

Dead Minus One
Chapter 6
By Thomas Martin
solarpons@mac.com

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Nick enjoyed killing people, and he was not particular who it was. Take tonight, for example. The woman was about 30 -35 years old, brown hair, was once rather nice looking, but had that haggard look of a little too much vodka and maybe other things in her life. She was an easy bar pickup. He used his best sympathetic nods, and just enough "too bad"s. She took him to bed the first night, and he discovered the wonders of sex. The pleasure he received was astounding. She, on the other hand, seemed less enthused as the evening rolled on and he wanted more, and then more. Finally, he asked her for one more position. From where he was, he could reached her neck easily. From there, the training took over. Snap.

He cleaned the apartment of any traces of himself and left, closing the door and locking up, using her key. He dropped it down a sewer. Another unsolved crime in a city full of them.

He went down to the Vladivostok pier, and breathed in the rank odor of ocean, fish, gas and oil. It sent a tingle down him. Every new experience did. Oh, there were memories, of schooling, training, learning to fight already embedded from the day of the awakening. But these. Walks along the ocean. Food. Vodka. Climbs up Mount Kholodilnik, the highest peak near the city. Women. Sex. Reading. Learning more all the time. That's what he needed. He had the basics. He wanted more. They needed more.

How else could he begin to understand? How else could he be a good leader for his people?

And he would be a good leader, well, one of them would be. But there was work to do. He gazed over to the docks where the Russian Pacific fleet lay anchored, the rusting hulks, the older submarines permanently docked.

"Soon enough," he said, not caring if passerbys heard him. "Soon enough." After a final look toward the horizon, he returned to the facility. And to his brothers. There would be other nights.

First the Associating with his five brothers. Then he found he had his first assignment waiting for him. Finally the freedom he was ready for, that one brother had already known.

Moscow.

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She'd set off the alarm only five minutes after she had sat down at her computer. She'd gone to the agency search engine and typed in two words. The screen came back:

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*****  
*   Warning: You do not have proper clearance to view this   *  
*                   information. Do not attempt to access this *  
*                   level again. A permanent note has been   *  
*                   placed in your personnel file.            *  
*****
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"Damn," she said quietly. "Damn." Claggart will see it.

All she had typed in was Seventh Son, using the cyrillic translation software, and up had come the warning. So she tried just looking over Vladivostok businesses on the internet. Nothing. Varieties of names. A person's name? Something close? Nothing. So she thought she'd try-

"What are you doing?"

Well, that didn't take long. She looked up to see Claggart, arms folded, a granite frown chiseled in place.

"I'm trying to do some research here, sir. You're sending me to Russia. I need a lot of background."

"Fine. There's all you need that we know about the nuke strike and the government going haywire over there. We can go as deep as you like, I'll set up what you need. If you need some refresh as far as field work is concerned, we'll do that too. I want my best agent as prepared as possible."

The frown did the best it could to smile, but it only got halfway. Which made it worse. Melissa plowed on.

"But when I ask the search engine for information on Seventh Son -"

"Classified. You don't have clearance. That's it."

"But there's a call from the Defense Minister's office to-"

"Classified, Melissa."

"What's going on in Russia is classified?" she asked. She could swear whatever conversation that had been going on out on the floor had just ground to a halt. Heads peaked out of room, or right at the door, not to be seen. This is the NSA, after all.

The folded arms squeezed themselves tighter as Claggart asserted his position.

"There are levels of clearance. There are some the President does not even have. You're in heady company. Now there's a lot you can do to assist the Russians, and give us a better idea on who or whom is in charge of a place that has a whole lotta nukes left. There are other levels of government to handle other things. Be in my office in twenty minutes, and be prepared with your research. We'll get you squared away."

With a nod of dismissal, Claggart was gone, and Melissa could hear a lot of chairs being moved around in the offices and cubicles near her.

All right. Forget it. Back to work. She sat and waited for her fingers to do something on the keyboard. Instead they sat on ASDF and HJKL. She was trying to process what Claggart had said.

"We're classified, " she mumbled, "they're not. And Claggart can..."

The fingers moved. She typed "The Cell."

The machine requested a password. There were other levels of government to handle other things. Seventh Son was apparently one of them. And this was another, and Claggart and Selznick knew about it.

"Ms. Trown," he said, remaining seated. "wonderful to see you again. General Claggart has told me so much about you. He's quite proud of you."

He grinned quick and then went stoic as if the whole process caused him pain. Claggart sat near his compatriot, and indicated Melissa to sit between them. She smoothed her light tan skirt as she sat.

Selznick looked at Claggart who nodded slightly. The round faced Selznick let out a sigh, as if fighting the entire idea of being in this room, and then turned to Melissa.

"Ms. Trown, what do you know about cloning?"

"Carl, be very careful." Claggart said with an I-really-mean-it look. If Selznick saw it, it never registered outwardly. He waited for Melissa's response.

"Uh, no sir. I mean I know about the sheep and some other animals, but the rest is just science fiction."

She looked at both generals.

"Isn't it?"

Selznick said nothing, keeping his arms on the table and touching his fingers lightly. He was giving Claggart the honors. But Claggart just looked out the window, maybe counting the same cars.

"Melissa, pay no attention to what General Selznick was saying. We're here to discuss the Russians and what you -"

"No, we're not, Bill" Selznick interrupted. "If you were having a regular briefing you'd have all the experts here chipping in their two cents worth like you normally do. We agreed, Bill, that's you and I, last night, that Ms. Trown would go to investigate Seventh Son in Russia. Why are you changing your mind?"

Claggart hesitated. Selznick gave him a moment, then continued

"Bill, it's too late. Once Ms. Trown heard the name Seventh Son, and then saw how you reacted to her knowledge, the game was up. She's an excellent agent, and she read it on your face, didn't you, Ms. Trown?"

Claggart now had his "if I had a rocket launcher" look. Of course, Melissa had heard the quiet swearing when the Seventh Son named was mentioned. But Claggart swore at ill fitting paper clips, too.

"I'm sorry," she said, trying to play referee. "All I know is that there was a phone call placed from an apartment in Moscow to a place that is identified as Seventh Son in Vladivostok. That's it. Attempts to access the number since have failed. Now if you call it you get an operator saying the line is down. You can try it yourself. I have a number of times. Hell, I even called the Russian embassy and had them try it. Same thing. They know nothing about level 12 security, not even the guy we know is the intelligence officer, not that they'd tell me even now. Even my best contacts know in our government know nothing."

Both generals sat, the testosterone level at the cut-it-with-a-chainsaw level. Melissa just what she helled it and pressed on.

When she got home, she finished packing, grabbed a bite to eat, and then flipped open her laptop. Her chat software was on and she was soon talking to her sister. Nothing big, just a trip for business, yes, I'll be careful, how are the girls? All that. She loved it. They signed off.

She was about to turn the machine off to pack it for the trip when a message appeared on the desktop.

"The clones are real."

She peered at it for a moment.

"Who are you?", she typed.

"The clones are here, the clones are everywhere."

"This is not funny." she responded. Who is this nut?

"Save Irina. Save the world. Vladivostok."

"Stop it." She started to reach for the off button, but another message came.

"Save the clones. Kill the clones."

She turned the machine off. Someone had gotten into her network. Probably easy enough for a good hacker despite government firewalls. She knew people who could, but to focus just on her instead of reeking damage on machine upon machine? She flipped on the machine again, this time keeping the network off. She looked at her screen. There had been one more message yet.

"I comply."