

1. The Jewel Thief

In order to allow for new growth, the old must often be felled, burned away to the ashes. This is as true of forests as it is the constructs of men.

And as a single thunderous current can engulf an ancient forest in flame, a solitary strike of violence can erase the oldest of men's foundations.

On this day, such a strike of violence unfolded almost perfectly.

Almost.

It began with a group of vehicles methodically making its way from the outskirts of the capital, through the dust-covered streets, and emerging into the open space of the ancient city square. This motorcade moved in precise unison, seeming like a scarab beetle crossing a desert hardpan.

The lead pair of motorcycles, traveling side-by-side, came to a stop just past the main entrance to the embassy. Following closely behind was an out-of-place black limousine, somewhat dusted over, yet shining brilliantly in the midday sun, which was itself followed by a pair of aging military transport trucks. The head and abdomen of this insectile formation were bristling with weapons; the 'cycles had RPGs mounted across the handlebars for easy access to the driver, and rear-facing second riders, conspicuously armed with AK-47s; the trucks, each carrying a dozen armed men in their canvas-covered beds.

After a moment's pause, the doors to the elongated thorax opened almost simultaneously. Several brutish men, whose demeanor and air could only be those of guardians, emerged into the hot Arabian day. Seconds later a small man of indistinct features was helped out of the rear of the limousine. He then began a slow but purposeful walk up the stairs toward the entrance.

The motorcade had already begun moving away, into the crowded street, when the first flashbang went off to the right of the embassy's entrance. This non-lethal grenade, usually used in close quarters to confuse an opponent and render them momentarily vulnerable, nonetheless produced the desired effect out in the open. The trained guardians were instantly put on the defensive, and surrounded the Prime Minister. They began moving him away from the embassy and toward street in an attempt to regroup with the motorcade.

The motorcade itself had already made its way halfway down the block when it too reacted to the explosion. The driver of the Minister's limousine stopped and attempted to reverse course, but the sudden onslaught of frightened citizens enveloped the vehicle, rendering it temporarily immobile. The men and women attempting to flee the explosion likewise impeded the men in the back of the truck and the motorcycle drivers.

One of those fleeing men, dressed in a flowing but crudely made thawb, made his way behind an abandoned food cart, and calmly observed the security detail's next move from this hidden vantage point. They could again reverse course and head back toward the embassy. Obviously, this was the riskier course of action as it would take them near the source of the original threat, exposing the Prime Minister to any potential enemies lurking there. They could alternately use multiple alcoves and doorways to get back to the protection of the armored limousine.

As that lone citizen had already predicted, they chose the latter, and seemingly safer alternative.

And so, as they attempted to systematically regroup with the motorcade, the citizen pushed a button on the cellphone he was holding, and a second flashbang went off, fifty feet in front of the security detail, and approximately halfway between them and their destination. The armed men, who had by this time dismounted the truck and were running to meet up with the guards, pivoted immediately and began firing at the source of the latest explosion in an attempt to suppress any immediate attack. The host of bodyguards, meanwhile, moved into the nearest enclosed doorway, armed electrons around the Minister's cowering nucleus.

What they didn't know was that buried in the interior wall of that doorway was an improvised explosive device, and, no doubt, the Prime Minister was closest to its lethal core.

The hidden citizen now pressed another button.

The result was not another bright, yet harmless light show, but rather an immediate thump of destruction and carnage. Any remaining citizens huddled behind vehicles, carts, or doorways now retreated in all directions away from this onslaught.

The hidden assassin did likewise, putting on a face of fright and anguish. As he made his way across the open marketplace, he flung the cellphone high into the air, where it hit the side of a building and went careening into a darkened alleyway.

"How do you catch a jewel thief?" a mentor of his had once asked him. Before he could attempt a guess, the mentor had answered with a smirk, "You hire a better jewel thief."

That neither of them were jewel thieves was not the point. That at the time they both protected some of the most powerful people in the world *was*. As was the fact that often the most dangerous threat to those powerful people was not some unknown perpetrator, but instead their former associates. Former pieces of an inner circle that knew how the current pieces operated, understood their tendencies and strategies, and most critically of all, could exploit their weaknesses.

A most dangerous threat, indeed, such as he had become.

He now ran more briskly, and disposed of his feigned, panicked face which was replaced by a stoic, unreadable one. He methodically made his way into the labyrinth of the city's underbelly, eager to get out of the city.

All had gone smoothly, with neither he with his pistol on the ground, nor the sniper on the roof being required. Throwing the cellphone away had been the "all clear" to the sniper and two spotters, who would by now be making their way to their respective exits.

He was just about to make a sharp turn toward his own exit, when he realized he'd picked up a tail. It was nothing more than a momentary overlap of sunlight on cloth, as the man beneath that cloth moved closer to him in the otherwise darkened street, but it was enough to tell him that someone had marked him and was in pursuit.

Damn, he cursed to himself. He was so close to his escape, and had been so sure that in the stampede of people surging away from the explosion he couldn't have possibly been spotted.

Another of his mentor's lessons came to him: *Why do we make sure to lock the door once the jewel is stolen?* The simplest mistakes are often the most costly. You pick the

lock to get in and steal the jewel, but you should make sure to lock the door as you leave, to ensure your crime goes unnoticed for as long as possible.

Had he left a door unlocked?

As he made his first attempt to lose his pursuer, an eerie intuition told him he had.

“So it can be done?” his contact had asked in their final meeting, almost four months before. Behind the man’s air of calm and arrogance was a tight nervousness to which the assassin had grown accustomed to hearing from clients. His employers (or their middlemen) had such balls at the onset, but they always grew nervous and fidgety as the zero hour loomed closer. This man was better at hiding it than most, but still, the slightest tremble could be detected as he spoke the target’s name. “Saiid can be gotten to?”

“Of course,” the assassin answered after a moment’s pause. “Anyone can be gotten to. Presidents and Popes and Heads of State can all be gotten to. Will you pay my price, though? I’ll likely never be able to work again. And disappearing takes money.” This was a lie. He’d take some time off, of course, but he didn’t want the likes of this fellow knowing he’d be out there on the hunt again.

The arrogant man was already waving a hand in the air, as if the vast sum that he had asked for was of no consequence. “It has already been arranged, my friend. As long as there are no mistakes, your price will be paid.”

He began to rise from his seat, when the arrogant man asked, “I do have one more request. Rather, my partners in this endeavor have a request.”

He sat back down, but as he did so, surreptitiously got his pistol at the ready. *When milking a snake*, his mentor had reminded him often, *remember always that what you seek is not milk*. To his client, he merely raised a questioning eyebrow.

“We know that you were once an agent for the United States. At what levels and for whom, we are not aware.” The man paused, as if waiting for the assassin to fill in the missing information. Getting only a face of stone, he continued, “It would be worth a bit more to your sum if you knew or could tell me what the ‘Tangerine Demon’ is.”

The face of stone cracked a bit at this, as a slight upturn in the assassin’s lips appeared. He had heard this phrase whispered about in his time with the National Security Agency. He had taken it to be a ruse after having done some personal and extensive research with nothing to show for it. He had, however, inquired about it once in his time after leaving the NSA. His source had been a former colleague, in a much senior position at the Agency (and unbeknownst to anyone at the time, the greatest American security leak beyond even Ames and Hanssen). When he had casually tried to ask about Tangerine Demon, his source had laughed gruffly and said, “If *you* knew what the Demon was, we’d both *already* be dead.”

But to the arrogant man he simply shook his head slowly.

“A pity, my friend. Regardless, proceed with your plans.” As the arrogant man stood and turned to walk into the shadows of the room, the assassin wondered just how much that additional tidbit would have meant.

It had been hours since the explosion, and by now his primary mode of escape had certainly fled. He had of course made contingencies, but now dreaded the knowledge that they would have to be used. Throughout the city sirens were blaring, as were angry voices over loudspeakers, shouting in a language that he only half-understood. The bloodthirsty manner in which the language was spoken required no translation, though.

He had carefully broken into a closed fabric shop, and was making his way toward the back office area when a low, sharp thud rang out. The numbing pain was instant, and although he wore an armored vest beneath his tunic, he knew immediately that the shot had made its way into him. Barely registering the blood pouring out of him, he sank to his knees, was shot a second time, then hit the earthen floor face-first.

Oh, God, liver-shot, was his first thought, and he absently realized he was grunting involuntarily. Now, though his ears were still ringing, he heard a voice in the dark, "You were such a promising pupil." That voice, familiar, but different somehow, stung him out of the dreary, lethargic pull that was threatening to take his consciousness.

He found the strength to turn himself over, and heard the voice continue, slow and deliberate, "I warned you, did I not, that neglecting the mundane was dangerous. Flinging your phone in the air, for anyone to see," then making that castigating *ntt-ntt* sound with his tongue that the assassin remember only too well. "That was as reckless as it was unnecessary. Had you not done so, I would have lost you in the masses. I suppose the failure is my own. 'Do, or instruct. For if you attempt both you will succeed in neither,' as *I* was once instructed."

Face-up now, he tried to sit, but muscles refused to respond, and pain was advancing from the wounds' epicenters. His pistol, dropped when he'd been hit, was at arm's reach though he doubted he could have lifted it even if given the opportunity. Instead, he simply looked up to the source of the familiar lecture, unbelieving, and weakly gasped, "You? But I..."

The shadow replied, stepping into the soft light of the moon outside, revealing his mentor's unmistakable visage, "Yes, me. Minister Saiid is dead, but the corpse of his assassin hanging from the embassy should appease the masses somewhat. Sadly, that is no concern of yours. For you must now go to a place with no locks and no doors."