

Analogue in a quantum world

Chapter 1

Time slowed to an all too familiar trickle, the cold cylindrical steel nudging into his cheek, he relaxed the grip on his own favoured machine pistol, gently offering it to the deep, cream piled carpet.

A carpet now ruined, finest Axminster wool that could be no more than a year old, little signs of wear apart from the spreading crimson pool of blood and acid frothing gently, eating away at the natural fibre.

Seemingly little reaction from the grey suited man, frown lines drawn a little deeper, all the commotion surrounding him, planets being drawn into his solar system, hell bent upon impact.

Torver's eyes flitted between the two bodies, he had not meant to hit the man quite so hard, a fleeting glance with the flat of the machine pistol designed to knock the man to the ground, a perceptible slight shake of his head; to the lady screaming on her back, a baby enjoying its first tantrum, hands clutched at the remnants of her face, the acrid smell of burning flesh long since diffused throughout the room.

Security alarms pierced the vacuum, rushing steps, men and women burst into the room.

A series of heavy breaths heard parallel to his side. 'Sir, put the gun down.'

He knew the voice, Larkins; how would the Ambassador's bodyguard react to more Palace security? Torver settled into the contact of the metallic barrel.

'This man, your man, he has killed Ambassador Suranhi.' The steel jutting into his cheek showed a reluctance to withdraw, a heavily accented voice showed clear signs of tension.

Larkin's intonation was more collected now. 'Sir, I am a sergeant of the Royal Protection Branch, I ask you again to lower your weapon; we have contained the situation.' High pitched shrieks belonging to the lady were reduced to a dull moan, the security personnel gathered around her attaching various drips through needles, the intensity of motion slowed just a little, critical moving to stable; after the initial hunt for a pulse the man in the growing circle of blood was left unattended, his eye lids lowered to obviate the stare of the dead.

One last blunt jab to Torver's cheek, and the steel sent to retreat, the pistol returning to the blazer, an inside jacket pocket. 'This man killed my Ambassador.' Fury filled out the man's voice, anger oscillating fluidly in and out of control.

Torver turned slowly, his eyes drifted back to the now limp body of the lady, destroyed face and left shoulder, body soaked from the water designed to dilute any remaining acid. Why? Beauty and the vitality of youth literally melted away from her. A carefully measured voice offered to one of the men that he had spent the last four years training since the loss of Andrews, Torver's words clearly enunciated. 'Sergeant Larkins, I am guilty of the manslaughter of Ambassador Suranhi, I place myself under your detention.'

His eyes showed little comprehension, Larkins studied the room once again, trying to absorb the detail; he paused for a moment. 'Torver, talk me through this.' Motioning away one of his men who had been readying a set of handcuffs.

The faintest of smiles ghosted across Torver's face. 'I responded to a series of muffled screams from the Iranian Ambassador's room.' He gestured to the bodyguard with the welling bruise taking on colours selected from the rainbow across his jaw. 'I incapacitated the bodyguard on seeing the lady present being the victim of a liquid liberally dowsed over her.'

Larkin's seemed to breathe as opposed to speak the reply. 'And the Ambassador?' His eyes had lost little in the way of incomprehension.

Torver took a deep breath, regretting it with the acrid smell of burnt flesh now an integral olfactory stain throughout the room, the sharpness of the acid mixed with flesh and wool from the carpet, one of the three uniformed police men behind Larkins lost the battle and moved to the corner of the room, bent over heaving, a far less potent acid splattered the carpet.

'The bodyguard had the lady's arms pinned behind her, held at length, whilst the Ambassador poured the acid from the bottle you see on its side over the subject's head.' He paused, eyes bored into the bodyguard, voice dropping in tone.

'Once I had incapacitated the man now to my side, the Ambassador threw the bottle of acid in my direction. I avoided said item and attempted to neutralise the Ambassador with a gun butt to the side of the head.'

'You caved in his temple; you know what you have done? What this will mean?' A police officer attempted to bustle past Larkin, brandishing jostling handcuffs.

The police officer wheeled around, air exploding from his mouth as Larkins pinned him to the wall, barely contained fury rippled through his tone and body language. 'The man

in front of you is Alex Torver, the Queen's personal guard, I will tell you if we are to restrain him; do you hear me? Do you!'

Medical personnel flinched slightly at the outburst, none losing focus on the lady in front of them fighting for her life.

Larkins noted the outstretched hands in his peripheral vision, what the hell had happened here? This was Alex Torver, his mentor over the last year and some. Yes Torver was old school and sometimes a little heavy handed but the only one Queen Victoria truly trusted with her security and wellbeing. What was going on?

A quiet, authoritative voice. 'I killed him, Larkins.' Torver gave a slight shake of his head. 'Did I mean it? No, but to see the look of pleasure and sadistic glory while he emptied the acid over that poor lady's face.' He wrapped his bottom lip over his top teeth. 'Tell Victoria I am sorry.'

Larkins blinked slowly, incomprehension cycling to disbelief and then finally to a decision. 'Alex Torver, I am restraining you on the manslaughter of Ambassador Suranhi, an Iranian national.' A pause, eye contact between the two men revealed little. 'If you would follow me.'

'You're not going to cuff him? Torver's lethal, you know that?' The police officer who had been pinned to the wall was recovering some form of rhythm to his breathing.

A sharp shake of the head and snarl, Larkins nose upturned. 'The decision is mine to make, take a statement from the bodyguard.'

The bodyguard's expression twisted into surly superiority. 'I am an Iranian citizen, this man is both a liar and a killer; I will say nothing to infidels.' He crossed his hands over his chest.

Sounds of additional feet rang out pounding the stairs and landing, medical staff to replenish those attending to the lady, her breathing had slowed, a result he guessed of the heavy-duty tranquilisers and sedatives coursing through her system.

'Torver, time to go.' A resigned note filled out his voice; Larkins was still trying to adjust to this new reality. Frowns built on frowns across his lightly lined features.

'Who was she?'

'One moment please.' Torver moved slowly to one side, the bodyguard shrank away. Torver swiped at and deflected one of the police officer's outstretched hands; he pulled the bodyguard's head towards him by his throat.

‘Know this, I will find you, time will not be your friend.’ Acquiescing, Torver felt the cold steel bracelets close over his wrists, his arms drawn behind his back. For the first time fear trickled across the bodyguard’s features, the man turned away.

Larkins clicked the handcuffs into place, then took a firm grip of his mentors arm, his voice low and measured. ‘No more, you hear me, today no more.’

He addressed the police officers around him, Larkins voice boomed outwards.

‘Stay with the Iranian Ambassador’s bodyguard, and the lady with our medics, I will escort away Torver.’

Ignoring the grimaces and muttering from the men in navy blue and fluorescent yellow bibs, he led Torver by the arm from the apartment within the Palace.

‘Who was she?’ He could not recognise the lady from the scarred, molten features of the unconscious body being attended to by the men and women in green fatigues.

‘Fatima Suranhi, the Ambassador’s niece.’ Torver kept his expression straight.

Larkins stopped abruptly, wheeling Torver around so the two were face-to-face, his words blurted out. ‘But she was just a girl, what seventeen? Part of the Ambassador’s entourage?’ The picture of the bubbly teen came back in a series of images, tall and slender, the kindest of faces. He shook his head, no more would those gentle eyes bless those around her, they now resembled poached eggs; how could someone do that? What was going on?

‘What is happening here?’ Familiar tones of command emitted by a female. ‘Torver, Larkins?’ Victoria paused, a rare expression of confusion flooded her face. ‘Why are you in handcuffs, Torver?’

Larkins turned to his mentor, giving a slight shake of his head, his gaze dropped.

Torver cleared his throat, straightening his shoulders as best he could with the restriction of his hands cuffed behind his back.

‘My Queen, on hearing screams from the Iranian national suite I attended the scene, finding the Ambassador pouring acid over a female figure whilst his bodyguard held the lady in question.’ His eyes narrowed, eye contact held between the Queen of England and her personal guard. ‘I incapacitated the bodyguard but was a little heavy handed in dealing with the Ambassador, caving in his temple while attempting to subdue him.’

Victoria gave a deep sigh, gathering her nightgown around her.

‘The girl, how is she?’

Larkins stuttered, putting his head slightly to one side, listening in to the earphone coiled in and around his left ear. ‘The girl is stable but has severe third degree burns across

her head and left shoulder, significant tissue loss; she has certainly lost eyesight, ears, nose, lips.’ His voice faded out.

The Queen’s voice became clipped. ‘And she was?’

Larkins bit his lip. ‘The Ambassador’s niece.’ He ran his hands over his eyebrows and eyes.

Queen Victoria’s head returned facing towards Torver. ‘You have been played, you know that? When I continue to need you most.’

Torver gave a perfunctory nod. ‘That I realise, their timing was perfect, they knew of the potential and how I would most likely react to the situation.’

A clench of his jaw. ‘Looking back on the last three days of the Iranian visit, my time spent protecting you has found the Ambassador’s niece in your company, ensuring I built up an emotive recognition of the girl.’ He closed his eyes for a moment.

‘I would imagine they would not have expected me to take the life of their Ambassador, but an assault would have been sufficient to remove me from my position within Royal Protection.’

Larkins looked in deepening surprise and confusion between the two, the Queen and her favoured bodyguard. The two had a relationship forged by their time when the Royal Family had been systematically obliterated, whilst Torver would not volunteer any details, those that he had heard from other sources explained the closeness and implicit trust shared between the two.

A quiet voice and knowing look. ‘You are no use to me behind bars.’ She gave a half smile to Torver.

‘I am sorry my Queen.’ Torver’s eyes had lost any sense of emotion. ‘And Larkins, I am also sorry, guard well and heal quickly.’

Larkins felt his head spinning. ‘What, sorry for what?’ He scanned the man in front of him, Torver’s hands pinned behind his back.

‘For this.’ A matter of fact tone, Torver dropped to his haunches, spinning like a top on one leg.

Larkins reacted too slowly, he felt his world shift to the horizontal and then an elbow powered into his solar plexus, air exploded from his body, the goldfish flapping on the wrong side of the fish tank, gasping for oxygen.

His head slid to the side, noting the Queen watching on dispassionately whilst Torver knelt by his side, releasing the key to the handcuffs from his pocket, quiet words thundered through his head.

‘Look after her in my absence; I will not be far away, you understand?’

Larkins eyes connected with Torver, Torver gave a sharp nod seemingly in agreeance with what he had seen, one final look back to the Queen and he left at a slow jogging pace.

Gasping for the available oxygen, Larkins slowly gathered back his ability to breathe. He stretched to gingerly touch the back of his head, good, no blood; he had certainly taken a crack when he had hit the floor. Damn the man, Torver may be getting on in years but he had not seen that coming; in training Torver was slowing down a little now but when it actually counted, now that was something else.

Larkins closed his eyes, trying to bring himself back together, realising that his Queen’s attention had been on him, what must she think?

‘Don’t use that just yet, give Torver the luxury of a few more minutes head start.’ She pointed at the personal electronic alarm Larkins had palmed; she gave a sad smile at the confusion flooding his face.

‘Larkins, if Alex Torver has chosen you as his mentor then I have no doubt in your ability to guard me, if you are even half the man Andrews was then I am in safe hands.’ Victoria sat slowly into the deep pile carpet opposite him.

Looking at the carpet Larkins had a flashback to the acid eating through the wool back in the foreign dignitaries apartment, he shook his head. Surprising himself his voice came out clearly. ‘People have only said good things about Andrews, Torver’s last partner, I certainly feel privileged to have been chosen. Please, my Queen, what has happened today?’ Larkins held the panic button, flicking it between fingers in his left hand.

Victoria gave a snort. ‘Today? Don’t you mean the last eighteen months? Successive attempts to undermine and discredit the Royal Family and myself, one and the same; they do not want to kill me just yet, simply erode away any sense of credibility and dissect those whom we count as allies, a slower much more painful and permanent form of death.’ She paused, clear eyes checking that Larkin was following her. ‘Well, so far down to good judgment, the team and a little luck we have ridden the storm but losing Torver is a big win for them.’ Her voice had become less certain. ‘All things change though, I fear our time with Torver has led me to a natural conclusion, fate can offer opportunities that should be grasped.’

‘What do you want me to do, my highness?’ A quiet certainty had slipped into Larkins tone, he could and would step up; he could do this for the young Queen sat in front of him.

An open smile. ‘First, press that panic button then let’s condemn Torver in sorting out this diplomatic tangle, he can and will look after himself.’

Victoria gave a definite nod, standing up and smoothing down the silken nightgown surrounding her.

Larkins pressed the button between thumb and forefinger, no auditory signal to offer that anything had happened but give it thirty seconds and security would be converging on this position. His expression shifted gears, calmness returned.

‘You want to lead on this?’ Openness to his question, a smile at her answer.

‘I am the Queen, that is my role, anymore silly questions?’

Victoria glanced sideways at him.

You can do this, you will do this; Larkins gave the slightest of nods, he would not let either the Queen or more importantly Torver down, those two could figure out the games being played, he just had to keep Victoria alive, a smile hidden down deep, not a big job then, just to keep the Queen out of harms way. His eyes cleared, attaining a peripheral focus, a false calm descended over him, he gave an involuntary shiver.