

Ghost in the Machine: A Lawson Vampire Story

By Jon F. Merz

www.jonfmerz.net

Vienna, Austria: 1992

The bar curved around and my seat gave me two immediate advantages: view and field of fire. The view was important; I didn't expect to have to shoot anyone.

At least not tonight.

While I sipped my drink, the Pet Shop Boys blasted out of the speakers. On the dance floor, throngs of people pulsed in time to the beat. I would have been out there among them, preferably with the blonde bartender with the petite frame, but I had a meeting. The only problem was, I had no clue what my contact looked like. I would have had a picture of him, but the lone ferret manning the safe house outside of Lanzendorf hadn't changed out the ink cartridges in the printers and I didn't have time to wait around. So I was going in blind.

Fortunately, people tend to give themselves away with their body language or even a vibe they emanate. I was counting on that to help me pick out the man I was due to meet. After all, anyone who genuinely belonged in the club wouldn't look out of place. A pro would be able to make it look like they belonged, but I didn't think my contact was much of a pro. At least, that was the scuttlebutt.

There's a rhythm to any environment, no matter what it might be. The trick is to be able to blend in and ride that rhythm. If you're trying to get close to a target, it's vital they don't feel you coming. Any bit of discord in the rhythm will tip off a trained spotter.

I took another sip and noticed the group of dancers closest to the door had started moving out of time to the beat.

I set the glass back down and then saw him a second later.

He kept bumping into people and muttering apologies with his eyes forever cast down at the floor. What little hair he had left bounced in odd trajectories about his spotted scalp. He dressed like an accountant. The tie alone would have marked him as an imposter. As he moved through the crowds, he kept whipping his head around. His eyes were wide. I could almost see his pulse throbbing in his neck. And the expression he wore on his face was one I'd seen before - too many times.

Hunted.

He paused about a dozen feet away from me and continued looking around. At the corner of the bar, I was draped in the shadows, caught in the purgatory of darkness where strobe lights and neon couldn't reach. I waited until there was a break in the music.

"Kemp."

He spun and squinted at me. I shouldn't have been surprised he couldn't see me. Kemp wasn't one of my kind. But I was here doing a favor for an old friend, so that meant I was dealing with a human and his limited senses.

"Come closer."

Kemp shuffled over and then his face broke into a grin. "I did not see you there."

No shit. "Sit down. Let's talk."

Kemp slid his frame on to the stool closest to me and glanced around. The bartender came over and kept her eyes on me the entire time. I smiled. If things progressed quickly with Kemp, I might even get some extracurricular activity tonight. While she poured Kemp a beer, I admired the stylings of her miniskirt and the way it hugged her in all the right places.

After Kemp downed several gulps of beer, he looked at me. "Thank you for meeting me."

"I owe Gavin a favor. This is me repaying a debt. Nothing more. Don't expect me to suddenly look at you as a friend or even a colleague. That's not the case at all. I'm here to do a job and then go home."

"So I can expect no Christmas cards in the future?" Kemp grinned.

I smiled. "As long as we understand each other."

"Gavin says you're a good man. Talented."

I sipped the Bombay Sapphire and tonic and shrugged. "I don't suppose you live very long doing what I do if you're not good at it."

"Indeed. Gavin told me very little about you."

"As it should be," I said. "My background matters far less than my ability to get a job done." I looked around, spot-checking the club for anything unusual. Kemp sucked at his beer and I watched him for a moment. "So, tell me what you need."

"The Soviet Union is no more," said Kemp. "Chaos reigns in the country now. There's a semblance of government, yes, but there's little control. Corruption is rampant."

"I'm up to speed on that," I said. "Cut to the chase, please."

"I need a package brought across the border." Kemp eyed me. "Can you do it?"

I frowned. Transportation wasn't my usual forte. "What's the cargo?"

"My sister."

The bartender swung by and flashed a smile at me. I lifted my glass and she nodded. I refocused on Kemp who was far less appealing. "Why can't she just walk out like everyone else? The borders aren't like they used to be. People are leaving in droves."

"For any other citizen, you would be right. But my sister is...special."

"What-like short bus special?"

Kemp shook his head. "She is not retarded, if that's what you're asking. She is rather brilliant, actually. In fact, it is her work that makes it difficult for her to leave. Because, while you may be up to speed on the surface of what happens in Russia now, you may not know that the state security apparatus is still largely intact. And they would not allow Elena to leave if they knew she was trying to."

I didn't tell Kemp that I knew the First Directorate of the KGB had reconfigured itself as the SVR. The Council had a finger on the pulse of the

latest happenings in the Kremlin and as a Fixer, it was my job to stay abreast of it. “What did she do for Mother Russia?”

“She headed up a special division of paranormal research.”

I blinked as my drink arrived. The bartender stood there waiting for an acknowledgement, but I kept staring at Kemp. “Paranormal?”

Kemp shrugged. “Surely you know that the Soviets conducted an extensive amount of research into the occult and supernatural. This shouldn’t be too much of a surprise to you.”

It wasn’t, but I don’t like things I can’t put bullets into and expect to die. It ruins my whole day. “Tell me more.”

“Not much more to tell,” said Kemp. “She headed up one of their divisions - I don’t know which - and now she wants to come to the west. But apparently, the Russians don’t want her to go.”

I sipped my new drink and took a breath. “Where is she now?”

“Bratislava. She’s attending a conference there.”

The bartender was mad at me for ignoring her. I shot her a quick grin but she turned and headed for the other end of the bar. I didn’t have time to waste trying to win her back. Vienna was the espionage capital of Europe, especially a few years back. Its proximity to the Iron Curtain meant the city was a virtual gateway to the west. As a result, it crawled with spooks from every nation on earth. Hell, if you knew what to look for, you could stroll down the streets and see dead drops everywhere with telltale chalk signals for load and unload. In typical spook fashion, it was considered the height of bad manners to unload another service’s dead drops. Honor among spies and all that crap.

But the Cold War was supposedly over. I smirked. How many times had I gotten myself into a shitty situation because someone had insisted on one thing or another? Too many times to count. And like it or not, I was going back into the cold. I just hoped Kemp was giving me all the information I needed to make it back alive.

“Give me the address,” I said finally. “And a picture.”

I'd never been to Bratislava before, but the ancient architecture and winding streets could have been part of any other European city. I spoke a smattering of Czech and the cab driver at the airport understood enough Russian to get me to the hotel where Kemp's sister Elena was staying. I spoke Russian because the city was a vacation destination for Muscovites and the less English I used, the better. The cab deposited me a block away from the hotel entrance and I took my time walking back over to it. I did a quick SDR - surveillance detection route - to make sure I hadn't acquired any ticks, but I came up clean after a few blocks of doubling back several times. Then I checked out the hotel layout and made sure my getaway car was where it needed to be.

My entry into the country had been long and indirect: Vienna to Madrid to Moscow to Bratislava. The less direct my approach, the better chance I had of pulling this off. I used the time to organize my exfiltration - relying on a network of contacts I'd built up over the decades of being operational for The Council. Of course, no plan is ever perfect and I'd seen enough things go wrong to have guarded expectations about how well this would go. Still, the border checkpoints were supposedly porous and manned by uninterested soldiers who might even be open to bribery, if it came to that.

All of this was going through my mind as I approached the front entrance of the hotel, a stately number with gargoyles perched high up near the top of the building, a circular drive packed with limousines, and a team of doormen ready to help. There was a lot of money flowing into the former eastern bloc countries from all over Russia. Now that Communism was supposedly dead, people were getting into getting rich.

Since I hadn't arrived in some sort of limousine, the doormen gave me a quick look over to make sure I looked like I belonged and then held the door for me. The black Calvin Klein suit I wore looked rich enough to pass inspection. Inside the lobby, I spotted the bar and strode toward it, my eyes roving over the area cataloging everyone. Two men stood out immediately. Their suits were

nearly threadbare numbers and the shoes they wore had thicker soles - standard uniform of SVR gumshoes. Obviously, they weren't taking any chances with Elena being in the hotel.

I ordered vodka at the bar, which looked like it had been recently redecorated in velvet and leather, and watched as the waiter brought the bottle out of the freezer. That was a good sign. If he hadn't thought I was Russian, he would have asked me how I'd like it. After he poured it, I took a hearty swallow and brought the glass back down.

"Spassequbub."

"Pabzbalistub."

Another swallow of the vodka bit the back of my throat. "Why is this place so busy tonight?"

"Some sort of conference. Lots of your countrymen in attendance."

He seemed disinterested so I didn't press. The last thing I needed was a talkative bartender running off to the SVR guys out front trying to make a quick buck. I slid a few rubles on the bar top and walked out.

The problem now was how to find Elena. Knowing the SVR, they'd stash her on a floor high enough up that she couldn't jump out and make her escape. But that meant combing ten floors at least. Not the most productive use of my time.

So instead, I saw the sign directing conference goers to a large room and headed in that direction. Along the way, I accidentally bumped into a man coming toward me. After profusely apologizing, I continued on my way, his conference badge now in my possession. I passed a cursory check and then entered the conference.

Elena was speaking at the podium, finishing up by the look of it. I watched her gesture to a large screen behind her filled with a series of diagrams and arrows aimed at someone's head. As she spoke, her blonde hair bobbed in time to her gestures. She was animated and clearly knew what she was talking about. She looked barely forty and judging by her features, I would have pegged her for the Belarus region. A White Russian. Normally they look more

Scandinavian. Elena looked good. Damned good. And I don't usually like Russian women.

Elena finished her presentation and walked off the stage. I waited an extra minute and then made my approach. She looked up and smiled at me as I came toward her.

"Did you enjoy the talk?"

"Very much so. Is there a place we can talk privately?"

She frowned and looked uncertain. "I'm traveling with some people. They may not like me changing plans on them."

"I know about your handlers," I said. "Kemp sent me to get you out."

I had to hand it to her, she didn't even blink. Instead of showing any trace of surprise, she nodded. "I understand. But how are we going to get away?"

I held my arm out to her and she slipped hers into it. "We're going to walk right out of here, into the bar, and then out the back of the hotel."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

I guided her out of the conference room and into the bar. As I did so, I spotted her two security goons perking up, but they kept their distance. Odds were good that they were under orders not to interfere with Elena unless the situation demanded it. From all appearances, she was going to have a drink with a would-be lover. I just hoped they'd be content with that and we could get a good jump on them before they noticed the subterfuge.

Inside, I steered Elena toward the doorway to the kitchen. The bartender glanced at us, but said nothing. It was vitally important not to show any degree of hesitation; act like you owned the place and chances were good no one would question it.

The kitchen bustled and I kept us moving deliberately toward the exit. A few of the chefs asked me who I was, but I muttered something and kept moving. The sooner we were out of the hotel, the better.

A light drizzle greeted us as we exited the building and found ourselves in an alley. I knew the layout of the hotel from my earlier reconnaissance and now

directed us down the alley to a cross street.

Elena's voice was a whisper, but I could tell she was starting to stress out. "How are we going to do this?"

"Just relax. Hopefully, it will all be over in a few hours."

Down another side street, I spotted the black Chenault that had been left there by one of my contacts. "Gimme a second." I ran my hand up under the right passenger wheel well and found the magnetic box with the key inside. I popped the locks and nodded at Elena. "Get in."

With the wipers flicking the drizzle away, the windshield cleared and I could see the street. There were plenty of people still out and about, and I had to remind myself that the prospects of screaming sirens coming after us were remote. After all, Communism was dead.

Still, I doubted the SVR handlers back at the hotel would remain in place for too long. And if they could buy off the border guards before we arrived, then we'd be shit out of luck. So I pressed down on the gas and we accelerated until we were on the outskirts of Bratislava. Then I poured on the gas even more.

The E75 took us south out of the city. The border with Austria wasn't far away and I hoped to be across it before the SVR realized I had their prized possession.

But as we passed the border crossing near a town called Jarovce, I saw flashing blue lights.

"Get down."

Elena slid down in the seat and I kept the car pointed south instead of turning west into the checkpoint. A few years earlier and the SVR would have had this place entirely bottled up and searched any car that even came close to the crossing. So that was a bit of luck for us. Still, I had to flush my first exfil plan and resort to my secondary.

A mile further on, I pulled the Chenault over and down a dirt road that disappeared into the woods.

Elena poked her head up. "Where are we?"

"At Plan B," I said. "I hope you're in the mood for a romantic walk."

Elena gestured to her feet. "In these heels? You must be crazy."

"Leave 'em, then. Either that or you can take your chances with the SVR."

Elena frowned but shrugged her shoes off.

I got out of the car and listened. The night air was cold and wet. Sound would travel far so we'd have to be careful. A mile away from the crossing point was no guarantee of success, but we couldn't wait any longer. I needed to get Elena across the border and be done with this op. The sooner the better.

"Where to?"

I turned. Even in the darkness, Elena's blonde hair stood out like a searchlight. I got a blanket from the car and tore off a length, wrapping it around her head. "As much as I hate ever concealing a beautiful woman, this is necessary."

She smiled. "I don't even know your name."

"Lawson."

"You're not Russian."

I smirked. "Not even close."

"But you speak it flawlessly."

"Comes with the job description." I went back to the car and fished around in the glove box. The cold metal of the Beretta 9mm felt good in my hands. I dropped the mag into my hand and checked it over and then slapped it back home, racked the slide and made it safe.

Elena eyed me. "Do you really think that will be necessary?"

"I hope not. But I don't take chances when I don't have to." I swept the immediate area but saw nothing of concern. If we headed west now, we could be at the border in about fifteen minutes, depending on the lay of the land.

"Let's get moving."

The forest stretched before us thick with pine and spruce. The scent of them made me think of Christmas, but this was the end of October. I still had time to get my shopping done, lucky me.

The carpet of pine needles meant there wasn't much grass to contend with and the ground was reasonably soft and quiet, something I'm sure Elena appreciated. We moved in total silence for ten minutes before I detected a change in the landscape. The trees were starting to thin out. I brought us to a halt and knelt down, letting my jaw drop thereby opening my ear canals to better hear the environment. As the sounds came to me, I catalogued them: rodents, bats, and somewhere off in the distance...voices.

I motioned for Elena to stay put and then crept up ahead. Sneaking around would have been much easier in outdoor clothes and the Calvin Klein number I wore stretched in odd places. But at least I looked good. Or so I thought. I wondered if Elena thought so, too.

That made me frown. Of all the things in my life, I always was a sucker for a beautiful woman. Here I was, a member of an elite unit - a Fixer charged with protecting the secret existence of the vampire race, a veritable legend among the shadows - and yet a pretty face could reduce me to a wide-eyed little boy. Sad pup.

I shrugged it off. Everyone had their vices. Mine just happened to be women.

Human women. And someday, that would no doubt get me into a helluva lot of trouble.

Whatever.

I crept forward and the trees thinned further. Ahead of me, I could see an open expanse of land with higher grass. Beyond that, a fence roughly ten feet high stood barring entry to what must have been Austria.

Closer to the open area, I could hear the voices better. Looking to my right, I saw flashlights crisscrossing roughly a half mile away.

Shit.

I didn't know if this was a roving patrol or if the SVR had gotten there

first and were out looking for us. Either way, it didn't matter. Elena and I needed to be on the other side of that fence.

And soon.

Backtracking to Elena, I grabbed her hand and brought us right to the edge of the tree line. Once we left the cover of the trees, we'd be out in the open. The darkness would help, as would the grass, but we were going to be exposed. If that patrol happened to look up as we scaled the fence, we were in for a whole heap of trouble.

There wasn't another option. This was the easiest and fastest way across. So we had to go for it.

I leaned close to Elena's ear and whispered what I wanted her to do. We'd use the grass and low crawl through it to reach the fence. Once at the base, I'd help her climb and get over. I'd follow. In five minutes, we ought to be across and home free.

Hopefully.

Elena crawled out ahead of me and we moved as quietly as we could through the grass. To her credit, she didn't complain, despite still being in her cocktail dress and wearing no shoes. That scored her some more points in my book.

We reached the base of the fence and I checked it for any signs that it was electrified, but I saw nothing to confirm that it was. Many times, an electrified fence would have a few dead animals around - you know, the ones who hadn't been able to read the warning signs about the high voltage that ran through it.

I thumbed up and over to Elena and she moved without hesitation. I stood as she did and helped push her up the fence. She was able to reach the top, then swung herself over and dropped almost soundlessly to the other side.

I glanced right and saw the flashlights were much closer now, perhaps only five hundred meters.

Time to go.

I jumped and grabbed the top of the fence. And at that point, the chain link ripped away from the post with an awful metallic clanging noise that

scurried down the fence in both directions like one massive sound wave.

“Oh fuck.”

The result was a momentary pause followed by a whole lot of shouting. The flashlights immediately swung my way. Whether they caught me in their glow or not, I don't know, because I was already over and dropping to the other side. I grabbed Elena's hand and we started running for it across the open expanse on the Austrian side of the border. I wasn't foolish enough to believe we were safe just then. Not yet. Not by a long shot.

I could hear the strain in Elena's breathing as she huffed while we ran. She stumbled once and I turned back.

“You okay?”

She got up and nodded, but I saw her wince with pain.

“Your ankle?”

“Yes.”

The flashlights were coming faster. The fact that they were now on the Austrian side of the border told me our pursuers weren't border guards at all.

No time to think, I scooped Elena up in my arms and ran for it. I'd had a hit of juice before entering the hotel and had energy to spare. Elena weighed next to nothing and stood only about five feet four inches.

Easy day.

Ahead of me, the forest loomed again. As we entered the tree line, a shot rang out and splintered a branch to my left. I ducked and then wove through the trees. On the other side of this wood, I hoped my contact had stowed the car I'd requested because I was sure as hell going to need it.

And soon.

I was breathing harder now and when I finally emerged from the woods, I could just make out the car sitting under cover of some branches a few yards away. Leaning Elena against the car, I got the key from the wheel well, unlocked it and slid her inside before jumping into the driver's seat. I gunned the engine and screamed away from the parking spot, spitting up dirt and debris in our wake. With the pedal smashed to the floor, the little sedan fishtailed once,

straightened itself, and then we roared down the highway, away from the border and toward Vienna.

We weren't due to meet up with Kemp until that evening so I drove us back to the safe house in Lanzendorf as the sun broke across the horizon. I pulled the car into the garage and let the door slide back down before getting out and helping Elena from the car. Inside, the Ferret assigned to the house was out, so I carried Elena upstairs to one of the bedrooms and put her down on the bed.

She glanced down at her ankle. "I think it's sprained."

I examined it, probing gently and looking for confirmation of the injury. The skin was slightly discolored and a bit swollen. Touching the area around her ankle made her flinch. "You're right. I'll get you bandaged up. Kemp is meeting us tonight and I'm sure he'll have more traveling for you to do before you're safe."

Elena gave me a sort of sick smile. "I'll live my life on the run from now on. The SVR won't be forgiving."

"You'll have to hide for a while," I said. "Eventually, they'll get tired of looking."

"No," said Elena. "Not with me."

"What makes you so different from any other defector?"

She leaned back on the pillows and sighed. "Did my brother tell you what I did for them?"

"Paranormal research."

She laughed. "That doesn't even begin to explain it."

"We've got time."

"Are you familiar with mind-body dualism?"

I sat on the edge of the bed facing her. "Not really."

"Descartes. Surely you know of him."

“French philosopher. Never read much about his work.”

Elena propped herself up. “It wouldn’t kill you to pick up a book every once in a while.”

I eyed her. “Yeah, I’ll try to make some time for it when I’m not helping beautiful women escape from their captors.”

Elena sighed. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Forget it. Mine’s a thankless job. Continue.”

“The sort of dualism that Descartes adhered to is called Cartesian dualism and he asserted that the mental could not have any sort of extension into the physical realm. That the mental and material were separate.”

My eyes were getting heavy. But then again, philosophy had always made me sleepy. I kept mine simple: kill the bad guys, save the good guys, and go to bed each night with a stiff drink and a beautiful woman. Easy. “All right, what does that have to do with the paranormal?”

“Everything,” said Elena. “If you adhere to any sort of dualism theory, then you are immediately compromising your belief that the mind can actually affect the physical. That the two are intermingled and that one can most definitely affect the other. Sometimes in incredible ways.” She took a moment. “After the second world war, Soviet troops acquired much of the research that Hitler had been working on. They brought it back to Moscow where it was pored over and they used it to start their own paranormal and psychic research programs. If we could figure out how to harness the power of the mind, then we would potentially be ahead of the west. It could be vital to the power of the Soviet Union.”

“Did you have any successes?”

Elena smirked. “You could say that. We used our research to show that the mind was far more powerful than the physical realm. Chess matches were readily influenced by having someone in the audience concentrate on one of the players so they would play poorly. The results of such experiments were intriguing and ultimately satisfying. That then led to further research.”

“You’re not old enough to have been involved with that.”

“Of course not. I came to their attention when I was young, however. My brother probably has no memory of it. I’d taken a test at school that supposedly measured mental prowess. It was actually an early indicator of potential psychic ability. I scored off the charts and they came for me. A special school, they told my parents. For gifted children. I wound up deep in the Ural Mountains nestled up near the SVR training facility.”

“Doing what?”

“Learning to do this,” Elena pointed at the book on the nightstand.

As I watched, it shuddered for a moment and then shifted its position ever so slightly. I looked back at Elena and she had her eyes closed. After another moment, she collapsed back on the pillows and sucked wind.

“You okay?” Her eyes opened halfway and the effect on me was immediate. “My god, you’re beautiful.”

She smiled. “I’m dying, Lawson.”

“The hell, it’s just an ankle sprain.”

She shook her head slowly. “I have a cerebral tumor. The result of my youth. And the training they made me undergo.”

“What did they do to you?”

“When we didn’t progress fast enough - there was always so much pressure for us to progress and show how amazing we could be - then they resorted to other methods they perceived to be optimal to unleashing more mental power. As I said, if you accept mind-body dualism, then you are predisposed to disregard the psychic realm. Unfortunately, the opposite extreme is just as harmful. They couldn’t perceive how the mind-body connection couldn’t be amplified. So they tried everything: drugs, radiation, electroshock stimulation on open brain cavities, you name it.” She ran her hand up to her hairline and pulled a lock away. I saw a faint scar.

“My god.”

She smiled again. “I felt like a psychic Frankenstein’s monster. But they eventually got what they wanted: a display of telekinetic power. But only on the small scale like what I just showed you.”

“That was incredibly impressive.”

Elena sniffed. “I wish you’d been in charge back then. It wasn’t enough for my masters. It never was enough. They kept prodding and poking until they gave up at last. But what could they do with me? I’d been exposed to too much, so they thought the next best thing was to use me to help them come up with new research methods.”

“Did you?”

“What choice did I have? If I refused to help, they would have killed me. My body would have cremated and my ashes scattered about the countryside with no one the wiser.” She sighed. “I asked for only one thing: to see my brother again. He was the only family I had left.”

I leaned forward. “Did they let you see him?”

“Yes. It was the only thing that has kept me going these past few years.”

“Does he know-?”

“That I’m dying? I don’t think so. When the government collapsed, we both thought it would mean I’d be able to join him in the west. But that was not the case. He told me he would take care of it. That he would see to it that I made it to the west safely.”

“And here you are.”

“Thanks to you.”

I shrugged. “It’s what I do. Help out the good guys.”

Elena pushed herself up. “I don’t know how much time I have left.”

“Who does? The world we live in, nothing’s ever a guarantee.”

“You don’t have hope?”

I turned to face her. The bright blue of her eyes pierced my soul. “I hope for a lot of things: world peace, no more bad guys, and maybe the love of a beautiful woman.”

She nodded. “Those are good things to hope for.”

“And you? What do you hope for?”

Her eyes misted over. “My future is set. So my hopes are only for the given moment. This moment, Lawson. Here.” She leaned forward until her

face was close to mine and I could feel her breath across my skin. "Now."
Our lips came together then and she pulled me back on top of her.
The rest of the world suddenly disappeared.
As far as I was concerned, it could stay that way.

Twelve hours later found us parked up around the corner from a warehouse along the banks of the Danube River in Vienna. Kemp had set the meeting for 9pm and I'd arrived an hour before that, taking my time to see if the area was infested with anything other than river rats. The last thing I wanted was to walk into an ambush.

While we waited, a light drizzle peppered the windshield. Elena drank a coffee and I watched for bad guys. I'd taken a hit of juice back at the safe house and was buzzing.

"You never finished telling me about your work."

"I was interrupted," said Elena. "And it was a wonderful interruption."
I smiled. "I had fun, too."

"So I helped them," she said. "I helped them refine their techniques. In some ways, I even pioneered new methods. Methods that were far more successful than even I could have anticipated."

"How successful?"

Elena eyed me. "Terrifyingly so. Imagine someone being able to kill you with just a thought. One single well-placed thought. A mental bullet as it were."

"They'd be undetectable. Untraceable. Someone with that ability could upset the balance of power in any nation on the planet."

Elena nodded. "It was what they were driving toward. They wanted the ability to weaponize someone with psychic powers. If they could figure out how to do that, they'd be unstoppable."

"And you figured it out?"

Elena was quiet for a moment. Finally, she nodded. "Yes."

“How successful was it?”

She sighed. “Extremely so. But unfortunately, the person who kills also dies in the process. The effort needed to produce a killing thought travels in two directions: at the intended target, and also back at the person who fires it.”

I frowned. “In some ways, that’s a perfect scenario. Even less chance of it being traced back to the original handler.”

“True,” said Elena. “But the cost was too high. The number of people they would potentially burn through would be too great. They needed to be able to figure out how to ensure the safety of the assassin.”

“Did they?”

Elena shrugged. “I don’t know. I was removed from the program last month when it became clear that I was starting to have doubts about it.”

I checked my watch. “Five minutes.” I smiled. “You excited?”

“If my doctors are to be believed, then I have perhaps a month left to live. You’ve already given me more than I could dare to hope for. From here on out, this is all extra.” She leaned over and kissed me again and I tasted the coffee on her lips. On her tongue. In each breath.

I broke away. “Careful. You’ll get us all worked up again. I need to get my game face on.”

She laughed. “Then let’s go.”

Kemp was on the third level, exactly where he said he’d be. As we walked up the stairs, I saw stacks of wooden crates marked in Cyrillic lettering. Kemp obviously had a decent business going here.

“Welcome.” Kemp looked a lot less like a bumbling fool than he had that night in the club. Now he looked...different. As I cleared the top step and stood aside, Elena came up next to me.

And frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

Kemp walked toward us. Smiling. “Elena, my dear. How nice to see you again.”

Elena pointed and let out a gasp. “Him.”

I started to turn but then someone cold-cocked me from behind. The lights went out.

Hard.

I came to when cold water splashed over my face. I coughed and sputtered and spat it out. My head throbbed from the hit I’d taken and I cursed myself for allowing anyone to sneak up on me. My hands were bound at the wrist behind me.

“Welcome back, Lawson.”

I blinked and looked up at Kemp. “I never told you my name.”

“She did,” Kemp thumbed across the room where Elena was tied up. “She obviously cares about you.”

“Multiple orgasms,” I said. “Most women never have them with limp-dicked assholes like you. So naturally, I tend to stand out.”

Kemp backhanded me across the face and my jaw throbbed. I spat blood.

“Who are you?”

I spat again. “Lover-for-hire. Elena found me hooking on a street corner and took pity on me.”

Kemp stared at me. “I can keep hitting you all night.”

“You’d get bored. And I wouldn’t want you to mess up your manicure.” I looked across at Elena. “I’m guessing this isn’t your brother.”

Elena shook her head. “No. This man was part of the program I ran.”

I looked up at Kemp. “What’d you do with the brother?”

“Exactly what you think I did.”

I heard Elena cry out, but I kept staring at Kemp. “And Gavin? What about him?”

Kemp shrugged. "A tragic accident. He apparently suffered a brain aneurism whilst driving. Imagine that."

I sighed. "So that's two deaths I'll have to collect on."

"Three, if you count Elena's impending death by my hand." Kemp laughed. "Four even, once I'm done killing you."

I saw one other man in the room standing next to Elena. He must have been Kemp's helper and the sonofabitch who clocked me. I looked back at Kemp. "You're assuming, of course, that I'm easy to kill."

"Well, I have to say that thus far, I'm not exactly impressed."

"Why go through all this trouble? You could have killed Elena anytime you wanted. What the hell did you need me involved for?"

Kemp shrugged. "In the old days, we wouldn't have needed a convenient scape goat. But with the Soviet Union no more, the populace tends to be very suspicious and those in power don't want to ruffle their feathers. Killing Elena became an obvious necessity, but doing it in such a benign manner was even more vital."

"Yeah, but she's dying already."

Kemp shook his head. "No, she's not." He looked back at Elena. "Did you hear that, darling? That nasty brain tumor? All made up by your doctors on orders from higher up."

"Why would you tell her that?"

Kemp looked back at me. "To rush her toward doing what we knew she would do all along: defect. Once she grew disappointed with how the program was progressing, it was obvious that she might tell the west about what we'd managed to accomplish. And there are those in my country who feel that we may one day have need for psychic weapons. If we lose that edge over our enemies, then the effects of the program are nullified."

"So you made up the story, got to her brother and Gavin, and then used me to bring her to you."

Kemp nodded. "As I said, the convenient fall guy." He frowned. "There's just one little thing: we don't know who you are."

“I told you, male gigolo.”

Kemp sniffed. “Interestingly enough, you don’t show up in our database. And we have an extensive one. Thousands of people employed by the western intelligence services. Yet, no one with your face. It’s almost as if you don’t even exist.”

I smiled. “I’m just a bad memory to a lot of people.”

“Indeed,” said Kemp. “However, we need to know because it helps with the story we’ll plant about Elena. So kindly tell me who runs you.”

As Kemp talked, I worked my wrists. The knots were good and solid, but they’d been designed to hold a human being. Not a vampire. And not a fully-juiced vampire at that.

“You know as I well I do that I’d never give out that information.”

Kemp frowned. “I can make her writhe in agony.”

I shrugged. “So what? I hardly know her.”

“You care more about her than you would admit.” Kemp turned and pointed a finger at Elena. Immediately she cried out.

As I watched, she flailed about as if she had no control over her limbs. She bucked and then went still, her eyes closed.

Kemp turned back to me. “You see?”

I heard Elena’s voice. “I thought you were dead.”

Kemp laughed. “I was your crowning achievement, Elena. The one who didn’t die. The one who figured out how to control the energy. You can imagine how much more valuable I became when they realized I was immune to the mental bullet.”

Judging by the give in the knots, I knew I could break them at will. But I needed to keep Kemp’s henchman busy. Elena had to help. Somehow.

I looked at Kemp. “So you can kill people with your mind?”

“Easily.”

I shrugged. “Big deal. Elena can move shit at will. Telekinesis is so much more impressive. Like if she made your buddy over there fly into the wall or something.” I looked at Elena. Hard.

She nodded once.

“That is quite beyond her abilities,” said Kemp with a sneer. “She was never anywhere near to me in terms of what she could do with her mind.”

“Wanna bet?”

And then Elena shut her eyes tight and grimaced. Kemp’s henchman suddenly cried out and grabbed his throat.

Kemp reacted instantly, raising his hand toward Elena.

I broke the ropes and came out of the chair charging for him, driving down and toward the floor as we collided. Kemp grunted and rolled with me. We crashed into a pile of boxes.

Kemp came to his feet and immediately attacked, kicking up at my exposed chin. I dodged, narrowly missing his shoe. Then I closed and delivered two quick strikes to either side of his rib cage, trying to shatter the bones there. Kemp grunted and I went upstairs for a quick hook to his jaw. But he turned and my first glanced off the side of his face. I’d pegged him, but not hard enough.

He threw an elbow at me and it connected with my neck. Hurt like hell, but I shook it off and drove back into him. We tumbled and I came up astride his chest, raining punches down on him.

“Lawson!”

I turned. Elena was covered in sweat and Kemp’s henchman was getting to his feet. She must have exhausted her strength keeping him occupied.

But Kemp’s helper was stumbling. He kept rubbing his throat.

I threw another punch into Kemp’s throat and then scrambled off of him, running for the other bad guy.

He turned as I flew at him - tried to bring his hands up to ward me off. No good, I plowed into him and ran him right back into another pile of boxes. These had no give and we collided hard. I heard his wind go out of his lungs and he started to collapse. I let him slide down, got my hands around his jaw and jerked his head to one side, further than his spinal cord had been designed to accommodate. A pop told me I’d broken his neck and I let him slide to the

floor, dead.

Elena cried out.

I turned.

Kemp.

He had one arm outstretched toward Elena.

I threw myself toward him, coming between him and Elena. Instantly, my head felt like a million hammers were thundering inside of my skull. But I kept going. And as I reached him, I could see the look of bewilderment on Kemp's face.

"You should be dead. No human could ever withstand that assault."

I grabbed his arm, stomped his rib cage, and then jerked the arm out of his shoulder socket. Kemp screamed and I leaned over him. "I'm not human." Then I dropped my knee into his throat and drove my weight through breaking his neck. For an instant, he shuddered and then his body went still. I checked his pulse to be sure, but Kemp - or whatever his real name was - was dead.

"Lawson..."

I ran back to Elena and got her untied. She collapsed into my arms. Blood ran out of her ears. A bit of pink froth dribbled from her mouth.

"Shit..."

She smiled. "It doesn't matter."

"It does to me."

"No," said Elena. "What I told you earlier...you gave me more than I could have hoped for...it was the truth. I meant it."

I could feel her pulse dwindling. "Dammit, don't die on me, Elena..."

"It's too late. But at least you killed him. Make sure...it's not in vain. The west has to know...what we made..."

"I'll make sure they do. I promise."

Elena's smile was weak. "At least...we had...today..."

I leaned down and kissed her. Her lips were cold. "I won't forget you."

"Neither...will...I..."

Her eyes rolled away from me and I saw them go vacant. I sat there

cradling her body. Staring at her. Willing her to come back.

But I knew it wouldn't work.

Death was an absolute.

And as far as I knew, there was no such thing as a roundtrip ticket.

I set Elena's head down gently and kissed her one last time. Then I got to my feet and walked out of the warehouse. Three bodies wouldn't bode well for me if the cops discovered me here. I needed to disappear and quick.

Sometimes, this business really sucked.

As I walked back to the car, I wiped my eyes.

It must have been all that dust in the warehouse.