

Prologue: Perennial Rain

Evan is nineteen, fresh off the plane, trained up, mission-ready. And yet untested.

His first assignment as Orphan X.

He adjusts rapidly to this foreign place, a city with drizzly rain, imperious ministry buildings, and men who kiss on both cheeks.

His backstop is impeccable, endorsed by visas, a well-stamped passport, verifiable previous addresses, and phone numbers that ring to strategically placed responders. Jack, his handler and surrogate father, has built for him a suitably banal operational alias — enterprising young Ontarian, recently separated from his equally young wife, eager to shepherd his family's home-siding business into territories unknown. He and Jack worked the identity, kneading it like dough, until Evan was aligned with it so thoroughly that he actually felt the sting of his domestic setback and the fire of ambition to expand into this brave new market. Evan has learned not to act but to live his cover. And he does his best to stash away the part of him that does not believe his alias until the point at which he will require it.

He moves frequently around this gray city to prevent degradation of

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cover. Now and then in the streets, he comes across others his age. They seem like creatures of a different species. They don backpacks and trickle in and out of hostels, drunkenly recounting school tales in foreign tongues. As always, he remains separate—from them and everyone else. The United States has no footprints in this country. There will be no rolling-car meetings, no physical contacts from an embassy. If he fails, he will expire in a cold prison, alone and forgotten, after decades of suffering. That is, if he's not fortunate enough to be executed.

One night he is meditating on a threadbare blanket in a hotel seemingly as old as the country itself when the mustard-yellow rotary phone on the nightstand gives off a piercing ring.

It is Jack. "May I speak to Frederick?" he says.

"There is no one here by that name," Evan says, and hangs up.

Immediately he fires up his laptop and pirates Internet from the travel agency across the avenue. Logging in to a specified e-mail account, he checks the Drafts folder.

Sure enough, there's an unsent message.

Two words: "Package waiting." And an address near the outskirts of the city. Nothing more.

He types beneath: "Is it a weapon?"

Hits save.

A moment later the draft updates: "You're the weapon. Everything else is an implement."

Even from across an ocean, Jack casts arcane pearls of wisdom—part koan, part war slogan, all pedagogy.

Evan logs off. Because they communicated within a saved message inside a single account, not a word has been transmitted over the Internet, where it could be detected or captured.

On his way out of the rented room, Evan freezes, hand wrapped around the wobbly doorknob. He has been tasked. Once he goes through that door, it is official. Seven years of training has brought him to this moment. His body is gripped by a comprehensive, bone-crushing fear. He doesn't want to die. Doesn't want to crack rocks and eat goulash in some labor camp for the rest of his days. Doesn't want his last moments to be the pressure of a Tokarev nine-mil at the base of his skull and the taste of copper. The perennial rain streaks the window, a tap-tap-tapping on his nerves. He's

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sweated through his shirt, and yet the tinny doorknob remains cool beneath his palm.

Like a prayer, he hears Jack's words in his ear as if he were right beside him: Envision someone else, someone better than you. Stronger. Smarter. Tougher. Then do what that guy would do.

"Act like who you want to be," Evan tells the stale air of the hotel.

He vows to leave his fear behind him in that room. Forever.

He opens the door and steps through.

The bus out of the city reeks of body odor and sweet tobacco. Sitting in the back, Evan applies a thin sheen of superglue to his fingertips to avoid leaving prints. He prefers this to gloves because it looks less conspicuous and allows him better tactile sensation.

Uneven asphalt erodes into a winding dirt road carved into a mountainside. Eastern Bloc municipal rigor dissolves into hamlets in shambles. Bedsheets flap in the wind. Buildings lean crookedly. Riding a wet gust, a muezzin's call to prayer. It is as though they have traversed not communities but continents.

The address belongs to a walk-up apartment overlooking a cart-congested road. Evan mounts the curved stucco staircase, padding across blue-and-white Turkish tile, and knocks on a giant arched door, its wood embellished with rusting metal straps. It creaks open grandly to reveal a round man in loose-fitting clothes of indeterminate style.

"Ah," he says, wireless spectacles glinting. "I trust your journey was safe?" A sweeping gesture of arm and draped sleeve accompanies his softly accented English. "Come in."

The ceiling is high, churchlike. A Makarov pistol rests in plain view on top of a television with rabbit-ear antennae. The man and Evan pass through clattering bead curtains into a cramped kitchen and sit before shallow teak bowls filled with figs, dried fruits, and nuts.

The man produces a small plastic bag with eyes only Magic Markered on the label in Cyrillic. Inside the bag is a single bullet casing. Evan examines it through the plastic. A copper-washed steel cartridge from a 7.62 ★ 54mmR round.

It dawns on him that this shell holds a fingerprint, that it is to be left behind to direct blame elsewhere for what Evan will be instructed to do.

He thanks the man and moves to rise, but the man reaches across the

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table, wraps his brown fingers around Evan's wrist. "What you hold in your hands is dangerous beyond what you can imagine. Be careful, my friend. It is an unsafe world."

The next morning Evan takes to the city neighborhoods he has been scrupulously exploring for the past few weeks. He knows where to make inquiries, and these inquiries land him in the back of an abandoned textile factory, speaking to a trim little Estonian over an industrial weaving loom on which Sovietski rifles are laid out at fastidious intervals.

The preserved shell in Evan's pocket requires a round that fits a limited range of guns. He looks over the Warsaw Pact offerings, spots a surplused-out Mosin-Nagant with a PSO-1 scope. He points, and the Estonian, using a clean gun cloth, presents it to him. As he observes Evan examining the Russian sniper rifle, his smile borders on the lascivious.

The gun will give Evan a two-inch grouping at a hundred meters, which is all he needs, but he affects a negotiator's displeasure. "Not a world-class rifle."

The man folds his soft pink fingers. "It is not as though you are going to the National Matches at Camp Perry."

Evan notes the reference, tailored for him, a North American buyer. He lifts a wary eye from the scope, regards the little man in his ridiculous suit and pocket square.

The Estonian adjusts his tie, dips his baby-smooth chin toward the rifle. "And besides," he says, "three million dead Germans can't be wrong."

"Alvar?" A weak feminine voice turns Evan's head.

A beautiful young girl, maybe fifteen, stands in the office doorway, naked save for a ratty blanket drawn across her shoulders. Her eyes sunken and rimmed black. Bones pronounced beneath her skin. Behind her, Evan spots a filthy mattress on the floor and a metal cup and plate.

"I'm hungry," she says.

Evan catches her meaning through his grasp of Russian, though he presumes she is speaking Ukrainian. He makes a note to add this linguistic arrow to his Indo-European quiver.

The Estonian seethes, an abrupt break in his middle-management demeanor. "Back in your fucking bedroom. I told you never to come out when I am conducting business."

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She doesn't so much retreat as fade back into the office.

Evan hefts the rifle, as if he will be paying by the ounce. He flicks his head toward the closed door. "Looks like she keeps you busy."

Alvar grins, showing tobacco-stained teeth. "You have no idea, my friend."

To the side a pallet stacked with crates of frag grenades peeks out from beneath a draped curtain. The Estonian notices Evan noticing them.

"My friend, 1997 has proven good to me," he says. "It is the Wild West here now. Orders coming in faster than I can fill them. High quantity now. These are the kinds of movers who move nations."

"For which side?" Evan asks.

The man laughs. "There are no sides. Only money."

At this prompt a wad of bills changes hands.

Seventy-two hours later, Evan finds himself in the sewer beneath a thoroughfare, stooped in the dripping humidity, Mosin-Nagant in hand. He stands on the concrete platform above a river of sludge, waiting. The eye-level drainage grate set into the curb grants him a good head-on vantage down the length of the boulevard. In the distance, squawks from mounted speakers and the roar of an erupting crowd. The parade drawing nearer.

Various coded dispatches from Jack have filled in some of the blanks. The target: a hawkish foreign minister gaining power by the day, vocal about nuclear development. Breathing the swamplike air, Evan waits. A cheer emanates from the street above him. He lifts the rifle, the tip inches from the mouth of the curb inlet, and clarifies his view, allowing the scope to become his world.

Children held aloft on shoulders laugh and clap. On the banked curve of visible street, sawhorses hold back the masses. Miniature flags flicker before faces like swarming insects.

The front of the procession, a phalanx of armored SUVs, turns into view several hundred meters away. The vehicles head up the stretch of asphalt toward Evan. His view is slightly offset from each windshield as it flashes in the muted midday sun.

Evan aligns himself with the rifle to reduce recoil and allow for quick repeatability if he has to cycle a second shot. He calculates the mechanical offset—the one-and-seven-eighths measurement between the crosshairs

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and bore axis. Then he adjusts the intersection point for ninety meters, the spot where the vehicle spacing is optimal for the angle he requires. His field of view will diminish the closer the car gets. If the target passes the mark, his shot will grow more difficult by the meter. It must be ninety meters — no more, no less.

He sets himself in position. Aside from the breath cooling his pursed lips, he is still.

At once, looming large in the scope, is the target. A tall, balding man with a dignified bearing, lean in a dark suit, surrounded by various generals in full regalia and his wife in a flowy aubergine dress. Waving to the crowd, they are clustered in an open boat of a vehicle that brings to mind the Popemobile.

One hundred ten meters.

One hundred.

There is a problem.

The foreign minister's wife turns to face the opposite side of the street, completely blocking Evan's view. Her head right in front of her husband's.

Ninety-five meters.

Panic. In a split second, Evan falls apart and regroup.

If he has to go through her, it's better to penetrate the eye socket so there's only one chance for the skull to deflect the round. Evan lays the crosshairs directly on her pupil.

Ninety-three.

He takes the slack out of the two-stage trigger, breathes breath number one.

He is looking directly into her eye, into her. Mascara on the curled lashes, joy crinkling the upper lid. She is not part of the mission. Should he disregard her as collateral damage? In the corridors of his mind, Evan listens for Jack but hears nothing aside from the hiss of passing tires and the frenzied stir of the crowd.

Second breath. Exhale. The final half breath before the shot.

If he waits any longer, a host of new problems will present themselves.

A one-millimeter movement of his finger pad gets it done.

Inconveniently, Jack's voice announces itself now, a whisper in his ear: The hard part isn't turning you into a killer. The hard part is keeping you human.

The vehicle coasts forward. It is on the X. The dark dot of her pupil, the minister's head pulling back, aligning perfectly behind her. Now.

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And then they are past.

Evan discards the half breath. Sweat stings his eyes. His mind races, recalculating, adjusting intersection points, dialing back the magnification, faces zooming and shrinking as he fights to hold the mission together in the circle of the scope. As he's feared, his field of view diminishes, complications stacking on top of complications.

He breathes. Focuses.

Slack out of the trigger. Mag dialing back, back. There will be a moment, one moment, to get it done right and clean, and when it presents itself, he will be ready.

The generals shuffle around the wife, smiling beneath mustaches, the minister's face popping in and out of view, there and then gone. Seventy-five meters now, the preceding vehicle squeezing the angle tighter and tighter, diminishing it to a slice.

The universe is reduced to the tunnel of the scope. There is nothing else, not even breath. The wife turns, her sturdy bosom filling the vantage, the minister drifting again behind her. Evan waits for her arm to rise for another wave to the crowd, and at last it does, a sheet of cloth draped wing-like beneath her arm. The minister is invisible behind it, but Evan has tracked his movement, anticipates how far to lead him.

He exhales slow and steady, then pulls. The bullet punches through the gauzy cloth an inch and a half below the wife's straightened elbow.

Evan's hands move of their own volition, manipulating the bolt for a follow-up shot, the shell spinning free and clattering at his feet. But there will be no need for a second bullet. The foreign minister leans propped against two of the generals, his eyes vacant, one cheek dimpled by a hole the size of a thumb. His wife's mouth is stretched wide and trembling in a scream, but Evan can hear nothing over the eruption of the crowd.

He drops the weapon into the stream of passing waste below. After pocketing the kill brass, he takes out the plastic bag and shakes onto the dank ledge the copper-washed steel shell case with its invisible fingerprint, a fingerprint that he now knows belongs to a Chechen rebel of some reputation.

They will search the crowd, the surrounding buildings, the parked vehicles before they will think to look beneath the earth, but nonetheless Evan runs to his exit point and emerges through a manhole cover into a park five blocks north. He walks three blocks east, away from the quickening

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commotion, and boards a bus. A few clicks later, he exits, flips his reversible jacket inside out, and zigzags the city, the spreading news on the lips of passersby, wafting in snatches from café tables, blaring from car radios.

Once he's safely back in his rented room, he logs in to the e-mail account and creates a new saved message consisting of a single word: "Neutralized."

A moment later the draft updates: "Close the operation."

Evan stares at the words, feeling the glow of emotion beneath his face. He runs a hand over his short hair, and his palm comes away damp with perspiration. He stands up, walks away from the laptop, walks back. Types: "Request phone contact."

He hits refresh. Hits it again. Nothing.

Jack is thinking it over.

Seventeen anxious hours later, Evan finally receives a response, and two hours after that he is standing at the specified cross street, having reached Jack at a pay phone from a pay phone. He's caught Jack on the front edge of an East Coast morning, though he seems as alert as ever, his station-agent's mind shaping his responses into neat packets of words, articulate silences, loaded intonations.

"All he did is provide a cartridge case," Evan says.

Jack says, "That's all he did of which you're aware."

"He seems loyal. An asset."

"Don't believe everything you think."

The breeze blows flecks of moisture into Evan's face, and he hunches into the collar of his jacket, turning this way and that, watching pedestrians, vehicles, the windows of the towering, stone-faced buildings all around.

"He's not a friend to us," Jack says. "He's a friend to everyone. A businessman. He doesn't just sell cartridge cases with fingerprints. He moves weaponry."

"Weaponry?"

"Fissile material. Highest bidder. He is a complicating factor in our work there. That has to be enough for you."

"What about the Sixth Commandment?" Evan says, anger creeping into his voice. "'Question orders.'"

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"You've questioned them," Jack says. "Now execute them. Close the operation. Your friend and anyone else you might have used. This cannot — will not — come back on us."

The steady hum of a dial tone follows.

Evan wanders the neighborhood until he comes upon a GAZ Volga, a four-door sedan as common on these streets as a Chrysler in Detroit. He hot-wires it and leaves the city, driving into a bruise-colored sunset. He parks several blocks from the apartment with the curved stucco staircase and then closes the distance under cover of the rapidly falling night. Only once he's reached the blue-and-white Turkish tiles does he remove his pick set. The rusting lock on the arched wooden door gives itself up within seconds.

Evan steals silently across the dark front room with its vaulted ceiling. The Makarov pistol remains in its place, resting atop the antique television. It is loaded.

In the rear of the apartment, the kitchen is lit, and carrying through the beaded curtain is the static-filled sound of an animated radio announcer rattling on in a language with which Evan is unfamiliar. Tajik? Bukhori?

How little he knows of this life he is about to extinguish.

The hanging beads slice his view into vertical slats. The man sits at the small chipped table, facing away, spooning soup from a bowl. An old-fashioned radio rests on the counter beside a hot plate. A prosaic little portrait: Man Eating Dinner Alone.

Evan steps through the curtain, the clattering beads announcing his presence. The man turns and looks back through his wireless spectacles. There is a moment of recognition, and then the lines of his face contract in sorrow. There is no anger or fear — only sadness. He nods once and turns slowly back to his soup.

Evan shoots him through the back of the head.

As the man tilts forward, his chair slides back a few inches and his body remains resting there, chest to the table's edge, face in the soup.

Evan lifts him out of the soup, upright into the chair, and cleans his face as best he can. His left eye is gone, and part of his forehead. As Evan returns the dish towel to the counter, he comes upon a crude clay ashtray, shaped by a child's hand.

He vomits into the sink.

After, he finds a bottle of bleach in a cabinet and sloshes it into the drain.

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As he exits onto the dark staircase, he becomes aware of a man easing up the stairs, drawn perhaps by the sound of the gunshot. The man's left fist gleams even in the shadow.

They freeze midway down the stairs.

The man is all dark silhouette to Evan, just as Evan is to him. The man's head dips, orienting on the pistol in Evan's hand. The man lowers his own gun, opens his other palm in a show of harmlessness, and shakes his head. Evan nods and brushes past him.

Ten minutes later, halfway back to the city, his knotted chest still prevents him from drawing full breaths.

His next stop is the abandoned textile factory. As he enters, darting through the warren of giant fabric rolls, the trim Estonian appears suddenly. He holds a no-shit Kalashnikov, its curved magazine protruding like a tusk. Evan has brought a pistol to an AK-47 fight. They are standing by the industrial weaving loom where they met before.

The Estonian cocks his head with benign curiosity, but his grip stays firm on the assault rifle, his small eyes hard like pebbles. Even at this hour, roused from sleep, he wears neatly pressed trousers and a tailored shirt, though one flap remains untucked. The door to the office behind him is closed, but a smudged glow illuminates the fogged glass of the window.

The men square off in an uneasy truce, not aiming their weapons but not putting them away either.

"I need your help," Evan says. Slowly, cautiously, he raises the Makarov, then fiddles with the slide. "It keeps jamming."

The Estonian's smile appears, a neat arc sliced through soft pink cheeks. "That is because you did not buy it from me." He reaches for the gun. "But seriously, this is a statistical near impossibility. Makarovs do not jam."

Evan knows this, but it was the only excuse he could fabricate in the moment.

The Estonian shakes his hand impatiently. Beneath his other elbow, the muzzle of the AK nudges forward. "Well?"

Evan is forced to relinquish the pistol.

The Estonian takes it, then sets down his own weapon on the loom. He drops the magazine, examines it, then grins at Evan's ignorance. "The underside of the magazine feed lip has a burr from grinding on the clearance."

With the toe of his loafer, he hooks a cardboard box and tugs it out from

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beneath the loom. Digging through the contents, he produces a new magazine, jams it home, and hands the pistol back to Evan.

"I'm sorry," Evan says, and shoots the man through the chest.

The Estonian falls back, his palms slapping the concrete. He is trembling, his arms wobbling violently. A cough leaves a coat of fine spittle on his blue lips. His pupils track up in little jerks, find Evan. Never has Evan seen such terror in another person's face.

Evan crouches, takes his manicured hand. The nails are clean and cut short. The Estonian clutches Evan's fingers, grips his forearm with his other hand, pulls him closer. The partial embrace in another context would be affectionate. Perhaps it is even now. Evan lowers him gently to the floor, cradling his head so it doesn't strike the concrete. He holds the man's hand until it goes limp.

Then he rises, walks back to the humble office, and opens the door. The girl, bloody-lipped and ashen, lies balled up on the mattress. A heroin kit rests on a metal folding chair. She is naked, spotted with bruises, skin tented across bones. Her left shoulder looks dislocated. It is impossible that she would not have heard the gunshot.

On a metal desk across from the mattress, a cigar box brims with bills. Evan picks it up, sets it on the floor by her thin arm. "You're free to go now," he says.

She rolls her eyes languidly toward him. "Where?" she says.

He leaves her there with the box full of cash.

That night he beds down at a different hotel, logging in to e-mail and leaving a draft for Jack. "Operation closed."

He checks departure times out of the second-largest airport of the neighboring country. Tomorrow will be a busy day.

And tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.

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