

Shooting Russians

The Irishman's shooting position was hidden on the roof of a café at the Hilton Fayrouz complex, beneath a large steel storage tank. The café fronted onto a promenade footpath, beyond which were date palms, the beach and Na'ama Bay. A blood red dawn rose ahead of him, washing across the moored yachts. From below him, out of his sight, came the sounds and smells of breakfasts being prepared, coffee and spiced rolls. Lying prone on the gritty sand-strewn cement roof, he curled away from the spreading glare and pulled his bed sheet burnous tighter around himself, the chill mists of the February night not yet passed.

Six days ago he'd been in a pub in Kilburn. The shooter, who was actually not Irish but was treated by everyone as if he was, had drunk lager. The buyer, a tall Englishman named Finch, had been on Guinness. Grey February daylight filtered through the nicotine-stained windows.

"So that I understand", the Irishman had said, in his slow, soft, measured tones, "the target is one Vassily Yussionov, a Russian who lives in London. But you can't tell me what he looks like and you don't know where he lives, exactly?"

"That's about the size of it", replied Finch. The Irishman had thought that he sounded East End, but well educated. "Doesn't pay tax under his own name, no NI number, his properties and motors owned by offshore companies. One distinguishing feature, a scar on his throat, but otherwise he's the invisible man. He'll be tough to find."

"Maybe, but they caught Griffin in the end."

"Who?"

"John Hawley Griffin. The Invisible Man. H.G.Wells."

The sun was climbing, burning the mists away. The Irishman avoided looking toward the ocean. No point in risking your eyes, catching the sun through powerful optics. The sound of tourists passing could be heard, passing greetings with the ever-smiling hotel staff. It was amazing how many Russian accents he'd heard over the last few days.

"Egypt?" he'd asked Finch. "What'll he be doing in Egypt?"

Finch had stubbed out his cigarette with a massive paw. "He's got interests there: would you believe that, after London, his biggest market is Israel? Sadly for him, the Israelis have been cracking down. Nowadays they have to shift the merchandise in via Egypt, Sharm mainly. Lots of Russians visit Sharm, you know, dead popular with your Moscow nouveaux riches. Then it's six hours drive and over the Israeli border - the Bedouin handle that. Nice little earner, along with the tourist camel rides, I suppose. Another beer?"

"Why next week? Yes, same again."

"Yussionov is persona-non in Moscow at the moment, some local spat that gave him that scar. He's got a business partner, name of Lebed, handles the Russian end. We've had a tip that Yussionov and Lebed will be meeting in Sharm."

The sun continued to climb. The white-painted tank radiated heat down onto him. He idly wondered what it contained as he drained the first of his bottles of water. Constant chatter was coming from the café below, the tourists probably middle-aged, their pink and white rolls of flesh nothing to excite the voyeur.

"What's Yussonov into?"

Finch had lit another cigarette. "People trafficking and prostitution, mainly. Nasty piece of work. His gang run girls from Russia, Estonia, Siberia, dirt-poor towns. Routes them to London via Prague. These girls think they're going to be barmaids, dancers, au pairs, make their fortune. They end up in brothels, no money, no passport, no language, too scared of his goons to go to the cops. Slavery. He's got some worse habits, too. I know he can get you a fourteen year-old for three grand."

"Was she worth it?" The ghost of a smile played on the Irishman's face.

Finch had stared impassively. "Funny. Funny fucker."

The sun was high enough. The Irishman got himself back into position behind his equipment, the long barrel resting on the parapet. He lined up on his target, the motor yacht *Shalimar*, moored at a buoy about 150 metres offshore, beyond the coral reefs, stern on. Other than a lookout there was no activity on board, the boat's Zodiac dinghy nowhere in sight. The thought that he'd blown the day already, that Yussonov had skipped, vaguely troubled him. He adjusted himself to minimise the amount that his knees, dick and hipbones were grinding into the cement. He tried to let the rising heat wash over him. Through the heat shimmer, he zoomed in on the lookout: long-faced, of indeterminate age. Not someone he recognised.

The Irishman had sipped his drink. "So this guy's got some serious lads with him, yeah?"

"Definitely. We reckon he's behind three bodies in London. Albanians in the same racket, probably. Wasn't enough of them found to make positive ID's." Finch slipped over a large envelope. "These here are some of his KA's, including Lebed. Main one is his bodyguard, a bruiser called Blokhin, here." He slid out one photograph. "He should be easy enough to spot."

The Irishman studied the photograph: heavily muscled, narrow blue eyes, cropped hair, big chin and cruel mouth. "Handsome." He looked up at Finch, dark eyes glittering beneath heavy brows. "KA's? Speak like that and anyone would think you were police...."

The Englishman shifted in his seat. "Not me. Why did you leave Belfast, anyway?"

The Irishman held his gaze for a moment longer than comfortable. "Ah, peace broke out. What use would I be?" He sipped his pint. "Look, if this guy's that connected it'll cost you extra. I'll need anonymity too. No fuckups, hear?"

"Understood. How did they find him?" asked Finch, unexpectedly.

"Who?"

"Griffin, the Invisible Man."

"He needed other people and they gave him away. That, and a bit of luck."

The Zodiac powered in after an hour or so, steered by the same man he'd seen on the jetty two nights ago, Slavic features and a bad moustache - an East Belfast special, as the Irishman thought of it. In the boat were Blokhin and a fat, balding man: Lebed, the business partner. The Zodiac tied up at the yacht's transom deck and they stepped aboard, stepping into the main salon. Inside, he could see the silhouette of another man moving but could not make out features. Moustache-man re-emerged on the flying bridge. He and the lookout spent some time peering forward, until Blokhin appeared behind them, startling them like schoolboys caught

smoking. A while longer and the two girls appeared, diving off the bow from where they'd evidently been sunbathing.

The Irishman had got his good luck, after three exhausting days of leg work. It had been nearly midnight. As he had strolled along the restaurant-lined promenade, he had spotted Blokhin, sitting on a cushion sofa at a Bedouin-style cafe, Arab carpets strewn everywhere. He was dressed in a white t-shirt that accentuated his gym-built muscles, a pretty but bored-looking girl sitting on each of his bulky, jean-clad thighs. Neither girl was older than eighteen. The Irishman had strolled into the café and ordered a mint tea. The waiter, a tall, prominent-nosed Egyptian in a white kaftan, had come up to the trio and chatted in broken Russian. After a few minutes he had changed the bazaar music to something modern, poppy and Russian. The smaller of the two girls, a tanned feline blonde with a sulky expression, had got up and started to dance, her shoulders and hips as sinuous as smoke in a breeze. The tall waiter had joined in with a hopping little jig, clapping, which made her smile. The Irishman had watched her gyrate, clad in skin-tight white pedal pushers, until he had realised that Blokhin was staring at him. The Irishman smiled at him, nodded. Blokhin smiled back. The other girl had started to nibble his ear.

"You selfish prick. You're not jealous about me leeching at your girl, you just want me to know that you're shagging them both."

After the Russians had paid up, the Irishman had followed them to the jetty that the glass-bottomed boats picked up tourists from. They had climbed into the Zodiac, guarded by the Slav. It purred slowly into the ocean darkness beyond the beachfront lights. "Gotcha", he had murmured, watching the running lights disappear. A day's surveillance gave him the yacht and his hiding place.

The two girls splashed for a while then clambered back aboard via the stern, barely clad in thong bikinis. They towelled off and headed forwards again. The day wore on. The thirty-degree heat battered off of the white surfaces and metal around him, steadily baking him under the improvised burnous. Sweat ran into his eyes, already aching from the sun's glare off of the ocean. Still his target did not appear. He drained another bottle of water and tried to ignore the growing pressure on his bladder.

After four hours watching, the bed sheet was wrapped around his sweat-soaked body like cling-film on a chicken. He was arranging himself to piss into an empty water bottle when things changed on the Shalimar. He saw Blokhin emerge and issue orders to the moustache, who scampered down into the Zodiac. Another shout brought the two blondes back from the fore deck. Lebed and another man – tall, well built, shorts and polo shirt, face still in shade - emerged from the main cabin, smoking cigars, laughing. The Irishman tensed. He needed to see the face, the scar. He needed to piss.

The tall man gestured to the two blondes, now standing quietly to one side. They smiled unconvincingly at Lebed.

"Go on matey-boy, try a free sample," muttered the Irishman. Lebed hesitated, made gestures. "Oh no Monsieur Ambassadeur, with these Ferrero Rocher you are really spoiling us." Lebed stepped down into the dinghy. "Thank you Comrade, but they give me wind." The Slav fired up the Zodiac's outboard, Lebed waved back up at Yussonov, the boat sped away.

A huge drip of sweat blinded the Irishman in his targeting eye. He jerked his head away, cleared himself and settled back in, his finger poised. He could see that Yussonov had taken his shirt off, passed it to the smaller girl, the dancer, who neatly folded it. The other blonde climbed onto the side of the yacht and dived gracefully, surfaced and beckoned them in. Yussonov and the dancer stepped into the sunshine onto the transom, he stooping to speak to her. The Irishman tensed.

He couldn't see the man's throat clearly. Was this definitely Yussonov? The man took the girl into his arms and kissed her, ran one hand through her blonde curls, the other, still holding his cigar, down her bare back. The girl started to kiss her way lower, down his pale chest and stomach. He leaned back against a stern pillar of the boat, slipped the cigar into his mouth, closed his eyes and offered his grinning face up to the sun. The Irishman saw an ugly white scar across his windpipe: he had his man. Experience took over.

He slowed his breathing.

He moved the target in his lens down to rest on the back of the kneeling girl's bobbing head.

He reconsidered and swung back up to the smiling face.

He started to shoot.

He was not caught.

Finch published the Irishman's photographs in his newspaper, along with the rest of the exposé on the sex slave racket. The article was syndicated globally, the photographs selling particularly well in sensationalist publications. Yussonov was arrested and deported back to Moscow, where he dropped out of sight. His departure prompted a brief spike of violence that culminated in six deaths, mainly Albanian. The Irishman was able to move into a larger flat, but the new tenant of his old flat, an Irish accountant, unfortunately died in a mysterious fire, not long after settling in.