

03

Steel slammed steel. The hammer drove the spike of steel re-enforcing rod through flesh and flowing blood. The Pakistani screamed, he pleaded, his words incoherent shrieks in English and Urdu. His body thrashed against the men standing on his legs.

The first spike penetrated the right thigh of the Pakistani above his knee. Suyuti directed the point outside the femur bone, then hammered the spike through the muscles and into the oil-and-tar asphalt floor of the aircraft hanger.

Illuminated by the headlights of a truck, the Pakistani sprawled against the steel wall of the hanger, his arms out-stretched. Ropes secured his arms to a steel cross-beam. The Pakistani wore only a shirt. Urine pooled under his naked crotch.

Egyptians stood on the bare legs of the Pakistani. His head rolled back and forth, he beat his head against a steel vertical as he shrieked in Urdu, then English, then Urdu again, incoherent.

The group of Egyptians laughed. Unlike the ragged Pakistani prisoner, they wore leather jackets and tailored European shirts and slacks. Kalashnikov rifles hung by slings over their shoulders. They smoked American cigarettes as they struggled to maintain their footing on the screaming Pakistani. One Egyptian joked to the prisoner, in English:

"You are like standing on a fish."

"No," the other Egyptian countered. "You are like an English whore."

Suyuti jerked the left leg away from the right. The Egyptians shifted their stance to secure the leg. Opening the legs exposed the crotch of the Pakistani. Suyuti put the point of the second spike to the left thigh, brought the hammer down again and again on

the rusted steel spike.

Years before, an aircraft mechanic had welded sections of re-enforcing rod together. The crossed sections formed spiked crosses with down-turned arms, like crude steel swords. The spikes served as tie-down points for ropes securing the wings of light planes. Tying down the wings and tail held the parked aircraft steady in gusts of desert wind.

Now, Suyuti drove the second spike through the left leg of the Pakistani. He continued hammering until the curved cross-piece of the spike pinned the leg of the Pakistani to the asphalt.

Suyuti: "You will tell me of the Americans." He spoke English --- the Pakistani did not understand Arabic. "I will take no more shit from you. I was told of your betrayal. They heard your voice. We know"

The Pakistani prisoner cried and begged. But his words came as incoherent screams of Urdu and English. Suyuti signaled the Egyptians to release the legs. The steel spikes secured both legs of the Pakistani to the asphalt floor of the hanger, the legs open in a V. Suyuti shouted through the sobbing:

"Tell me! Tell me of the Americans. You called the Americans! Where is the telephone?"

A second Pakistani watched and cried. Like the first man, ropes secured him to the wall. Suyuti would question him next. But the other Pakistani did not require torture to plead:

Second Pakistani: "No Americans! No cell phones. We not with Americans, please no, please no, no, no, no --"

A kick in the gut stopped the begging. Suyuti returned to the first man. "We know a Pakistani talked to the Americans. Was it you? Or was it your friend? Do you want to live? If you tell us, you can work for us."

Suyuti leaned down to the Pakistani. "You can

work for us. You can be useful. We will take you to a doctor. Tonight. Now. I will apologize for hurting you. We will forget this. We will pay you more than the Americans pay you. The next time you call the Americans, we will tell you what to tell them. You will work for us. You will keep your legs. You will live. We will pay you more money. Tell me”

“No ... no no Americans ... we do not work for Americans ...”

Suyuti reached out with the hammer. With the hammer head, he flipped the penis of the Pakistani back and forth. "You want to keep your dick? Answer! Answer!"

"... we do not work for Americans. We do not know Americans"

Raising the hammer high, Suyuti told the Pakistani: "Look! You see this? Answer!"

" ... no Americans ..."

Suyuti brought down the hammer. The hammer head skipped off bone.

In the glare of the truck headlights, the gouge in the shin looked pink against the dark skin. The Pakistani shrieked and convulsed against the steel spikes fixing his legs to the asphalt. Blood welled from the torn shin.

On the asphalt, blood formed black pools under the through-and-through thigh wounds. As the Pakistani thrashed, a stream of blood flowed from the hammer-gouge of the shin wound to drip on the sand. The Egyptians waited as the Pakistani sobbed and cried, his words incoherent.

An Egyptian took a portable radio from the back of the Mitsubishi transport truck. He set the radio on one of the motorcycle crates and extended the antenna. He spun the dial through snatches of voices and music until a woman chanted through an instrumental rhythm:

Got me lookin so crazy right now
 Your love's got me lookin so crazy right now
 Got me lookin so crazy right now your touch's
 Got me lookin so crazy right now

Suyuti hammered on the feet of the Pakistani. The man shrieked, thrashed, tried to jerk his legs free of the steel spikes. The hammer came down on one foot, then the other. Blood sprayed into the face of Suyuti. He spat, then demanded: "The Americans! What did you tell the Americans?"

Two men entered the hanger, an Egyptian in modern clothing and a second man second man in the flowing white jalibeyya of the Sudanese. Yet he called out in the idiomatic Arabic of Cairo:

"صديقي سيوطى فى النهاية انت هنا وشغلك مستمر. وفى
 النهاية الصواريخ أنت. لماذا تسأل الباكستاني سؤال؟"
 "ياسين! لماذا كنت لا هنا؟ انت لية مش نا؟ انا
 اتصلت بيك وما رديتشي."
 "انا ذهبت الى المطار. انا اتصلت هنا بس ما حدش رد
 والمسافة بعيدة والخدمة سيئة."

Yasiin went to the open crate of SAM-7 launchers. He ran his hands over the green enamel of a launcher tube. He closed his hand around the pistol-grip. "Oh, Americans, we will fuck you. لماذا تسأل الباكستاني سؤال؟"

Suyuti: "Paki! Answer! You answer Yasiin! Why did you betray us to the Americans?"

Incoherent, the Pakistani only gasped and choked. As the Egyptians waited for an answer, the voice on the radio rose and fell through the wavering signal:

Got me hoping you page me right now
 your kiss's
 Got me hoping you save me right now
 Lookin so crazy your love's got me lookin

Got me lookin so crazy your love

"كانت هناك رسائل من الثريا. في التعليمات
البرمجية. شخص خيانة لنا."
"هذه الباكستانيين؟ كيف يمكن أن يخون منا؟"
"صوت على الثرياز."
"في القاعدة. ربما رأيت حسن. الجندي القديم."
"من هو حسن؟"

Yasiin went to the bleeding Pakistani. Careful to pull the white cotton hem of his jalibeyya higher, he placed his shoe down on the hammer-smashed foot of the Pakistani. He ground his weight into the raw flesh and broken bones. The Pakistani screamed, Yasiin shouted out in English, "Where is that old soldier, Hassan Ismail?"

The other Pakistani answered. "Hassan Hassan was at the fence ---"

Yasiin keyed a number on his cellphone. "Hello?" The Egyptian spoke in fake idiomatic American. "Hey. I don't speak Arabic. You're the clerk at the Garden Hotel? You speak English? I'm Pakistani, I don't speak Arabic. I'm calling for Hassan. I need to talk to Hassan. You know, Hassan, old fellow, like forty years old. Talks English like a Brit"

Covering the cellphone, Yasiin turned to Suyuti: "انه هناك."

" Yeah, that old guy. He went there to talk to the American. The American who's staying there. French? Okay, maybe the foreigner is French. American or French, Hassan went there to talk to him and I'm a friend of Hassan He isn't there? He's out. He go to the cinema or what? No ... no message. I'll stop by to talk with him. Yeah, tonight, tomorrow, whenever."

Flipping the cellphone closed, Yasiin told Suyuti:

"نذهب إلى المدينة. هناك الاميركية في المدينة."

Suyutti pointed a Glock 19 pistol at the head of tortured Pakistani, fired twice. The second Pakistani screamed, received three bullets to the face. "We will fuck up that American"

Sand streaked past the headlights. As the trucks approached the cinema, Suyuti scanned the highway and the sidestreets. No one moved in the early morning darkness of this section of Al-Kasaad. Suyuti saw only wind-driven trash, the closed shops, and a few dust-blurred lights. Ahead, the scrawl of a sign flickered against the night:

Garden Hotel | Hôtel du Jardin | فندق الخنية

Suyuti: "ليس في الجبهة"

Turning onto a sidestreet, the driver lurched over the broken pavement to park in the darkness. Suyuti stepped into the sand-storm, his eyes filling with grit as he walked back to the highway. He heard the doors of the trucks slam as the other Egyptians followed him.

The hotel sign cast an amber light on the pavement. Suyuti paused at the doorways. He listened for voices, radios, any sound indicating activity inside the shops and apartments. He glanced at the windows overlooking the highway. The apartments remained dark. On the next block, he saw only closed shops and the shadow of the cinema marquee.

At the entrance to the hotel, he heard a television blaring music and voices. Suyuti stopped at a gate of welded steel designs. Through the steel loops and spikes, the blue light of a television revealed an empty lobby of concrete and broken ceramic tile. Wooden benches lined the walls of the lobby.

Suyuti signaled his men to wait. He eased the steel gate open. Inside, the television played to the empty lobby. Dust drifted in the air, hanging vines

shifted with the gusts of wind. A kung-fu hero barked out dubbed Arabic, then an orchestra played the drums and bells of Chinese drama, special effects added the steel-on-steel sounds of a sword fight. But Suyuti saw no one in the lobby. Slipping through the doorway, Suyuti crossed the broken tiles to the desk.

Behind the desk, a teenage clerk slept on a folding cot. Crutches leaned against the wall within reach of the clerk. Suyuti swept his hands along the inside of the desk. He found the registration book.

Watching the cripple, Suyuti eased out the book. A ballpoint pen clipped a page. Suyuti flipped open the book and scanned the lines of Arabic script until he found the one line with a European signature. A French name. Anton Micheaux. A carefully inked Arabic translation and a passport number followed the name.

Suyuti went behind the desk and crouched next to the sleeping clerk. Above the cot, an electric clock displayed the time in blue numbers, 3:01. An hour and thirty minutes to morning prayers. By the glow of the numbers, Suyuti searched the area around the cot. He saw papers and a water bottle. On the desk shelves, he saw English and French dictionaries, an Arabic-English Qur'an, and a telephone. Suyuti reached across the sleeping boy to search the shelves above the cot.

His touch found the keys. The keys to the rooms lay next to the crutches.

The Frenchman slept in room 23. Suyuti signaled for two of his men to enter. They served as his personal bodyguards and they knew his methods of operation. He motioned for the two men to come to the desk. He pointed one man to the feet of the crippled teenager, the other man to the head of the cripple. He gave that man the cripple's folded shirt and pantomimed covering the face of the cripple.

Suyuti took a knife from his bodyguard. The

bodyguards knew what came next. Suyuti confirmed the grip of the combat-knife in his hands, then nodded.

In a simultaneous motion, one man smothered the boy, the other man secured the feet of the boy as Suyuti dropped down. He took the jaw of the boy in his left hand, with his right hand sawed the blade through the throat, the boy heaving with a scream unheard, the shirt silencing him even though his hands tore at the arms of Suyuti as he sawed through the larynx and arteries, breath from the wound spraying blood, the blade continuing through arteries, muscles, the boy already dying as Suyuti stepped away and watched the crippled teenager bleeding to death.

Screams came from the Kung Fu video, chimes rang. The cot collapsed and the dying boy fell to the floor, blood flowing from the open throat, the eyes of the boy wheeling in the sockets as his consciousness faded, his hands at his open throat. Death stilled the eyes, the hands fell. Suyuti laughed. He wiped his hands and the blade on the dead boy's shirt, returned the knife to his guard.

With the keys, Suyuti led his men up the stairs. One of his men continued up the stairs to the rooftop garden -- he signaled Suyuti. No one. The Egyptians followed Suyuti to the door marked 23.

At the door, Suyuti paused. His eyes scanned the courtyard of the hotel. A second-floor walkway overlooked the lobby. Closed doors lined the walkway. Windows criss-crossed with scrolled iron grills provided ventilation for the rooms, louvered windows blocked vision into the rooms of anyone passing on the walkway. In the quiet of the hotel, the voices of the Kung Fu epic continued.

With a penlight, Suyuti found the key with the number 23. He turned the key slowly in the lock, entered the room in three steps, the light of the penlight showing two forms in the bed, the dark hair of a woman, a man turning, then Suyuti clamped his

hands on the mouth and throat of the man, the other Egyptians overwhelming the woman.

Tape went over the mouth of the man. Both the man and woman jerked and heaved under the strength of the Egyptians, but the Egyptians looped tape around the wrists of the man, then his ankles. Suyuti wrapped the man in the sheet as other men secured the woman.

Suyuti keyed his Thuraya cell-phone. He stepped into the open air balcony to speak. "الشاحنة"

Steel clicked. Suyuti returned to the room to see one of his men holding a lock-blade knife to the white throat of the woman.

"نحن قتلها؟ أو نحن نأخذ بها؟"
"انه عمل. انها هدية."

Suyuti laughed quietly. He joked in his idiomatic English. "Whore, you go for a ride."

"البحث عن غرفة الهاتف. لأجهزة الكمبيوتر.
لأمريكا أن يقدم تقريرا إلى رؤسائه. والالكترونيات. استخدام أي
سائه في اتصالاته مع رؤ"

At the window, Zayd listened to the instructions of the gang leader. Shoes scuffed the sand on the concrete balcony, he looked through the louvers --- men with styled hair and foreign jackets carried sheet-wrapped forms. Inside the sheets, the forms struggled, their elbows and knees jerking, feet kicking.

Gasps, whining, choking came from the bundles as the group went down the stairs to the open air patio.

"Who?" Hassan whispered from the second bed.

"Foreigners" Zayd crossed the room to the Sudanese, crouched so close he could smell the Hassan's sweat as he whispered. "Foreigners. They took the Frenchman and his wife from the other room.

Men are searching their belongings for uplink devices. They think they're taking us

Zayd wore only his pajama pants. He went to his bed, found the kitchen knives he had hidden there. He gave a knife to Hassan. "If I question one of them, we can identify the gang."

"Two against that gang?"

"One. I'll do it. You only back me up. I will take one of them alive."

"You against that gang? Only you?"

Zayd went out the door. Silent on his bare feet, he went to the railing. He heard the kung fu movie and the sound of shoes on the concrete as he glided the five steps to the next room.

The steel door remained open. Light fanned across the walkway. Zayd snapped a glance --- under a hanging lightbulb, two men leaned over the bed, one with his back to the door, the other with his eyes on the spilled out the contents of two backpacks, the men searching through the clothes and papers on the bed, a radio, a camera, wired miscellaneous objects off to one side. Zayd saw that the men kept their eyes on the search, not on the door.

Zayd rushed the first man, shot out his right hand in a perfect variation of a karate punch, yet with a knife extending his reach, his arm following a straight line, his wrist turning, the blade in his hand turning, the blade rotating to parallel the floor, the point of the blade entering the gap between the skull and the first vertebrae, the force of his arm driving the blade into the brain stem, the man gasping only once as he dropped, already dead ----

The blade jammed. Zayd jerked the handle once as the body spasmed with nerves, the knife did not come free, he abandoned the knife as he turned to the other man, Zayd torquing his body in a close-quarter attack, driving his left knee into the gut of the man ---

Pain staggered Zayd for an instant, his knee

suddenly the white exploding center of the world --- the man had jammed his auto-pistol in his pants, his belt holding the pistol, and Zayd had driven his full-body force into a knee strike, the pistol spiking a steel edge into the top of his knee where the ligaments of his thigh met the joint, the pain taking his breath for an instant as he continued through the attack, his left elbow slamming into the jaw of the gunman, teeth shearing, the man's head hitting the wall, a spray of blood and teeth splattering Zayd.

Hassan moved behind him. He identified himself with a whisper, "أنا هنا."

The stunned, blood-spraying gunman reached for the pistol in his belt, Zayd threw him to the floor. He held the man's neck in his right hand, grabbed his styled hair in his left, pounded the man's forehead into the tile, once, twice, the man ceasing to struggle.

Searching under the semi-conscious man, Zayd found a Glock 19 semi-automatic pistol. Hassan reached past Zayd, pushed the prisoner down. Zayd stood against the wall with his weight on his right leg, tried moving his left leg. Pain --

"Allah, give me strength." Zayd struggled to walk. He went to the dead man, tried to wrench the blade from the skull. The blade broke.

Zayd switched knives with Hassan, the older man holding up the half-blade to the light and softly laughing as Zayd took a second Glock 19 from the dead man. A snap of the slide ejected a 9mm cartridge. He gave the pistol to Hassan.

"Safety is the trigger," Zayd whispered. "Point and shoot."

And Zayd limped out the door. Below, he heard a car door slam, then an engine. The sounds of steel zinging on steel came from the Kung Fu video. Zayd listened for the gunmen, heard steps --- in the video? or the hotel?

Movement on the stairs, styled hair and a leather jacket came into his vision, he did not chance a struggle, he hammered the man down with the Glock, hitting him again and again as he fell, he hammered him three more times, the lightweight pistol lacking the weight to smash the skull of the man. The man gasped, tried to move on the tiles. Zayd slammed him again and again until he stopped moving -- he did not need another prisoner. He found a Glock and a bloody combat knife on the unconscious man.

Going to the stairway, Zayd snapped a glance, no one. He eased his head out, scanned the lobby. No one. Headlights moved across the entry --- tires spun sand on asphalt, then an engine accelerated away. Headlight appeared again -- the sound of American pop music came. Another vehicle. Other gunmen?

Pistols, knives, a prisoner -- Zayd pressed the pistols and knives against him as he dragged the unconscious man into the room with Hassan.

"A car left, I think they took the French man and woman --- guard these shits, wait."

With the combat knife and a Glock, Zayd went down the stairs, his bare feet silent. He saw an SUV waiting at the entry, a man waited at the steering wheel, music playing, his hand rising with a cigarette. Unlike the others, the man wore the white of a Sudanese --- and Zayd dodged sideways, out of sight of the waiting driver. He glanced to the reception desk.

Blood pooled on the floor. Zayd went to the desk, saw Mustafa. Mustafa, only eighteen, crippled when a hit-and-run truck hit his bicycle, who had studied French and English and mathematics with hope of a scholarship and surgery in Europe, who had practiced his French with Zayd and given him an off-the-book room in exchange for the tutoring in French and math, murdered. For nothing. How could a crippled, underweight teenager stop the gang of kidnapers?

Glock in his left hand, knife in his right, Zayd continued to the entry. Britney Spears chanted from the Mitsubishi SUV.

But it doesn't mean
That I'm serious.
'Cause to lose all my senses...
That is just so typically me.
Oh, baby; baby.

The driver had parked the SUV with the back passenger door exact center on the entry of the hotel -- to allow the gunmen to step straight into the truck?

Chance it. The driver faced forward, Zayd stepped to the truck and opened the back door --- but the knife blade scratched the metal, the driver turned, saw the muscled black man in white pajama pants, the driver reached for a shoulder-holstered pistol. Zayd slammed the door behind him, fired once into the face of the driver, the bullet continuing through his head to slam the metal of the roof, blood and brains spraying the headliner. The dead man fell back against the driver window, Britney Spears continued, he seemed to sleep even as blood flowed from his third nostril and down the white cotton of his jalibeyya.

Oops!
... I did it again.
I played with your heart.
Got lost in the game.
Oh, baby; baby.
Oops!
... You think I'm in love.
That I'm sent from above...
I'm not that innocent.

The headlights of the SUV fanned into the drifting dust, the engine idled. Britney moaned. Zayd turned in the seat, scanned the front of the hotel, the doorways, the avenue. In the darkness and wind, the

shopfronts seemed a blurred photo, dust blowing past lights, signs swaying, no human forms breaking the straight-lines and shadows of the town.

Zayd did not see anyone watching him. He left the truck in a rush, ran through the lobby, and up the stairs to the room.

In the room, Hassan struggled with the prisoner, the prisoner already dying, a hand trailing a length of tape clutching his blood-spurting throat, the other hand pushing Hassan back, Hassan slashing at the arm with the broken knife -- Zayd ended the fight by hammering the steel pommel of the combat knife straight down on the skull of the dying man, the shock stunning him, his heart continuing to pump blood out his throat as Zayd dragged Hassan away from the kicking man.

The other prisoner lay on the tiles, motionless, blood pooling around his head.

"That fellow stopped breathing." Hassan whispered. "That other man, I tried to tape his hands, he fought. I did not murder him."

"I got a truck. Please go to the room, gather everything. Wrap my Mac in clothes, protect it, that G Four's got to function. We're out of here."

Hassan rushed out. Zayd went through the pockets of the dead men, found passports, papers, Egyptian Pounds, Euros, American hundred dollar bills, Thuraya and Nokia cellphones. He bagged all the material and weapons in a daypack of the kidnapped French couple. He switched off the light of blood-spattered room, walked to his room with calm, paced steps.

Lights showed from other rooms. Devout Muslims would be preparing for morning prayers. Travelers would be leaving soon for the bus terminal.

On the tiles, Zayd saw a path of blood. His footprints and the prints of the running shoes of Hassan smeared the pools.

In their room, Hassan had packed the equipment, as instructed. Zayd wiped some of the blood off his body, pulled on his clothes. The two men rushed down the stairs, past the ending credits of the Kung Fu epic, to the waiting Mitsubishi SUV.

The lights of the SUV remained on, the engine running, the music playing on the stereo. Zayd searched the dead driver, took his cellphone, Glock, identification, then he let the body fall to the asphalt.

Across the avenue, Zayd saw a workman with a box of tools stop and stare. A merchant opening the steel door of his shop turned, the two men spoke. Zayd slammed the door, stood on the accelerator.

At a hundred fifty kilometers per hour, he drove west from Al Kasaad. Zayd told Hassan: "This truck won't make it to Khartoum. Daylight, the police and army will be looking for us. This is your country, what do we do?"

"The hotel registry will have your passport information, and the room boy and the guests will describe you ---"

"Mustafa is dead. They killed him."

"That helpless boy? On crutches?"

"He's dead. He moved me into the room with two beds without charging me. I didn't pay, I didn't sign into the room. The man and the woman, the French people, they were in my room with the one big bed. That's why I'm alive now. That's why they'll die. The Egyptians went to the wrong room."

Hassan did not speak for a moment. "They kill without a thought. All the men at the airfield. The boy. The man and the woman. Such men are beyond understanding."

"What do we do?"

"The police will be searching for this truck. And a Frenchman with a foreign coat. That coat. The men at the hotel will remember your coat with the winged woman of cigarettes."

"I'll trash it. Will they remember me?"

"A black man in Sudan? There are many black men in Sudan. Even some of your pale American color."

"I'll trash the coat. Trash the pistols I took. Keep the identification and cellphones. I need those for my superior. The numbers, the names. How do we get to Khartoum? Or Port Sudan?"

Hassan pointed to a family standing at the side of the road, they flashed through the headlights, gone before he spoke. "We shall travel on the bus. As do Sudanese. I will speak for us, there will no one who hears your university Arabic, or your French. We will be two men, on a bus, two of many thousands of men who travel."

"They could check all the men on buses. We left five bodies back there."

"The police will search for this truck."

"Then this truck goes in a wadi and we walk to the highway. To Khartoum."

"إن شاء الله."

In the truck, Suyuti kept his feet on the white sheet containing the struggling Frenchwoman. He heard her crying despite the tape over her mouth. Keying his Thuraya, he waited for Yasiin at the hotel to answer.

Yasiin did not answer.