

Title (up to 20 words) - Curveball

Strapline (up to 40 words) -

Copy (between 900 and 1000 words) - Shots of noise pierced what should have been silence. The screaming and yelling of the crowd reverberated off surrounding buildings as the tumultuous mass of warm, sweaty bodies swayed left, stumbled right and careered forwards as one huge creature. Placards bearing a wide range of mildly amusing expletives and sensational slogans rallying against the war jostled and fought to gain coverage from reporters. Painted faces and luminous clothing announced the harsh opinions of the crowd: No War In Iraq! Amongst the cat-calling and whistling, a man perched on a crumbling wall, glancing up every few minutes as if clearly hearing something through the indistinguishable wall of noise travelling like a barricade through London City. His mousey hair was a rats' nest upon his head, a clear rift where his hand had run, agitated, through the messy curls. He had a regular face, a familiar face, some might say. On his feet he wore a pair of heavy-duty, tarnished black boots, fully accessorised with a pair of fraying laces. His clothes bore the look of one who had travelled far, and indeed he had, further than he should have done in the last few months.

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Lennard has never really had a talent for getting people to follow his orders without bribery first. Well, not with me. But my whole life's a bribe, a shady deal, formed purely out of his wishes. I can't move from his commands, or they're dead, or we're all dead. Which means I do what he tells me to do.

It takes about a month to get to Germany, travelling all the long routes to avoid being spotted, keeping my head down, focusing on the task ahead. It's not hard; I trained for this. The beauty of the trip overwhelms me; it's ironic really, but I enjoy it anyway, sapping up the shimmering emerald lagoons; barren and haunting wastelands; luscious, bright meadows; majestic mountains slicing gashes through the sky, slitting the night into pieces, holding the power I long to possess. But all too soon I get there, do my research, plan my mission. Murdering Curveball.

I don't want to do this. I never wanted to work for Lennard in the first place; I stole a loaf of bread from the market, and to stop the murder of my family, in cold blood, in front of me, I have had to work for him as a spy, for life. What else could I do? I don't think I'm a murderer though, not ready to see my victim's scream of terror cut short, the colour draining from his face, the spark in his eyes extinguished as though he were little more than a brief flame, his short

existence snubbed out like a candle, his blood pooling around him in a protective yet unforgiving lake, his family left to fend for themselves, and so soon after he'd built a new life for himself. I remind myself, however, that it's his fault I'm in this position; he is the Iraqi defector, the one who's spreading lies about 'Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction'. He needs to be quietened, stopped before anyone else hears his tales; it's gone too far already.

So I break in to his home office, smash the windows with all the power I can muster. The years spent in tense agony come down to this moment, my future resting on a fine line of uncertainty. The gun is raised to Curveball's forehead. Then he speaks. And that's the beginning of the end.

"You can't do this, you know", he says, a sly grin pulling at the corners of his mouth. "I know you've never really felt ready. None of the people Hussein employs ever do. That's why I left. I needed a new life, so I came to Germany, sought asylum."

I have to stop him. I can't stop him. He carries on.

"You don't have to shoot me; you could get out of this snare he's got you in and escape, build a new life somewhere else. It sounds like a dream, doesn't it?"

I can't let him do this to me. I must carry out my orders, or my family will die.

"I can get you to England, and from there you can go anywhere, explore the world. You can have everything you need. This is what power feels like, see how well I've fared? Well, you could do the same."

Imagine living my own life, free from a life of spying - no. I can't be misled by this stranger. I need to kill him now or it will all go wrong. Trembling, I place my finger tentatively on the trigger, and still he watches my every move with a taunting smile plastered onto his triumphant face.

"Go on", he bribes, "You know what will happen when I'm dead; you'll get back to Lennard, have another mission. Following me, the possibilities are endless. The power we'd have - I an Iraqi defector, you a spy for Hussein, through his aide, Lennard - could allow us to do anything. We'd hold the power to do anything, we could start a war, start an uprising, or you could have a safe life. It's your choice."

He holds out a sheet of crisp, white paper; fake ID, so close, mine for the taking. I reach out, but he stops me, handing over a train ticket, along with details of a man, Duncan Sheath. I can't believe I'm really doing this; I'll be killed if I'm found.

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Curveball smiled, a secretive, seductive smile, one that he only turned on for those *special* occasions. He sat on a balcony, with several other mediocre gentlemen, overlooking the march streaming through the London streets. "Yes", whispered Curveball, "I knew he would come, searching for a way out. He took it, and now look what's happened." Cackling in response,

Curveball's cohorts turned, like vultures seeking out their prey, to the man, darting through the bodies, chasing after a lost dream.