

Prologue

Somalia Coast—Horn of Africa

THERE IS SOMETHING *about a man on his knees*, Keyre thought, *that stirs my very heart*. Keyre, the Somali magus, a Yibir whose lineage stretched back through time to the days of the Ajuran Empire, pre-dating all the subsequent failed sultanates, stood on the hard shingle twelve feet from the soft rumble of the Indian Ocean. He breathed in the salt air, the familiar scents of the sere desert behind him, the sun-baked brick of houses destroyed by bazooka blasts and rocket fire. But all these clean scents were at the moment overwhelmed by the stink of human sweat, excrement, and terror.

Ah, but terror is what Keyre fed upon, lapped up like mother's milk since he was a child of eight, in the aftermath of his first kill. The first taste of blood was always the sharpest, but, for him, the blood didn't matter as much as it did to his compatriots. But then they weren't Yibir, weren't steeped in the Stygian darkness of his family's ancient sorcery. Their nostrils dilated as the fresh blood flowed from the newly dead. But for Keyre, the blood was an adjunct, as necessary as shooting dead the man who, on his knees, waves the white flag.

It's the white flag, you see, he told himself. *The white flag stinks of fear.*

I want to inhale its scent, savor its taste before I put a match to it and set it afire. Where he stood now, on the shore of Somalia, between the desert of destruction and the Indian Ocean on which he often enough plied his particular brand of terror, he was immersed in the stench of death.

Before him thirteen men knelt, backs bowed, heads bowed further. Some stared in stony silence at the shingle on which they knelt, its shifting layers slicing like razor blades into their knees. Others wailed their fear in pitiful ululations. One or two had tear streaks along their dust-caked cheeks. None of them murmured a prayer—further confirmation, if any was needed, of what Keyre already knew.

He was a tall man, cadaverously thin, all muscle and bone, with a long, triangular face and a saturnine countenance. He was both as athletic as a swimmer and as graceful as a dancer—not only strikingly handsome but possessed of a charisma gifted to very few. He had dedicated himself to many things, not the least of which was creating a dazzling smile that fooled everyone.

Thirteen men, on their knees, bowed down, wrists tied behind their backs. In Keyre's left hand a large German Mauser restored to all its World War II glory. *Who was its original owner? A member of the Gestapo, or the Abwehr, maybe, their mortal enemy. What did it matter anyway?* Keyre asked himself; it was his now, unlocked and loaded.

Stepping up, he placed the muzzle of the Mauser against the back of the first prisoner's head and pulled the trigger. The sound of the hammer falling was as loud as a thunderclap. As one, the line of men flinched. But there was no detonation, no bullet. Stepping to his right, Keyre placed the muzzle against the back of the second man's head. When he pulled the trigger, the man's head exploded, and what was left of him pitched forward, sprawled awkwardly onto the shingle.

Blood, the stench of it rising up to mingle with a terror that, to Keyre's heightened senses, was palpable. Above, black birds wheeled, calling to each other, dinner bells announcing another feast. High above them, the vast sky rippled with clouds, like a weight lifter flexing his muscles.

Another step to the right brought him to a spot directly behind the third man in line. Keyre shot him, with more or less the identical result. In all, there were twelve corpses lying facedown on the bloody shingle when he reached the end of the line. That left the first man. Keyre had reloaded two-thirds of the way down the line; his Mauser was still itching to inflict more death. He could feel the sensation run up the nerves of his left arm, like the output of a live wire. His hand twitched briefly in just the way a female lion's paw twitched when she was dreaming of running down an okapi or a gazelle. Jaws at the throat, clamping down, blood and viscera overrunning her teeth as the males loped up to feed.

Keyre took his time returning to the one remaining kneeling man. He stood in front of him, staring down.

"Look at me," he said. He could see the man shaking. "Look at me!" he said more sharply.

The man's head came up. Keyre locked his eyes onto the prisoner's. "I know who you are," he said, his tone conversational now. "I know what you and your kind have been up to. Their death sentence has been carried out, as you can see." He crouched down so suddenly the prisoner flinched. He was a thin man, short in stature, but with plenty of upper body strength. He was dark of skin, his nose long and sharp. His brown eyes were set close together. His lips were chapped, the skin flaking off as if he'd been out in the sun too long.

He's been here with me too long, Keyre thought. That's for certain.

He stared hard into the other's face as he said, "Here, your death sentence will be carried out in the blink of an eye." There were smears of dried blood on the prisoner's cheek; he stank of sweat and terror, and there was about him a certain fecal stench. "But for you, my friend, that death sentence can be commuted. Your life can continue." Keyre left it there; it was time to keep silent.

The prisoner's jaw muscles worked spasmodically. His tongue, gray as ash, appeared, then slipped back between his teeth. "H...how?" he asked in a thin, reedy voice, and Keyre knew the man would tell him what he wanted to know.

Despite the miasma the man wore like a cloak, Keyre leaned in and said in his ear, “What I want to know is this: who do you work for?”

The prisoner’s mouth worked as if he was trying to summon up the courage to answer or enough saliva to speak clearly.

Before he could say a word, Keyre said, “His full name and position. Nothing less will save you.”

The prisoner swallowed hard. His eyes flicked from one side to the other, as if frightened of being overheard, even out here in the Somalian wilderness. “Not out loud.”

Keyre nodded, giving him permission to lean forward. He placed his lips against the opening of Keyre’s ear and whispered six words.

Those words—the identity of the man who trained these thirteen to infiltrate his cadre—caused a profound change in Keyre’s demeanor. His face darkened, his lips compressed, his eyes seemed to cross. Then, in a flash, he turned his head sideways and with his open jaws and his bared teeth, he ripped the man’s throat out.

Part One

MEME

1

MORGANA ROY WALKED briskly to work at precisely 8:36 in the morning. As a creature of habit, she always walked a mile from the public parking garage to her office in the rear of a half-derelict building, on the flyblown main drag of Bowie, Maryland. Bowie was just southwest of Fort Meade, where the black-glass NSA colossus rose seemingly out of nowhere. As usual, she had arisen at six in the morning, driven to the dojo where she had been a member for seven years, and worked out vigorously with masters of two different martial arts disciplines for more or less forty-five minutes each, before showering and changing into her work clothes.

Her apartment, twenty miles southwest of the office, would seem to an outsider like a perfectly sterile environment: apart from appliances, there were two or multiples thereof of everything—sofas, chairs, lamps, coffee and side tables, laptop computers at two different workstations. On the dining room table stood two vases, each equidistant from the center. Six chairs. Everything was symmetrical. She lived a compartmentalized life; order was important to her. Chaos made her uneasy, though the truth was she found the concept intriguing.

She made this walk in all seasons, all kinds of weather, without fail, and at a speed that would make most others huff and puff and clutch the stitch in their side. There was about this walk something of a challenge, so grueling in summer heat and winter sleet, that those who occasionally had to walk with her privately called it the Bataan Death March. It was a joke, of course, but a decidedly grim one.

Morgana Roy worked in a small suite of offices hard by a gymnasium, and those new to her unit were assaulted by the smells of stale sweat, underarm odor, and worse, which insinuated themselves through the baseboards of the wall that separated the offices from the gym. Twice a week these would be temporarily overpowered by the acrid stench of Lysol and bleach. Morgana seemed unaware of these odious smells, or perhaps she had become accustomed to them.

Using a magnetic key card, she passed through the door marked with a small, discreet sign: MEME LLC, printed on a sheet of plain white paper. It looked as unsettled as Morgana's state of mind, and in bad weather it had to be replaced almost daily. Still, there was no plan for anything permanent to take its place. Across the street was the smallest post office Morgana had ever seen, a tiny brick building with a sadly draped banner, RENT A P.O. BOX TODAY, hanging off the iron railing of the cement handicap ramp.

At Morgana's entrance, a heavysset young woman of twenty-three in a distinctly non-government issue gabardine suit got up from behind a desk, said, "Good morning," and went to fetch them both cappuccinos.

"Good morning, Rose," Morgana said when Rose returned.

Beside Rose's desk a rubber plant's leaves shone as if polished daily. To the right was a cabinet, closed and locked, that, in fact, contained nothing at all. To the left stood a row of three chairs that had never been sat on, a low table on which were scattered copies of *Vanity Fair* and *Wired*, never read but nevertheless kept current. There were never any visitors to Meme LLC, ever.

At thirty, Morgana was the oldest member of the crew. She had seven people working for her in the office, seven more out in the field. All of

them were young and ruthless; they had, to a person, lean and hungry looks, which was just the way she wanted them.

There were two doors in the wall behind Rose. The one on the right led to a break room, complete with a refrigerator-freezer, a two-burner stove, a sink, food cabinets, a coffee bean grinder, and the cappuccino-espresso maker. Farther along lurked a warren of store-rooms that eventually led to a basement.

The left-hand door was locked with a retina-recognition system. Morgana, cappuccino in hand, looked into the display, opening the door. She took a judicious sip of her cappuccino before stepping across the threshold.

She entered a large, windowless room. Across the left wall was a mosaic of LED flat-panel screens, but instead of showing feeds of CCTV cameras in airports and street corners in cities around the world, or images of desert encampments relayed from various drones, these screens contained images from computer terminals, hard drive data folders, dynamic malware firewalls. The images kept changing, often so fast they became a blur. Most of the writing on the screens was in Russian Cyrillic or Mandarin Chinese, but there was one in Persian, others in Hebrew and Arabic, still another in Urdu, a final one in Pashto.

The right-hand wall was a 4K video loop of aerial footage of the Swiss Alps. An hour from now, it would be scenes shot from a boat prowling the Maldives, and the hour after that, the crowded streets of midtown Manhattan. And so forth. No one ever complained about the lack of windows; no one looked up when Morgana strode in, which was just the way she liked it. Her cadre of six had eyes and minds glued to their laptop screens.

There were no partitions between workstations. Thick cables rose from each station to tracks hung just below the ceiling, which allowed Morgana's staff to move around at will, huddle together for impromptu conferences, exchange vital information in real time. Everything on the flat-panels was in real time. Real time meant everything to the operators of Meme LLC; being current was their currency. Morgana fostered a

cluster method of cryptanalysis, hence the screens. All Meme's projects were collaborative efforts. This led not only to one success after another but to a close-knit comradeship among the team impossible to achieve inside the federal government's myriad clandestine services.

Morgana passed through a narrow door set discreetly in the far wall. There was no nameplate beside it. This was Morgana's sanctum. From here, she could monitor everything that went on in the outer room. She also had the freedom to turn it all off, and in the semi-darkness contemplate algorithms and her future.

Setting her cappuccino down at her workstation, she removed her jacket, slung it over the back of her ergonomic task chair, sat down. The moment she did so, the screen on her laptop flared to life. Her thumbprint was scanned, and she was in.

There was the usual slew of email messages waiting in her inbox, but there was also one that was flagged.

Uh oh, she thought. Black Star.

She knew what Black Star meant, and it wasn't usual in any way, shape, manner, or form.

She clicked on the icon. Instead of opening the message, she was taken directly to the office of General Arthur MacQuerrrie. His wind-burned, time-lined face filled the screen. His baby blues stared out of the screen as if he were Dr. Strange, who, along with Wonder Woman, was one of her favorite comic book heroes. The analogy was apt. Her boss at NSA was something of a magician. How he kept her unit secret from the mandarins floating at the top of the governmental alphabet soup—NSA, CIA, DIA, FBI, DOD, DHS, you name it—was a complete mystery to her. And that was only the top layer of his legerdemain. Meme was well funded—there wasn't one thing Morgana had ever asked for that the general had ever refused. They had bleeding-edge technology to the point where all their equipment was upgraded twice a year. Obtaining vast sums of money from Marshall Fulmer, former senator and head of the Joint Armed Services Appropriations Committee (JASAC) who had just been confirmed by Congress as the incoming

president's national security advisor, without letting on what the funds were for, seemed an impossibility. And yet the general managed it.

"Morning, Mac," she said, as she took another sip of her cappuccino. "What's up?"

The general was possessed of a wide brow and beetling eyebrows. One could tell a lot from those eyebrows, which were the most mobile aspect of his diamond-shaped face. "It seems our old friend, Boris Il-lyich Karpov, has climbed out of the grave."

"General Karpov is dead," Morgana said. "His throat was slit from ear to ear, in Moscow last year at his wedding."

"And yet, he keeps bedeviling us." The general shook his head. "As you are well aware, Boris Karpov trod a fine line between doing the Sovereign's bidding and working for himself. That is more difficult in Russia than it is anywhere else in the world, save North Korea. It seems that in the months before he was killed, Karpov was working on several clandestine initiatives."

Morgana's screen split. MacQuerrie remained in the left half, while the right half was filled with a rain of vertical lines of computer code so complex they took her breath away.

"What in the name of holy hell is that?"

"No idea," MacQuerrie said. "Which is why I've brought it to you."

"We'll get right on it."

"That's just what you won't do," MacQuerrie said. "This is for your eyes only. No one is to see or even catch a whiff that this code exists. Got that?"

"Of course, but what do you think it is?"

The general seemed to age a decade before her eyes. He ran a hand across his face, and to her horror, she noticed a slight tremor in the fingers.

"My best guess: a cyber weapon, something so sophisticated that it's far beyond anything we've seen—or even dreamt of—before. For some time, this *thing*, this weapon, was a rumor, nothing more. But because some of the stories attributed fantastic powers to it, I kept my ear to the ground, collated even the most outlandish of the rumors.

“And, then, out of the blue, an hour ago, this shard appeared in the wild. My people found it quite by accident while trolling the dark web for intel on a certain arms dealer we’ve been after for years, but have yet to pin a single misstep on, let alone a crime. When leads do surface, the people behind them vanish as if into thin air. We never even find a body.”

“What’s this arms dealer’s name?”

“Keyre. He’s a Somali pirate—or was, anyway, until we took Viktor Bout into custody.” She knew Bout was the most notorious illegal arms dealer of the last decade. “That left a giant hole in the illegal arms trade, and Keyre was first into Bout’s territory, killing off whoever was left from the Russian’s own network, replacing them with his own people.

“Keyre has proven himself to be smarter, better connected, and far more slippery than Bout ever was. The story goes that his network is larger, more far-flung, and, most crucially, contains contacts inside governments worldwide. Bout had customs and immigration people in a dozen countries in his pocket. By contrast, Keyre’s network makes Bout’s look like a kindergarten class.

“Whether that’s the emmis, I don’t yet know, but it’s this cyber weapon that’s giving me a migraine for the ages. You need to make sense of the fragment and you have to find the rest of the code.”

Morgana sat back, absorbing the information Mac was throwing her way. Something was nagging at her, and she voiced it: “Mac, have you thought about why this fragment suddenly showed up on the dark web?”

“What d’you mean? There are any number of ways—”

“No, there aren’t. Not something of this level of sophistication. No, Mac, my guess is that it was released on the dark web deliberately.”

“But what for?”

“I think it’s a strong possibility that whoever took possession of the cyber initiative following Karpov’s murder is putting it up for auction.”

“Auction?”

“What better way to whet potential buyers’ appetites, and drive up the bids, than to let them take a peek behind the curtain, so to speak.”

“Christ, I hadn’t thought of that.” MacQuerrie was sweating now, droplets forming at his hairline, rolling down the sides of his cheek.

“Could this Keyre be running the auction?”

“Possible. Even likely. Somalia is just the place for such things.” The general frowned. “But I’m thinking he’s only the conduit. Someone else is the mastermind. And knowing Karpov as I did, it would have to be someone he trusted implicitly as well as explicitly.”

“That rules out just about everyone in the Russian government, doesn’t it?”

MacQuerrie nodded. “Yes, it does.”

“Someone from within the initiative itself, then.”

“Again, knowing Karpov, he wouldn’t trust anyone like that with the big picture. His operations were meticulously compartmentalized. That was his first rule of keeping his work absolutely secure. No one could betray him if they didn’t know what was really going on.”

“In that case, I’m willing to bet several people wrote this code, each one unaware of what the others were doing. Could Karpov himself have stitched all the pieces of code together?”

“The general was a man of many talents,” MacQuerrie said. “It’s possible, I suppose, but, frankly, not very likely.”

“Well, no programmer could direct Karpov’s initiative as a whole. The best ones are like idiot savants: they know their stuff backward and forward, but that’s all they’re good for. They couldn’t direct themselves out of a paper bag.” She pursed her lips. “So again, I have to ask, who is running the operation now?”

MacQuerrie did not answer right away. It seemed to Morgana that now they had come to the nub of the matter, his face had gone even grayer. Perhaps it was the lighting in his office, but she doubted that. His right eyebrow twitched, which meant he was under extreme stress. *What could cause such a thing?* she asked herself.

“One thing before we go any further, Morgana.”

She said nothing. Even for her, who was more or less inured to such things, waiting for the second shoe to drop was a mighty unpleasant ex-

perience. This was General Arthur MacQuerrie, not some fatuous NSA type who didn't know his ass from his elbow.

"I have no doubt that Karpov's operation is aimed squarely at the United States." He paused to wipe at a growing film of sweat on his upper lip. "It could be the national electrical grid or even, God forbid, the president's bank of nuclear missile codes."

"What? But that's impossible. The code data is buried so deeply behind a phalanx of firewalls . . . and then the codes are changed hourly."

"All true. But Karpov's operational language is so obscure, so utterly unknown, I and my people believe the nuclear codes are its target."

"If the Russians access our nuclear codes . . ."

"You see the nature of the extreme danger we're in."

Morgana stared at the lines of code, cascading down her screen. *Good God*, she thought. *What we have here is the ultimate weapon of mass destruction.*

Black Star. No wonder.

"This is a superworm," she said. "A form of malware no one's ever encountered before."

"Tell me something I don't know. This is catastrophic. You had better come up with the answer, *stat*."

Morgana didn't like the tone that had set into his voice. This had happened more than once before, when Mac started treating her like a low-level gopher, his voice hard and threatening. She bit her lip, but bile built up in her stomach, churning, as if a whirlpool had opened up inside her.

"Horribly, there's more," Mac was saying.

She tensed even more as the code vanished, to be replaced by a grainy black-and-white photo, obviously taken with a telephoto lens. A surveillance shot, then. Men in tuxedos, women in fancy floor-length gowns, jewels and beading glittering. Over their heads an ornate crystal chandelier, spilling light down on them.

"Moscow." MacQuerrie gave her a date from last year. "On the occasion of Boris Karpov's wedding."

“I see Karpov,” Morgana said. “In the center.”

“D’you recognize anyone else? He has his arm across the shoulders of the man to his immediate right.”

“Yes.”

“Do you recognize that man?”

She leaned closer, zoomed in a bit, but not too much; the images would become too vague to accurately glean features and expressions. “I’m afraid I don’t, Mac.”

The general sighed. “Well, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.”

She felt the whirlpool congeal into an icy ball. She wanted to vomit it up and throw it at Mac. Instead, fighting to keep her cool, she said: “Karpov looks genuinely pleased to be with him. But, as you’ve told me, he didn’t have any close friends in the Russian hierarchy.”

“That’s correct.”

Now she was sure that MacQuerrie was in serious distress; his eyebrows were knit together in a dreadful expression of anxiety.

“That man isn’t a Russian, Morgana. He’s one of ours—or at least he was. You’re looking at Boris Karpov’s best friend, the only one he would trust to continue his operation in the event of his demise.

“The man Karpov is embracing is Jason Bourne.”