

04

Maya woke to the jet shuddering with deceleration. Equipment shifted, a cymbal clanged, red appeared above her -- Maya upblocked the flash of red, the feather-light slick plastic glancing off her arm as she rolled from the bed of clothing to the black vinyl deck. Maya sprawled on the deck as the executive jet slowed.

A surfboard had fallen. Her mind blank, she stared at the surfboards, the Fender bass guitar, the stacks of rock and roll equipment, the ports of the jet. The weeks of aircraft and nations rushed back to her, she remembered -- -

The cockpit door slid back. A pilot saw her on the decking, "Ouarzazate. Colonel's plane's already in. Miss, take one of the seats. And belt in. Regulations."

Colonel Del Cielo, the Marine with the scarred face, the contract. The weeks of zigzagging flights to New York, Istanbul, Beirut, Damascus, Paris, Tangiers, Washington D.C., then back to Paris, then London. All the equipment and clothing purchased with hundred dollar bills and fake name credit cards. All of it assembled in the plane ---

The flight company had converted the Gulfstream for cargo. Maya strapped herself into a rear-facing seat. Only the two forward bulkhead passenger seats remained. Parallel web-works of straps ran down the center of the interior. An aisle divided boxes and equipment stacked from the vinyl decking to the overhead. The straps also secured a line of amplifiers and two surfboards -- alarm yellow, tropical pink. Other straps criss-crossed the black cases of a drum set. A red surfboard had fallen to the decking.

Morocco. The call. Morocco, now, tonight ---

The jet banked through a slow turn. Through the port, Maya saw the Atlas Mountains like distant

shadows, the white of snow defining the jagged lines of the ranges against the stars. As the landscape dropped, she viewed desert and hills streaked by the long shadows of dawn. A gridwork of lights appeared.

Ouarzazate. The lights of the modern sections of the city. A modern city side-by-side with the ancient caravan city of adobe towers and maze works of narrow walkways. In the desert of Morocco. Last city before the Sahara.

The contract. Fulfill the contract. No more planning. No more zigzagging flights. No more internet coding and MySpace uploads to create an imaginary band. No more calls to studios, no more faxes -- now she fulfilled the contract. Go with the Marines into the desert of Morocco.

The desert. Again. This time, no students, no professors. This time, guiding Marines, translating for them.

Through the port, Maya watched darkness and airfield lights streak past. The wheels hit concrete, the engines reversed, the plane shuddered with deceleration. The roar drowned all other sounds. Beyond the runway, she saw black rectangles against a gray sky splotched with dawn pink. Light through the windows of a terminal cast fluorescent glare across asphalt. White swirled on the asphalt.

Snow? Here, this low in the desert? The plane slowed to a roll. As she watched, wind threw the white against the walls of the terminal. Individual flecks of white swirled -- papers. Thousands of sheets of paper.

The white page of the disqualification.

The last night in his bed, the unconsciousness of pleasure and dreams, the white sheets, the anonymous e-mail, the letter of disqualification from the university --- then burning that letter and his photos, the call from the Colonel, calling again, then the contract, the white pages of the contract ---

Love and errors had thrown her here
 Love and errors like wind throwing trash
 Love and the years of hope now only ash
 Love and errors had thrown her here

"ما لي لا أتفكر؟ لم أكن أفكر و كنت في الخطأ"

She spoke out loud, her words slow with exhaustion. The travel of the past weeks through a maze of nations and time zones had lined her face with fatigue. She had almost the beauty of a model or actress, her oval face perfect, her forehead and eyes classic, yet her nose angled from her profile, a middle-eastern straight line, the bridge of her nose defined, not the surgically perfected doll-nose of American glamour. And as she considered her situation, her fatigue-blackened eyes went to slits, her lips a hard horizontal line across her face.

Marines. The word brought flashes of memories, photos, and videos through her imagination. How must she deal with them? She remembered the Marines of her childhood, muscled men in camouflage, squads running in lockstep in the wavering heat of Camp Pendleton, the videos of the shimmering deserts and highways of Iraq. The slamming noise of automatic weapons. Burning cities. Burn the motherfuck down! The screaming, the crying of the wounded and grieving. War.

A university professor had once termed the Marines, 'Agents of Hell on Earth.'

And she laughed. No one in her university would believe she worked with Marines.

What of her friends in Damascus? Would they laugh? No, she would never tell them. Talking of the Marines would end her life in Damascus. If the regime ever learned of her work for American military intelligence, the Syrian Consulate would never grant her another visa, all the families would be questioned, perhaps the fathers and brothers and cousins in the military would face interrogation and disappearance.

... the quiet of the gardens and the fountains, the night boulevards of the Sha'a'lan jammed with thousands of cars while she and all the other girls cut through traffic in their party clothes and black abayas. The girls had pitied the soldiers guarding the embassies all night while Damascus came alive

Would Dina laugh at her? Three brothers officers in the Syrian Army -- and now Maya worked with soldiers. Not officers. Enlisted men. Would Dina laugh at her? Maya, the friend from California, her English teacher working with soldiers?

Maya, who did not drink alcohol? Maya, the vegetarian? The vegan advocate, who would not eat meat, or eggs, or drink milk? Maya, the student of Qur'anic Arabic? With Marines? Killers?

Colonel Del Cielo had described the Marines as 'contractors.' For whatever reason, they no longer served in the Marine Corps. What did that mean? Had they left the Marine Corps to work for an intelligence agency? Or had the Marine Corps court-martialed and discharged the men? Had the Colonel hired criminals? Did they work for the Colonel to avoid prison?

No, he had described the Marines as men of diverse cultures -- Russian, French, Palestinian, Mexican -- who spoke multiple languages, who played guitars, drums, the oud -- A Marine who played the oud! Marines who traveled in the strange lands of the world to gather intelligence.

The languages, the videos, the computers, the guitars, drums, amplifiers, the clothes -- to watch and report on the movements of enemies, the hypocrites who spoke of Islam and mass murder of Americans and Europeans to advance their international campaign to return to the imaginary past glory of the Caliphate, actually to seize the oil-wealth of the Middle East and impose the Wahabbi Salafi reign of insanity on the peoples of the world.

And against that, the Marines. And she would

work with them. She had accepted the work. She had signed the contract. To regain her academic ranking in the university. To gain a place in a medical school. To make money fighting the Salafis. To travel again in Marakesh, Fez, Tangiers. Love and error had brought her here

To cold, cold Ouarzazate.

Maya searched for a coat. She had bought thousands of dollars of used clothing for the Marines. Shirts, pants, jackets in sizes, styles, colors. Shoes, boots, berets. And she had ordered shoes and clothing from catalogs. But what had she bought for herself? She found a Syrian leather jacket -- the design, the details, even the stitching duplicated from an Italian import, only the label identifying the shop on Abu Rummaneh -- and a black abaya to cover her from her head to her feet.

A pilot pushed open the door between the passenger compartment and the cockpit. He held a cellphone. "Miss!"

"Maya!" She recognized the voice of Colonel Del Cielo. "My production director ready to work? You rested, good to go?"

"Colonel? You are here?"

"Waiting for you. Waiting to make the introductions. Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir. Ready. This plane is loaded with what they need"

A hanger appeared outside the ports. The high doors opened. Inside the hanger, in the glare of worklights, a ground crew pushed a set of flight stairs. She saw Colonel Del Cielo speaking into a cellphone as he watched the plane approach. Through her cellphone, she heard his voice in sync to his speaking:

"All of it? Equipment? Clothing? The video props?"

"Sir, this plane is loaded. Going through customs will take hours. Maybe all day."

At the side of the work area, Maya saw two trucks. Exactly as she had ordered. A van for the electronics -- a high-side van with a steel equipment rack on the roof. And a second truck, a box-back cargo truck for the band equipment.

The plane angled to the stairs as the Colonel spoke into the cellphone. "The camera crew is here. We've got to move fast, get these planes out of here. But I want you to take a few minutes and put together a quick-change presentation. Of what you can do with costumes. Saudi one minute. And under that, modern clothes from London, Paris. High style."

"Damascus."

"No, not Arab. Modern."

"Sir, London? Paris? That's Damascus."

The flight stairs bumped against the fuselage. A pilot stepped out of the cockpit, threw open the door. Colonel Del Cielo stepped in. "My men will be hesitant to work with a woman. I want them to see the advantage. Not what you're wearing now. I want extremes. You. Will. Be. EX! TREME! A Saudi woman suddenly a woman from Paris. One minute Saudi, next minute, Paris. Quick change. You can do what they cannot -- I am amazed, you did load this plane. Drums, amplifiers, surfboards."

"Yes, sir. And all the clothes I could buy. What do they have with them? What do they need?"

"They need it all. They will empty this plane. They had to leave Sudan in a rush. They've only got what they were wearing. Video company uniforms. And I want them to trash those uniforms. They're over there in the other hanger. You walk in there, you do your demonstration, then we come back here and they become a rock and roll band. We've got to get this crew on the road."

"Yes, sir. The band. Immediately."

Del Cielo laughed. "Yes, sir. Immediately. Yes, 'mam. You already sound like a Marine. You may have

a positive influence on those fellows. Look at those surfboards. Could see those from ten kilometers. I did not brief them on the new concept. We'll tell them after the demonstration. And I've still got men in flight. One man went commercial to Madrid, I've lost contact with him. He may or may not make it here this morning. If not, he'll call you. I want the ... you all out of here. Walk into that other hanger, make your presentation dramatic. Saudi, then Paris in sixty seconds or less. You can do what they cannot."

Maya nodded.

"You understand. Marines are very conservative, very careful. Disciplined."

"You puked on the Virgin Mary!"

A fist fake-hammered Floyd. He turned away from the for-play impacts, simultaneously coughing and vomiting again.

Salazar: "My shirt! The Virgin!"

Degrev: "Stop it, Snake."

Salazar: "My Virgin of Guadalupe! He puked on her!"

Degrev threw a karate sweep at the feet of Salazar, Salazar went horizontal in the air, Degrev caught Salazar and eased him to the concrete. Floyd continued coughing and choking.

Salazar: "He puked on the Virgin. That's got to be a sin. Cursed! We will be cursed!"

Floyd: "I'm sick, man. I'm choking on that toxic shit dust from Sudan."

"Gentlemen!" Del Cielo interrupted the fight. "What! Is! This? Put yourselves in order. I will now introduce the young woman. She will guide you through his country. Right now, listen up --"

Del Cielo held up a computer-generated contour map. "When that plane comes down in the desert, you will be there. You will observe and follow the

Egyptians. Multiple vehicles, international personnas, you will use your foreign passports, it's all preplanned and booked ---“

Asad: “Colonel Del Cielo, sir. International personas? You said we will not be a news crew again. What is the story? Why are we out in the desert?”

Del Cielo laughed. “Your new team member will brief you on that. She managed the planning.”

Floyd: “The woman. Who is the woman?”

Del Cielo: “You will meet her. In a minute.”

Degrev: “Sir, we lucked out in Sudan. Everyone in business drove white trucks. We've got to have a variety of vehicles.”

Del Cielo: “She's got that covered. Four-wheel drive for the desert, panel trucks for the highways. Reservations for rental cars in Marakech.”

Floyd: “Who is this woman?”

Del Cielo: “In a minute.”

Degrev: “And a woman, sir? Can we discuss that? Can we ask you to reconsider that idea?”

Del Cielo: “No. And you are all responsible for her. There are rules with this woman. You don't ask about her name, Armstrong. Maya Armstrong. You do not recognize that name, you do not question her.”

Floyd: “Armstrong?”

Salazar: “Armstrong? Like the professor at Pendleton? He had a daughter who spoke Arabic.”

Del Cielo: “She is in fact his daughter. Now, no more discussion of that relationship.”

Floyd: “This is Armstrong's daughter? She's going with us?”

Del Cielo: “I know you know him. But as of now, you do not know him. You. Do. Not. Know. Him. And if she speaks of him, you say nothing.”

Salazar: “That man's a fool for his girl. He is the proud daddy. He showed us baby pictures. ‘This is my daughter Maya in a Cobra. Notice she's in the killer seat?’ A complete fool for his girl.”

Del Cielo: "You will not discuss her father or your experience with her father again."

Floyd: "Armstrong's daughter? Going with us? No, sir. She can't go with us. This is not safe."

Del Cielo: "She signed the contract. And. You. Will. Not. Speak. Of. Him."

Degrev: "Is there are problem between Armstrong and his daughter?"

Floyd: "Does he know she's doing this?"

Del Cielo ignored the questions. "Returning to my instructions. Degrev. You are responsible for her safety and well-being. She is valuable to us. If she can do this, I want her working with us. First, you will intercept those missiles. Second, you will take care of her. Do you understand?"

Degrev: "Sir, a girl? With us? Out there?"

Del Cielo: "A woman. Here. With you. She is already here. With you. And you will guard her with your life. That camera may mark the target. But she will get you there."

Degrev: "Sir, there is always a chance of action. We cannot ---"

Salazar: "Sir, in Sudan, it got muy loco."

Asad: "Difficult."

Floyd: "She doesn't have the training to operate with us, how can she ---"

Del Cielo: "Teach her what she needs to know."

Floyd: "Sir, we're disposable. She's not."

Del Cielo: "Floyd, don't say that. You, all of you, you're like my own sons. You are not disposable."

Floyd: "Yeah? That's not what the contract I've got says ---"

Degrev: "Молчать."

A black form cut the rectangle of the doorway. They turned to see -- what appeared to be -- a Saudi woman in full black abaya, her form concealed from head to feet, black hood over her hair, the niqab masking her face, only a rectangle open to reveal her

eyes. Yet the black drape did not conceal her tall, slender form.

Del Cielo: "Gentlemen, allow me to introduce Maya. This young woman is Arabic fluent. Very experienced in the Middle East. More time in Arabic countries than you. All of you. I believe you will immediately see, and hear, how she can be useful to you. She can change her look, she can be a woman from Saudi, in the next minute, she can be Paris. Degrev, Asad. You speak Arabic. Question her."

Degrev: "من أنت؟"

"أنا الذي يتطلب تخصيص."

Salazar: "An Arab woman with white skin and blue eyes? And white hands?"

Maya: "I did get dark contracts. I do have the black gloves of the Wahabbi women. And I can use makeup to darken my skin. However, many Arab women are as pale as anglos.

"أنا الحديثة. أنا امرأة من دبي."

Turning, Maya drew her hands into the black shroud, the black rising to show white diaphanous cloth. She cast aside the black.

Now she stood in a white silk gown. She extended her arms, the fabric waving like wings. Red and black showed through the gossamer white.

Floyd: "She's a jinn. هي الجن"

Maya: "This is how a woman who did not want to be recognized might dress to go to out for the evening at a resort. Or a night club. This is conservative but not black. And stylish. She conceals her identity but shows that she's wearing European clothing and high heels."

She turned again, the white floating away. "And here's how some Syrian women dress for parties --"

Floyd: "Catwoman!"

For a moment, they saw a second skin of black leather revealing her slender form, then she

straightened a blood red silk shantung blouse. Her blonde hair flowed over the red of her shoulders and back. Wavy blonde hair, red silk, long black leather legs tapering to zipped ankles, spike heels completing the high fashion image -- the Marines stared.

Floyd: "Grease. Olivia Newton-John. Black leather and red."

Salazar: "That can't be right. Arab women? Like that?"

Asad: She's got it. I've seen it. In Paris. Saudi women will spend thousands and thousands of Euros to look chic."

Del Cielo: "She can do it, Saudi to Paris."

Salazar: "Paris Hilton."

Floyd: "Shakira. Sha - KEY- ra! In black leather and red."

Degrev: "Women in Syria? Women in Syria dress like that?"

Maya: "The red shantung came from a Saudi princess at my school. She bought it in Dubai. The shop of a Paris designer in Dubai."

Degrev: "The black leather catsuit?"

Maya: "I bought it in Damascus. In the Sha'a'lan district. I bought it off the shop rack. Two hundred dollars. And for that price, they cut it down. I'm thinner than Arab women. I've got a coat for you, that I bought at that shop."

Del Cielo: "Gentlemen, Maya will direct your surf video in the Sahara. Maya explain."

Floyd: "What?"

Asad: "Speak again, sir? Surf? Video? In the Sahara?"

Degrev: "Sahara?"

Salazar: "Desert?"

Del Cielo: "You're a rock and roll band making a surf video in the Sahara desert."

For a long moment, no one spoke. The noise of props approached from the distance. Wind banged the

hanger door. They heard Moroccans speaking outside.

Floyd laughed. "Who thought of that?"

Del Cielo: "New concept gentlemen."

Floyd: "A surf movie. In the Sahara. That's a new concept."

Maya: "World's biggest beach."

Floyd: "No waves."

Maya: "We'll add the waves with computer generated images. I brought the computers and software. The colonel told me one of you does video editing and special effects."

Floyd: "And people call me a clown? This girl's ... a super freak."

Del Cielo: "Allow me to explain. News crews. Traveling through the Middle East to tape video reports. Great idea. Like Al Jazeera. Glad I thought of it. However, there is a central flaw. News crews -- but no news made it to the televisions of the world. Fact is, the bureaucrats who sign off on the visas want to see what made it to broadcast. And they didn't see our programs on television. So they called and they wanted program tapes. And I couldn't produce those tapes. News crews too busy fulfilling assignments to actually produce video news.

"I told Maya of this contradiction. Video news crews for a video news company that didn't produce any video news. I told her I needed to make phony programs. I told her I wanted her to be the news producer. I needed her Arabic, I needed her experience in the Middle East, she would direct technicians who would cut the video tapes into programs. Then we would move the videos out to stations.

"And I told her of you. I told her of your multi-cultural backgrounds, your time out there at Pendleton, the surfing, the garage band music in Oceanside and Kuwait, and your controversial choice of music, your lyrics creating trouble with your superiors,

your skills with video, what a fine group of gentlemen she would work with, and she gave me the solution. No more phony Al Jazeera. She gave me the new concept. Maya, tell them --“

Maya: “Bands. Bands make videos. Bands go everywhere in the world, they make travel videos, cultural videos, political videos, they make crazy videos. Surf movies in the Sahara. Anything to get attention. They spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on travel, equipment, services. And they miss deadlines. And no one in the real world questions that. Colonel Del Cielo told me you need to avoid the muhabarat of the countries. Do the obvious. Change your news crew into a rock band --“

Floyd: “The obvious. Of course. A surf video in the Sahara. Why didn’t I think of that?”

Degrev: “Молчать.”

Maya: “If you’re a band, they won’t even look at you. Maybe the police, they’ll check you for hashish, alcohol, pills. But the secret police? The military? You’re a band. No one will take you seriously.”

Floyd: “Hey, hey, we’re the monkeys, monkeys out looking for waves ---“

Degrev: “Заткнись.”

Salazar: “Who you calling a monkey? You’re the cowboy clown who puked on my Virgin ---“

Degrev: “Заткнись.”

Salazar: “You tell that cowboy clown from space to be silent!”

Del Cielo: “YOU BE SILENT! The two stooges. Gentlemen! She’s fluent in Arabic. Even Moroccan dialect. She is very experienced in Morocco --“

Maya: “Sir, I am not fluent in the Moroccan dialect. Not Maghrib Arabic. Not Berber. I speak Al Fus’ha Arabic. I speak ameiya with a Syrian accent. When they hear me, they will think I’m a Syrian trying to speak Moroccan.”

Del Cielo: “But they won’t think you’re

American. Got it, gentlemen? She can speak the languages. And this will require the languages. You will be following the shipment of anti-aircraft missiles through Morocco and she will serve as your guide throughout this assignment.”

Degrev: “Sir, we can’t risk her out there ---“

Del Cielo: “That’s correct. You can’t. You can’t risk her out there. There will be no risk. There will be no action in Morocco. Morocco is an ally of the United States of America, the Morocco government cooperates with the American intelligence services, and this unauthorized surveillance violates the sovereignty of Morocco. And the laws of Morocco. And all our diplomatic agreements with Morocco. There will be no risk, no action. No accidents, no fist fights, no drinking, no clowning. Nothing. You watch, you wait for instructions. Period. Maya. Tell them the penalty for committing a crime with a weapon in Morocco.”

Maya: “Possessing a weapon, life in prison. Period. Then you do the time for the crime.”

Floyd: “What exactly is a weapon? Kalashnikov? Pistol? Degrev? He’s a weapon.”

Del Cielo: “And I can’t get you out.”

Degrev: “Sir, will we be working with their intel services? Any liaison?”

Del Cielo: “Negative. None. Al-Qaeda has penetrated the bureaucracies of many Islamic nations. We don’t know who’s working for who. We can’t risk official liaison. One telephone call, those missiles disappear. That’s why I’m sending you. But only to watch. No weapons, no action. Video and uplink. Your superiors watch what you send up, your superiors decide what to do, you wait for instructions.”

Degrev: “And Ms. Maya is with us?”

Del Cielo: “Why not? Women are in bands.”

Maya: “I’ll be your tour manager. I’ve done it before.”

Floyd: “For bands?”

Maya: “For bands in the US. For professors. For students. In Morocco. Exactly where we are. Here. Documents. Transportation. Rooms. I’ve already got trucks waiting. In the other hanger. In the other plane, I’ve got clothes for you, international rock and roll clothes, computers, guitars, amplifiers, drums --“

Salazar: “You got a shirt for me? This bolo clown puked on my shirt.”

Floyd: “It’s that dust. I got lungs infected with dust.”

Salazar: “And so you puke on the Virgin of Guadalupe.”

Maya: “Tonanzin forgives.”

Salazar: “Tonanzin? You know about Tonanzin?”

Del Cielo stopped the back and forth. “Gentlemen! Introductions. Maya. This fellow who speaks Arabic and Russian, he’s Degrev. Also known as, The Chechen.”

Maya: “Why Chechen?”

Degrev: “My grandfather. He came from Chechneya.”

Del Cielo: “This other man, who always interrupts his superiors, he’s Floyd.”

Floyd: “A K A, the Cowboy. Why the Cowboy? I played country music. I wore a cowboy shirt. I wore a cowboy hat. I’d rather be called Cowboy than Pink, like Pink Floyd. Or Pretty Boy. Like Pretty Boy Floyd.”

Salazar: “A K A, Floyd the Noise, Floyd the Clown, Floyd El Payoso, Floyd E - bu - ya.”

Maya: “Why jackal?”

Floyd: “Jackal of the Jihad!”

Degrev: " ممنوع "

Maya: “Jihad is a very problematic term, if you are referring to the enemy.”

Degrev: " ممنوع "

Floyd: “He won’t let us call them jihadis. Everyone in the world calls them jihadis, but not us.”

Maya: “Perhaps violent salafis or takfiris or muthafiqiun, if they commit murder. If they murder other Muslims, they are called, enemies of Allah.”

Del Cielo: “She wrote a book on Jihad. That’s how I met this young woman.”

Across the hanger, the steel door banged. Two pilots entered. They wheeled overnight cases. Technicians walked with the pilots, clipboards in their hands, reviewing details of the check-outs. A technician pointed from the clipboard to the engine.

Del Cielo started away, turned in mid-stride: “Talk fast. I will be flying out most immediately. Unload that plane. You must get out there and waiting.” He shouted across the distance. “Next stop, the Sahara.”

Pilot: “Sign here, sir.”

Del Cielo: “How are you recording these flights?”

Pilot: “Renditions. Prisoners. When they see this piece of paper, the office will shred it.”

With the group of Marines, Floyd lowered his voice as he leaned to Maya: “No jokes now. Road to Morocco, this won’t be, Princess Maya.”

Degrev: “Молчать. Introductions.”

“I’m Salazar. From Oceanside.”

“I’m Asad. Family Palestinian, I was born in Algeria, we moved to France, then to the U S of A.”

Floyd: “He’s called Red Card. Because a gang of La Costa rich boys thought Salazar was a Mexican who had joined the Marines for a green card, you know, citizenship. Then Asad went Red Card on them.”

Salazar: “Because I am a green card Mexican.”

Asad: “And I’m a green card Algerian. With a French passport.”

Maya: “La Costa? The resort?”

Floyd: “The astroturf suburb. South of Pendleton. There’s a suburb around the resort.

They'd never let us into a resort party. We went to a party at a house. Millionaire suburb. Wrong party. Mistake. And the vato loco alla, he's Snake. Because he's going to get a righteous snake tattoo some day."

Salazar: "Xolotl, the double headed snake of paradise and hell."

Floyd: "But not now. And Maya, I bet you don't have a tattoo ---"

Maya shook her head, no.

Floyd: "None of us have got tattoos. There's a reason we don't have tattoos. It's so that if ---"

One moment Floyd spoke, the next moment he did not --- Degrev had clamped his larynx closed with one hand: "Молчать. Это закрытая информация."

Floyd nodded his head, Degrev released his throat. "Okay, I'll be cool. But I got to tell her this, you don't know what you're involved with. Maybe you could go back to college, real quick? Like, fly back with the colonel."

Salazar: "Shut up. She's with us."

Maya: "I signed a contract. I need this."

Degrev: "لا الأساتذة ، وليس الطلاب."

Maya: "I signed a contract. The colonel ---"

Floyd: "Yeah, and we signed contracts. But the contracts don't say shit about what we're actually doing."

Degrev: "Молчать."

Floyd: "Contracts are paper. Paper can't tell you what we do."

Maya: "The colonel told me what I will do, I can do it."

Floyd: "Colonel doesn't know what happens out there."

Salazar: "Shut up. Got it? Colonel signed her. She goes."

Degrev: "This will not be professors and students."

Floyd: "So remember, we told you."

Salazar: "What about a shirt? I want a shirt, I want my international rock and roll clothes."

Maya: "It's all in the other plane. Stacks of clothes. The colonel gave me your sizes, I bought clothes. Stacks. New boots. You've got to change. You want to look like a band when we drive the trucks through Customs and Immigration. And from now on, only English, no Arabic."

A shout came from Del Cielo. "Stop talking! Unload that plane! And the other plane! Load the trucks!"

Maya gathered her costumes, tried to run on her spike heels, her ankles wobbled. She took off the shoes, ran for the exit. The Marines watched her running across the hanger in her socks.

Floyd: "Anything happens to her, Armstrong will die. And he'll come back from hell, he'll scream through our heads forever."

Degrev: "Nothing will happen."

Floyd: "I don't want to take his daughter out there. Not Armstrong's daughter. I'm trash. Disposable. But not Armstrong's daughter."

Degrev: "She decided. Not you."

Motors cranked chain, steel screeched on steel as the hanger doors powered open. Dawn illuminated the interior. They carried equipment from the Gulfstream to a flatbed push cart. Floyd stared out the open hanger doors to horizon of desert. He took his Nikon camera from the stack of equipment, unsnapped the case and glanced through the viewfinder.

Floyd: "Saudi, Jordan, Iraq, Sudan, Morocco. Why do all deserts look the same? Like the moon. And cold. Where's my official jacket? Cameraman to the dictators of the world jacket?"

Del Cielo rushed across the hanger: "Quit the

sight-seeing. All of it, all the electronics, out of that plane! Gentlemen. We've got daylight outside. Salazar! That camera case --" Del Cielo took the oversize Halliburton Zero case, put it in the hands of Floyd. "Your camera. Floyd, get all this moved to the trucks. Before my plane goes, you try an uplink to my computer. On your own. I trained you, now you do it on your own. And later we'll try an uplink while I'm in flight. When I get to the District of Clowns, I want to know I'm straight lined to this crew --"

Floyd: "Sir! District of Clowns. That was the name of my band. Copyrighted."

Del Cielo: "When I was young, that line was old."

Floyd: "Then we changed it to 'Clowns in Action.' C I A. Is that cool?"

Del Cielo: "Before I signed you, that line was old. The correct phrase would be, 'Clerks Incapable of Action.' Why do think I created this operation? Now listen. Floyd. I want you ready to uplink now. We got daylight, that means already two hours of daylight in Sudan, that means they could've flown out the Strelas and you are not out there waiting for that shipment. I want you one hundred per cent operational with that camera before you go out in that desert."

Degrev called out from the door of the Gulfstream. "How do we know the shipment is still there? Not here?"

Del Cielo held up his Iridium and Thuraya satellite phones. "The staff back in D of C. If the gang moves it, I get the call. Then you get the call. Move this equipment. Gentlemen! No more talk. You may have weeks of waiting to talk. Get all this to the trucks, the trucks are in the other hanger."

Degrev brought an armload of components down the stairs. He set the stack on the flatbed cart, secured the components with a web-strap. "Sir. This is it. That plane is empty."

"Yip, yip, yippy yo kay yay," Floyd pushed the

luggage cart to speed, then jumped up to ride. The cart rolled from the hanger to the expanse of airfield asphalt. He raised his arms like a bird in flight.

The colonel laughed. "The Clowns in Action go surfing in the Sahara."

As the free-rolling luggage cart cleared the hanger, the dawn wind hit Floyd. He kept one foot on the cart, pushed as if he propelled a skateboard.

Floyd: "Oh, what is this? Cold! We're in North Africa? We're going to the Sahara? Turn on the sun!"

Salazar pushed the second luggage cart. He pointed to the mountains. "Snow."

Floyd: "We're in Africa and there's snow. How can we do a surf video where's there's snow? Where's my contract? I like it hot. And here it is not. Man, is that a Nikon moment? Blue sky, pink snow, black mountains. Where is my Nikon?"

Leaning over the push-bar, Floyd found the camera case. He flipped the snap to release the front section of the case, powered the camera one-handed, looked through the viewfinder.

The cart free-wheeled sideways. Floyd rolled into the hanger as he framed the image of the distant mountain ridges. The luggage cart spiraled between the Gulfstream and the white trucks. Floyd rolled parallel to the van, the van and open sidedoor blurring through the LCD viewfinder -- and he saw Maya.

Maya had changed out of her leather, returned to jeans. In the viewfinder, she pulled a sweatshirt over her head. Floyd saw an instant of slender torso, then the sweatshirt went over her head, she shook out her hair -- and she saw Floyd focusing the camera at her as the luggage wagon of electronics rolled to a stop. He grinned.

"Beautiful lady! Nikon moment!"

"There! The P V C. The saws. The tape." Maya sat in the sidedoor of the van. She pointed into the van, then pulled on red high-top Converse tennis

shoes. “Colonel Del Cielo said you needed three-quarter inch P V C pipe, hacksaws, duct tape, cable ties. There it is ---”

Maya ran to the top of the flight stairs. She looped straps over her shoulders, picked up plastic wrapped clothing and a stack of courier packages. “Production crews rent that van. You’ve got built-in AC sockets. European-Middle Eastern two prong sockets. Two hundred twenty volts, fifty cycle. Generator runs off the engine. And there’s a hands-free mount for Thuraya satellite phones on the dashboard.”

Floyd: “Looks like an Iraqi ambulance.”

Maya: “Ready for the computers, electronics --”

Floyd: “Wow. Is that a Cub Scout shirt? Except in Arabic? Did you get a Cub Scout shirt for me?”

“I got this years ago. I did get a Batman shirt in your size. Black, long sleeves, hood, Batman mask.”

Floyd: “Does it say ‘Batman’ in Arabic?”

Maya: “It’s got a bat, that bat says bat in all languages.”

Salazar pushed the second luggage cart to the van: “What is all that?”

Maya threw the courier packages and plastic-wrapped clothes on the electronics. “Rocker styles from Europe. Shirts. Pants. Coats. And PowerBooks.” She held out a black nylon carry case. “Who wants a G Four? Who works the computers? It’s got Final Cut Pro for the video editing. Photoshop for stills. ProTools for sound.”

Asad: “Final Cut Pro? PowerBooks? This is a video production.”

Maya: “And LaCie external hard drives.”

Del Cielo: “What’s the name on the software registration? Can the programs be traced by registration?”

Maya: “I bought all the equipment and programs in Beirut. Duped from Europe and the United States. If anyone tries to back track the registration, it goes to a

shop in Beirut. I wore an Iranian chador when I bought the programs. They didn't even see my hand. Black glove with stacks of hundred dollar bills. And the money? That goes back to a currency exchange in Martyrs' Square in Damascus. I changed Euros to hundreds, took the hundreds to Beirut."

Del Cielo: "What universities are doing to our youth. Currency manipulation. Copyright violation. To make subversive videos. A young woman from the suburbs, an honor student, now a transnational criminal."

Floyd pulled sheer, flimsy cloth from a courier package: "Tights? And silver sequined cowboy boots? Are these are my size?"

Maya: "Try them. The colonel gave me shoe sizes. And the silk thermal underwear. For you. For all of you. Invisible under your clothes. Like this --" She pulled up her Cub Scout sweat shirt. She revealed form-fitting, flesh-colored silk. "Is it cold out there?"

Floyd grabbed the package of silk underwear. "Mine! It is ---" He broke into a song line. "It is cold out there"

Maya answered the line, singing. "Baby, it's cold outside"

Degrev: "No. She sings."

Maya: "Sayeed Qutb's favorite song."

Degrev: "What?"

Del Cielo: "Gentlemen. Maya. Assemble your equipment. Now I got to go, my pilots are waiting. This man's got work in the District of Clowns. And this is not it. You men -- and young woman-- are heros."

Floyd: "No. Jihadiis."

Degrev looked around the hanger at the surfboards, amplifiers, electronics --- and Maya Armstrong wearing an Arabic script Cub Scout sweatshirt. "Sir, with all due respect, a surf video, in the desert, they'll think we're clowns"

Del Cielo: "Exactly. Clowns in Action. But they

will not think you're intel. Or recon."

Floyd: "Name of the band. Anywhere we go, we are the Clowns in Action."

Minutes later, as his Gulfstream soared north, Del Cielo saw a text message on his encrypted PowerBook:

French Embassy, Khartoum, Sudan received call from Al Kasaad, a town on the highway to Port Sudan. There is a report of murders in the hotel. There is a report of a kidnapped French national.

Our man does not respond to calls.