

Sacred Nemesis

Part 1: The awakening.

Alex shivered and exhaled what little warmth remained inside him. The frigid stale air was a cold wet blanket on his skin. Every breath he took chilled him to the bone. Exhausted, Alex leaned against the ice-cold steel arm of the chair he sat in while his neck slung out over his shoulder like an old saddle bag. Circulation prickled through his extremities and nudged him awake. Slowly Alex raised his aching head and opened his weary eyes to see where he was, but saw nothing. He squinted to make sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. They weren't. An abyss of darkness surrounded him.

Greatly fatigued, Alex sat up against the cold, hard steel. The chill of the metal seemed to go right through his clothes. He checked his arms and legs. He was clothed, but to his surprise the shirt and pants weren't his. They were paper-thin, like a hospital medical gown. He reached up and felt his partially numb face. It was rough, like he hadn't shaved for days. A moment later he heard the oddest sound--tiny metallic clicks--just below him. His eyes widened. *Where the hell am I?*

A strange warmth wrapped itself around his wrists. Blood pressure cuff-like warmness had greeted Alex (and he not having had heat for as long as he could remember, cautiously welcomed the oddly comforting feeling). He began to contemplate what to do about his situation, but before he knew it a series of metallic chinks ripped alongside the chair and pulled his hands down on to its cold steel arms. (Thoughts of fight or flight scenarios ricocheted through his mind).

Alex mustered all his strength and jerked his arms backwards as hard as he could. Whatever had a hold of him intensified its grip the exact moment before Alex had made his move. "Ouch!" His joints popped loud, like he had cracked bone. Searing pain raced up through his arms. His skin pinched unbearably and his hands felt as if they'd been ripped off. Alex knew he had not budged an inch. This only added to his agonizing discomfort.

It felt like octopus tentacles laced with razor blades had a hold of him. He knew that if he tried to jostle his way out of the bindings it would cause more pain. He came up with

another approach for escape. Alex leaned over while trying to keep his arms steady and bit into his bonds. He found the taste putrid and immediately spit out the aftertaste. The instant he let go, his wrists seared with pain. Alex felt the flames of a roaring fire and yelled in response to his burning flesh. A moment later the pain dissipated completely as if nothing had happened. *How is that...possible?* Alex was baffled, but relieved.

The next thing Alex knew his bonds loosened. The sound of those tiny metallic clicks started up again, and whatever had been wrapped around his wrists slid off and onto the floor with a gushy metallurgic plop. Alex heard the thing slither off making mechanical popping sounds as it faded into the distance.

The flavor of moldy mushrooms and rusted metal resided within his mouth. Amazed by what just happened Alex tried to spit out the horrid taste then rubbed his wrists and realized he was free. With his new found freedom he proceeded to get up out of the chair, but to his detriment, found himself falling right back into it.

Alex was drained. Just a few moments before, he had felt rejuvenated. His strength had returned to him. It wasn't his body that had become alert, it was his mind. Extreme fatigue took hold of him. His neck, arms and legs became limp. There was nothing he could do, but sit there and think. *What the hell is happening to me?*

Then they came, specific thoughts raced through his brain. No, they were more random...they were formulas: *X-ray to the power of Kilo. Sierra cosign square root of Quebec times pi.* Alex recognized the military phonetics from his time in the service, but not the math. Then they stopped, the bizarre rambling of awkward mathematics had faded into the distance leaving his mind a complete blank. The darkness surround him didn't help his situation. He felt confused and began to lose his grip with reality. His name was on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn't remember it.

Out from nowhere, heavy footsteps quickly approached on all sides. He half expected at least one of them to bump into him, but none did. Then it came to him, *Thermal imaging.* The only logical explanation he could think of, but how could he remember such a thing and not recall something as simple as his own name. For a moment he imagined them staring intently at him through their night vision goggles--until one brushed by him leaving a subtle scent. It smelt vaguely familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. His mind began to work overtime.

Out of the blue something sparked in the deep recesses of his mind. *Calvin Klein Euphoria...but how do I know that?* He became frustrated and tried reaching out. It was no use. He could barely budge his arm. Annoyed, Alex couldn't take it anymore. He had to know what the hell was going on, "Stop!" A moment later, the footsteps halted.

A dark silence filled the dark room. Then he heard them start to whisper to one another. *Are they...studying me?* He strained to listen to their voices, but they were too low for him to make out anything. During their whisper session Alex heard one of them stepped up close to him. He sensed this person leaning over him. He could hear their breathing and smelled their horrible garlic onion breath. This annoyed Alex greatly. He thought about decking the bastard, but then remembered his state of paralysis. He did the only thing he could do, he stared in the direction of his captor and gave them his most disgusted and disappointed look, then said, "Go to hell, whoever you are."

A man laughed under his breath, and the whispers that had been in mid-conversation halted.

Must be their leader. Alex turned his head and listened as best he could in the direction of the laugh. Then whoever had invaded his personal space stepped back and walked away from him.

A moment later Alex heard whispering, but could only make out a few words. "bring in the..." Silence once again filled the room. He assumed from their response that their allegiance belonged to the owner of that mischievous laugh. The man spoke with a direct and urgent cadence under his breath. The recipient grunted in agreement to whatever had been discussed. Just then the sound of a distinct tinny click rung around the ill-lit room and echoed in Alex's ears.

Gun? Alex became uneasy and tried moving from his chair, but his energy had not returned to him. Before he could say anything about his predicament he heard a muffled metallic flick. Alex turned his head and cringed.

Alex expected to be shot in the head, but nothing unpleasant had happened to him. He turned his head back squinting out of the corner of his eye, and although he couldn't see anything in the darkness he wasn't going to give in so easily. Flick, there it was again.

The sound Alex thought originally to be death. *But if it wasn't a gun?* Before he could answer himself a subtle blue flame appeared about four feet from where he sat. Behind that butane lit flame, a cigar, and behind the cigar, the faint structure of a man's face.

Puff, puff, the owner drew in the tobacco's essence. The cigar burned a deep fiery red. Just above it, a pair of ice-blue eyes gazed at him. Alex knew this was an interrogation and he didn't like it one bit. He stared back at those ominous blue eyes and wondered why they looked the way they did. Then all of a sudden it came to him. Alex knew of infrared eye-contacts being used by the military for special ops, but they were a green color. These were different. New tech Alex hadn't been aware of. Now he knew how they made their way around the room without bumping into him or anything else. He wanted to ask the leader why he was there, and what had happened to him, but instead decided to play it cool. Alex smelt the burning tobacco, and somehow recognized its smooth and spicy aroma, "Avo?"

The man responded in a raspy disconcerting tone, "Mr. Porter, you know your cigars. That's good. Unfortunately, we're not here to discuss such luxuries." The man paused, flicked the remaining ash from his cigar, then drew one last puff from it before he dropped it to the ground and crushed it.

Alex was happy, even in his paralyzed state of disarray. *Mr. Porter, that's my name. Alex Porter.* The man with the raspy voice helped him regain part of his memory.

Alex heard them whispering again and looked up in their direction. A moment later he heard their heavy feet proceed to another area of the darkened room, where they continued their discussion. Not able to see the man's eyes, Alex observed the remains of the Avo cigar that smoldered on the floor. It triggered a memory from his old ISA [1] days.

[1] - Intelligence Support Activity

While on a protective detail in Cambodia in the 80's, he and his old partner Terrance Williamson had been assigned to escort Liaison Officer Vanessa Brooks to a safe-house. Vanessa witnessed the murder of her superior, Major Dennis Dewit. The Major had extorted money from local businesses, then used it to bribe a notorious crime family

into giving him a percentage of their ill-acquired funds. In exchange he would look the other way if the family did anything questionable. The only problem Major Dewit had not anticipated was an unfortunate bullet between the eyes. He hadn't considered the type of people he was getting into business with.

High profile witnesses were kept out of the public eye, even in the service. That meant a regular safe house would not work. A more secure private location was called for. The safe-house had no electricity. He and Terrance were allowed no communications equipment while on this assignment. That's safety measures for you. There was, however, a kerosene lantern that sat on a table, a few chairs, a sofa, and the 9mm they each carried on them. Beyond that, nothing.

They stayed there throughout that day and made do with what they had. Terrance had brought a deck of cards with him and encouraged everyone to play. Vanessa didn't really care for cards and instead decided to write in her journal. Terrance made a few advances toward her, but he soon got the hint that she wasn't interested in him. "I doubt my husband would care to know what you're trying to do, Officer Williamson. Just because I'm not wearing a ring doesn't mean I'm open game." That made Alex laugh. Terrance blushed. From that moment on Terrance respected the liaison officer's space.

That evening--per protocol, Terrance left to pick up special documents of transport for Vanessa's hand-off, which was scheduled at dawn. Hours past, and he had not yet returned. Alex became impatient. *He's never this late. Not his style.* A half-hour later, after Terrance didn't show, he made a command decision, "Get your stuff Officer Brooks. We're leaving now."

Vanessa stared at him sternly, "You're breaking protocol, Porter." She studied his determined expression and knew there would be no stopping him. She smiled, and empathized, "But I understand. I'd do the same for my crew." They grabbed their things and headed out in search of Terrance.

A half-hour before dawn, they found his partner. Terrance was a bloody mess. He had been stabbed multiple times in the neck and left for dead behind a shady bar a few minutes from their assigned location. While Alex was examining his dead partner, he looked over to Vanessa with hatred in his eyes, "Whoever did this, is nearby. Watch your back."

Vanessa shot him a questioning look, "How do you know?"

Alex gave her a look of disgust. "They must have known Terrance had the documents on him. They did their damndest to get them from him, but must have heard someone coming and finished him off."

He and the officer looked around for the papers that Terrance should have on him, but found none. They left Terrance lying in the alley and went into the bar. Alex looked around for anything suspicious, but found nothing. Then, he noticed the bartender polishing a glass nervously and walked up to him, "You seen any other Americans like us in here tonight?" The bartender, a timid little man, turned around and put the half-polished glass on a shelf. Alex thought the man was going to try something funny, so he drew his 9mm and asked the man again, but this time in Khmer, "Saum meul chn cheate amerik na muoy dauch chea puok yeung now yb nih?" The man slowly turned around with another glass, then dropped it as soon as he saw Alex with his gun pointed at him. Everyone sitting in the bar stopped what they were doing and looked up at Alex and Vanessa.

The bartender looked at the gun and responded nervously, "Bat moun. Borsa mneak dauch anak der. Kamposa cheamuoy nung sak pnr krahm. Keat ban now cheamuoy strei vy kmeng. Ilauv nih puok ke ban batbng." (English sub-titles "Yes, earlier. A man like you. Tall with red hair. He was with young woman. They gone now.")

Alex again scanned the bar, and asked the bartender, "Where's your phone?" The man lifted a dirty old rotary from behind the bar, and sat it in front of him. Years old dust flaked off the phone. Alex picked up the old receiver. He held it to his ear, no dial tone.

The little man smiled at him and shook a glass jar with change in it, and placed it next to the sorry excuse for a telephone. "Gotta pay the bills, man."

Alex glared at the man dug in his pocket and pulled out a few bucks, then gestured to connect the phone-line. Once he heard the tone he dialed the numbers on the old rotary. Finally, a woman's voice answered, "Rare Imports. How may I help you?"

Alex responded in a coded language, "The first-edition has fallen off the shelf. Pages are blowing in the wind."

A few moments passed, "Thank you sir. I have notified the author. A newly signed copy is on it's way to you now." This meant a they would send a cleanup for crew for Terrance, and move Officer Brooks to a new safe-house.

Alex hung up the phone and turned to tell Vanessa the news, but it was too late. She lay there, throat slit and blood pouring out onto the floor. Out of the corner of his eye, a figure slipped out the front entrance. Alex drew his 9mm and ran through the doorway. Outside, a man dressed in dark clothing pushed another man off his motorbike and started to drive off. Alex yelled, "Stop!" but he didn't. He yelled again, this time in Khmer, "*Chohp!*" The man drove off, Alex fired and killed the suspect.

A moment later, a beautiful young woman dressed in a traditional sarong ran up to him and yelled at him in Khmer, "Anak aroksa pnrsa del anak ban trauv ban saam leab btei robsa khnhom. Keat mean kar branhab knong kar kheunh m ta y slab robsa keat." (English sub-titles: "You white devil, you've killed my husband. He was in a hurry to see his dying mother.") She collapsed to the ground and wept. Alex looked down at the woman and noticed she was holding her belly--the woman was pregnant. He had just made her a widow. Alex not only felt like a total ass, but he had botched the assignment. *I'm done, no more.* He went back into the bar, picked up the phone, and dialed his people. After he hung up, he motioned for the bartender to pour him a strong drink, then waited for the cleanup crew to arrive.

After the long flight back home and being reprimanded by his commander and countless other officials, he took his leave and went to his partner's funeral on Knotts Island in North Carolina. It was one that he never forgot. Terrance had purchased that private land for such an occasion. He wanted a knight's funeral. He was nostalgic like that. During their missions, Terrance would tell him stories about knights from the Middle Ages, that they were hired to protect royalty and go on secret missions. Terrance always thought of himself as one of those men. *He was a good soldier.* Alex watched his friend burn atop the pyre that night. It was an image that he would never forget.
