had the eyes of an adult; they watched everything with a combination of wariness and mistrust. He stood protecting the skeleton of an unexploded Russian rocket he had scavenged for bread money, likely all that stood between his family and starvation. He held a gun in his left hand; his right arm ended at the wrist. Murat immediately looked away but Arsenov continued to stare.

'A land mine,' the boy said with a heartbreaking matter-of-factness. 'Laid by the Russian scum.'

'Allah be praised! What a little soldier!' Murat exclaimed, directing his dazzling, disarming smile at the boy. It was this smile that had drawn his people to him like filings to a magnet. 'Come, come.' He beckoned, then held his empty palms up. 'As you can see, we're Chechen, like you.'

'If you're like me,' the boy said, 'why do you ride in Russian armored cars?'

'What better way to hide from the Russian wolf, eh?' Murat squinted, laughed to see that the boy held a Gyurza.

'You carry a Russian Special Forces gun. Such bravery must be rewarded, yes?'

Murat knelt next to the boy and asked his name. When the boy told him, he said, 'Aznor, do you know who I am? I am Khalid Murat and I, too, wish to be free of the Russian yoke. Together we can do this, yes?'

'I never meant to shoot at fellow Chechens,' Aznor said. With his mutilated arm, he pointed to the convoy. 'I thought this was a *zachistka*.' He meant the monstrous clean-up operations perpetrated by Russian soldiers who searched for suspected rebels. More than twelve thousand Chechens had been killed during the *zachistkas*; two thousand had simply disappeared, countless others injured, tortured, maimed and raped. 'The Russians murdered my father, my uncles. If you were Russians I would've killed you all.' A spasm of rage and frustration played across his face.

'I believe you would've,' Murat said solemnly. He dug in his pocket for some bills. The boy had to tuck the gun into his waistband in order to take them in his remaining hand. Leaning toward the boy, Murat said in a collusive whisper, 'Now listen to me – I'll tell you where to buy more ammunition for your Gyurza so you'll be prepared when the next *zachistka* comes.'

'Thank you.' Aznor's face cracked open in a smile

Khalid Murat whispered a few words, then stepped back and ruffled the boy's hair. 'Allah be with you, little soldier, in everything you do.'

The Chechen leader and his second in command watched the small boy as he clambered back over the rubble, pieces of an unexploded Russian rocket tucked under one arm. Then they returned to their vehicle. With a grunt of disgust, Hasan slammed shut the armor-plated door on the world outside, Aznor's world. 'Doesn't it bother you that you're sending a child to his death?'

Murat glanced at him. The snow had melted to trembling droplets on his beard, making him seem in Arsenov's eyes more like a liturgical imam than a military commander. 'I've given this *child* – who must feed and clothe and, most

important, *protect* the rest of his family as if he were an adult – I have given him hope, a specific objective. In short, I've provided him with *a reason to live.*'

Bitterness had turned Arsenov's face hard and pale; his eyes had a baleful look. 'Russian bullets will tear him to ribbons.'

'Is that what you truly think, Hasan? That Aznor is stupid or, worse, careless?'

'He's but one child.'

'When the seed is planted, the shoots will rise out of even the most inhospitable ground. It's always been this way, Hasan. The belief and courage of one inevitably grows and spreads, and soon that one is ten, twenty, a hundred, a thousand!'

'And all the while our people are being murdered, raped, beaten, starved and penned like cattle. It's not enough, Khalid. Not nearly enough!'

'The impatience of youth hasn't yet left you, Hasan.' He gripped the other's shoulder. 'Well, I shouldn't be surprised, yes?'

Arsenov, catching the look of pity in Murat's eyes, clenched his jaw and turned his face away. Curls of snow made visible wind devils along the street, whirling like Chechen dervishes in ecstatic trance. Murat took this as a sign of the import of what he had just done, of what he was about to say. 'Have faith,' he said in hushed, sacramental tones, 'in Allah and in that courageous boy.'

Ten minutes later, the convoy stopped in front of Hospital Number Nine. Arsenov looked at his wristwatch. 'Almost time,' he said. The two of them were riding in the same vehicle, against standard security precautions, owing to the extreme importance of the call they were about to receive.

Murat leaned over, pressed a button, and the soundproof barrier rose into place, cutting them off from the driver and four bodyguards sitting forward. Well-trained, they stared straight ahead through the bullet-proof windshield.

‘Tell me, Khalid, as the moment of truth is upon us, what reservations you have.’

Murat raised his bristling eyebrows in a display of incomprehension that Arsenov thought rather transparent. ‘Reservations?’

‘Don’t you want what’s rightfully ours, Khalid, what Allah decrees we should have?’

‘The blood runs high in you, my friend. I know this only too well. We’ve fought side by side many times – we’ve killed together and we owe each other our very lives, yes? Now, listen to me. I bleed for our people. Their pain fills me with a rage I can barely contain. You know this better, perhaps, than anyone. But history warns that one should beware what one wants the most. The consequences of what’s being proposed –’

‘What we’ve been planning for!’

‘Yes, planning for,’ Khalid Murat said. ‘But the consequences must be considered.’

‘Caution,’ Arsenov said bitterly. ‘Always caution.’

‘My friend.’ Khalid Murat smiled as he gripped the other’s shoulder. ‘I don’t want to be misled. The reckless foe is easiest to destroy. You must learn to make patience a virtue.’

‘Patience!’ Arsenov spat. ‘You didn’t tell the boy back there to be patient. You gave him money, told him where to buy ammunition. You set him against the Russians. Each day we delay is another day that boy and thousands like him risk being killed. It’s the very future of Chechnya that will be decided by our choice here.’

Murat pressed his thumbs into his eyes, rubbing with a circular motion. ‘There are other ways, Hasan. There are *always* other ways. Perhaps we should consider –’

‘There’s no *time*. The announcement has been made, the date set. The Shaykh is right.’

‘The Shaykh, yes.’ Khalid Murat shook his head. ‘Always the Shaykh.’

At that moment, the car phone rang. Khalid Murat glanced at his trusted companion and calmly clicked on the

speakerphone. 'Yes, Shaykh,' he said in a deferential tone of voice. 'Hasan and I are both here. We await your instructions.'

High above the street where the convoy was idling, a figure crouched on a flat rooftop, elbows atop the low parapet. Lying along the parapet was a Finnish Sako TRG-41 bolt-action sniper rifle, one of many he had modified himself. Its aluminum and polyurethane stock made it as light as it was deadly accurate. He was dressed in the camouflage uniform of the Russian military, which did not look out of place with the Asian caste of his smooth features. Over the uniform, he wore a lightweight Kevlar harness from which hung a metal loop. In his right palm, he cradled a small matte-black box, no larger than the size of a pack of cigarettes. It was a wireless device in which were set two buttons. There was a stillness about him, a kind of aura that intimidated people. It was as if he understood silence, could gather it to him, manipulate it, unleash it as a weapon.

In his black eyes grew the world entire, and the street, the buildings upon which he now gazed were nothing more than a stage set. He counted the Chechen soldiers as they emerged from the guard vehicles. There were eighteen: the drivers still behind the wheels and in the center vehicle at least four guards as well as the principals.

As the rebels entered the main entrance of the hospital on their way to secure the site, he depressed the top button of the wireless remote and C4 charges went off, collapsing the hospital entrance. The percussion shook the street, set the heavy vehicles to rocking on their oversized shocks. The rebels caught directly in the blast were either blown to bits or crushed beneath the weight of falling rubble, but he knew that at least some of the rebels could have been far enough inside the hospital lobby to have survived, a possibility he had factored into his plan.

With the sound of the first explosion still ringing and the dust not yet settled, the figure looked down at the wireless device in his hand and depressed the lower button. The

street in front and back of the convoy erupted in a deafening blast, collapsing the shell-pocked macadam.

Now, even as the men below struggled to come to grips with the carnage he had visited upon them, the assassin took up the Sako, moving with a methodical, unhurried precision. The rifle was loaded with special non-fragmentation bullets of the smallest caliber the rifle could accommodate. Through its IR-enabled scope, he saw three rebels who had managed to escape the blasts with only minor injuries. They were running toward the middle vehicle, screaming at the occupants to get out before it was destroyed by another blast. He watched as they yanked open the right-hand doors, allowed Hasan Arsenov and one guard to emerge. That left the driver and three remaining bodyguards inside the car with Khalid Murat. As Arsenov turned away, the figure sighted on his head. Through the scope, he noted the expression of command plastered on Arsenov's face. Then he moved the barrel in a smooth, practiced motion, this time sighting on the Chechen's thigh. The figure squeezed off a shot and Arsenov grabbed his left leg, shouting as he went down. One of the guards ran to Arsenov, dragged him to cover. The two remaining guards, swiftly determining where the shot had come from, ran across the street, entering the building on whose roof the figure crouched.

As three more rebels appeared, racing out a side entrance to the hospital, the assassin dropped the Sako. He watched now as the vehicle containing Khalid Murat slammed into reverse. Behind and below him, he could hear the rebels pounding up the stairs leading to his rooftop perch. Still unhurried, he fitted titanium and corundum spikes to his boots. Then he took up a composite crossbow and shot a line into a light pole just behind the middle vehicle, tying off the line to make sure it was taut. Shouting voices reached him. The rebels had gained the floor directly below him.

The front of the vehicle was now facing him as the driver tried to maneuver it around the huge chunks of concrete, granite and macadam that had erupted in the explosion.

The assassin could see the soft glint of the two panes of glass that comprised the windshield. That was the one problem the Russians had yet to overcome: Bullet-proofing the glass made the panes so heavy it required two of them for the windshield. The personnel carrier's one vulnerable spot was the strip of metal between the two panes.

He took the sturdy metal loop attached to his harness and snapped himself to the taut line. Behind him, he heard the rebels burst through the door, emerging onto the roof a hundred feet away. Spotting the assassin, they swung around to fire on him as they ran toward him, setting off an unnoticed trip wire. Immediately, they were engulfed in a fiery detonation from the last remaining packet of C4 the assassin had planted the night before.

Never turning around to acknowledge the carnage behind him, the assassin tested the line and then launched himself from the rooftop. He slid down the line, lifting his legs so that the spikes were aimed at the windshield divider. Everything now depended on the speed and the angle with which he would strike the divider between the bullet-proof panes of the windshield. If he was off by just a fraction, the divider would hold and he had a good chance of breaking his leg.

The force of the impact ran up his legs, jolting his spine as the titanium and corundum spikes on his boots crumpled the divider like a tin can, the panes of glass caving in without its support. He crashed through the windshield and into the interior of the vehicle, carrying with him much of the windshield. A chunk of it struck the driver in the neck, half-severing his head. The assassin twisted to his left. The bodyguard in the front seat was covered in the driver's blood. He was reaching for his gun when the assassin took his head between his powerful hands and broke his neck before he had a chance to squeeze off a round.

The other two bodyguards in the jumpseat just behind the driver fired wildly at the assassin, who pushed the bodyguard with the broken neck so that his body absorbed the bullets. From behind this makeshift protection, he used the

bodyguard's gun, fired precisely, one shot through the forehead of each man.

That left only Khalid Murat. The Chechen leader, his face a mask of hatred, had kicked open the door and was shouting for his men. The assassin lunged at Murat, shaking the huge man as if he were a water rat; Murat's jaws snapped at him, almost taking off an ear. Calmly, methodically, almost joyously he seized Murat around the throat and, staring into his eyes, jabbed his thumb into the cricoid cartilage of the Chechen leader's lower larynx. Blood immediately filled Murat's throat, choking him, draining him of strength. His arms flailed, his hands beating against the assassin's face and head. To no avail. Murat was drowning in his own blood. His lungs filled and his breathing became ragged, thick. He vomited blood and his eyes rolled up in their sockets.

Dropping the now-limp body, the assassin climbed back into the front seat, hurling the driver's corpse out of the door. He slammed the vehicle into gear and stepped on the gas before what remained of the rebels could react. The vehicle leaped forward like a racehorse from the gate, hurtled over rubble and tarmac, then vanished into thin air as it plummeted into the hole the explosives had made in the street.

Underground, the assassin upshifted, racing through the tight space of a storm drain that had been widened by the Russians, who had intended to use them for clandestine assaults on rebel strongholds. Sparks flew as the metal fenders now and again scraped against the curving concrete walls. But for all that, he was safe. His plan had concluded as it had begun: with perfect clockwork precision.

After midnight the noxious clouds rolled away, at last revealing the moon. The detritus-laden atmosphere gave it a reddish glow, its lambent light intermittently disturbed by the still burning fires.

Two men stood in the center of a steel bridge. Below them, the charred remains of an unending war were

reflected in the surface of the sluggish water.

'It's done,' the first one said. 'Khalid Murat has been killed in a manner that will cause maximum impact.'

'I would expect nothing less, Khan,' the second man said. 'You owe your impeccable reputation in no small part to the commissions I've given you.' He was taller than the assassin by a good four inches, square-shouldered, long-legged. The only thing that marred his appearance was the strange glassy utterly hairless skin on the left side of his face and neck. He possessed the charisma of a born leader, a man not to be trifled with. Clearly, he was at home in the great halls of power, in public forums or in thuggish back alleys.

Khan was still basking in the look in Murat's eyes as he died. The look was different in every man. Khan had learned there was no common thread, for each man's life was unique, and though all sinned, the corrosion those sins caused differed from one to the next, like the structure of a snowflake, never to be repeated. In Murat, what had it been? Not fear. Astonishment, yes, rage, surely, but something more, deeper – sorrow at leaving a life's work undone. The dissection of the last look was always incomplete, Khan thought. He longed to know whether there was betrayal there, as well. Had Murat known who had ordered his assassination?

He looked at Stepan Spalko, who was holding out an envelope, heavy with money.

'Your fee,' Spalko said. 'Plus a bonus.'

'Bonus?' The topic of money refocused Khan's attention fully on the immediate. 'There was no mention of a bonus.'

Spalko shrugged. The ruddy moonlight made his cheek and neck shine like a bloody mass. 'Khalid Murat was your twenty-fifth commission with me. Call it an anniversary present, if you wish.'

'You're most generous, Mr. Spalko.' Khan stowed the envelope away without looking inside. To have done otherwise would have been very bad manners.

'I've asked you to call me Stepan. I refer to you as Khan.'

'That's different.'

'How so?'

Khan stood very still, and the silence flowed toward him. It gathered in him, making him seem taller, broader.

'I'm not required to explain myself to you, Mr. Spalko.'

'Come, come,' Spalko said with a conciliatory gesture. 'We're far from strangers. We share secrets of the most intimate nature.'

The silence built. Somewhere on the outskirts of Grozny an explosion lit up the night, and the sound of small-arms fire came to them like strings of children's firecrackers.

At length, Khan spoke. 'In the jungle I learned two mortal lessons. The first was to trust absolutely only myself. The second was to observe the most minute proprietaries of civilization, because knowing your place in the world is the only thing standing between you and the anarchy of the jungle.'

Spalko regarded him for a long time. The fitful glow from the firefight was in Khan's eyes, lending him a savage aspect. Spalko imagined him alone in the jungle, prey to privations, the quarry of greed and wanton bloodlust. The jungle of Southeast Asia was a world unto itself. A barbarous, pestilential area with its own peculiar laws. That Khan had not only survived there, but flourished, was, in Spalko's mind at least, the essential mystery surrounding him.

'I'd like to think we're more than businessman and client.'

Khan shook his head. 'Death has a particular odor. I smell it on you.'

'And I on you.' A slow smile crept across Spalko's face. 'So you agree, there is something special between us.'

'We're men of secrets,' Khan said, 'aren't we?'

'A worship of death; a shared understanding of its power.' Spalko nodded his assent. 'I have what you requested.' He held out a black file folder.

Khan looked into Spalko's eyes for a moment. His discerning nature had caught a certain air of condescension

that he found inexcusable. As he had long ago learned to do, he smiled at the offense, hiding his outrage behind the impenetrable mask of his face. Another lesson he had learned in the jungle: Acting in the moment, in hot blood, often led to an irreversible mistake; waiting in patience for the hot blood to cool was where all successful vengeance was bred. Taking the folder, he busied himself with opening the dossier. Inside, he found a single sheet of onion-skin with three brief close-typed paragraphs and a photo of a handsome male face. Beneath the picture was a name: David Webb. 'This is all of it.'

'Culled from many sources. All the information on him anyone has.' Spalko spoke so smoothly Khan was certain he had rehearsed the reply.

'But this is the man.'

Spalko nodded.

'There can be no doubt.'

'None whatsoever.'

Judging by the widening glow, the firefight had intensified. Mortars could be heard, bringing their rain of fire. Overhead, the moon seemed to glow a deeper red.

Khan's eyes narrowed and his right hand curled slowly into a tight fist of hate. 'I could never find a trace of him. I'd suspected he was dead.'

'In a way,' Spalko said, 'he is.'

He watched Khan walk across the bridge. He took out a cigarette and lit up, drawing the smoke into his lungs, letting it go reluctantly. When Khan had disappeared into the shadows, Spalko pulled out a cell phone, dialed an overseas number. A voice answered, and Spalko said, 'He has the dossier. Is everything in place?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. At midnight your local time you'll begin the operation.'