

## **Dark Running**

*By Justin R. Macumber*

Captain Charlie Sheppard awoke in darkness. From the chill he felt beneath his right cheek he guessed that he was lying face down on a concrete floor. His arms were pressed close to his sides, and his wrists were bound together behind his back in metal cuffs so tight they nearly cut off his circulation. Slipping out of them without cutting off several fingers first would be impossible.

With a Herculean effort his sluggish mind worked to remember what had happened to him. The last thing he could recall was walking into his office deep in the heart of Fort Carson, Colorado. As an officer in the 10th Special Forces Group, he had a mountain of reports and forms on his desk that needed dealing with. The thought of tackling them had sat in his mind like a dark cloud during the morning drive onto the base. But, once he entered the building and turned down Hall C, there his memories ended.

Struggling, he rocked himself back and forth until he was able to sit up. As he moved, the sound of jingling metal and a greater sense of weight to his restraints told him that he was chained as well as cuffed. A few test pulls told him that the chain was secured to the floor behind him. His legs were free, but that didn't mean much.

In the darkness he heard what sounded like a leaky pipe dripping off to his left, and small creatures scurrying through the walls around him, their tiny claws and teeth busily working. He leaned forward and strained his ears, but there was nothing more to hear.

Grunting, Charlie shifted his legs around and rose to his feet. His muscles bunched into

knots as he pulled on his chain, but the bolt that secured him to the floor didn't budge. He whipped the chain back and forth, up and down, all the while hoping to feel even the slightest bit of give, but several minutes later all he had to show for his efforts were aching wrists and a body covered in sweat.

Knowing he would never be able to escape on his own, he fumbled through the pitch black area around him, trying to feel for anything within reach that he might use to help himself. Half a minute into his search a key scraped into a lock off to his right. Charlie turned to face whatever was coming, determined to not show any fear.

The light that rushed into the room when the door opened blinded him. His eyes watered, and he pressed his eyelids closed to block it out. He then heard what sounded like a person being shoved into the room with him, their words muffled, the shuffling of their feet frantic. He blinked several times, and when his eyes finally adjusted, he looked to see who had entered the room. When he did, the bottom of his stomach dropped out.

"Oh my god! Jane, honey, are you okay?" His words boomed in the small enclosure of the room.

Charlie's wife nodded, but then she shook her head as tears streamed from her bloodshot eyes. Her dark black hair was tousled into an angry mess, the long, thick curls hanging in her face like funeral drapes. She was dressed in the same jeans and flower print t-shirt he'd last seen her wearing, but the material was dirty and frayed. Several scrapes marred the skin of her arms and face. The marks seemed superficial, though that did nothing to dampen his rage. A stripe of black tape was laid across her mouth.

A figure stood behind his wife, but Charlie couldn't see any of his features clearly, as the outside light bloomed too harshly around his head, and Jane's hair obscured what was left. The

way the man stood with silent confidence told Charlie he was a soldier, though his identity and purpose was a mystery. Reaching around his wife's head, the man jerked the tape away from her mouth and then pushed her forward while he closed the door he'd come through. The soldier then flipped a switch, and a bulb over Charlie's head lit up, filling the small room with feeble light.

Jane stumbled into Charlie, her balance thrown off by the cuffs binding her wrists in front of her. His standing body helped keep her on her feet. He felt her trembling against him, sobs racking through her in waves.

"Charlie, what's going on?" she asked, her words having difficulty leaving her throat.

"I don't know," he replied. "The last thing I remember is going to my office. After that... nothing."

Jane looked up at her husband through watery eyes. "I was in the back bedroom, putting away some of my summer clothes. There was a loud bang, people were shouting, and then a bag or something was thrown over my head. I thought... I thought they were going to kill me. It was terrible. I fought as much as I could, but there were too many of them."

A hard lump formed in the hollow of Charlie's throat and sat like a stone, making it hard for him to breathe or think. He wanted to embrace his wife, to comfort her, but her restraints made that impossible. All he could offer her were words.

"It's okay, honey. I know it was terrible, but now you're here with me. I won't let anything happen to you."

The soldier standing near the door chuckled, the sound thick and dry. When Charlie looked up at him, his eyes had adjusted enough to give him a clearer picture of the man. He was a touch over six feet tall, and looked to weigh an easy 220 pounds. His face was dark, lined with

deep crags that split his visage like a weathered rock. A full moustache covered his upper lip, giving him a slightly Slavic look. His clothes were all black and lacked any sort of identifying insignia. A large knife was strapped to his leg, and a pistol was holstered at his side. From where Charlie sat it looked like a GSh-18, making him possibly Russian military. If he had to guess, he figured the man for Spetsnaz.

"If you hurt her –" Charlie began to say before the soldier stepped forward in a rush and slammed the back of his right hand across his face in a thunderous slap. Charlie stumbled to his knees.

"You are in no position to make threats or demands," the soldier said as he resumed his place near the door and massaged his knuckles. His voice, like his appearance, painted him as Russian, possibly Georgian by the accent.

"Then what is it you want?" Charlie asked. A pain had settled into his jaw, but he felt lucky it wasn't broken.

The soldier stared down at him with eyes like stones, but he didn't say a word.

"They told me they want answers," Jane said between sobs as she knelt down to the floor. "When they took me they said they had questions, and I was going to help them get the answers they wanted."

"Questions?" Charlie replied, scooting as much as he could next to his wife. "What kind of questions?"

Jane looked down at her manacled hands and ran shaking fingers across the torn hem of her shirt as a rush of tears spilled down her face to blot the frayed blouse. After a few seconds she sniffled and said, "What have you gotten me into, Charlie? What have you done?"

Regret and anger boiled in Charlie's chest. If hatred could kill, the soldier near the door

would have fallen to the ground in a lifeless heap when Charlie turned to look at him. "I've done a lot of things, honey," he said. "Some I'm proud of, and some I'm not."

"Oh god," she sobbed. "Oh god."

Silence descended over the small, dank room like a woolen blanket, and Charlie felt his throat tighten as he looked at his terrified wife. She seemed to pull away from him little by little as the seconds ticked past. He then shifted his eyes up at the soldier behind her. Through his clinched jaw he said, "Tell me who you are. You're obviously professionals. Taking Jane from our home is one thing, but getting into a secured military installation and kidnapping a seasoned covert ops officer is quite another. If I had to guess, I'd say you're GRU, but accents can be faked. Who are you, and what is that you want?"

The soldier's flat, lifeless eyes bored down on him like dead stars, and when he spoke, his words were said without any hint of mercy or humanity. "Tell me about Marigold."

The effect of his words was like cold water splashed across Charlie's mind, and he unconsciously shuffled backward. He could feel the color draining from his face.

"Marigold?" he managed to reply. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

His reply had barely finished leaving his lips before the soldier drew his pistol and rammed the barrel of it against the side of his wife's head. Jane screamed and tried to pull away, but the man grabbed a fistful of her hair and shifted her back into place.

"Tell me about Marigold," the soldier said, his voice raised. Veins along his neck throbbed. "If I have to ask again, it will be after your wife's brains have been blown across your face."

Charlie looked at his terrified wife, trying to figure out a way to comfort her while tears and snot poured down her face. Her eyes were wild things, racing from him to the man above her

and back again in an endless loop. He'd never seen her look so scared, even when their son had fallen from a tree and broken both his arms. She'd held his limp body close to her, cried all through the night while he was tended to and made well again, but that was nothing compared to the horror that filled her entire being at that moment. Seeing it, Charlie felt the wheels of mind slip their tracks, and without warning he was transported mentally backward in time, to a moment when he was standing in the rubble of what had once been a home. Nothing was as it seemed, nothing was as it was supposed to be. He remembered fire and screams, freezing cold turned into a summer breeze, and then his thoughts became a jumble. He lowered his forehead in pain, and his eyes squeezed closed.

*I'm running.*

The words entered Charlie's mind like a memory from a previous life. He felt them tumbling through his thoughts, strange and yet aching familiar.

*I don't know where I'm running to, or what I'm running from, but I have to keep running.*

He sensed shadowy trees whipping past him in the dark silence of twilight, and in the sky above him a pale moon spilled weak light into the gloom. Opening his eyes, he saw his wife sitting before him in her tattered clothes, but he also saw a forest blanketed in snow. The images trembling against each other like warped mirrors sent swinging in a breeze.

"Marigold was a codename," he mumbled, shaking his head to clear it. The more he tried to recall the events, the murkier they became. Bile rose in his throat.

"A codename for what?" the soldier asked. His hold on Jane's hair loosened, but his gun didn't waiver an inch.

Charlie opened his mouth, but instead of speaking, he vomited onto the floor. As another wave of nausea rushed through him, Jane pushed away from the soldier to kneel next to him. Her

cool hands soothed his hot forehead as best she could. The soldier didn't make a move to reclaim her, instead letting his gun now cover them both.

"I don't know," Charlie said once he had control over his body again.

"Just tell them what they want," Jane said in a soft sob. "Please, get us out of here."

He rubbed his mouth against his right shoulder, trying to clean the sick away from his face. "I... I don't... I'm having a hard time... remembering anything."

Jane rolled over until she was in a sitting position, and she drew her knees up to her chin. She seemed so small and frail to Charlie, and despite the sickness he felt inside, his instinct was to reach out and hold her. The manacles that locked his arms behind him kept him from following through.

"If you will not answer, then you are useless to us," the soldier said as he took his pistol in a two-handed grip. "And useless things are disposed of."

Charlie again felt the world twist on its axis.

*An explosion erupts in the distance behind me, and a wave of heat presses into my back. I stumble as it rolls past me. The thunder of it shakes the season's last remaining leaves from skeletal branches, and they fall fitfully to the frosty ground around me. I stop running and turn to look back the way I came. Shifting flames dance where my home once stood.*

"I'm trying!" Charlie yelled. "All right? There's this... this fog, in my brain, and I don't... I just don't know."

Jane leaned toward her husband. He could feel her tear-soaked blouse press against his arm. "You have to tell them something," she pleaded. "I want to go home."

He thought as hard as he could, and his eyes moved rapidly back and forth like a machine searching through a library of data. Sweat dropped from his nose, and his muscles shook. He

only realized he had been holding his breath when his lungs began to burn.

"It's a blank," he told her in a rush of expelled breath, his voice raspy and lifeless.

"There's just nothing there."

The soldier grabbed Jane by her shoulders and lifted her into the air. She kicked and screamed and bucked, but her protests were nothing in the face of his strength. Savagely the soldier punched her in her side, doubling her over in a scream of pain before he yanked her head back up by her hair and drove his elbow into her neck. The sight and sound of her beating drove Charlie to his feet. He pulled at his chains with everything he had and his blood burned in his veins. As the soldier dropped his wife to the floor with another punch, Charlie's mind erupted in alien thoughts again, and he collapsed into an impotent heap.

*The heat of the flames that consume my home grows as I near the timberline that borders it. Melted frost has turned the ground to mush, and it squishes between my toes. Burned bits of wood, glass, and paper litter the ground. Smoke from smoldering wood fills my nose, but beneath it is the scent of charred meat.*

Charlie didn't know how much time went past, as seconds and minutes had ceased to have much meaning, but eventually his mind was his own once more. He looked at Jane, who was on the floor next to him, and she was worse than before. Much worse. Several cuts and bruises were on her arms and face, and her clothes were in shreds. Charlie's heart broke. His tears joined his sweat and vomit on the floor.

"I'm so sorry," he gasped. "I'm so, so sorry."

"Then help her," the soldier said as he towered over them. "Tell me what I want to know."

As he looked at his wife Charlie feared it would be the last time he would ever do so. He

saw the same fear mirrored back at him in her trembling eyes.

"Honey, I don't -"

The last word of his sentence was barely past his lips when the soldier reached down with his free hand and unsheathed a long-bladed knife that was strapped to his leg. The blade winked in the light like a dragon's eye, and moments later it was placed against his wife's neck as he wrestled her up against his body. Charlie's mind quaked in his skull.

*I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. I turn my head toward it and see a man moving away from the tree line. He's dressed all in black, but in his hands is a rifle. His movements are careful, silent, and precise. 'I'm not here,' I think to myself intently. 'I'm not here, I'm not here, I'm not here.'*

"Don't hurt her!" Charlie bellowed. "She doesn't know anything! She's innocent! I'm the one you should be hurting, not her!"

A thin stream of blood appeared below the knife's edge, and Jane gasped.

"I don't know anything!" he cried out. "How many times can I say it? I don't know what you want!"

The stream widened, and his wife shrieked. Charlie strained forward against his chains, his eyes locked on the red rivulets that clashed garishly with the pale skin of her neck. His heart pounded in his ears. But, as he was beginning to black out from the exertion, the fog in his mind lifted.

"Stop!" he said. "Stop hurting her. I think... I think I remember."

The blade moved away from Jane's neck an inch. She wept, and every sob pulled another cobweb from his mind.

"If I tell you what you want to know, will you promise to stop hurting her?"

The soldier said nothing, but he released his hold on her, and she fell weeping to the floor. Charlie knew it was as close to an answer as he was going to get, so he swallowed and began speaking, breaking every military oath he'd ever taken while he did so.

"MARIGOLD was an operation given to me a little over a year ago. Our orders were to find and capture Doctor Nathan Zener. We weren't given specifics about the nature of his work, but from the notes we had it seemed like he was working on the fringes of science. Paranormal stuff. Absolute crap. But, someone upstairs wanted to know more, so I was told to take my team and find him. It took awhile, but we eventually tracked him to a house deep in the forests of the south Ural Mountains. After we setup a recon post we saw that he had a handful of people working with him. There were five, in all: four adults and a child. The kid couldn't have been older than thirteen. Once we knew the lay of the land, we attempted to infiltrate the facility."

Jane settled onto her right hip and said, "People died, didn't they." It wasn't a question.

"I... there was an explosion." Charlie shook his head fiercely. "No, an alarm. We must have missed a motion sensor, because when we closed on the house, floodlights lit up all around the building and an alarm rang out. We shot teargas into the front rooms, but about ten seconds later the whole building blew apart."

"You killed all those people?" Jane asked, her voice quivering.

"No," Charlie replied. "Couldn't have been us. Teargas canisters don't contain explosives. Our mission was to capture Doctor Zener and secure whatever research he had with him. Blowing up the house wouldn't have accomplished that. They must have triggered a failsafe. Capture's not an option for some people. Because of that, we didn't find much. A few scraps of paper, a toasted hard drive, but that was it."

"What about the doctor and his people?"

*In spite of my love, I can't move. Fear roots me as solidly to the ground as the trees that stand around me. My heart calls out to my father so loudly that it's like a trumpet in my ears, but my feet won't budge, and my hands hang mutely at my side. In the wreckage, the dark figure leans down over my father. As my mind fills with rage I think, 'Go away! There's nothing for you here! Leave us alone!'*

Charlie squeezed his eyes closed and shook his head. "Zener died seconds after I found his body. There was nothing I could do. He tried to tell me something, but his words were just... death rattles in his throat."

"What about the rest of them?" the soldier asked in a voice that betrayed a hint of anger. "What about the child?"

"It was... horrible. The adults were in the rubble. What was left of them anyway. As for the boy... we... I don't remember. I guess we assumed he died in the explosion. Buried under debris. We... didn't look for him."

The soldier's grip on his knife tightened, and the overhead light flashed against the blade. "Who sent you after him?" he asked. "Who gave you your orders?"

"Colonel Stantz hands down my missions, but he gets them from people higher on the food chain, and who exactly that might have been... I don't know."

"Think!" the soldier yelled, his face dark red and his mustache twitching. "Who would have wanted Doctor Zener found?"

Charlie closed his eyes to block out the world around him as he concentrated, hoping to find answers somewhere in the mist. After a minute he said, "It... it might have been General Cuse. There've been rumors for years that... this is so stupid... that he's looking for a way to develop psychic operatives. Everyone I know has laughed it off. I mean, who could believe such

nonsense? But, if anyone would have wanted to know what Doctor Zener was up to, it would be Cuse."

Jane sat back on her heels, and for the first time in what seemed like years to Charlie, she wasn't crying. Her face took on a serene expression.

"Thank you, Charlie," she said. "That was what I needed to know."

"Wha...?" Charlie stammered before pain lanced through his skull. His vision blurred and his stomach lurched upward. Looking down, the concrete beneath his feet seemed to melt away, revealing black and white floor tiles. Turning his head he saw the dank walls and rusted pipes of the room fall away like leaves in autumn, revealing the bare white walls and military issue grey filling cabinets of his office. Behind him, the cuffs that bound his hands dissolved into nothingness.

Charlie couldn't believe what he was witnessing, but when he looked to his wife for answers, she was no longer there. In her place stood a boy, his eyes heavy with loss. He seemed familiar, and yet not, like someone he'd once caught out of the corner of his eye in passing. The soldier behind him vanished in a puff of grey smoke.

"Who...?" Charlie asked. His brain reeled in confusion, and he absentmindedly lifted himself into the desk chair that had materialized beside him. "Why?"

The boy shook his head. "It doesn't matter, Charlie. In a few seconds you won't remember this at all. Originally I'd planned on killing you, for what you did to me and my father, but now I know the truth. It was his pride that killed him, not you. I always thought he was so strong, but maybe... maybe I was wrong."

"Who are you?"

"A figment of your imagination," the boy answered. "Go back to sleep, Charlie. Go to

sleep and dream. When you wake up in a few hours, you're going to feel refreshed, and then you're going to call your wife and tell her you love her. You're going to forget all about me again, and you're going to forget about Marigold. By the time I'm done, no one else will remember it either."

"You're him, aren't you? The boy with Doctor Zener."

The youth nodded. "My name is Jacob. Doctor Zener was my father, or as close as I ever had to one."

"How... how did you find me? What's happening here?"

Jacob looked at Charlie as he considered the questions asked of him. After several moments he said, "I'm a telepath. Father was helping me to develop my ability. When you and your men stormed the house, he pushed me out the back and told me to run. I did. When the house blew up, I went back, but by then it was too late. I tried to hide myself from you, reaching into your mind to make you not see me, to push you away. I was unprepared, though. I was clumsy, and I made a mess of things in your head. That's why I had to approach you this way, using the face of your wife, making you believe she was in danger. It made you focus, concentrate. I had to make you break through the fog I'd accidentally created. You had to pull it all together yourself."

Charlie didn't want to believe what he was hearing, but part of him knew it had to be the truth. As strange as it was, it was the only thing that made sense. "That doesn't answer how you found me."

"Finding you was easy," Jacob said, shrugging. "You'd be surprised how loudly people think, especially people who want to keep their secrets the most. Getting here, though, took time. Far too much time."

"But why? Why go through all that?"

Jacob's eyes dropped. "My father might not have been the man I thought he was, but he deserved better than what he got. I have to make sure that the person who took him from me pays for what they did."

"You mean General Cuse? You can't possibly think you can get to him."

Jacob laughed. "Why not? I got to you, didn't I? I never knew what I was capable of before my father died, but the general has helped open my eyes. He deserves to see what he's created. Now stop asking questions you'll never remember the answers to, and go to sleep. Sleep and forget."

Charlie wanted to reach out and stop the boy from leaving, but invisible hands pressed him back into his chair. Several heartbeats later his eyes were closed and he began to dream of fire and pain and sadness.

*I feel the heat of the smoldering wood as I dash to my father's side, and flames scorch my bed clothes, but I ignore all of it. Within moments I'm on my knees beside him, holding his fragile head which had once contained so many wondrous thoughts. Soot has darkened the bald dome of his skull, but it washes away as I take him into my arms and cry. Hours later the tears finally stop falling, and when they do, anger flows in their place. To the east, a dark sun begins to rise, and again I run.*

**The End**