

02

Night-vision green. A truck moved through highway traffic of phosphor images, semi-trucks and trailers, passenger cars, walking men, indistinct forms of women draped in cloth and veils. Rectangles of shops, neon signs in Arabic script blurred white against the chaos of green images and the electronic black of the night --

"Floyd! You got the camera on them?"

"Yeah, I got it on them." Through the viewfinder, Floyd locked the re-engineered electronics of the BetaCam on the mismatched backdoors of the old Mercedes step-van. He kept the viewfinder on the Mercedes as the green rectangle of the old truck lurched through the late-night traffic.

Mini-buses and taxis wove through the lanes, the step-van stopping and starting, smoke clouding from its exhaust. At the side of the highway, images of crowds, donkey-carts, and market stalls played random patterns of green and black. Dust from the pavement swirled green.

A hundred meters behind the Mercedes truck, Floyd crouched on the cargo deck of a new rental van. He aimed the BetaCam between the front seats. The Mercedes truck continued through traffic. Floyd clicked off the power, lowered the BetaCam. Easing his legs between the seats, he retook the passenger seat.

"I can't shoot from back there. All I get is straight ahead. And we can't use this camera in the front. Not even at night. Absolutely cannot hide it."

The driver told Floyd: "Stay in the back. Shoot between the seats."

"Forget it, this isn't it. Where ever they're going, they're not going for the semtex. Would he send out those two skinny little losers to load it? A thousand kilos? They couldn't do it."

"I want that camera on them."

"Waste of battery, waste of tape. They make a stop, I've got the Nikon."

"Nikon doesn't have night vision."

"Night vision won't work for facial identification."

"What about the Canon video?"

"Nikon. Fast lens. I've got a chance at faces."

"Nikon, BetaCam. Whatever is required. Keep a camera ready. We need faces for identification."

"Degrev, you sound like the Skyman. 'Whatever is required.'" Floyd concealed the BetaCam under a black jacket. The jacket displayed the logo of the International Video Corporation.

Blond, as tan as a California surfer, Floyd wore a backwards baseball cap with the logo of the IVC. Stenciled red spray paint letters marked TV over his t-shirt logo of the IVC. In the heat of Sudan, Floyd had torn away the sleeves of the t-shirt to cool his arms and to display his muscles. His IVC leisure slacks showed days of sweat and dirt.

Vanities clicked on his wrists: a counterfeit Rolex purchased in Singapore, a silver Sri Lankan snakechain bracelet, and the brilliant colors of a bracelet woven of thread in the mountains of Guatemala.

Ahead, the Mercedes braked for an oncoming taxi, then turned right, leaving the north/south highway for an intersecting avenue.

Degrev told Floyd again, "Camera ready!"

"It is ready. And I'm ready." Floyd turned to the back of the van. "Redcard! You ready? Snake? Yeah, they're ready. Combat meritorious Staff Sergeant Degrev, are you ready?"

"Молчать ... no more of that talk. ممنوع"

"Yeah, you're ready. You're always ready. We're all ready and we been ready for two days and nights and this is not it."

Degrev drove the rental van. Accelerating, he guided the van between a semi-truck/trailer and a group of workmen carrying tools. A woman and child stepped into the road. Degrev leaned on the horn and closed the distance to the corner. He whipped around a three-wheel motor rickshaw, slowed, turned right, regained his sight of the Mercedes step-van two hundred meters ahead in the darkness of overarching trees.

"If this isn't it, why isn't it? He sent them out. Why?" Degrev had defined, angular features. Sky-blue eyes contrasted his dark skin and black hair combed straight back. Like Floyd, he wore the t-shirt and leisure slacks of the I V C. Unlike Floyd, he did not need to tear off the sleeves to display his muscles -- his arms and shoulders stretched the shirt, his neck filled the collar.

"The four work at the warehouse," Degrev calculated out loud. As he spoke, he slowed, allowed a Fiat taxi to veer in front of the rental van. The van headlights illuminated the backseat of the taxi, revealing two Muslim women shrouded in black hejab and nikob -- the black gown, black head covering, and black face mask of Muslim women following ancient tribal customs. The women reviewed a spreadsheet displayed on a laptop computer screen.

"After the warehouse closed," Degrev continued. "Two walked out. That was hours ago. Now the other two come out in the truck. Why did the sheikh send them out?"

Floyd: "They're not making a delivery. That truck's empty. Springs are trash. Truck's shaking like a dog."

Degrev: "Does he know we're watching them? Did he send them out to run us in circles? And a truck comes in with the semtex? We need another squad, another car watching the warehouse."

"Tell it to the Skyman."

"Told him."

"Three more cars and trucks. Squads to work the ---"

"Told him."

" -- and some time off to meet women."

"Забудь... что за женщина может тебя хотеть?"

"أنا أمريكي. جئت إلى بلدكم بحثاً عن المرأة."
"انه ممنوع."

"All good times are forbidden. And they don't know we're on them. They're losers, they don't circle, they don't even look in the mirror."

"We don't know what they know. Keep your eyes on that truck. Camera ready."

Static and voices came from a scanner monitoring radio frequencies. They heard quick idiomatic Arabic.

Degrev: "Asad! What is it? Salazar! Who's behind us?"

Asad spoke from the back of the van: "Patrol. Military."

Degrev: "On us?"

Asad: "No. Not on us. Out there. Somewhere."

Degrev: "They looking for foreigners? Americans?"

Asad: "I only understood numbers. A code for their location. A code on a map. They've got that map. I don't."

The other men rode in the cargo area of the van. Asad and Salazar sat on equipment cases. They monitored electronics mounted on an improvised rack of PVC pipe. The rack of electronics ran from behind the driver's seat to the back doors. Along the length of the rack, LED lights flickered. Cable-ties secured components. Loops of cable ties secured wiring and cords. Tape held flex-extension-LED-lights over the two men.

In the center of the cargo area, his back to the sliding steel door, Asad faced an array of multiple radios and scanners. He sat on a fiberglass equipment case.

Like the Degrev and Floyd in the front seats, Asad wore the uniform of an IVC t-shirt and slacks. He also wore a Muslim prayer cap over his swept-back hair. With his almost-blond hair, café-au-lait skin, he looked both Arab and European.

Degrev shouted out again. "Salazar! What do you see behind us? Salazar!"

At the back of the van, Salazar monitored a satellite digital/voice link as he checked and rechecked a work table of microphones, cameras, radios. A flat-panel video screen displayed a global position grid. Two other flat-panel screens displayed local television stations --- solemn announcers alternating with images of riots, the Iraq war, Palestinian funerals, corpses, maimed children, men and women wailing. Arabic script ran across the screens.

Salazar had gloss-black hair and a hawk nose. His t-shirt declared his Mexican ancestry with an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the image, a frame of roses surrounded the incarnation of Mary who held an unconscious campesino in her arms. "Mi Vida Está En Tus Manos."

Turning from the screens, Salazar glanced out the rear windows of the van. He saw headlights fanning through dust as taxis maneuvered. A motorcycle bounced over the broken pavement, the single headlight a vertical fan through the dust and smoke. At the side of the avenue, a donkey pulled a cart. A young boy rode on the back of the donkey.

Salazar: "Al Mukhabart! On war horses. A calvary attack of muharabat. Coming to cut off the heads of the infidels."

"المخابرات؟"

Floyd: "يقتل الكافر؟"

"أنا لست كافر" Degrev studied his rear-view mirrors. "What are you talking about? I don't see horses --"

“Then why’d you ask me?” As if he played a drum set, Salazar beat a bass beat with his heels, then tapped imaginary drum sticks across his display screens. “Mu - har - ra - baat! Mu - har - ra - baat! Ma-ta-la, la mu - hara --“ He hit an imaginary cymbal. “Baat.”

“Snakeman,” Floyd called out. “My Stratocaster. I want to write a song. About Sudan. And my love for the desert --“ He sang out an improvised stanza. “The dust, the wind, the cars, the nights without the moon or stars, Sudan, my love for it, this desert wonderland of sand and trash and shit --“

Degrev: “Eyes on the truck.”

Salazar shouted. “I don’t want hear your cowboy dog howling.”

To the melody of ‘Secret Agent Man,’ Floyd sang out. “Secret Recon man, Secret Recon man, they’ve taken ‘way your life --“

Degrev: “Classified! Quit that talk.”

Floyd corrected his lines. “Secret cam’ra man, secret cam’ra man -- they’ve taken ‘way your life and sent you to Sudan.”

Degrev: “Quiet. You’re a volunteer. Eyes on the truck.”

Floyd: “I outrank a volunteer. I’m a contractor. I volunteered and resigned, I came back and I signed. Secret Recon man, you signed away Iraq and you came back on contract.”

Degrev: “Молчать!”

Traffic slowed, horns sounded where the avenue intersected a boulevard. The Mercedes met stalled traffic. Taxis and mini-buses veered into open spaces. Silhouettes of men drifted through dust red with brake lights. The silhouettes stopped traffic, drivers leaned on their horns. The pause allowed the Mercedes to turn again. Degrev waited. A white van -- much like the rental van he drove -- lurched into the lane. Two mini-vans accelerated, braked behind the white van, Degrev accelerated into a gap, then braked to a slow roll past

groups of men.

Ahead, the Mercedes delivery truck stopped. A crowd blocked a lane of traffic. Along the curb, groups of men stood around the pushcarts of vendors selling bottled drinks. The clothing of the men and boys intermixed North African traditional clothing with Arabic and European styles. Some men wore the shoulder-to-ankle white cotton robe of North Africa, the jalibeyya. Others wore the jalibeyya with European sport coats or the jackets of soccer teams. Young men wore modern jeans and shirts. Many men wore company uniforms. All the men wore prayer caps.

Floyd: "Where's the women? Look out there. There's no women in the crowd. No women. لا سيدات What goes on here?"

Degrev allowed a three-wheel scooter-taxi to cut into the lane, then a mini-bus. He closed the distance, putting the bumper of the van within a meter of the mini-bus. In the back of the mini-bus, a woman robed in radiant fuchsia glanced at the foreigners.

Floyd waved. "A woman! She looked at me. That lady! Look at those colors. Black and beautiful. I'm in love."

Raising a white veil patterned with purple flowers over her face, the woman turned away.

"Beautiful! Black, white, purple, pink. Nikon moment! Where's my Nikon! A woman as dark as the night. It's a moment for digital color and light."

"Sharia law, you touch her, they cut off your hands."

"A photo. She won't even know."

"They'll cut out your eyes. Keep your eyes on the truck," Degrev repeated.

"What is this?" Floyd asked. He scanned banners hanging on fences and overhead cables. Wind flagged the banners. On iron fences, the lengths of white canvas displayed Arabic calligraphy. Other banners flapped

overhead on high cables. The angle did not allow Degrev and Floyd to see the overhead banners. Degrev struggled to read the Arabic script on the fences.

“Sheikh ... that’s an old fool or a religious leader ... whoever ... will speak ... Iraq ... I don’t know those other words and that’s the date, the time. Tonight. Was tonight. It’s over.”

“Hey, fools.” Floyd looked at the crowd of men. “Want to hear about Iraq? I’ll tell you. Almost as much dust as Sudan.”

“Classified. You won’t tell them anything. You were never there.”

“I forgot. Class -- a -- fied. As the Skyman told us. ‘You. Were. Never. There.’ In fact, I’m not here. In fact, I don’t exist. Never did. Never will. Look at that ---” Floyd held up his hand, turned his hand. “That’s interesting. The hand that is not there.”

Within the fences and banners, hundreds of men crowded an expanse of asphalt. Lights shone on a raised platform lined with chairs, microphones, and loudspeakers. Workers coiled microphone and speaker cables.

Floyd scanned the stage. “No guitars. No amps. No drums. No women. Why’d anyone show up? Nothin’ going on at all.” He bounced and sang to a rhythm only he heard. “ nothing going on at all”

Degrev pointed. “They came to hear him.”

As the van paralleled the center of the crowd, Degrev and Floyd looked up at three banners waving on overhead lines.

الله أكبر الله أكبر فليسقط الكفرة
جاهدو في سبيل الله .. اقتلو الكفرة
اقتلوهم بالرصاص .. اقتلوهم بالمدافع

A black-on-white banner showed a stenciled logo of raised arms. One arm held aloft a Kalashnikov. A second arm and hand held aloft a sword. Arabic calligraphy circled the Kalashnikov and sword.

The center banner displayed a photo-realistic bearded cleric. The image portrayed the cleric speaking to the viewer, his index finger extended to emphasize his words, his deep-set eyes locked on the viewer. A line of Arabic script ran across the bottom of the portrait.

A red banner showed the two gray towers of the World Trade Center. Yellow flames circled the Twin Towers. Rows of alternating mirrored blade icons crossed the bottom of the banner. The wind-movement of the banner created the illusion of glittering silver flames.

“What is this?” Floyd raved. “What! Is? This! This I got to video tape --”

As Floyd raised the BetaCam, Degrev grabbed his arm, “No.”

Floyd took a Nikon digital camera from the seat.

Degrev repeated: “No. Don’t. Keep your eyes on the truck.”

“Two days, two nights. No blood, no action. Tape of dancers, shots of the Nile. Tea women in their beautiful clothes. All so National Geographic. But there! Right there! There’s the best shots in this Islamic Republic of Shit-dust and I can’t even take a snapshot?”

At that moment, a young man in the crowd saw the foreigner with a camera. He called out to the other young men with him, they all looked at Floyd. Floyd concealed the Nikon.

“Then again, I want to videotape the stories. I don’t want --” He pointed to himself. “Me, to be, the blood and the action. Not me. I shall not be, the --” Floyd dropped his voice to the phony bass of a news commentator. “Foreigner ripped apart by the righteous brothers of the jihad, video at eleven.”

“Don’t use that word on these shits.”

“Righteous?”

” جهاد ”

“Jihad al-Asghar?”

"I said, don't use that word on them."

"جقال"

"What?"

"Jackali. Jackals. Not jihadi. Jackals."

"That one I haven't heard. You're trying. You'll learn

"Got it out of my book. Steingass, page two hundred eleven."

"Try جنائية criminal. . Or the phrase, Dog that eats garbage كلب مفترس"

The van passed the young men. Voices called out, a teenager wearing an Osama bin Laden t-shirt screamed at the foreigners. Others grasped the boy, pulled him back. Floyd smiled and waved as the van left the group behind. "Who was that?"

Degrev glanced at the banner. "A Wahabbi. Salafist."

"وهابيست - سلفيست"

"You're learning."

"Letter by letter, word by word. Harf-harf. To learn Arabic, this American dog must bark. And you are my teacher. What's it say, Ustedi Degrev?"

"Iraq ... warning ... Iraq ... a warning. I don't know."

Floyd answered his own question. "Mata Amrki ... Kalb. Kalb. Die American cowboy dogs." He broke into a George Clinton beat. "Burn -- dog -- burn -- Amrki! Burning the dog! Burn! Burn, burn."

"Quit the jokes. Watch the truck."

"Who's joking? Blades and A K's, Amrki dies! Video at eleven. Salazar! Salazar! SNAKEMAN! Look out the back windows! Jackals of the Jihad! Wow. Jackels of the Jihad! What if Osama had a garage band. You know, to pass time in the cave. Like we did."

Degrev: "Watch the truck! They stopped."

Two men opened the mismatched back doors of the Mercedes, got in.

Floyd laughed: "Mystery solved. No video at eleven. The other two. That's what went on. Two of them went to the show, then these two came to pick them up. The gang of four. One, two, three, four. Now they'll go back to the warehouse and we'll watch them tonight and then we'll go back there and watch them tomorrow. Degrev, what do you say we just"

Floyd made a grabbing motion with his hands. "And ask them, ask them where the semtex is. Standard field interrogation procedures. And then we bag them, drop them out in the desert somewhere. And we'll fly away. Semtex gone, the gang gone, we're gone, Sudan a memory"

Through the back windows of the van, Salazar studied the scene -- the crowds, the portrait of the cleric, the Kalashnikov, the sword, the flaming towers above the sea of upraised blades. Below the level of the back windows, he pantomimed holding an automatic rifle and shooting through the sheet metal of the van back doors. With his heels, he simulated the thumping of a rifle firing.

"Ka lash ka, a ka lash ka," Salazar continued, the beat taking rhythm, as if he played bass drum pedals. He developed the rhythm as he rapped out staccato Russian. His words and beat carried through the van. "Ka Lash Ka, al ka lash ka --" He switched to idiomatic Spanish. "Cuarenta siete. Ella los mata, mi ka lash ka y ella no lamente nada."

As he watched the banners recede, he hammered his fist on his thigh to create another beat line. "Ho'ja de fuego, ho'ja de'a cero, ya'te veo, ya le mato, todo yo veo --"

Degrev commented, "الكلاش والحزن."

Floyd shouted from the front seat. "Forget the A K rave, whip out the laser designator and call down a Hellfire --"

Degrev: "Classified!"

Floyd: "Hellfire with Whiskey Pete sub-munitions."

Degrev: "Don't talk that jargon talk."

Floyd: "No one's got us miked."

Degrev: "Do not assume they can't ---"

Asad: "We're not miked. I always check."

Electronic tones came from a scanner -- the tones of a cellphone, then came static and music, background voices.

Asad: "A call. The gang's making a call."

Degrev: "We got them scanned. Why not mike us? Got it?"

Static scratched words. A woman answered the telephone in French. A man spoke in slurred idiomatic Arabic. Asad switched off the monitor speakers, pressed the headphone cups against his ears.

The others maintained silence. Degrev swerved around a last group of men, accelerated in the boulevard traffic to gain on the Mercedes. Floyd held the BetaCam ready. He kept the lens low on the dashboard, the body of the camera covered by the jacket, only the viewfinder visible.

"I didn't understand all of it," Asad told Degrev. "One of the Sudanese. One of the hired men. He's stoned and speaking dialect. Talked to a woman. I don't think she understood him. She spoke French and Arabic. I understood her. I heard hashish. Whiskey. Boys? Boys and hashish and whiskey? She said, later. She said, he'd get what he wanted when he brought money. No money, no hashish, no reservations. She spoke French."

"It's a faggot whorehouse," Floyd told the others. "Saudis have them. Why not here?"

Floyd mimiced the electronic noise of the monitors, his throat and mouth creating a series of clicks and hisses and squeaked voices, "Signals intelligence. Satellites, computers, billions of dollars to math P H D's, software to decode space noise. And we're listening to stoned Arab losers buying dope and

boys."

"Putos!" Salazar thumped out a beat. "Mata los putos! Con la Ka lash ka! Mata'los traperos, putos traperos."

"Mata'los traperos, putos traperos." As he sang out the line, Floyd pantomimed rock-star power-chording the BetaCam. "Mata'los traperos, putos traperos."

Degrev: "Quiet! Keep that camera ready."

Salazar: "Con la Ka lash ka! Mata jac kal los ---"
"Quiet!"

"It's ready. I'm on it. On the track of international terrorism. Video at eleven. Video from Sudan, the Islamic Republic of Shit Dust, with a special report on the romantic traditions of Saudi Arabia. The jackals of the desert, doing the dog. Fucking the dog, dog, dog."

Degrev turned to Asad. "Money, boys, whiskey?"

Floyd answered. "Money, boys, whiskey. Saudi sodomy in the Su - du - dan dope den, video at eleven."

"Quiet!" Degrev shouted at Floyd. "Asad! He ask for hashish? Hash ish sha? Or shii sha? نرجيلة؟ شيشة او تعميرة اوجوزة؟ هم يشربون الحشيش؟"

"I think he said, hashish. I know she said, no money, no hashish. Not shi sha, not naguila, not narjileh. She said, "No money, no hashish."

"There it is. The semtex came in. Salazar. Update the office. Try to get through to the Skyman. This is it."

Electronic tones came from monitors at the rear of the van. A background static indicated an encoded transmission through a voice/data link.

"Man in the sky," Salazar called out. He thumped a beat. "El Señor De Los Cielos. El voz de los cielos! Hablando de las cohetes, a matar los What would rhyme with cohetes and mean putos?"

"Sa - oud - dees" Floyd answered. "Mandar los co - hue - tees, a matar los Sa - oud - dees."

“A matar los ji – Ha - diis”

“Snakeman!” Degrev shouted back. “Shut up on jihad. You understand? Red Card, you got the office? Tell them we want the Skyman. Tell them we're following and we want authorization to move on the gang. Brief them on the intercept. I believe the gang got the shipment. The gang is talking like they've got money to spend.”

A voice spoke in the denatured tones of an encoded transmission. Behind the voice, jet engines droned. “Gentlemen. You leave tonight. You will be on a plane.”

Degrev: “Sir! The shipment came in -- can he hear me if I talk from up here? A microphone, pass forward a microphone.”

Skyman: “I can hear you. I repeat, I want you to strip the hotel room, strip the van, make it back to the airport. Most immediately. You will fly out.”

Degrev: “The semtex, sir. I believe it's here. That sheikh promised them money when the truck came and now they're talking of spending money.”

Floyd: “They're planning a party. Los putos --”

Degrev: “Cowboy! Quiet.”

Skyman: “We can't risk any more days. We've got to let it go.”

Degrev: “A thousand kilos of semtex? That's ten car bombs. Ten embassies. That's the United Nations in Baghdad, ten times.”

Skyman: “I've got other work for you. I'll brief you when you're out of Khartoum.”

Degrev: “Sir, do we have time to confirm the shipment? We can photograph the gang, maybe radio-mike and G P tag the shipment. Next crew to Khartoum will be three steps ahead, they can track the semtex, close down this gang.”

Skyman: “Okay. Go ahead. I authorize that. But that only. Observe, photograph, place transmitters if possible. Whatever is possible immediately. You will be

flying out before dawn. The Sudanese are on you. You are at risk. The Sudanese, they called the flight company, they made calls to New York. They attempted to contact the offices of International Video Corporation, and they could not.”

Floyd laughed. “That corporation that don’t exist.”

Asad: “Sir? Do you believe we're compromised? We've seen no sign of counter-surveillance, no one at the hotel, no follow cars, nothing.”

Degrev: “We hit it lucky, sir. White panel vans, like this one we rented, they’re one of the most common commercial vehicles in Khartoum.”

Skyman: “You are out of there. And I've re -- thought the television news crew concept. Forget the Al-Jazeera model. News crews making videos for a news network, it isn’t working -- I'll brief you when you're in flight. Finish the job, you will fly out tonight, the plane will be waiting. I don’t want you in a Sudanese prison, I need you elsewhere.”

Degrev: “A metric ton of semtex. A metric ton, sir.”

Skyman: “We lost hundreds of tons in Iraq. Thousands of tons. Looted. Only God knows where it went. I need a hundred teams like you to chase what's out there. And I don't even have funding for you. Finish with the sheikh. Tonight. Now. I've got another job for you.”

The link to the encoded satellite frequency clicked off.

“Dang me,” Floyd sighed. “Last night here, I think I’ll take a rope and hang me. This desert wonderland. With sharia law. Get whipped for looking at a woman. Amputation if you touch her. Torture, amputation, death. Wow, just like old times, cruising El Anbar --“

Degrev: “Classified.”

Floyd: “Right. We weren’t there.”

Degrev: “And we weren’t here.”

Floyd: “Что думаешь Дегрев?”

Degrev: “Ночью, сделаем это ночью.” Degrev switched back to English. “Camera ready. Be ready to run tape.”

Floyd: “Run the battery for nothing? Waste tape? They got no boys –“

Degrev: “You hold that camera ready.”

Floyd put his eye to the viewfinder. “Stay tuned special report from that new stop of the international jetset, Khartoum. Life styles of Al-Qaeda sheikhs. Cheap dope. Cheap boys. Exclusive report. I am the international investigative reporter, I got to go network, make my name, gain my fame --“

Degrev: “You got to go silent.”

Floyd: “Me? Quiet? This man shall not go quiet into the dark, he shall rave, rave against the failing of the light. Yes, my voice is my identity.”

Degrev: “Your name is noise. Floyd the Noise. И ты будешь молчать, если хочешь пойти на этот склад.”

Floyd: “Так точно, буду молчать.”

The two men simultaneously looked to the back of the van. Asad had his eyes closed, his hands to the headphones as he concentrated on outside transmissions -- he had not heard the exchange in Russian. At the televisions, Salazar also wore headphones as he clicked thorough satellite channels. Floyd nodded to Degrev --

"نعم."

The old Mercedes went north on the boulevard. The Americans followed the gang through a long corridor of the modern and the third-world. The boulevard presented scenes of glass-front shops, chrome and plastic markets, walls of Chinese posters displaying electronics, late night cafes of music and neon. The modern images alternated with mule-drawn trash wagons, blank walls topped with barbed-wire, and the stalls of individual vendors presenting the

merchandize of the world and Africa. Despite the late hour, florescent tubes illuminated a few vendors remaining in their stalls with their displays.

With distance, the van left the modern shops behind. Even the shops of street vendors became infrequent. Where signs in Arabic and English identified shops and products, rolling steel doors secured the entries. Concrete walls and steel gates advertised the sales of international trucks in Arabic, English, and the other languages of Europe. Above an expanse of chain link and asphalt, lights blinked on the industrial logos of Chinese transnationals.

From sand side streets, dust came in swirls to blur the headlights of traffic. Through the closed windows of the van, the wind brought the smell of the dust and old fires. The Mercedes turned again. Degrev recognized the double-avenue. He slowed to create distance, then turned.

The avenue left north Khartoum for a north-east sector recently cut from the desert. Earthmovers had scraped a grid of roads and lanes. The city had paved the main boulevard with asphalt but the grid of access roads and intersecting lanes remained sand. Without pavement, the wheels of every car and truck raised dust. And tonight, wind brought waves of dust from the desert.

Degrev drove through the blowing dust, the mismatched doors of the Mercedes five sets of taillights ahead. The van passed rows of parked semi-trucks and trailers, then the steel-frame roof of an open-air maintenance terminal where crews serviced long-distance trucks. Degrev glanced at the terminal to confirm his position. In the past two days, he had memorized the features of the grid.

Throughout the sector, steel structures stood in random patterns of pre-fab rectangles and open areas of brush and sand. Factory walls met tangled brush, the brush and sand divided lines of modern semi-trucks and

trailers, the vehicles parked at the shanties of workers.

At one corner in the grid, lit by strings of lights in many colors, a haphazard line of food shops served meals to workers. Entrepreneurs had constructed stalls of scrap corrugated steel, painted the stalls with enamel designs. Some of the stalls used colored lights to frame the Arabic script of their signs. This corner served as a reference point for the Americans.

The colors of the lights illuminated the blowing dust, the workers seeming to stand in tinted smoke, the men shadows, the stalls the pale colors of the lights and dust. The old Mercedes turned at that corner and continued into the darkness of a grid road into the desert.

Degrev continued past the turn. A hundred meters farther, he switched off the headlights, turned and accelerated into the darkness. From their previous follows of the gang, they knew the unpaved road paralleled the road taken by the Mercedes. Floyd raised the BetaCam, switched on the night-vision and saw --

Mules.

"Stop!" Floyd stomped on the floor as if he could work the brakes.

Degrev swerved. Floyd hit the door. Two mules pulling a wagon of scrap metal flashed past. In the back, Asad and Salazar bounced off the inside of the van, the rack of electronics swayed, all the cable ties and tape held, only an aluminum can clattered.

"My Red Bull ..." Salazar cried out. "You're driving like"

The wheels shuddered sideways through sand. Degrev cranked the steering wheel into the drift and accelerated, the van shuddering over ruts. Floyd put his eye back to the view-finder, scanned the darkness.

In the back, Salazar continued cursing. "My last can! You're driving like, you're driving like --"

"He's driving like a Mexican in Baghdad, the Black Bat out of Baghdad" Floyd shouted without taking

his eye from the viewfinder of the BetaCam.

“You owe me a can of Red Bull!”

Degrev took a folded slip of paper from the dashboard, flipped it over his shoulder. Asad caught the paper, passed it back to Salazar: a Sudanese banknote of 1,000 Dinars.

Salazar: “Where do they sell Red Bull in Sudan?”

No one answered. Through the night-vision optics of the BetaCam, Floyd saw the pale green of dust and the suggestion of an open road. The vertical forms of walls passed on both sides. Above one long wall, lines of florescent tubes burned white in the night-vision optics of the camera. Past the lines of lights, a green zigzag scratched the darkness -- the flashlight of a watchman waving along a line of parked vehicles. Floyd saw the watchman turn and stare as the white van raced past in the night.

The van hit deep ruts, the axels banging the frame. Degrev maintained speed through the dust. He watched the alternating flashes of walls and darkness.

Kilometers into the grid, they approached a wall of white sheet metal. Floyd pointed to the wall of white, Degrev had already started another turn -- this cross track intersected with the road taken by the gang. Degrev slowed to a lurching roll at the side of the track.

A hundred meters ahead, at the intersection of the track and the parallel road, the security lights of a steel prefab structure created an island of false daylight. As Degrev jerked the parking brake, they saw the Mercedes step-van park in the lights of the warehouse.

“Get video.” Degrev told Floyd. “Snakeman. Microphones. GPS transmitters. The micros for placement. We’re going in there.”

“You get the video --“ Floyd passed the BetaCam to Degrev. “We got light. I’m working the Nikon.”

Degrev braced the BetaCab and zoomed on the door to the warehouse. The electronics switched from night-vision, the image becoming color.

A fifth man left the warehouse. Unlike the Sudanese, he had the lighter skin color of a South Asian. White streaked his hair and beard. He wore a European suit with the collar of the white shirt open.

“A Paki,” Degrev called out. “A Paki. That’s the sheikh. That matches the accent on the phones. That’s him. Get photos, get photos, get him!”

Floyd aimed the zoom-lensed Nikon digital camera, snapped stop-action frames of the Pakistani and Sudanese. “Got him. Got them. Got the gang of four. Got the number five, the Paki sheikh. The man we shall seek. Action at eleven.”

“I count the four and the sheikh going in, no one outside. You got photos of the sheikh? You positive?”

“Got him. Nikon positive. Face, straight-on and profile. Asad, here --” Floyd switched memory cards. The camera card with the images of the gang went to Asad, a new card went in the Nikon.

The crew moved. Equipment cases snapped shut, hands checked radios, switches clicked, “Microphone. You hear it?” “Got signal.” “Radio, test, got signal?” “Got signal.” “Throat mike, got signal.” “Good to go.” “Got to go.” “Robes?” “Three.” “Headrags?” “All of it. Got to go.” “Camels?” “Camels, what?” “No camels, got to walk.”

Equipment went into plastic carry-bags of market vendors. Arabic text and logos marked the bags -- when the Americans had bought water and packaged foods at the downtown supermarkets, they had saved the plastic bags for exactly this purpose.

Simultaneously, Asad ran the BetaCam cassette through a viewer, cued the images of the Pakistani talking with the four Sudanese as they left the Mercedes step-van. A Thuraya satellite phone beeped. He reached to the side, keyed that phone, spoke without taking his eyes off the monitor.

“Sir, prepping an uplink. At this moment.”

Degrev: “Asad, uplink and update. Maintain the

scanners.”

“Skyman waiting. Ready to receive video and photos.”

The others stepped into the wind and dust. Behind the van, the three Americans unrolled lengths of white cloth, the wind flagging the cloth as they slipped on full length cotton robes, jalibeyyas.

Asad shouted from the interior: “Check the satellite panels!”

Floyd glanced at the cable running between the van back doors to the flat black plastic rectangles duct-taped to the roof of the van. “Secure!”

Degrev: "لأ اللغة الإنجليزية"

The Americans now looked like the robed men seen on the boulevards. Turbans completed the costume -- the Americans wrapped their heads with lengths of cloth, the ends of the turbans masking their faces. In times of dust storms, Sudanese men covered their mouths and noses to breathe. Now, in the night of wind-driven dust, turbans masked the Americans.

Floyd: "I look like a local?"

Degrev: "لأ اللغة الإنجليزية"

Floyd: "أنا خرطومي؟"

Degrev straightened Floyd's turban, tucked in the end to conceal his features. Only his blue eyes remained exposed.

Degrev: "Beta cam?"

Floyd held up the Nikon, wrapped it in a market bag. “I can conceal it this here burka. Wish I had a black burka. Infiltration and observation ragged up in white. Negative situation.”

"الجلباب"

"Jalababa, burka. Whatever, a white target in the Khartoum night.”

In the van, Asad studied the front of the warehouse through the BetaCam zoom lens. He swept along the roofline, the wall and chain link fence, the distance beyond the fence. Only the blowing dust moved, the image of lighted warehouse, the Mercedes step-van, the fence seeming to fade in shifting moments of dust. He swept the zoom to the three walking men in jailibeyyas. The camera switched back to night-vision. Seen through the electronics, the forms of the Americans looked like drifting green flags.

Chain link and corrugated steel lined the sand track. Within the high fences, security lights illuminated parked vehicles. Structures remained rectangles of black -- no lighted windows, no lighted signs, only floodlights marking doors.

Salazar: "If we got guards watching us --"

Degrev: "لا للغة الإنجليزية"

Floyd: "أذا شاهدوني سيشاهدوني بالليل"

Degrev: " نجم! " He switched to Spanish, "Hombre."

Salazar: "لا للغة الأاسبانية."

The three Americans stopped at the corner. Taillights moved a few hundred meters away, a group of men walked through the dust -- other than that movement, the road remained empty. Behind them, they heard the rhythmic scraping of a hacksaw. Degrev leaned to a window criss-crossed with welded bars. The interior smelled of oil and solvents. Amber work lights revealed parked vehicles with engines disassembled -- an auto repair garage. He did not see the mechanics.

Degrev turned to the warehouse across the road. From his angle, he saw the front of the warehouse and one side. The gang had entered through double doors. The English word, 'office' identified the entry. Next to the office doors, high doors allowed trucks to drive into

the building to load and unload. Only the doors offered entry -- Degrev did not see windows on the front wall nor the side wall of the pre-fab warehouse.

The blank enameled metal of the pre-fab warehouse continued thirty meters back to a high chain link fence topped by concertina wire. Through the chain link, he saw the bumpers and grills of semis, the box-backs of trailers. A vehicle yard. He buzzed Asad.

"You see a man on watch? Any movement?"

"Red Card here. No movement. The five went in, no one out. No movement. And I don't see video security cameras."

"Anyone else out here?"

"No one I can see."

"Scanners?"

"Police. Maybe military. Patrols. What we've heard every night."

A light flashed. Degrev signaled the others not to move. The jalibeyyas covered their clothing and faces, the plastic bags concealed their equipment -- if a watchman at the warehouse saw them, they could not be identified as foreigners.

Within the wire fence, the light flashed again. Degrev watched the darkness of the fence and parked trucks. The light appeared again -- not a flash, a waving light. Degrev saw the light reflected in the glass of a truck cab.

Degrev looked to Floyd, pointed to the waving light. Floyd nodded, angled across the dust of the road. Degrev and Salazar followed. Floyd continued along the fence of the vehicle yard, Degrev and Salazar stopped at the front of the warehouse.

Aware anyone in the area could see the entry, Degrev pretended to knock at the warehouse doors. His knuckles did not touch the steel. He glanced to Salazar, Salazar nodded.

Degrev stepped across the two meters of sand to the Mercedes, looked through the passenger window, no

one. The van reeked of marijuana.

"Be advised, gentlemen. The gang's wacked on dope."

At the doorway, Salazar eased the long, slender blade of a knife between the double doors. He felt weight, he lifted --

"Cross bar" As Salazar felt the bar clear the brackets, he tried one door, then the other.

Metal slid on concrete. The door eased open. Degrev slipped through, found chains and a padlock hanging on the back of the door. The gang had crossbarred the entry, but not secured the locks. Degrev crouched in the darkness and keyed his radio, whispered into his throat-mike.

"We're in. Degrev and Salazar inside. Floyd at the fence. Floyd. What do you see?"

"I see the sheikh. I see the sheikh. He's supervising the four losers in the back lot. I smell dope. I hear them talking, I can't understand more than Americans, Europeans."

"Do you see the sheikh? Repeat, actually see him and the other four?"

Looking under the trailer of a semi, Floyd counted the legs of five men. He aimed the directional microphone. He now operated as a cold professional, no antics, no jokes -- sharp in speech, precise in words.

"I am positive. I see the pants of the sheikh. I see the four Sudanese walking. One, two, three, four Sudanese. And the sheikh. Microphone receiving. I hear it. Red Card, you hear it?"

In the van, Asad adjusted the volume of a monitor. Arabic came from the speakers. "Red Card receiving here."

Degrev answered through his throat mike: "The

Chechen here. Got it.”

The voices of the gang came through as Asad switched on another recorder, translated: "With this, we will kill Americans and Europeans and Jews."

At the fence, Floyd shifted position. He looked through a narrow space between two truck-trailers. Several battery lanterns illuminated a scene:

The Sudanese work crew took wooden crates from a shipping container. They carried the crates past the sheikh. Floyd recognized the boxes and markings.

"Cowboy here. Semtex. I see semtex. Old style ten-kilo shipping flats. Dark green. Not the new plastic cases, not cardboard. Repeat, semtex. Flats look like 1980's. Russian lettering. Looks like Arabic painted on top of that."

In the darkness of the warehouse, Degrev stopped in mid-step, dropped to a crouch. He cupped his hand over his earphone to capture every sound received.

"Absolutely positive?"

"Ab. So. Lute. Ly. I've seen it before. Where I never was. The gang's taking ten kilo flats out of a container. Shipping container. All the time we watched this place, the explosive's been here."

"Aim that mike. I want to hear every word they say."

"I'm moving to get a different angle."

At the fence, Floyd stepped past a parked semi. The signal of the microphone carried the fading of the voices, the wind rushing over the metal, the voices returning as Floyd eased to a crouch at the fence. He heard the gang but a truck fender blocked his line of sight. Slowly, slowly, he leaned past the fender with the

microphone.

The Sudanese workers crossed the asphalt with ten-kilo crates in their hands. They stepped into the back of Mitsubishi heavy duty delivery van.

Unlike the old Mercedes step-van, the Mitsubishi truck looked new. The paint retained the factory shine, the tires looked new-rubber-black, the suspension remained steady as the Sudanese stepped up the bumper with the ten-kilo crates.

A foreigner supervised the loading. The foreigner -- young, sharp-featured, dark, with wavy, slicked-back black hair, wearing the coveralls of a trucking company - - looked Middle Eastern, not African. The Sudanese spoke to one another, they did not speak to the foreigner.

Floyd whispered: "I see another man. There is a man number six. The gang's loading the semtex into a truck. Repeat, they're loading it. They're not getting a shipment, they're loading the semtex to send it out."

The foreign driver stopped one of the workers, took the crate out of his hands. Metal squeaked as the driver pried open the crate with a crowbar. He raised a block wrapped in cosmoline paper, opened the paper to confirm the block of explosive.

"The number six man," Floyd continued. "He's checking the semtex I see a standard semtex cube. Cube end. Looks like point five kilo. Hole in end for detonator. Standard. The old orange color."

As Degrev and Salazar moved through the warehouse, they heard the voices of the gang through the wireless microphone. From time to time, Degrev paused to listen. He translated for Salazar:

"Into the truck ... we take it for the flight to the west ... all of it ... it will kill many Europeans and Americans."

Degrev switched on his radio, whispered. "Red Card. Replay that if you can, listen to it again. Did he say, 'Flight to the west' Cowboy, can you get a count

on the ten-kilo boxes?”

“Not possible. They are stacking the boxes out of my field of view. I can estimate many.”

“Can you move to get a view of the stack?”

“Negative. They’re stacking the semtex inside a truck.” Floyd glanced at the chain link and concertina wire above him. “And I can’t get into the parking lot. I can’t go over the fence. Repeat, can not. Is not possible with them only ten meters away.”

“Watch them. Red Card. Did you hear a place name in that talk?”

“No. Only the words, ‘flight to the west. To kill Europeans and Americans.’”

“Update the Skyman. Semtex. Flight to the west. Kill Americans and Europeans. Maybe we get to stay here. Tell him we’ll wait for instructions.”

For seconds, Degrev and Salazar stood in the darkness of the warehouse. They scanned the darkness, they listened. They heard the voices of the Sudanese loading the truck. Lights from the battery lanterns broke through the darkness of the warehouse. The moments of light revealed parked trucks and racks of pallets loaded with barrels of oil. When the lights passed, the vehicles and racks returned to black within black. Only the faint rectangle of the truck entry remained, the outlines defined by the lantern light reflecting from sheet metal. Finally, Degrev flicked on a red penlight. The men found a path through the trucks and equipment.

In the van, Asad spoke into the satellite uplink: “Calling the man in the sky. Man in the sky. We have the subjects under direct observation. We have images ready for uplink. Night-vision and digital. Repeat, images ready for uplink. Audio recording of Arabic language information will come soon.”

The encoding-denatured voice answered. “Ready

for uplink.”

“Our Cowboy confirms semtex in transit. He describes the semtex in wooden packing crates of ten kilos, Soviet codes. Arabic markings over the Russian. He believes manufactured in the 1980s. And we miked the words, 'flight to the west. They used the word, magreeb.”

“Semtex? Ten kilo crates?”

“That’s what he saw. Many ten kilo crates. Exact number unknown. Ready for uplink?”

“Ready for uplink.”

“Night vision surveillance video clip. Video edited to speed upload. Photo images next. You will see four members of the gang and the man we believe to be the sheikh. The Asian voice we monitored on the other intercepts. We will wait for instructions. Wait, the Arabs got a call, satellite call ---”

Phone tones sounded, then an Arabic-accented voice spoke. "This is the director. Speak only English."

As the video and audio uploaded to satellite, Asad switched the scanner audio to the radios --

Degrev crouched near the truck entry of the warehouse. Twenty meters from him, the Sudanese carried the crates of semtex from the container to the Mitsubishi cargo van. The foreigner in the coveralls of a trucking company supervised. The Pakistani in the business suit stood at the side, speaking into a Thuraya satellite telephone.

”By the Grace of Allah, the shipment is leaving Khartoum. We are now transferring the shipment to the truck. Is all in order at the airfield? Is a plane ready?”

In the van, the scanner intercepted the other voice in the Thuraya conversation:

“We await the shipment. Give the telephone to the

driver.”

In the van, the voice of the Skyman asked Asad: “Can you get an image of the semtex?”

“Not possible -- and the Arabs are talking of an airfield. They’re talking of flying the semtex out. They’re speaking English.”

“What?”

The accented voice spoke through the monitors: “All is in order, however, we require the shipment here immediately. There can be no further delay. Drive through all the night and the day.”

At the fence to the equipment yard, Floyd aimed the wireless microphone at the truck where the driver spoke into the satellite telephone.

“Is there emergency?”

“There is an emergency.”

Floyd kept the wireless microphone aimed at the group. “Did you hear that? He said, ‘Emergency.’ Why did he say that?”

“There is no time to talk. End the relationship with the hired men. We expect the truck here no later than a night and a day. End the work of the men who are Sudanese and the Pakistani. End it with them.”

The microphone transmitted the voices and sounds of the equipment yard to the van, the scanner intercepted the satellite conversation. In a cacophony of noises, Asad struggled to monitor the microphone, check the satellite upload, and at the same time, record the call of the sheikh. When the Arabic voices quit, Asad switched off the recorder, returned the conversation to the start.

“Intercepted sat-phone talk. And I don’t

understand what they're talking about. End the work with them? End it? Here it is."

In the warehouse, Degrev listened to the conversation as he watched the Sudanese loading the Mitsubishi truck. They threw bricks of semtex, they talked and laughed.

"وفى النهاية هما دفعولنا الفلوس والطيارة نقلت الموتى الى امريك."

"انظر . كل صندوق فية هدية ! ميت أمريكي."

In the light of the battery lantern, a workman held up a block of semtex. He jigged in a circle.

"موت موت موت الأمريكي"

"كل هذا البارود سوف يقتل المئات والآلاف من الأمريكان"

"All this will kill hundreds," the Pakistani told the workers. "Many hundreds of Americans. Thousands of Americans."

Floyd laughed. "They're dancing with the semtex. Wacki Pakis, dancing with semteki. Where's the BetaCam when I need it?"

In the darkness of the warehouse, a red flashlight waved across tools. Hands closed on a length of pipe.

"نحن سوف نمحو كل الجيوش وسوف يعلم العالم ما

نحن فاعلون وسنعلن ذلك على قناة الجزيرة"

Behind him, one of the men lit a hand-rolled cigar, drew down smoke. He passed the cigar to another man.

"وبالنسبة لفلوسنا. احنا عايزين فلوسنا . الجزيرة كويسة بس

احنا عايزين فلوسنا."

Floyd heard a pistol pop in rapid fire, in bursts of two or three shots. Men screamed, bullets slammed metal, screams cut off. In the light of a battery lantern, a man ran. The pistol fired, the man jerked and fell.

"It's a wipe out!" Floyd told the others. "It's a wipe out. And he's using a full-auto pistol --"

As he spoke, the foreigner in the trucking company uniform stepped over the man and pointed a pistol straight down. He fired a burst.

"The truck driver Arab, he's got an auto-pistol, looks like a Skorpion. Soviet Skorpion auto-pistol. He's killing them all."

Another pistol fired. Sprawled on the pavement, the sheikh shot the driver in the back, the driver staggered, then turned, fired a long burst down into the sheikh.

"That gang is gone." Floyd spoke over the popping of the auto-pistol, then he saw white blur behind the driver, metal flashed.

"Cowboy! In here now!"

In the equipment yard, Degrev slashed the driver with a pipe, the horizontal arc of the steel striking the man's right arm above the elbow, the bone snapping. The Soviet pistol fell from his hand, the man staggered, fell. Degrev swung the pipe again. The man fell back as the pipe hit his left collar bone -- behind him, a pistol flashed.

Bleeding on the asphalt, the sheikh held a revolver. He fired again. Degrev saw the pistol rising to point at him, Degrev stepped over the driver, axed the hand, the pistol clattering away. Degrev continued another step, jammed the pipe into the solar plexus of the sheikh.

Degrev spoke into his throat mike. "Cowboy, need you in here. Bring the BetaCam."

The van skidded to a stop at the warehouse. Floyd ran from the darkness, Asad threw open the van door and passed Floyd the BetaCam. Running through the warehouse, Floyd flicked on the camera light.

Degrev stood in the center of the corpses, his foot on the throat of the driver. He shouted Arabic into the face of the wounded and broken driver:

"أين المطار؟"

Behind him, Salazar crouched on the asphalt, his hands on the sheikh. The Pakistani struggled to breathe. Blood sprayed from his mouth.

Salazar: "This one's got a sucking chest. Multiple sucking chest wounds."

Degrev: "Cowboy, where are you? Videotape this! I want anything he says on tape."

"Rolling tape." Floyd rushed from the warehouse, BetaCam on his shoulder, the lens pointed at the wounded man.

"Red Card, party's over," Floyd spoke through the radio. "A truck driver snuffed the gang, the sheikh shot the driver, then the Chencen did the job on him."

"Where is the airfield?" "أين المطار؟" Degrev brought the pipe down like an ax on the knee of driver. The man lurched -- but did not cry out.

Degrev: "أين المطار؟"

Floyd: "You break his knee and he don't make noise?" Camera still on his shoulder and recording video, Floyd crouched down, checked the prisoner with his left hand. He felt for a throat pulse, then opened one of the man's staring eyes wide. Floyd diagnosed:

"He's gone."

Degrev: "He's looking at me. He's still breathing."

Floyd turned the head of the driver. His fingers found a bloody wound. "Won't be answering questions. He's got a bullet in his head."

Degrev axed the other knee. The driver stopped breathing.

Floyd laughed. "Interrogation over. And no time for a séance. Shots fired. We got to move it."

Salazar called out. "This one's talking. He's trying to say something."

Pivoting the BetaCam, Floyd focused the camera light on the Pakistani. The mini-spot illuminated a man gray with shock, choking on his own blood. "I am" The sheikh gasped in British-accented English. "I am one of you. I work ... for you Americans ... a hospital. Please take me ... to"

"We take him to get help?" Salazar asked.

Floyd laughed. "Foreigners show up with a shot-up sheikh? We got no time for a Paki E R episode."

Degrev checked the man's wounds. Blood marked several holes in the man's white shirt. Wounds in his gut poured out streams of blood.

"Shots fired, dudes," Floyd repeated. "Two minutes since shots fired."

"Who did you work for?" Degrev demanded.

"You. You Americans." I reported to"

"Who did you report to? Give me a name."

"Jack of Spades, only ... only that name"

"Describe him. How They gave you names! Name them!"

The Pakistani choked on blood, could not answer. He struggled to pull down another breath.

Floyd repeated. "We got to get out of this place. Now,"

"Forget him," Degrev told Salazar. "Get the telephones. Identification. Whatever. Cowboy photographs. Them. And the semtex."

The sheikh convulsed, blood spraying as he choked. Salazar turned the man, tried to clear his mouth of blood -- Degrev stopped him.

"We don't have the time."

"He said he worked for us."

“Wouldn’t you lie? If you thought you could live?”

Laying on his back, the sheikh stopped breathing. His eyes stared at the Americans. He tried to reach up to Salazar, Salazar turned away, searched the pockets of the dying Pakistani. Salazar found keys, identification, a cell-phone. All the material went in a plastic bag.

The sheikh shuddered a last time. Salazar crossed himself, reached out and closed the man’s eyes, then turned to search the other dead.

Degrev went to the Mitsubishi cargo van, slammed open compartments. He spilled out new tools, plastic bottles of coolants, spare fan belts and hoses. Floyd stepped into the back of the van, took photos of the stacks of crates. He took a careful close-up of an open crate of semtex and the cosmoline-wrapped blocks of explosive. Shifting a crate, he composed a careful photo of the factory codes and stenciled Arabic markings.

One of the dead Sudanese had a plastic bag containing marijuana cigars. Salazar threw it aside.

“These punks are the enemy?” Floyd laughed. “Stoned and dancing with semtex?”

In the van, Asad heard an exchange of codes on the radio scanner. He reached to the side rear view mirror, pivoted the mirror to check the road back to the main boulevard. Nothing.

With the Nikon, Floyd snapped quick flash photos of the dead, first the sheik, then the driver. He kicked the dead driver's head sideways for a profile. He went to the next man. He straightened his head with his foot, blood and brains spilled out.

“Don't need to ask this one any questions. We can see what was on his mind.”

Degrev: “Photos? Why not the Beta Cam?”

“Why video? Wakis ain’t dancing no more.”

Searching the dead driver, Degrev found a map. He moved his red-lensed flashlight over the paper, saw an irregularity. He put the map in the light of a battery lantern.

“He marked a route. And a place.”

The light shadows a thumb-nail depression from Khartoum across the paper to a highway.

Degrev read the Arabic: “Al Kasaad. And it says airfield. Al Ma Taar. I know where we go next. The highway to Port Sudan. Snakeman, we’re done, we need to move, bag it, take it to Asad, get that name to the Sky Man. Al Kassad. On the highway to Port Sudan.”

Floyd passed the Nikon to Salazar, Salazar ran for the warehouse. Floyd opened the bag of cigars. He found a lighter.

“I got a plan.” He glanced at his watch. “We gotta go. Four minutes, thirty seconds. But listen -- semtex, drugs, shots fired? In a parking lot of cars and trucks. Gasoline?”

Floyd flicked the lighter, held up the flame.

Degrev nodded.

In the van, Asad monitored a cacaphony of voices and codes coming from the scanner. One voice called out, a series of other voices answered with names and Arabic numbers. Asad spoke into his radio:

“We got activity.”

Salazar left the warehouse, saw a line of headlights a few hundred meters away. The angle of headlights behind the first truck revealed the transparent colored plastic of police light strips -- and the outlines of antennas and directional dishes. Salazar spoke fast into his throat-mike as he stepped through the sidedoor of the van.

“We got police. Police with electronic surveillance.”

Degrev: “Where?”

Leaning between the front seats of the van, Salazar watched a black and gray camouflage-patterned SUV pass. Lights inside the SUV revealed camouflage-uniformed men at keyboards and computer displays. A dish antenna rotated on the roof.

Salazar: “Here. That’s where. Here.”

Asad repeated: “Here. We are looking at them. Military. And repeat, electronic surveillance.”

Degrev crouched in a between parked trucks, listening to Asad. He walked fast to another line of trucks. Floyd crouched at a fueling station, a lighter in his hands. He flicked the lighter.

Degrev: “Don’t!”

The flame of the lighter touched a rope saturated with oil, the flame started up the rope to a can of gasoline on drums of gasoline.

Floyd: “Don’t what?”

Degrev jerked Floyd into motion. They ran for the warehouse. Outside the chain link, a police truck passed the far side of the equipment yard. A spotlight fanned through the chain link.

In the warehouse, Floyd used the mini-spot of the BetaCam to light the aisles as they ran --

Floyd: “Like Iraq.”

Degrev: “Classified. Never happened.”

“And we weren’t here, either. Never were.”

“It did not happen.”

“We don’t even exist.”

“Classified.”

“Who is classified?”

Gasoline flashed, flames lighting the interior of the warehouse. They paused at the doors, scanned the street. Floyd tossed the bag of marijuana cigars under

the parked Mercedes step-van.

Floyd: "Evidence"

In the street, the dust of the sky reflected the yellow light of the flames. Salazar held the side door of the van open, Degrev and Floyd ran the three steps to the van, they threw themselves through the sidedoor, Asad accelerated, Salazar slammed the door.

Degrev passed the Nikon to Salazar. "The memory card. Uplink the imagery, blank the memory. Uplink and blank."

Asad accelerated through the night, no lights. In the front passenger seat, Floyd put his eye to the BetaCam viewfinder, saw:

Wild, careening night-vision images. Warehouses, fences, empty streets, a group of men at a street stall.

Degrev: "Make the highway, make the highway."

Floyd: "We could go back, video the scene. Action, if it bleeds, it leads, and man, flames' the same -
_"

Degrev: "Make the highway, make the airport."

Asad: "Not the highway, the side roads, I'm staying off the highway"

Behind the van, the horizon flared. The windows went orange with false dawn. The Americans looked back to see a vast churning ball of flame rising above the rooflines.

Floyd: "The semtex flashed. What you want to bet there's nothing left of that crime scene?"

Degrev: "Bet your life we got to get out of here."

Floyd: "Not even bones. Just ashes in the wind ..." He crooned. "Ashes in the wind, Wahibbi ashes, blowing in the wind"

On a dust-swirling dirt road, a Sudanese Army officer watched the flames and smoke. He spoke into a hand-radio:

"أحضر عربيات نصف نقل ورجال كثيرة واقفل المنطقة."

A technician called out.

"شفرة سرية."

The officer turned. Beyond him, on an intersecting street, the white van without headlights sped past.

"أين؟"

The soldier pointed to the fire.

Near the burning equipment yard, other soldiers talked with workers in coveralls. The workers pointed to the warehouse. The soldier repeated:

"مع كاميرة فيديو؟"

The worker shook his head, no. He mimiced a shoulder-carried BetaCam.

"كاميرة تليفزيون. الأجنبي معاة كاميرة تليفزيون."

A soldier spoke into a radio.

"هما سمعوهم بيصورا . وهما شافوا اعربية"

"ميكروباص بيضاء."

"هما شافوا اجنبي ابيض معاة كاميرة تليفزيون."

The soldier spoke from the scanner monitors. Salazar called forward. "Asad. I need you on the scanners. I can't understand the radio talk --"

Asad didn't take his eyes off the darkness: "They said 'white van.' They said, 'foreigner.' They said 'television camera.'"

"لجنة من البوليس على الطريق معاهم عربية ميكروباص ابيض ورشاشات وكاميرة تليفزيون . وهما عايزين فى المكتب يفحصوا"

"مصور التليفزيون يفحص الكل."

The van bounced over dirt roads. Asad swerved around cars parked in the center of the lane, a donkey cart, men unloading a truck.

Asad: "They said, 'white van.'"

Degrev: "They say 'foreigners'?"

Asad: "'Foreigners.' We don't go to the hotel. Right? No hotel?"

Degrev: "Airport."

Floyd: "I left my Arabic textbook in the hotel."

Degrev: "Buy another one."

Floyd: "And my Hans Wehr. That seventy five dollar dictionary. And my video cassette of Maha."

Degrev: "Who is Maha?"

Floyd: "The girl in the Arabic story. 'Ismi, Maha. Ana filistinia' Man, is it serious? I need my Maha. Maha is lonely. If I to go to New York and meet Maha, I've got to speak Arabic."

Degrev passed Floyd a roll of Sudanese banknotes.

Floyd: "What will I buy with this trash?"

Asad: "Pilots? Salazar! Buzz the pilots! They got to be ready to go."

Salazar: "No more radios. Those trucks had electronics. We got scanners, why not them?"

Degrev: "You sent up that imagery?"

Salazar: "Images up, camera tape blanked out."

Degrev: "The pilots are there. Skyman said there'd be a plane. No plane, they're in violation of contract."

Asad: "They're not Marine Corps. They're contractors."

Floyd: "We're contractors. If they're not there, we take a plane."

Asad: "Who flys it?"

Floyd: "Did I tell you I went to Florida? When I worked for the Saudis. They wanted flying lessons, I took lessons, too. Can't take off or land, but if you aim me straight on the runway, maybe I can learn real quick to take off, maybe I can get us out of here ---"

Asad: "Are you serious?"

Degrev: "Why do you listen to that clown?" He held up a fan of American hundred dollar bills. "We'll buy tickets. We'll fly out commercial."

Asad whipped through a right hand turn, accelerated, veered away from a truck. The maneuver threw Floyd against the door.

Floyd: "Be cool, Red Card. Don't red line. We're a news crew. We got official government permits --" He found his baseball cap on the seat, put the cap on Asad. "We even got our official International Video Corporation identification. What can they do? Throw us out of the country? Oh, no, oh, please, no"

Degrev: "Take off the official t-shirt, use your French passport. Buy a ticket, fly out commercial."

Asad: "There they are"

Ahead, police cars flashed red lights, sounded sirens. The line of police cars sped through an intersection, stopped. Traffic continued past them. A policeman with a Kalashnikov stepped out of the passenger side of police car --

Maintaining speed, Asad passed the line of police cars, followed a traffic circle through a sweeping left turn, accelerated into the merging traffic of taxis, mini-buses, motor scooters. He looked in the door's rear view mirror.

A policeman stopped traffic. Police cars veered to the opposite side -- an instant checkpoint. A mass of headlights illuminated the dust, the figures of police with Kalashnikovs paced through the lights.

In the back of the van, Salazar hit a frenzy of beats: "We're gone, we're gone, we're Out. Of.

Here.”

Floyd turned to Asad. “You’re magic, Redcard. Pure fucking magic. How did you know?”

Asad: “Two days and nights of observation. The boulevards are jammed, the dirt roads are open. Two seconds of thinking and calculation.”

Floyd: “And you got it, you got it.”

Asad: “The French invented modern philosophy. The Arabs invented modern mathematics. And I am both.”

Floyd: “Rip off! Professor Armstrong said that. In class. You ripped off his lines.”

Asad: “Instructor Armstrong. He said it of me. Those lines are mine.”

At that moment, a jet roared overhead. Floyd rolled down the window, leaned out the passenger window. Wind and dust struck him in the face. Above him, the flashing navigation lights of the jet defined the wings and fuselage against the dust-gray sky.

“Take me away!” Raising his hands to the darkness, Floyd turned, saw the railings of the bridge and the Nile beyond. Behind him, he saw the flashing red lights of the police checkpoint, ahead of the van, the lights of the airport. Floyd sang with joy.

“I’m ready for the goodtimes,
I’m ready for the goodtimes ...

“We are out of here,” Floyd returned to his seat, he found the roll of Sudanese banknotes, tucked the mass of notes into the front shirt pocket of Asad.

“You are righteous ... right direction, right route, right speed, righteous. Now make the airport. Think like an Arab, think like a philosopher, think like a magician, make me exist somewhere else.” Floyd shouted back to Salazar: “My Strat. My Stratocaster. I want to sing ---“

Salazar released the elastic cords securing a

Stratocaster and a battered oud, the guitar-like stringed instrument of the Middle East. He passed the Stratocaster forward to Floyd, the oud to Degrev. Floyd took a plastic guitar pick from the dashboard, hit the Stratocaster.

With the highway noise, without an amplifier, they heard only the twang of the guitar pick across the wire strings. But Floyd faked the chord progression, clowned for the others, sang:

"I used to fear those Baghdad skies
 My mind was full of Saddam's lies,
 lies of Scuds,
 lies of American blood
 But here a I am
 with eight more lives"

The van veered off the highway, wove through a lanes of modern steel buildings marked with the logos of transnational corporations. Blue-white security lights illuminated parked company trucks.

"I'm ready for the goodtimes
 I'm ready for the goodtimes
 Ready to be gone from Sudan
 I'm ready for the goodtimes
 I'm ready for the goodtimes
 Ready to be gone from here
 Ready to be gone from Sudan
 as far as I can fly in the skies"

Floyd changed his voice to a nasal howl: "Yippi yi yo kai yay. Gulf Stream jet, take me away, take me away, far, far away -"

"Cut that cowboy coyote yapping," Salazar shouted. "Back to Shakira. 'Ojos Asi.'"

I traveled from Baghdad to Khartom
 I traveled from the slaughter
 to this hell of doom
 and now I'll be gone

from their bloody hands
and I now I'll fly away,
beyond the stinking sands

As the van stopped at a drop-bar security gate,
they saw --

A hundred meters ahead, the prefab steel office
and hangers of the Raedon Flight Company.

A black Mercedes had parked at the office door.

And a SUV with the black, white, gray splotched
camouflage of the Sudanese Army had parked next to
the Mercedes.

Floyd twanged a dead chord. "You know anyone
rich? With soldier bodyguards? Maybe Britney Spears on
tour? Off to end the war of fear in Darfor?"

A sentry with a Kalashnikov left the guard booth.
The sentry eyed the van, the foreigners in the front
seats. With a flick of his wrist, the sentry signaled a
second guard.

The lights above the gate went black.

In the sudden darkness, the crew watched the
guard approach their van.

"Be cool," Floyd whispered. "Beeeeee sooooooo
coooooooooool"

Asad switched on the cab light of the van, held up
an identity card. "International Video - -"

"Beeeeeeee soooooo coooooooooool," Floyd
whispered as he played wire twang chords on the guitar.
He grinned to the guard. Degrev stayed back, out of
view. Salazar did not move.

Floyd crooned his soft refrain, "Beeeeee sooooooo
coooooooooool"

"International Video. T. V. T. V." Asad held the
identification steady. But the guard pushed the card
aside with the muzzle of the Kalashnikov.

"You stop," the guard told Asad. Holding the
pistol grip of the Kalashnikov with his right hand, the
guard reached through the window with his left hand,

turned off the ignition. He switched off the van lights. He told Asad:

“You out.”

At the gate, Asad left the driver’s seat. He stood in the darkness beside the van, his hands up, his eyes fixed on the eyes of the sentry. Floyd continued twanging the Stratocaster. The sounds of television themes and electronic codes came from the interior of the van. Wind swirled dust from the asphalt. Metal banged against metal somewhere. Far away, the noise of diesel trucks passed on the highway.

The guard shifted his hold on the Kalashnikov to point the muzzle to the asphalt. With his left hand, he motioned for Asad circle the van, get inside. The other guard raised the crossbar. As Asad slid the side door back, the guard got behind the steering wheel. He jammed his Kalashnikov under the dashboard in the clutter of bags, camera cases, Coca-Cola cans. He found the gear shift and handbrake, gunned the engine.

Floyd glanced at the Kalashnikov. His hand shifted on the frets of the Stratocaster and he played the lead guitar line of “Wipeout.” In the back, Degrev tapped out a quick code on the vinyl deck of the van. Floyd glanced to Degrev. The guard saw the looks, shook his head, no.

“Be cool! Beeeeeeee coooooooooool.” The guard cautioned.

The guard put the van in gear and entered the security area, veered behind the offices to the hangers. There, a Gulfstream jet waited, an aluminum stairway at the fuselage.

“You, you, you, all you ---” The guard told them. “You go. And you be cool.”

From the doorway of the jet, a tall man in the gray suit of an executive motioned to men in the van. Floyd left the van, ran up the steps with his Stratocaster.

“Colonel Del Cielo,” Floyd whispered. “I thought you ... were” Floyd pointed straight up. “In the sky.”

Del Cielo, a Marine Corps colonel, retired, stood at the top of the flight stairs with a cellphone in his hand. In his gray suit, gray hair, careful grooming, he looked the magazine image of the international executive --- until he turned to show the right side of his face, that side of his face marked with an abstract pattern of scars. The scars ended at the smooth line above his cheekbone where the polycarbonate of goggles had protected his eyes. A few slashes lined his forehead.

A patch of white guaze covered his right eye.

As he looked from the interior of the aircraft, to the men at truck, the light on his face changed the scars. He appeared to be two different men, the smooth corporate professional and the scarred veteran.

“What? Is? That?” Del Cielo pointed at the Stratocaster. “You are taking that?”

Floyd: “Sir, is your eye okay?”

“It's okay. There was a piece of bone loose in the socket. So they took it out. The fragment of bone. Not the eye. You are taking that guitar?”

“Yes, sir. My red Strat. All I got left in the world. Sir! You are a miracle man. Those guards ---“

“Don't talk. Put that in the plane. Not on my seat. Do not put that guitar on my laptop. The clerk's in there, in the office. Stalling the soldiers. Dismantle that van. You got three minutes.”

Floyd relayed the message. “Skyman says strip the van. Three minutes.”

As the others gathered equipment, Degrev ran to Del Cielo.

“Sir,” Degrev opened the map he had taken from the dead Egyptian. “I know where they wanted to take the Semtex. Here, it says, ‘al ma taar,’ the airfield.”

“I know. Strip the van. You're out of here.”

The four men of the news crew formed a relay line. They passed the BetaCam, computers, bags up the stairs. Asad worked inside the van with wire cutters, snipping the cable ties securing the electronics. Salazar

unplugged components, closed the components in cases before passing the shipping cases to Degrev. Degrev passed cases to Floyd. Floyd ran up and down the stairs.

Floyd: "Sir, you are a miracle man. Those guards. They work for us? What a miracle!"

Skyman: "Forget that happened. If the situation had not been so extreme, you never would have known. Forget it, don't talk about it, you will put all of us at risk ---" The cellphone in his hand buzzed.

The clerk spoke from the cellphone: "Skyman? Sir?"

"Skyman here."

Clerk: "... he's here with soldiers."

Skyman: "Who is he? Is he military?"

"He's an official. A dignitary."

"Can he hear you now?"

"I'm in the back office. The deskman's talking with him. In Arabic. Don't know what they're saying. I told him I'd call the crew cell phone, find out why they didn't go to the reception."

"He's not military?"

"Too old to be military. He told me he's with the Ministry of Information. Bureaucrat. European suit. Spoke French with me. Arabic with the deskman. He came in a Mercedes. Government. And he smells of whiskey."

"What did he say?"

"He said the camera crew got visas to video tape government events. And they didn't make the events. Not the other ones, not this one tonight and ---"

"Tell him no commentator. The newsman. The talking face. Stall him. Keep him in that office. Promise him a blonde talking face. Keep the soldiers in that office. Tell him the producer told the camera crew to tape background video of Khartoum until the commentator flies into the country. No commentator, no events. Stall them. You only know what the video

company told you. Stall him. We need a few minutes, stall him. Keep the phone in your hand, I'll listen to what goes on, I've got to get these men out --"

Degrev: "Sir, van is stripped."

Del Cielo spoke into the cellphone. "One more minute and we're gone." He turned to the pilots in the Gulfstream: "Get us out of here."

Pilot: "We've got clearance. Where to? What do we tell the tower?"

"Tell them Paris, Marseilles, what's your fuel?"

The camera crew buckled into the seats of the Gulfstream. As Del Cielo talked with the pilots and secured the door, Floyd chorded his Stratocaster.

"Paris! Righteous! Ready for the goodtimes

Ready for les jeunes fils,

Ready for the Champs de Elyses.

Now I've got a ride to party and play"

Engines whined, the jet moved. In the ports, the lights slid past as the pilots guided the Gulfstream to take off. Del Cielo snapped open an oversized Zero Halliburton case. He took out a battered BetaCam. "Put down the guitar, Cowboy, take this --"

Floyd: "Another BetaCam? Two camera lights? This one looks older than the other one."

Del Cielo: "It is, it is not. All the features of the other. And direct satellite uplink. Real time display of video imagery to decision makers. What you see, we see. And that second light. It's a laser designator."

Degrev: "We see it. You call down a Hellfire?"

Del Cielo: "That camera kills. You're going to Morocco."

Asad: "Morocco? الحمد لله!"

Floyd: "We get a vacation? Or what? We want women, we need women, Morocco is Muslim --"

Del Cielo: "Cease to speak. Hold onto that camera, I've got to get this laptop running --- Your

team gets the first upgraded camera. You're going to Morocco and I've got only this flight time to train you. And the training starts now. And in Morocco, I will introduce a young woman. She will accompany you on the assignment in Morocco. Right now, listen up --"

Floyd: "One woman? Sir, four women! Minimum! And some women for the other men in the squad."

Del Cielo touched the keys of a PowerBook laptop: "Cease to speak! Stop the jokes. You will be chasing missiles. Surface to air missiles. Sam sevens. En route to the United States. To kill thousands of Americans. Now listen --"

The British-accented voice of Hassan spoke from the laptop as images of missiles appeared: "They told us, they told all of us, the Americans fear the missiles, the Americans cannot stop the missiles. We will open the mouth of hell, and let fly forth the jinn to attack the Americans, to strike them down."