

Grand Theft

Stavros set down the weights and picked up the cell phone. Barely two weeks ago his new employer had whisked him away from the African jungle and set him up in a palatial (by Soviet standards) apartment within sight of the U.S. Capitol. He wanted to stay in his employers good graces so he answered the call before it rang a second time.

“Yes sir, I will be there in 15 minutes. Do I need to pack anything special? Understood.”

Five minutes later he was out of the shower and behind the wheel of his red Jeep Wrangler. Eight minutes later he was passing through security at the Agency's underground parking garage.

When Stavros walked into the briefing room he recognized Scorch. The red-headed driver had been in Stavros' “orientation” class and was also new to the Agency. The other two people were unfamiliar. When Control walked into the room he began the briefing without any preliminary pleasantries. “I have a task for you all.” he began.

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Stavros was still feeling a sense of awe when the Gulfstream G350 was leveling off at its cruising altitude of 32,000 feet. Here he was, the son of a minor Party bureaucrat from Kiev, sitting in a plush leather chair holding a crystal tumbler with ice cold Stoli. Stavros doubted even the mobsters in the Russian *Izmailovskaya* traveled this well. Uncharacteristically he experienced a moment of doubt, wondering if he had somehow sold his soul to this group of Americans. Quickly however, the self-doubt was washed away by the cool taste of vodka sliding down his throat.

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The mission seemed simple enough. The Agency had been transporting a package across the U.S. Mexican border near San Diego when the transporter was carjacked and the package (along with the Shelby Cobra) taken. The team was tasked with using the transponder onboard the Cobra to locate the car, recover the car, and then recover the package (hopefully still) hidden in the car. Only one odd detail - Control told them the package was “extremely fragile”; they were, under no circumstances, to open the package. Simply return it to their contact in San Diego.

This mission was being led by an agent codenamed Piranha. Piranha was a woman that looked to be in her early 20's, with an athletic build and attractive features. It seemed like all the women Stavros had met so far in the Agency were as beautiful. He only hoped they were as effective as they were attractive. Piranha seemed like a woman who was used to getting whatever she wanted.

The other agent, codenamed Valhalla, was more difficult to figure. He looked like the Norse his codename implied, and he had brought a deadly looking two-handed hammer along with him on the aircraft. Valhalla didn't look like the typical Norse barbarian; Stavros was hoping he wasn't some type of whacko who actually fought with melee weapons. Years of service in some very deadly parts of the world had taught him that, apart from silencing sentries, the only thing knives and other melee weapons were good for in combat was getting their owners killed.

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After landing in San Diego Stavros joined his team in the hanger, reviewing the equipment they had all requisitioned before boarding the jet three hours earlier. The silenced H&K MP5 looked brand new. The weapon was professionally maintained and its action seemed smooth as silk. Stavros placed the SMG and his other gear in the tactical truck and tossed the keys to Scorch.

“Leave the van here” he said “if we need to infiltrate a shopping mall we can come back and get it.” Why this racecar driver had requisitioned a minivan was beyond Stavros. Mumbling something about the van having some “special modifications” Scorch caught the keys and began moving his gear to the truck.

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For nearly an hour aboard the jet Stavros has studied the satellite photograph and accompanying maps of the warehouse. This would not be an easy target to approach. The small warehouse stood on the edge of an industrial district, 200m from the nearest other building and 500m from the nearest cover in the desert ground outside a simple security fence. The building itself was small enough for a 4-man team to assault and clear, but Stavros was not planning on walking into a building without knowing what the opposition inside had planned. His team in Grozny had taken serious casualties every time they assaulted a building without knowing what was on the other side of the door.

Piranha walked over to his seat on the plane and asked what was bothering him. “We need a good look inside the building, to see if the car is there and if it's been chopped yet. I don't want to walk into an ambush”. “Oh” she replied, smiling “perhaps I can take my hot car and hot body and go ask them for some upgrades.” Stavros was speechless. In all his time in the army he had never considered that option. In Chechnya none of the women in his unit had a “hot body”, and if any of them dressed as suggestively as Piranha was dressed right now they would have been shot by the Islamists before they got close to the door. Subtlety was not his strong suit, but working for the Agency may teach an old dog a few new tricks.

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The team arrived at the warehouse shortly before sunset. Scorch and Stavros parked the truck in the desert near the warehouse and moved on foot to establish a perimeter on the South and East. Valhalla was moving his car into position in the industrial park, covering the North and West approaches. After a few minutes Piranha came into view driving the Corvette straight to the target building. She parked the sports car and walked into the office door on the West as if she owned the place. Less than a minute later she stormed out. She looked like someone had just rejected her - probably the first time that had happened in years.

The team regrouped and Piranha gave them the rundown. The Shelby Cobra was inside the warehouse and it looked like it hadn't been touched. The Latinos inside seemed to be what they appeared, mechanics and not soldiers; Piranha didn't see any obvious weapons or preparations for an ambush. Better still the planned entry point was exactly what Scorch had hoped. If the package was still inside the Cobra this operation should go off without a hitch.

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90 minutes after landing in San Diego Stavros was sitting in the front seat of the truck, speeding towards the warehouse now less than 100m away. If Piranha was wrong this would be one of the shortest espionage careers on record. Hitting the loading dock door at 40 MPH caused the fragile door to explode into the warehouse, showering the nearby mechanics with pieces of aluminum and fiberglass. Scorch was on the brakes even before the impact and he almost made a perfect stop in the middle of the room. Unfortunately he had been slightly off-line and now the smoking tires were trying to stop the truck before it hit the pillar looming up directly in front of Stavros.

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The brakes on this Agency truck were better than he expected and the truck hit the pillar lightly enough that within the 5-point racing harness Stavros felt only a slight jarring. He'd made helicopter landings rougher than this stop.

Punching the harness release and standing up out of the top of the truck Stavros pointed the H&K at the nearest mechanics and shouted "Freeze, put your hands up!" At that moment he wondered if the Latinos understood any English. Before he could answer himself the nearest men dropped the wrench and torch they were holding and shot their hands up in the air. This just confirmed something Stavros had been taught a long time ago... "you can get more with a kind word and a gun than with just a kind word."

Hearing a curse behind him Stavros glanced over to see Piranha landing face-first on the concrete floor. Apparently she had caught her foot on the edge of the truck as she leaped off. Without so much as a moment's hesitation Piranha was back up and sprinting toward the Cobra.

With the mechanics in front of him disarmed and cowering Stavros turned to his left, beyond Piranha. He was sure he saw movement behind some crates, but now there was nothing...

Sure enough, as Piranha moved to the side of the Cobra two men popped up, guns trained on her back. Stavros instantly squeezed off a long burst of rounds from the MP5, but the recoil from the SMG was less that he was used to with a Kalashnikov. He over-compensated to the recoil and most of his rounds struck the targets' cover. Stavros made a mental note to get to the range when he got back and train more with this weapon. One round hit a target in the shoulder but Stavros realized that soft tissue wound would only piss the target off. Before he could get the targets back in his sights he heard a loud BOOM.

Scorch and his 12-gauge had joined the firefight.

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Scorch fired twice, his first shot hitting the wounded gunman and spinning him around. The second shot hit the other gunman's center of mass. The force of the shotgun blast at this range lifted the target off his feet and slammed him against the cinderblock warehouse wall. Two shots and two targets down; Stavros now understood why these Americans liked their shotguns.

Turning left to look for more hostiles Scorch heard a loud crash and muffled gasp behind him. He saw Valhalla pulling his hammer out of a bathroom door. What was this psycho thinking bringing a hammer to a gunfight? Just then Stavros saw the blood dripping off the end of the hammer and understood immediately where the gasp had come from. Interesting: he may have to reconsider Valhalla and rethink the utility of melee weapons...

Stavros was brought back to the firefight by the sound of Piranha's pistol firing. Spinning to find a new target he saw her reaching through the shattered window of the (formerly) pristine Shelby Cobra. Stavros frowned to himself. The plan had been for Piranha to jump into the Cobra, fire up the engine, and race out of here. Now they were going to have to improvise.

Remembering the office Piranha mentioned from her reconnaissance sitting above the warehouse floor, Stavros jumped out the side door and began racing for the nearby stairs. He heard Piranha shout something about "keys" to him as he moved through the warehouse. The mechanics in front of him ducked aside and began racing for the exit as soon as he was past them. No mind, the immediate concern was finding the missing keys so they could leave this party before it got any more interesting.

Stavros reached the top of the stairs a moment later and glimpsed a figure through the open doorway. This Latino was facing away from him, holding a gun in one hand and shouting into a cell phone held in the other. No doubt he was calling for reinforcements. Stavros felt regret for shooting a man in the back, but this target was armed and could spin around any second and compromise the mission.

Three rounds crashed into the back of the Latino's head and before the body hit the floor Stavros was looking for the keys. As he stooped to pick up the target's pistol Stavros spotted the large Ford key on a white keychain, the words Shelby printed in blue, sitting on the desk. Grabbing the key he spun around and exited the office. The warehouse below him was deserted except for his team, all the mechanics had run away and the hostiles were all dead. This was going to be tough for the Cleaners to explain.

Piranha was in the Cobra moments after catching the keys. Stavros barely had enough time to close the truck door before Scorch spun out of the warehouse, making room for Piranha to follow.

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As they drove off into the California twilight Stavros began to relax. They still had to get out of the area, confirm that the package was intact, and make it back to the airport without being stopped by the police cars he heard converging on the industrial park, but he had survived his first firefight with this new team. This looked like it was going to be the beginning of a very interesting career.

End

