

05

From the second floor office, two men watched the white vans approach the gates.

Abdel al-Raidi wore the severe suit and tie expected of a senior officer in the Immigration and Customs Office of Ouarzazate. The other man wore a casual uniform of dark blue polyester pants, pale blue shirt, and blue windbreaker. A plastic badge on the windbreaker identified the man in three languages:

Taxi / Chauffeur de Taxi / تاكسي

Mohamed Boulami

Al-Raidi passed the driver a folder of black-and-white photocopies. The top page showed video images of Maya Armstrong in levis and sweatshirt. The driver flipped through the photocopies to see images of Degrev, Floyd, Asad, and Salazar loading the vans. The angle of the images indicated video taken from surveillance cameras in the aircraft hanger:

Boulami: "لماذا يعتقدون أنهم جنود؟"

Al-Raidi pointed to a computer print out. Ink had circled the name Raedon Flights. Arabic in the margin:

شركة كاذبة. وتعمل للمخابرات من الولايات المتحدة

European letters spelled out, U S A / C I A.

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Shakira wailed the Spanish and Arabic of 'Ojos Asi.' Driving, Asad rapped the complex rhythm on the steering wheel as he sang the lower-register background chorus to her ecstasy. Floyd faked the half-tone violin riffs on his Stratocaster, the unamplified wire twangs lost in the CD volume as he raved:

Her words, she sings, she calls  
To warriors bleeding on the roads

a siren dancing over sand and skulls.

Leaning between the seats, Maya pointed to the steel-barred security gate. She shouted over Shakira, "There. Stop in front of the gate. At the gate. Not there in the inspection area. If a freight truck, a limo, someone comes up behind us, maybe they'll skip the inspection, wave us through --"

Soldiers in mismatched uniforms manned a booth at the gate. One man wore faded camouflage and plaid blanket over his shoulders. The other man wore plain OD green pants, shirt, jacket with red and white snow gloves with a red and white snow cap. With their Kalashnikovs swinging on their slings, they acted out a soccer pass with an orange and white soccer ball. As the foreigners approached, the soldiers went to sentry stance, their hands folded across their Kalashnikovs, the soccer ball rolling away with the gusts of wind. One soldier spoke into the handset of a telephone. The other soldier tried to light a cigarette in the wind, failed.

Floyd shouted back. "Those losers search us?"

"Not the soldiers. The officials."

Crouched in the back of the van, Maya watched the uniformed clerks inside the offices. They lounged at the windows, reading newspapers, drinking tea. As the vans stopped at the gate, one man turned away from the windows. She saw him call out, then point to the gate. Another clerk folded his newspaper.

On the second floor, a senior bureaucrat wearing a suit and tie stood at his office window. He talked with another man. An office boy brought the men a tray.

"Third world." Floyd shouted out. "Soldiers asleep on their feet. I count seven paper pushers. Doing nothing."

Asad slowed the van to a stop a step from the steel gate. The soldier with the matching snow gloves

and cap motioned for the foreigners to roll down the van windows.

Maya: “English! Only speak English.”

In the back of the van, Degrev sprawled on the vinyl deck, his feet propped on the van sidewall steel. His hands ran through patterns on the Fender bass. In the front seat, Floyd chorded the oud rhythms on his Stratocaster. Maya shouted over the music:

“And police. There’s police in there. The last time here, we got taken apart. Cameras, scanners, computers, disk drives. All the luggage, clothes, books. They looked through the pages of the books. They searched us for hours.”

Floyd rolled down the side window. “Why is it so cold? We’re in North Africa. A sun without mercy, winds like flames over burning sands. Here comes the inspector.”

Maya: “If they want, they’ll search us all day. If they want, they’ll wave us through.”

Floyd: “Catch a wave and you’re standing on top of the world ....”

Degrev: “Let them search us. We got time.”

Maya leaned over Degrev to turn down the volume of the boom box on the improvised equipment rack of PVC pipe. “I want to hear them, when they talk, I want to understand --“

Degrev deflected her hand with the hooked neck of the Fender bass guitar. “We’re a rock band, right? We need noise.”

Maya: “I want to hear them. And even if they don’t speak English, don’t assume they don’t understand English. They may be listening to what you say to each other. If they speak to you in Arabic, don’t, don’t, don’t answer in Arabic. Only speak English. Only respond to English.”

Asad switched off the engine. “My passport is French.”

Degrev: “And mine is Russian.”

Maya: "Speak French, speak Russian. Whatever. No Arabic ---"

Floyd: "It is cold out there. You get out and talk to them. You're the tour director."

Maya: "The soldiers, the police. They're bored, they've been here all night. They see a foreign woman and they'll be out here introducing themselves. Cold or not. And they'll all have their hands on me."

Floyd: "Hands on you? You're with us. No one puts his hands on you."

Maya: "This is Morocco."

A uniformed clerk left the office. Maya repeated her instructions to the men. "Even if you think you understand his Arabic, don't answer. Speak English. Speak French. Speak Russian. I can listen to them -- if you turn down the music! Turn it off! I can listen to them and maybe we can confuse our way through any problems. Salazar doesn't speak Arabic?"

"A very good morning, my friends. Welcome to the Kingdom of Morocco. Passports, please. Ah, musicians ...."

The clerk glanced into the van -- he saw an international group.

Floyd had found a complete cowboy costume in the stacks: red and white Western shirt with mother-of-pearl buttons, tight levis, and cowboy boots covered with silver sequins. He had his silver-flashing boots up on the dashboard.

Asad wore European slacks, a faded multicolor Monet-print sweatshirt from Paris, and a black and white keffiyah. He also wore his simple prayer cap stained with the dust of Sudan.

Degrev looked Russian-gone-Palestinian in pleated slacks, a horizontal-striped black-and-white t-shirt, and keffiyah. Black leather slippers, a black leather Syrian coat, and a black leather beret completed his image.

Leaning through the window, the official scanned

the PVC pipe-rack of electronics, computers, boom-box, cameras --- and then he saw Maya in her red Converse high-top tennis shoes, her torn jeans, the Arabic Cub Scout sweatshirt, and a high fashion black leather jacket.

“Bon jour, mademoiselle,” the clerk flipped through the French passport of Asad, then the other passports.

Maya held out a folder. She spoke over the wailing of Shakira. “We go to the Atlas Studios. This truck. And the other truck.”

The clerk saw the fax with the letterhead of the Egyptian Sphinx. “Ah, très bien. Cinema. We will see if all is in order with your documents ....”

Without explaining, the clerk left the van. Floyd glanced to the offices. Clerks and police remained at their desks. On the second floor, the bureaucrat and the man in a blue uniform watched the vans -- policeman? soldier? Floyd did not see a pistol on the man in the blue pants and blue windbreaker. Floyd adjusted the side view mirror to watch the clerk, then returned to chording his Stratocaster. He glanced to the mirror:

Floyd: “The clerk is taking the passports to the office. Is that the routine?”

Maya: “A computer check. International routine. The colonel said ---”

Degrev: “Classified. Say the Skyman. The Skyman said.”

Maya: “He said all the identification would check out.”

Degrev: “It’s all worked before.”

Floyd: “Let us through, dudes. I want to cruise the Kasbah. I want to rock the kashbah. Rock the kasbah.” He launched into a rhythm of chords. “The Sheik don’t like it ....”

The Shakira CD faded, Maya whispered to Degrev: “All the secret tricks are built into that

equipment? Absolutely? Nothing shows even if you turn it on?"

Degrev continued a bass line. "Don't know what you're talking about."

"Colonel told me --"

"The Skyman told you about the secret what?"

"Satellite uplinks for communication."

"Nothing secret about that. All us rockers uplink. Check in with the studio, long-distance video interviews with M T V --"

Asad: "All the communications are either civilian open market or encrypted military. A search of the hard-drives will find bands of encrypted data. Civilian or encrypted, passwords protect the programs. And they can't hit the files with crack-hammers. The files will self delete."

Degrev: "Quit it. Classified. We've got a script. Talk the script."

Asad: "Don't be concerned about the computers. Skyman had P H D's work on the equipment. It is all okay --"

Floyd interrupted: "He's coming back."

Maya: "Too quick. Police with him?"

Floyd: "Alone."

Maya: "That's too quick. Absolutely nothing illegal in the van or the big truck? And no identification, nothing military ---"

Degrev: "Молчать."

"Enjoy Morocco!" The clerk passed back the passports and folder. "I hope for you success with your production."

And he turned away. In front of the van, a solenoid clicked, power-chains clanked over gears, the gate rolled back. The soldier pointed to the traffic with his red-and-white snow mitten.

Asad started the motor. "That's it?"

Maya: "Go. Don't ask questions, go."

Floyd: "The surfers get the wave. Maya is

magic.”

Asad: “Go where? Directions?”

Maya: “Drive. Drive! The letter from the studio did it. He didn’t even open the back doors of the vans. Drive. The colonel --- the Skyman said freedom of movement and security. I reserved rooms at a secure hotel in the new city. On a road with trucks coming and going. High walls. Steel gates. No questions when you come and go.

“Or do you want high class? Like rock stars? I also reserved rooms at the studio hotel. They call it the Oscars. Pool, restaurant, bars. It’s three star but they charge super star prices. And it’s high security. For the movie stars. They identify and record the information on everyone as they come and they go. Expensive but the Skyman told me whatever you want.”

Floyd: “I want the life of a super star! A swimming pool, a heated swimming pool, limo, starlets like stars in the sky --“

Degrev: “We do as the Skyman said.”

Floyd: “And he said whatever! I want it.”

Degrev: “The downtown hotel. Vans off the street?”

Maya: “Walls. Steel gate. Rooms near the vans. And both vans’ve got alarm systems.”

Degrev: “And freedom of movement?”

Maya: “Complete freedom of movement. High walls. Locked gate.”

Degrev slid open the sidedoor. “Then it’s downtown --- I’m out, I’ll ride with Salazar. If he gets lost, he doesn’t have enough Arabic to ask directions.”

Maya: “Skyman told me you’d want security. Straight ahead. Straight to the highway ....”

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An office clerk passed photocopies of the passports of the band to the intelligence officer with the taxi driver identification, Boulami.

"اثنين من الاميركيين. واحد الروسية. واحدة  
الفرنسية. واحدالمكسيكية. وتقول الوثائق الموسيقيين. انها تبدو  
مثل الجنود. يتبع لها. مشاهدتها."

The last sheet displayed the logo of the Oscar Hotel, with the European text: Reservation.

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From the second floor of the offices, Abdel al-Raidi watched the white vans exit. Soldiers powered the steel security gate closed. A moment later, Boulami, the intelligence officer in the uniform of a taxi driver, ran from the Immigration office to a Mercedes taxi. A second driver threw the taxi into gear, accelerated to the gate. The taxi driver showed his identification -- the soldiers saluted the two plainclothesmen in the taxi, then powered the gate open again.

Al-Raidi spoke into his Thuraya satellite telephone "... and the girl has the name, Maya Armstrong. Armstrong. Our computer records tell of multiple entries of Maya Armstrong. With academics. Professors and students. Before, she came on airlines. Or she came from Alecrias to the Port of Tangiers. However, this time, a charter flight, Raedon Flights. And she met the men who came on the other flight, the other Raedon Flights. We know the flights to be contractors to American intelligence ...

"I have told you what I know this minute. But now this is a matter of the Dirección Générale de Surveillance. I must now pass all this information to the Direction Générale ...."

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In the cab of the cargo van, Salazar drummed the steering wheel as he accelerated. Degrev followed the rhythm with a staccato bass line. Salazar reached out to slam imaginary cymbals. Taxis, hotel vans, signs



blurred past, then the roadsides opened to desert alternating with shops and walled fronts. The tires drifted to the gravel, gravel rattled in the fenders, Degrev interrupted his bass line to lean across the cab and pushed the steering wheel to center the cargo van in the lane. Salazar grabbed the wheel:

"I got it. Perdoname por un momento de .... Exhilaracion!" He beat the steering wheel. "La aventura ha comenzado en el diserto de Morocco. Un momento ... La aventura! En el diserto! Ha comenzado!"

Degrev tried the radio. The Arabic of a recitation of the Qur'an blasted over Salazar's staccato raving. Salazar went silent, Degrev turned off the radio.

Salazar: "Where we go?"

Degrev ran a bass line. "Follow them."

Salazar: "I'm following them. Into adventure. Morocco. This is my new shirt." He turned to Degrev to show him the front of a hooded purple sweatshirt gaudy with stenciled graphics. "Got me through that inspection. What does it say?"

"It's French. It announces jazz in Paris. Years ago. Forget what it says. There's a saxophone. There's neon. You don't need to read it."

"Saxophone. I can't remember the word for saxophone in Spanish -- saxo? Sexo? Neon sexo fono, en el diserto loco --"

"Stop! Stop! You and Floyd. You talk crazy."

"نحن حقيقة الجن."

"What? We are true spirits? What do you want to say?"

"Devils. True. We are true devils. How do I say, 'We are true devils of the desert?'"

"أنا الكلب الذي يأكل الخراء في الصحراء."

Salazar leaned across the seat, jerked up the handle of door. The truck veered into the gravel again. Dust swirled into the cab. "Out Combat Meritorious

Sergeant Degrev. I'm no desert dog shit. I know what dog and shit mean. And I am not dog shit. Out."

"Then drive like you're sane! I want to live."

"You're alive because of how I drive. Maybe I'm a jackal. Crazy jackal of the desert? No, jackal is still a dog. Floyd calls the Saudis, jackals. And I'm .... El vato loco del diserto! El banzai del Saddam Benzi! What would rhyme with loco?"

"الحقيقة."

"Doesn't rhyme."

"Arabic doesn't rhyme. It rhythms.

"القائل للحقيقة."

"True killers? Don't talk that. Classified."

"El vato loco, del diserto rojo! The crazy man of the red desert. This desert is red. So I'm the crazy man of the red desert. El diserto rojo! Ven pa aqa ---" Salazar tried the beat on the steering wheel. "Ven pa aqa, e-bu ah wa, contra mi ka lash ka -- Russians sing songs to their rifles? Like lovers?"

Degrev stared at Salazar. "What? Why would a man sing to a rifle?"

"Mexicans sing to their horses."

"That's Mexicans. And maybe Floyd."

"And Roy Rogers. Kelb, dog, don't make it as a word. English jackal is okay, but it's not right. Jac! Kal! Contra mi ka lash ka. Doesn't make it -- Ja kal la! Contra mi ka lash ka -- Ven pa aqa, ja ka la, contra mi ka lash ka --"

"What are you talking? This is Morocco. Speak English. Speak Spanish. Try Arabic. Speak a language but stop making noise. "القائل اللغة."

"This is Morocco?" Salazar snapped his right hand to his forehead, as if shading his eyes, then slowly turned his head, as if scanning a landscape. "Looks like Me - xi - co."

The band van ahead slowed, the cargo van

continued at full speed. Late, Salazar slammed the brakes, the tires skidded, Degrev went rigid in the seat, his hands bracing the dashboard as Salazar corrected for the drift, the cargo van shuddering with the controlled skid. Cargo crashed in the box back.

Dust and skid smoke clouded around the van. Ahead, the band van's left turn blinker flashed, the van turned left through traffic. Salazar saw a gap in the traffic, whipped the steering wheel to the left and accelerated. A speeding truck swerved past him, horns sounded.

Behind the cargo van, tires skidded. Metal smashed metal. Degrev looked in the rear view side mirror. "You caused an accident. A taxi hit a truck."

Salazar accelerated, continued his rave: "We fly here in a jet, hours we fly through the night, we see deserts, deserts in all directions, pero aqu a est amos, perdidos en los disertos! En Calexico el lejos! I mean, this looks like Calexico."

"Молчать. And that's a direct order."

"No est amos Marinos, jefe! Est amos socios para contrato. Cal, like California. Exico, like Mexico. California and Mexico, Calexico. And across the border, Mexico and Cal -- li - fornia, Mexicali. And this city looks like Calexico."

They passed an avenue of wide sidewalks, red stucco facades, shops with plate glass windows with names in French and Arabic. Dust covered the avenue paving stones and the sidewalks. Ahead, the van turned right on a sideroad. Dust swirled from the tires, Salazar followed the van through swirling clouds of dust.

"Not like Calexico. The sidewalks are wider. And signs in different languages. But the dust. Like Calexico. Or Tijuana. Iraq, Jordan, Sudan, when do I get to the Sahara? Ya est amos en Tijuana, buscando por la Sahara. That don't rhyme, what would rhyme with --"

“Stop it! Quit it!”

The road became a rutted sand avenue black with oil. Trucks parked on both sides. Cinder-block buildings created a corridor of petrol signs, windows, and balconies overlooking the parked trucks. Tangled power lines crisscrossed overhead. On the sand road, men changed tires on semi-trucks and trailers, others worked under the hoods of trucks. Oil had colored the sand gray.

Salazar: “This looks like Tijuana. This looks like shit -- are we there?”

Maya stepped from the van, ran through parked trucks, her hair like a pale flame against the gray and dust red. Mechanics working on a truck axle watched the slender blonde pass. Degrev signaled Salazar, pointed to the back of a slat-side cattle truck.

A group of women sat in the back, their bodies shrouded in abeyas of blue-black cloth, wraps of the cloth covering their faces. A woman pointed to the foreigners in the cab of the cargo van -- ornate tattoos in blue ink swirled and looped over the back of her hand.

Past the women, a camel rested on hobbled legs. The camel turned, directed an eye at the foreigners, then looked away.

Salazar: “Yeah, we are there. And this is not Tijuana.”

Floyd ran back from the van in his cowboy costume and mirror-flashing boots. The mechanics stopped working to stare at the stranger in red, white, blue, and silver. The women stared. The camel saw him, ignored him. Salazar rolled down the window. He recoiled from the cold.

“What goes on? Why’s it so cold?”

As Floyd spoke, his breath clouded. “Snakeman, through there ---“

“Where?”

The van rolled ahead, Floyd signaled Salazar

forward, past the cattle truck sheltering the women, Salazar saw a gray steel wall rolling aside.

Floyd pointed. "There!"

Salazar steered the cargo van through an archway, into a wide courtyard lush with palms, fluorescent red bougainvillea, and the orange-purple tongues of Birds-of-Paradise. He continued to a dry fountain of brilliant blue tiles.

The electronics van parked behind the cargo truck. Floyd pushed his Nikon into the hands of Salazar. "Take my picture, take my picture. Aim and shoot."

"What?"

Salazar followed watched through the viewfinder as Floyd searched for his background. Finally, as if he played on stage, Floyd struck a wide-legged pose, his silver boots on the black paving stones, his cowboy shirt red-and-white against the palms and carved wood balconies. A cascade of orange Birds of Paradise created a crown of flames behind his head. Floyd gripped the Stratocaster neck and swept his right arm through a circle to hit a chord.

"Stratocaster moment!"

Clicking photos, Salazar screamed. "We are here."

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The Sudanese operative spoke from the audio track:

"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. And this will not be in Iraq, they said, in America, we will strike down airliners in America. That is what they said."

Del Cielo paused the laptop audio, took away the Iridium sat-phone. He had extended a fold-out table to

improvise a desk in the Gulfstream. A power cord extended to the PowerBook, papers and notes covered the table top. He spoke again into the sat-phone. "There it is, sir. You heard that?"

Even though the encryption circuits, the voice of the man betrayed fatigue. "Colonel. Excellent. Egyptian gang, Egyptian missiles. An al-Qaeda airfield in Sudan. And you sent the imagery? When can you make the presentation? This information cannot be delayed."

Through the port of the Gulfstream, Del Cielo saw clouds and gray ocean to the curve of the world. He glanced at his watch --- the District of Colombia? He would arrive late in the day, perhaps the evening.

"You will receive an encoded presentation of this on the laptop I gave you. Exactly what I played over the phone. With the photos to go with that voice track. But Doctor Haynes, this imagery is incomplete. My staff is assembling all the other information, the maps, the specifications from weapons manuals, photographs, overhead imagery ---" He glanced to the paper spread around him in the jet. "All the other material required for presentations. I set them to it. When we can, we'll pass it over to your staff. Hour, two hours. Maybe I'll hand carry it."

"Seventeenth and Pennsylvania?"

"The corner. As before. No one enters the building. Not the staff, not me. No sign ins, no security videos. A notebook will contain all the materials."

"Could you P D F this material? Electronic transmission?"

"I've only got paper here. I can't send what I've got to the laptop with the video. And my staff can't e-mail the pages ----"

"My university e-mail? If they send it there, I can open it here --"

"All the material will be in your hands tonight. When you get it, you make photocopies, then shred and burn-bag the originals. And all is gone. Let Congress

subpoena the ashes. All is gone. Except what you've got."

"Who may see this material?"

"Anyone with our level of clearance can see the satellite imagery. The video from Sudan, I cut out all the place names. And I stripped off the satellite inter-link coding. That video is only a civilian QuickTime production on a laptop computer. The maps, the satellite photos of Sudan, the weapons specifications -- all that will be from public sources."

"When will you make the presentations of this information?"

"You do it. We need decisions. We need decisions immediately."

"I'll schedule the presentations, you do the stand ups."

"Professor, start it. We need approval on Special Operations in motion immediately. We need Special Operations on standby. The Egyptians are waiting for the plane to take the missiles out."

"Why they are waiting?"

"Windstorms. You'll see that in the satellite imagery. No planes in or out of that airstrip until the winds drop. I'm waiting for an update on the weather conditions --- and the gang may have already taken one of my operatives. If they did, my man is gone, the missiles will go elsewhere, and my surveillance team will be waiting in the desert for a plane that will not come. We need Special Operations ready to go immediately. For any eventuality, at any moment. Tonight if possible."

"But the Al-Qaeda took one of your men? All of this may be already compromised?"

"I don't know. My man's out of contact. The Sudanese may have taken him, the gang may have taken him, he may be dead, the missiles may be gone, I don't know."

"You want Special Operations to take the

missiles?”

“In the Mediterranean. That would be ideal. This is what I want. If and when the gang flies the missiles to Morocco, my teams maintain surveillance, and when those missiles leave Morocco, Special Ops takes the missiles. The missiles disappear. No police, no shooting, no headlines. The gang does not know what happened. And my people will continue surveillance on the gang or gangs. That would be ideal.”

“You’ve placed surveillance on the missiles?”

“My people. In Morocco. Waiting. However, as of this moment, only one team. I’ve got to put more people into Morocco. They must be there when the gang delivers the missiles.”

“Your contractors. Only? No liaison with the Moroccans?”

“Absolutely no participation of the Moroccans. Tell Alexander, tell that man if you can talk to him, that this is a closed operation. Our personnel only. No diplomatic difficulties ----“

An icon flashed on the screen of the PowerBook. Del Cielo keyed a code, a text message and series of images appeared.

“Professor, this just got serious. Don’t wait for the notebook, make calls. Show the video straight off the laptop. The plane’s airborne from Sudan. A staff man just sent me ... it’s a Sudanese transport, contracted by a French sports company, with a flight plan cleared for Ouarzazate. Not the Sahara. Not a smuggler flight. For whatever reason, the gang changed their plans to a commercial transport, that transport is in flight, and we are absolutely positive some of the missiles are on that plane, perhaps all of the missiles. We need Special Operations, Navy SEALs in motion right now because this is happening and I’ve only got one team in place ....”

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“Move it,” Floyd held the re-engineered BetaCam on his right shoulder, pointed to the far wall of the courtyard with his left hand. He wore headphones with a microphone.

“Over there. You stand over there. I want to stand here in the sun, in the sun where it is warm. You, there. Against all those flowers. Oh, man, you are so stylish. Where’s my Nikon? I got pictures of me, I want pictures of you. For the cover of the jewel case when we release our CD.”

Red bougainvillea flowed over the bricks of a wall. Degrev squinted against the morning glare, his eyes slits. Floyd keyed the controls of the BetaCam. He spoke quietly into the headset microphone:

“Cowboy calling the Skyman. Testing the video and audio. Showing you a Russian fashion show. The Chechen in his Spetznaz of Arabia costume. With a Fender bass guitar. Yes, sir, our combat meritorious bass player wears Yves Saint Laurent slacks, a used shirt from somewhere, a shirt that happens to look like the Spetznaz shirt of the old Soviet Union, an old leather coat with an Arabic tag in it. And the black beret? A product of the Arabic People’s Republic of Syria -- Degrev, do a bass run on the Fender.”

A voice answered through the headphones. “Receiving. This is the Skyman. Receiving. Got video, got audio. Zoom out to wide angle, sweep the camera through a slow three sixty. I want to confirm the image quality through the satellite uplink and encoding.”

“Yes, sir. This is our Moroccan garden courtyard. Looks exotic. Cold as Dante’s ninth out here. But not as cold as the Arab icebox we got for a room. How can I make like the international rock star guitarist if I can’t work my fingers? I want the sands of the Sahara, the burning skies of --“

Skyman: “Receiving. Seeing the video. You may spare me the narrative. Switch on the laser designator.”

“You want me to light up combat meritorious

Degtyarev?” Floyd looked up to the sky. “You serious about that, sir? You absolutely positive we don’t have some Air Force Reservist up there looking to murder Marines?”

“Turn on the designator --“

Floyd keyed the code. “Lo though I stand beneath the blue, blue sky, I shall not fear the Air Fuck Reserve, for they do not know the Marines are here ---“

Degrev stepped up to Floyd, took the headphones from him. “Sir, all went well at the airport. The fax from the studio got us through without a search. The girl’s nervous but she’s got this work wired.”

“Can she hear you now?”

“No, sir. I can’t see her, sir.”

“Where is she?”

Degrev asked Floyd, “Where is she? Do not say her name.”

Floyd: “Went to a supermarket. To buy food. We need to eat.”

Degrev: “She went out? You let her go out alone?”

Floyd: “Skyman wanted an uplink.”

Del Cielo spoke through the headphones. “She went out alone?”

Degrev: “Yes, sir. Is there a problem with that?”

“There is a change in procedures. I want her accompanied at all times. One man, at all times. Any sign of surveillance, counter-intelligence?”

“Nothing, sir.”

“I saw you. Describe him.”

“Cowboy’s got a cowboy costume on. With silver boots. Looks like a rodeo clown.”

Laughter came through the encoded circuits. “That kid is wild. This is it. The plane is in flight from Sudan. Flight plan for Ouarzazate International. Not the Sahara. Ouarzazate.”

“A flight plan, sir? What is the information you’ve got?”

“A Sudanese commercial transport. They filed a

flight plan for Ouarzazate. A tracer confirms missiles on the plane. And that type of transport cannot land on a sand strip. All the details will be appearing on the laptop. Name of the company, aircraft number, estimated time of arrival, radio frequencies. Intercepted communications. They might go off that flight plan. If the plane actually lands at Ouarzazate, I want you there. I want surveillance of whoever gets off that plane.”

“We’ll be there. In motion immediately.”

“And tell this to the others. We’ve got a man out of contact in Sudan. Maybe two men. It is uncertain. One man, two men. Out of contact or missing or taken. It is uncertain.”

“Do they know of us?”

“The missing men do not know you are watching the gang. In that way, you are secure. However, if the gang knows we had one or two men on them, the gang will assume there is special unit surveillance.”

“Do I know the missing men, sir?”

“You met one of the men. In another country. Classified. He listened to John Coltrane. Byrd. Hated the Cowboy’s garage band noise. We cannot use names on voice uplinks. From now on, street names only.”

Floyd aimed the zoom lens at the dry fountain. “Skyman, you see that blue fountain? That’s ice. Blue ice.”

Degrev spoke into the microphone. “Sir, are you sure he is he captured? Or could he be out of contact? Only out of contact?”

Skyman: “He had instructions to get out of Sudan. He’s missed two required check in times.”

“Then it could be the batteries, the sand, maybe he dropped his phone on concrete.”

“He had multiple uplink devices. Just like you. And there are telephones in Sudan. I will contact you when I get information. I want your team, I mean your band, at that airport. Repeat. At that airport. And I want the band to be aware of the missing men. I want

one of you with the young lady at all times. And do not use the satellite phones or the computers except as absolutely required. His satellite uplinks may have betrayed him.”

“Sir, what’s the estimated time of arrival for the plane?”

“If it actually lands at Ouarzazate, maybe two hours. It’s in flight already. Put your band in motion now.”

“In motion, sir. Now.”

Degrev passed the headphones back to Floyd. “Turn it off. Where is she?”

“Market.”

“What market?”

“A market. A food market. A super food market.”

“We’ve got to find her, go out to the airport.”

“I don’t know where the market is and even if you see her, you won’t see her. She’s in a black bag.”

“We’ll find her. Camera back to the van.”

Degrev pushed through the red screen of bougainvillea. In the hotel room, the others sat on the beds, blankets around their shoulders. Only the face and hands of Salazar remained visible as he worked the chords of ‘Masters of War’ on the Stratocaster:

“ .... And I’ll stand over your grave and I’ll piss on your head .... olvidalo. Doesn’t work. No beat. Even Dylan can’t make that song rock.”

“Band practice is off. Redcard! Check the downlink. The plane is incoming. Skyman sent you data. Salazar! We’re going to the airport. To the airport. In the small van. Load what we need. Put it in motion. And play the role. Talk other than English. We’re now real world. We’ve got two men missing in Sudan.”

“Who?”

“And we’ve got to assume they’re watching for us here. Signals discipline. Assume they’ve got electronic surveillance. Minimum of talk. Redcard. Download the

information from the Skyman and turn it off.”

Degrev rushed through the courtyard, signaled Floyd to follow him. They slammed through the door of the hotel office. On the television screen, Pamela Anderson in a red bathing suit faced a keffiah-masked attacker who held a Kalashnikov -- the clerk clicked the remote control and an Al Jazeera scene appeared of Arab politicians in suits posed with Arab princes in flowing robes.

“Bonjour, monsieur. Avez-vous besoin d'un taxi?”

“Никаких такси. Où est le magasin? Food?”

“Supermarché? Une rue y aller --” He pointed. “Et une rue à droite.”

Degrev and Floyd stepped into the chaos of the avenue. Cargo trucks idled in clouds of diesel smoke, motorscooters reved their two-cycle engines, men with hand-carts bumped stacks of boxes over the broken asphalt. Diesel smoke commingled with the smoke of cigarettes, cook fires, and the stink of sewers. Slanting morning light made the smoke a white glare.

Degrev found his gargoyles in his jacket pocket, slipped on the sunglasses.

Floyd shouted over the noise: “Who was in Sudan?”

Squinting against the glare, Degrev scanned the sidewalk and trucks before turning to answer Floyd -- and he stopped.

Floyd wore pink 1950's tear-drop sunglasses studded with multi-colored rhinestones.

In a single motion, Degrev swept his hand to Floyd's face -- and too fast to see, Floyd blocked the grab, reflexes driving him back to a combat stance, Degrev responding with a second grab with his left hand, again, the action not seen until Floyd blocked the hand.

Degrev attempted a combination kick to the gut with another grab for the sunglasses, the kick lethal, the grab a blur, Floyd side-stepping, hitting the sheet metal

of a truck with his shoulder, bouncing back to attempt an aikido hold on the attacking hand, Degrev spun out of the hold, almost reached the rhinestoned sunglasses from the back, Floyd foot-hooking Degrev and slamming him against the steel rolling panel of the hotel courtyard entrance, Degrev pulling Floyd with him, Floyd slamming into the steel ---

The rhinestoned sunglasses flew. Degrev reached for the sunglasses, Floyd counter attacked -- in the next instant, Degrev held the rhinestone sunglasses, Floyd held the Gargoyles.

Floyd contorted his face like a Kung Fu villain. "You take mine, I take yours!"

"You can't wear those sunglasses! You're crazy! You look like Tinkerbell!"

"They're from Romania. Vampire glasses! Maya, my angel from the sky, she brought them for me, and now, and now, you're going to take them. No! I'm going to cry."

"Silver boots. Pink sunglasses? There. Is. A. Limit."

"The sunglasses are mission required! The enemy must be confused!"

"I outrank you. This is a direct order. Put these in your pocket. Do not wear these."

From a dismantled truck, Moroccans watched the two foreigners. A teenager lifted a cell-phone to try a photo. Degrev returned the Romanian sunglasses, Floyd returned the Gargoyles. Floyd leaned close to whisper:

"Sounding like the Colonel. You. Will. Be. A. Colonel. Degrev the lifer colonel. Make your granddad soooooo proud."

"Lifer means living through today and tomorrow. We got to find her."

"Who got taken in Sudan?"

"Remember Coltrane? Photo analysis?"

"That black magic karate man? He was in Sudan?"

"He's out of contact. People got killed and

Coltrane is gone.”

“And I thought this would be good times. After Sudan. Beach, music, C G I surf in the Sahara ....”

“Why would we get good times?”

“You volunteered. Resigned and signed.” Floyd sang, “Recon contract man ....”

“Quiet. We got to find her ---“

Degrev and Floyd wove through men and tool boxes on the broken concrete of the sidewalk. Men laughed at Floyd and his silver boots. Floyd grinned, struck a cowboy pose for the Moroccans, thumbs hooked behind his buckle, his boots pointed outward. Degrev shoved him, pointed to the street.

A voice called out, “Taxi?” Horns sounded, Degrev shook his head, no.

Floyd stopped in the doorway of a café. Smoke from a charcoal fire clouded past him, enveloping him in the spice-scent of broiling red-peppered meat. Windows displayed baked bread, dishes of pastries, and meat cooking in steel racks over flames. A skinned head dangled on a chain and hook. Horns identified the animal as a goat.

Inside, men at a counter talked as they ate from bowls of spiced rice, vegetables, meat. A framed portrait of King Mohammed dominated the far wall. Haphazard rows of action photos from soccer games lined the other walls.

In the doorway, Degrev waited, impatient, his eyes jerking from Floyd, to the window of cooking meat, to the street. He turned and faced outward, his eyes sweeping the traffic, the opposite shops, the apartment windows, and rooflines of the buildings.

“How do you say in Arabic, ‘I want a hundred dollars worth of food, to go, but no goat head?’”

Degrev pulled Floyd from the doorway -- and corrugated sheet steel scraped over his leather beret. He ducked, stepped into the avenue. A motorscooter swerved past him.

Scanning the avenue, Degrev saw traffic, workers, and mechanics to the end of the block. He recognized the Arabic of a few signs of freight companies, the corporate logos of Korean and European part suppliers. Other shops advertised motors, transmissions, brakes with oversized paintings of motors, transmissions, and brake shoes. He signaled Floyd to a doorway, ran through traffic to the opposite side of the street, continued to the corner. He confirmed a line-of-sight on Floyd, then studied the activity around him.

In front of Degrev, traffic turned left. Cargo trucks continued to the next block. There, trucks jammed the avenue to offload cargo, men shouldered sacks of grain and lurched across the broken pavement to an alley. On both sides of the sidestreet, merchants displayed walls of products. Groups of men talked at the improvised stalls. Beyond the line of vendors, Degrev saw the brilliant colors of vegetables and fruit --- the market.

Degrev watched for a pause in the traffic, stepped into the intersection. He visually searched the avenue, the doorways, the stalls, the sidestreet, the market area of vegetables and fruit, the blue and yellow Fiat taxis.

Women in black abeyas worked at cook fires. A group of school girls walked arm-in-arm in identical long skirts, sweaters, and headscarves. At one booth, a young woman in jeans and an oversized sweatshirt talked on a cell phone. A group of men watched Degrev --- but he did not see a young woman with blonde hair.

Forms lurched near him --- Degrev stepped back in a quick Shotokan sparring stance, his right foot ready to snap-kick. And then he saw ---

A bent-back matron struggled to stand. She had tripped on the broken concrete, a man tried to hold her upright. The elderly woman wore a black abeya and a long coat, she carried an empty mesh bag in one hand, a cane in the other hand. The cane had slipped in the filth of the gutter and the man caught her arm to stop her



fall. Degrev stepped forward, took her other arm. The old woman flashed a smile of perfect false teeth, her face displaying blue tribal tattoos, then continued past the two men.

The man glanced to Degrev: "Spickenze Deushe?"

"нет. Я говорю на русском."

"English?"

Shaking his head, no, Degrev moved through the walking Moroccans, continued watching the market sidestreet.

A slender woman in a black abeya left the stalls. She carried several bags in her hands.

Maya? A hejab concealed her hair, a wrap of cloth covered her features, only dark eyes watched him watch her ---

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Behind him, the man who had questioned Degrev in German and English stepped backwards into a doorway. He flipped open a cellphone ---

"الاجانب يتحدثون الانجليزية, ولكن و احديقول انه

يتحدث بلر و سية فقط."

He ended that call, keyed another number. "The foreigners, they are in the street. Two. They speak English to one another, but one says he speaks only Russian."

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A horn sounded -- Degrev saw a new Fiat only a step behind him. As he stepped away, a black hand motioned him to the car. A woman? A form in complete black abeya, black mask niqab, and black gloves drove the shining white Fiat. Slender even in the drapery of black cloth, the form motioned for Degrev to approach the car.

Left hand on the steering wheel, right hand empty -- Degrev confirmed her empty hands before he

crouched at the window. Horns blared behind the Fiat.

An open slash below the hejab and above the niqab exposed a rectangle of pale face and blue eyes.

“Maya?”

“I rented a car. Want to go to a supermarket?”

“Around the corner, fast. And wait.”

Degrev signaled Floyd to return to the hotel. The red and white shirt moved through the Moroccans and traffic like a flag. Degrev scanned the avenue again -- the trucks, the workmen, the vendors, the parked cars and taxis -- then dodged around the corner. He got in the Fiat -- and searched it, his hands sliding under the plastic of the dash, then the seats as he asked her:

“You rented this car? Did they assign it to you or did you take it off a lot?”

“They had three like this. All the same.”

“Then you took it at random?”

“At random.”

Degrev turned on the radio, filled the interior with Arabic pop music. He leaned close to her to tell her. “The plane’s in flight from Sudan. A commercial transport on contract. Won’t land in the desert. As of last information from Skyman, it’s coming straight into Ouarzazate. And we might have surveillance on us. Circle back to the hotel -- watch the mirrors for cars following.”

“They told me they want food. They can go to the airport, we’ll go to a supermarket.”

“No. Straight to the airport. And we’ll need to maintain line of sight and hand-signs to communicate ---  
“

“We’ve got cell-phones.”

“We’ve got satellite phones. And we don’t want to use the sat-phones. We uplink, even though it’s encrypted, the signal tells an electronic counter-measures unit they got encrypted players on the scene. And they can track us by those electronic uplinks. And it’s civilian encryption. An intel service might have the

key. If you must use the Thurayas, never name names, never name places, it's always Skyman, Cowboy, Chechen, Snakeman. Got it?"

"Yes, sir. I've got it. I've got it here." Maya reached behind the seat, brought out a box. "We've got cell-phones. Nokias. With cameras. The rental agency. I've worked with them. They always work for foreigners. Actors. Movie crews. They know what we need. What we want. They rent sets of cell-phones. Batteries charged. Call time pre-paid. Ready to go. Costs twice what a Moroccan pays but it's worth it, I think."

Degrev laughed. "At random? It's worth it. One for you. One for me. Three for them."

"Check the number screen. The numbers of the other phones are ready for speed dial."

"Circle, I'll run these into the hotel and then we've got to make it out to the airport."

Maya eased behind a truck, then turned left again, wove through pedestrians and other cars. Despite the chaos, she drove with the confidence of a chauffeur. Degrev shifted the rear-view mirror and watched the traffic.

"How did you rent this car? What identification?"

"Maya Armstrong. They've got my name at the airport, the authorities know I'm in the country, there's no point using my Irish passport and credit cards. But you've got identification as a movie exec. The colonel, the Skyman told me to print identification and business cards for a Russian movie company for you. When you take them the cellphones, get a white shirt with a collar and tie, and the prayer-beads and a Qur'an. You can pass as a movie production exec ---"

Two more left turns took them to the hotel. Maya stopped behind a truck loaded with skinned animals. She pointed to the cargo of fly-swarmed carcasses.

"One reason why I don't eat meat -- "

"Cell phones, character changes, manufactured identification -- you are too good at this. Did Skyman

hire you out of the Agency?”

“What agency?”

“The Agency. Tell me the truth.”

“The C I A? No. But if he did, would I tell the truth?”

“There will be a man coming to work with us. A kid. If he asks you if you worked for the Agency, if he asks you that, you say the Skyman hired you out of college.”

“He did.”

“That’s what you tell the kid.”

“Why?”

“I told you. Do as I tell you. That’s why.”

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Salazar slid a camera case from the cargo van, slammed the doors. Asad took blankets from the hotel room, Floyd carried his Stratocaster, the Fender bass, and a battery-powered mini-amp. He wore a black sweatshirt around his neck, the sleeves tied in a loose knot.

“You got to seeeeeeeeeeee! her!” Floyd raved. “She looks like a ninja. Ninja girl!”

Degrev ran from the gate. “What’s with the guitar? The bass? The amp?”

“Band practice. We could be waiting all day. All night. The Clowns in Action must be ready to play ---“ Floyd drew the black sweatshirt across his face. “As Maya the Mysterious guides the band into the ---“

“Quit the Clowns in Action crap,” Degrev passed out cell-phones. “We’re not them. Come up with another name --- she got a rental car, she got these phones. We’re in motion ---“

“She get the food?”

“We’ll get it on the way out there. I want the Nikon ready, the little Canon video, the BetaCam. Asad! The download ---“

“And I want some of that bar-be-que we saw on

the street.”

“Asad, you got the download?”

“Plane’s incoming. But we got time --“

“And we get fed.” Floyd keyed the cell-phone.

“Hey, Maya. Maya! Is there take out food on the way to the airport?”

Degrev: “In the van! Move it out of here. And don’t call her while she’s driving, the traffic out there is extreme, I don’t want her distracted and wrecking the rented car on the way out there.”

Salazar jammed cans of Red Bull into his Levi jacket. “I’ll drive the car. No one drives like me.”

Degrev: “We don’t need people killed.”

Salazar: “I didn’t kill people, I killed fedayeen.”

Floyd: “The Terror of the Black Mercedes, the Black Bat Out of Babylon, How to Make Fedayeen Fly. We need a car ruined, we’ll put you in it.”

Salazar: “It was Saddam’s ----“

Degrev: “Молчать! Classified. You weren’t even there. Get this van out of here.”

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In the hotel office, the clerk watched the foreigners. He flipped through the registration book as he spoke: " ... Russian, Americans, French, Mexican, I have photocopies of their documents ...."

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In a taxi, Officer Boulami clicked off his cellphone, spoke into the handset of a

military radio. "الأجانب يغادرون الفندق."

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Degrev hung his executive shirt and tie over the backseat, Maya merged into the traffic. “We’ve got to get food for the squad. Food from packages, drinks from bottles and cans. All traveler safe.”

“Supermarket. I’ve got dirhams but they’ll take dollars. Or Euros. All the tourists go there.”

The white Fiat disappeared into the traffic of trucks, cars, animal carts. The steel gate of the hotel courtyard rolled aside, Floyd waited for a pause in the traffic, then stepped into the avenue to stop a truck. An airhorn blasted. Behind him, the high-sided band van maneuvered backwards from the courtyard.

Across the avenue, a Mercedes taxi turned from traffic and parked. A woman with shopping bags paused at the taxi, the driver motioned her away.

In the taxi, the driver and his passenger laughed at the sight of the cowboy in red and white shirt, levis, and silver flashing boots. Floyd pushed the hotel gate closed and ran to the van.

As the band van left the hotel, a second Mercedes taxi appeared, again with a driver and a male passenger. The passenger spoke into a radio handset. The taxi followed the van away from the hotel. In the parked taxi, the passenger also spoke into a radio handset.

"أراها"

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“No food, no airport. Ultimatum from the Clowns in Action.”

“Change that name. You go out to the airport, we’ll go to the market.”

In the front seat of the band van, Floyd held the cellphone away from his face and shouted. “This is a non-negotiable declaration of the Clowns In Action. We want what we want and we want it now.” Floyd glanced to the others in the van. “Is that it? Did I tell him?”

Salazar raised a clenched fist. “Los payosos unidos, jamas serán jodidos.”

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Degrev spoke into the Nokia. “Change the name

of the band or no food.”

A voice shouted through the cellphone. “The Fearless Jihadi Killers!”

Degrev: نحن لا نقتل الجهاديين We do not kill jihadis. We kill monafiquon. Change the name.”

Maya: "دون خوف من القتلة السلفيين."

Degrev: “We can’t talk like this on a civilian telephone frequency.”

“The Fearless Salifi Killers want food. She said there’s a supermarket. We haven’t eaten since the Camel Burgers of Khartoum.”

"Shut up!" Ahead of the van on the boulevard, Degrev saw the turn for the highway. “Where’s the supermarket?”

Maya: “Straight ahead. Six or eight blocks. They’ll see offices and apartments on the left. The market on the right.”

“Packaged food? Water in bottles?”

“Whatever sells to foreigners.”

“Bread? Canned vegetables? Canned meat?”

“Captain Crunch. Twinkies. Coca-cola. Beer. Wine.”

“Alcohol in a Muslim country?”

“Whiskey. Vodka. Whatever foreigners want. All the poison. Sura Fifty-One, Fifty Four.

"فَتَوَلَّ عَنْهُمْ فَمَا أَنْتَ بِمَلُومٍ"

Degrev spoke into his cellphone. “Okay. Follow us. Straight ahead to the supermarket.” And Degrev answered Maya:

"وَذَكِّرْ فَإِنَّ الذِّكْرَى تَنْفَعُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ"

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In the band van, Floyd watched the rear-view mirror. “We got a problem ....” He called back to Salazar. “When we left the airport this morning, did you see the bureaucrats watching us from the second floor?”

“Second floor? Second floor where?”

“This is it.” All joking gone, Floyd spoke slowly, distinctly into the cell phone. “This morning, I saw a bureaucrat and a taxi driver watching us go through the gate. The taxi driver, narrow face, mustache with a streak of gray, 1970’s styled hair with streaks of gray at temples. Twist on his left eyebrow, maybe a scar. Blue uniform jacket with badge. I’m looking at him behind us in a white Mercedes taxi. Permit sticker on the windshield. Standard taxi with two uniformed taxi drivers in the front seat. Why’s a taxi need two drivers? Why didn’t they take the airport turn? Why aren’t they stopping for people who want a taxi? He’s got a cellphone in his right hand, looks like a military band handset on the dashboard.”

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Maya: “Market coming up. On the right. They’ll park at the curb. No parking lot.”

Degrev: “Market on the right. You slow down and park. We’ll see what the taxi does --- Maya, don’t stop. Circle. Cowboy thinks he’s got surveillance. We’ll circle. And don’t talk names. They could have scanners.”

Watching in the rear view mirror, Degrev saw the band van slow to a stop. A white Mercedes taxi passed the van, passed a sidestreet, stopped less than fifty meters past the van . Degrev hand-signed for Maya to turn right as he spoke into the cellphone. “Stay in there. Watch.”

Floyd: “Watching nothing. They parked. No movement.”

Degrev: “Send Redcard into the market. And watch.”

The rented Fiat eased through double-parked trucks and workers wheeling stacks of boxes. Maya accelerated over a stretch of open asphalt, slowed as sheep spilled from a sky blue truck. A boy in a gold Nike sweatsuit waved a rag to drive the sheep out of the intersection, Maya turned right again, curved past two



young girls in traditional multi-colored robes attempting to ride a polished aluminum and purple wheeled scooter on the broken asphalt. Maya laughed as she turned right again.

“Stop short of the boulevard -- what’s funny?”

“Berber girls with a razor scooter. Twenty-First Century globalism meets the First Century. They live in the desert. They live in casbahs. The casbahs are fortresses. Self-contained communities. And no sidewalks.”

Degrev spoke into the cellphone. “What do you see?”

Floyd: “He looked at a paper. He turned in the seat to look at Asad and I saw a paper in his hand.”

Degrev: “Photo? He has a photo?”

Floyd: “Paper, photo, what I don’t know.”

Degrev: “Did he talk into the radio or the cellphone?”

“Can’t see that. But he’s watching. An amateur. But he’s watching us.”

Asad’s voice came through the cellphone. “I saw him look at me.”

Degrev: “Okay. Amateurs.”

Floyd: “Let them watch us get food. We got to eat. I want Captain Crunch. Fearless moonafiqoon killers must eat.”

Degrev: “The Snake’s got a cell phone?” Degrev turned to Maya. “What’s on the other side of the boulevard?”

Maya: “Hotel. Shops.”

Degrev: “Snake. Cut across the boulevard. Fast. Like you’re in a rush to meet someone. Cowboy, take off in the opposite direction. Not the market. Just go.”

Floyd: “Chinese fire drill?”

Degrev: “Chinese fake out. Tell Red Card to watch our new friends, you take off, keep going. Tell Redcard to call me and tell me what he sees.”

From the position on the sidestreet, Degrev

watched Salazar enter the hotel. An instant later, the cellphone chimed. "Where are our new friends?"

Asad: "They're out. They split."

Degrev: "That's it. Confirmed ...."

A few steps away, a Moroccan in the blue jacket, blue slacks uniform of a driver passed the Fiat. He held a cell-phone in his hand. A second driver crossed the boulevard. Degrev slid low in the seat, only his eyes above the dash. Maya opened her door.

Degrev: "Where are you going?"

"To take a taxi." She slammed the door closed as he lunged across the seat to grab her.

In her black abeya, hejab, and niqab, Maya angled to the boulevard. Degrev lost sight of her, then his cellphone chimed.

Asad: "What's she doing? She's getting in the taxi."

Degrev: "Then that's what she's doing. Where are they?"

Asad: "Following Snakeman, following the Cowboy. She's in the taxi --"

"She's got a cellphone. Her number's on there. Watch the street. Call her, tell if you see them --"

Degrev clicked off, his cellphone chimed.

Maya spoke to him: "They've got a folder here ---"

"Stop! Stop talking on that cellphone. If they scan these phones, we've given it away, stop it, get out of there now. Get out, get out now." Degrev clicked off, keyed Asad: "What do you see? Where are the drivers?"

"She's out of it. One driver's in the hotel. Other one's .... the other one's following the Cowboy. What did she do?"

Degrev watched Maya return to the taxi, her identity utterly obscured in her black drape and mask. She opened the door, crouched next to the Fiat, the door concealing her from the street.

"What did you see?"

Maya pulled off her niqab, the hejab, and then the

abeya went over her head and into the back seat of the Fiat. She shook her hair loose to fall around her shoulders. And she keyed the image display function of the cellphone, held up the screen to Degrev.

"Photos of the papers. They've got our passport photos. There's an Arabic language air flight form. Raedon, Raedon is circled. There's a note. 'Company false. Operates for secret intelligence, United States.' They identified the planes. It was the planes. Not us."

Degrev glanced to the mirrors, scanned the boulevard and the passing cars. "They're on us ...."

"What do we do?"

"We go to the airport."