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This novel is written exclusively for Right Truth Blog (www.righttruth.typepad.com) and its readers.

In loving memory of my precious
Sara (7/25/1951 to 12/13/2003) who always
encouraged me to write from the heart and was
at once both my greatest critic and my most
loyal fan.

In love with you always!

And...

To the greatest dad anyone like me could ever
have hoped for: Joseph Stanley Godlewski
(11/29/1918 to 04/14/2008).

You gave me life. Thank you!

www.rjgodlewski.com

Chapter Thirty-Seven

September, 20xx
Kerch, Ukraine

Jonas Prinkler swore that he could hear his heartbeat echoing within his Latex mask as he drew closer towards the two shabbily dressed men skirting the edge of the concrete channel. While he and Seth were dressed as your stereotypical Arabs, these two men, almost within earshot, were dressed like Punk Rockers from the 1980's. One was tall and possessed what looked like a pretentious fake beard or perhaps he just held piss poor grooming standards. The other man was definitely younger and followed his companion with an AK-style rifle. This made Jonas *extremely* nervous.

Seth appeared much more casual; almost as if an encounter with two strange-looking men in a nation known to be out hunting for their asses was just a typical day at the office. At least Jonas could not tell if Seth was alarmed underneath the layers of stifling artificiality that gave him a threatening persona indicative of the situation in which they now found themselves.

Ever the one in command, for obvious reasons belying Jonas' relative background, Seth made straight for the two men who had only just then noticed the encroaching pair of Americans. His motions were deliberate, Jonas could tell that, but there remain a strange, foreign appeal to his gait. Jonas attributed this to their desire to refrain from undertaking any Western-style motions.

The others took on an immediate defensive posture as exhibited by the pointing of their rifles. The taller man appeared as if he was ready to fire, but then his face morphed into a balanced look between recognition and incredulity. After a few

moments of staring at the two Americans, he lowered his rifle partially to his waist.

“We are friends.” Seth Carmassi spoke in fractured Russian. “We are travelers on our way back to Russia.”

The taller stranger cocked his head slightly but said nothing. He turned slowly towards Jonas.

“Our means of transportation broke down.” continued Seth, hoping to divert attention away from his more linguistically incapable partner. “Are you Ukrainians?”

“No.” came a soft reply in Arabic from the younger stranger. His speaking out apparently caught the ire of the older, taller individual for the second man flashed a look of anger at him.

“Could Allah be so gracious as to have placed us in the care of fellow countrymen?”

Seth’s reply snagged the older man’s attention, but he remained silent.

“Blessed be Allah for I believe so!” Seth continued as if they were long parted relatives and charged past the two muttered incoherently in Arabic. “First our truck breaks down, then we arrive at our destination far too late, now we seek our master...”

“Friend.” the taller stranger finally spoke with a voice heavily laden with suspicion. “I am not your cousin but your search for a master is perhaps better directed towards this Allah of yours.”

Seth continued on walking towards the east, following a distinctive zigzag pattern that his companion remembered from countless journeys into developing nations.

“Friend.” the taller stranger continued. “What is your name?”

“My name is Ahmad.” Seth continued walking with a slight poke of his head back over his right shoulder. “My companion is my sister’s husband, Shawki. His does not speak very much because of his stay with the Americans.”

“You are Americans?” questioned the younger stranger.

“May Allah strike me down if I was.” Seth’s voice trailed off into the distance.

Jonas noticed an almost indecipherable smile appear on the tall individual as he lowered his weapon and began to fall into step behind them.

“I am Muhammad.” replied the tall man. “This is my disciple, Haytham.”

“Are you a teacher of Islam?”

“I am Islam.”

Seth felt the comment was a bit rash, even from an Arab. It was the kind of statement indicative of the many terrorists that he had encountered within his forty-five years of life and now understood that this Muhammad might in fact be *the* Muhammad. The long sought Sorcerer. His own defensive posture went on afterburners.

“Then we are with friends.” Seth replied.

Jonas noticed a slight agitation within his friend’s voice and could detect an increase in his pace.

“And what of young Haytham there?”

“I have said that he is my disciple.”

“Ah, yes. I beg your pardon. You must understand that we have been on a long and disturbing journey. Many are out looking for us and I fear for our lives.”

“If you are friends, then you have our protection.”

“Can you get us safely to Russia?”

“Yes, I have many disciples in Russia. They are prepared to act on my orders.”

“Are you then a soldier?” Seth paused briefly to gesture towards the rifles. “You don’t seem to be either Russian or Ukrainian.

“I am an Arab; that’s all that you need to know. Where do *your* loyalties lie?”

Seth’s defiance could not be constrained, even by the mask. “I am also an Arab. That’s all that *you* need to know.”

Jonas nearly fainted when he saw the expression of anger develop upon Muhammad’s face. *You cocky bastard; you’re going to get us killed.*