

06

"Colonel!" A voice spoke from the satellite channel.

Del Cielo startled. The voice repeating from the Mac G4, "Colonel"

Outside the port of the Gulfstream, clouds and gray ocean extended to the curve of the earth. In the far, far distance, the black wall of a storm angled from the north to the east. The voice spoke again through the drone of the engines, "Colonel"

Del Cielo touched the gauze over his right eye, looked at his fingers -- no blood. Only then did he key the program. An icon on the screen confirmed encryption of the audio. And the video, off.

"Skyman here."

"Hayes calling. Alexander got the missile report to the Secretary of Defense. The number one man saw your report. Are you ready for a conference?"

"That is not possible. Secretary of Defense? I cannot meet anyone in the administration. Impossible."

"Not the Sec Def. His man for ideas, Feith."

"No. Not possible. That violates the procedures. I show up there with my scars and eye patch? I will be seen and remembered. I cannot meet with anyone, anywhere. No time. Never."

"Not a physical meeting. A video conference."

"Video? Secure video? Military secure?"

"Absolutely closed. This room and your computer. Initialize your military video."

"This can't wait? I'm ninety minutes, maybe two hours out from Andrews. I've got military secure in the office. Or we can meet on the street."

"Colonel, I've got him now. We cannot fail to exploit this opportunity. I'm in a secure video conference room, waiting for Feith. Feith and his

people will be here in a minute. We're linking the audio and video now."

"You can't let that video get out. It will kill my men. We'll lose the gang --"

A voice spoke in the background: "A miracle of modern technology. Ultra secure."

Del Cielo keyed the G4, typed in the access code. Digital noise shrieked through the audio channel as the program locked into the encrypted satellite video. The screen flashed to the face of Professor Hayes.

The graying specialist in Middle Eastern policy leaned to the lens and spoke into a lapel microphone he held in his hand. Rapid motion broke his face into abstract smears of pixels as he glanced away, then looked back to the lens, then stepped away, out of view, the screen image showing a white walled office with rows of television monitors. "Can you see me?"

Zipping the pointer across the computer display, Del Cielo tapped another icon: Record.

"I've got you. Group? What group? Who will be in this conference?"

"Wycliff! Do you have other microphones?"

Over sixty, his youth in deserts and tropical lands had weathered the face of Professor Hayes. Fatigue shadowed his eyes, he spoke in careful phrases, his voice deliberate with exhaustion. "Alexander took the missile photos to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. The DefSec directed his men to talk to you. Now, immediately. And as you can not make a presentation in person, you will make the presentation by video."

"Ready here. I've got voice and image. Got my voice? Can you see me?"

"Where should we put the camera and microphones?" Professor Hayes stood in the center of the office of white walls and flat panel displays. His

paper-white hair and weathered skin indicated years past-retirement age. Despite his age, despite the fatigue slowing his voice, he remained quick and disciplined with his gestures. He pointed to a camera above a rack of monitors --- burn scars knotted on the back of his hand. "That camera?"

Images flashed from the racks of monitors -- the faces of television commentators, news scenes, commercials, sports, war. The audio system remained off, all the screens showing scenes without sound. Faces moved without words, men and women gestured without dialog, crowds raged without noise, soldiers ran through the dust and smoke of a desert town, weapons flashed, streets exploded -- a world at war in silence. Professor Hayes waited for a response from the technician at the desk, he repeated:

"That camera? Can we use that camera?"

"Video stream, mono audio, real time encryption." The technician, Wycliff, pushed a connector into the side of the PowerBook computer on his desk. "Here he is"

Del Cielo appeared on a monitor, his image unmoving as he waited, like a still photograph within the chaos of video images on the walls. Then his voice spoke from the wall mounted monitor. "Can you see me?"

"There you are, professor. Colonel Del Cielo." A pale, overweight young man, Wycliff wore a white shirt with a black bow tie and black suspenders. Fat ballooned over his collar. "Encrypted. Real time."

Hayes leaned down to the video camera mounted on the PowerBook. "We see you, colonel. We've got you on a monitor. But will we be using this little camera? Wycliff, is it possible to use a better camera? Wycliff!"

"Camera on." Wycliff flipped another switch. The interior of the office appeared on a wall monitor. "Stand there, in the center of the floor."

“And the microphones? Will we pass around a microphone? Or can we get individual microphones? Like a TV interview? How will we do this?”

“Professor, calm. We have time.” Wycliff returned to the pages of the briefing notebook --- he fanned screen-print pages across the glass of his desk. The low resolution color pages showed the specifications of missiles, color print-outs of satellite imagery, photos of the airfield in Sudan.

A call beeped from the cellphone Hayes held. He checked the number and name of the caller, ignored the beeping as he keyed the cell-phone to check for other messages, then looked up at the flat panel displays.

On the wall of monitors, a scene from Al-Jazeera showed a video of burning cars and twisted metal. A caption in Arabic script identified the location as, بغداد

The video zoomed to a woman sitting on the asphalt. The black-clad woman cradled a mass of rags and blood in her arms. Two small feet in pink shoes and white socks dangled from the rags. The woman raised her face to wail -- without sound. Hayes looked down to his cell-phone.

The micro-screen of his cell-phone scrolled through a directory of names and numbers. He auto-keyed a number, listened:

Hayes: “Wycliff! They’re not in their offices. They’re not answering. Wycliff! They said they would meet me here immediately.”

“Sir, ‘Immediately’ means ... when they get here. Until then, I’m working your presentation.”

“They saw it.”

“Only photos and voices? Not prime time qualified.” Wycliff arranged the pages in a sequence, then sketched a quick outline of a presentation on a legal pad. A click of a Wacom tablet activated a monitor with a display of video clip icons. “I think

others will want to see this”

Wycliff worked at a transparent desk created with a single sheet of glass supported by black tubing. Three computer CPU's blinked under the desk, cables ran to printers and a scanner to a side table of glass and steel. A frame of black tubing also supported three flat panel displays. One panel displayed a mosaic of program icons, the next the timelines and controls of an editing program, a third screen flashed as Wycliff set a page on the scanner. An image of the missiles appeared.

“Where are they? They said” Hayes opened the door to the waiting room. He stepped into the outer waiting room ---

Wycliff: “Professor! They will be here when they get here.”

Hayes returned. “Colonel, we’re waiting.”

“Who is that in the office with you?”

“A technician. This is the video room the Defense Secretary uses. Feith assured me -- ”

Wycliff interrupted. “I have the clearance, sir.”

“Alexander said he’s cleared. Colonel, keep the link open. We’ll get a decision immediately”

Del Cielo spoke from the monitor. “We need it now. The plane with the missiles will be landing in Morocco. What will be the weather in Morocco?”

Wycliff clicked through programs, the missiles appeared on a screen. “This requires a better presentation. Visual, dynamic. Your field men, whoever they are, they’re good, they got in there, they got the photos, but we’ve got resources, we will do a production to sell this project to --”

“We don’t need a production. We don’t need to sensationalize this threat, I need a straight forward presentation.”

“Images, audio, in English, this is what we need to get action.”

Hayes tapped a note letter by letter on the

keyboard of his cell-phone. "Satellite weather imagery. Morocco, we need the weather of Morocco. The Mediterranean. And the Atlantic. Ocean conditions. A forecast of weather for next few days and nights. If they ask what is possible, we will need answers to the weather conditions of the Mediterranean and the Atlantic."

Wycliff: "I can get weather imagery. Morocco? You want the coast, the cities, the desert. Where?"

The voice of Del Cielo spoke from the monitor. "We want it all --" A buzz tone came from his Iridium sat phone. Del Cielo muted the video sound ---

Colonel Del Cielo heard an encrypted voice through his cellphone --- a staff man spoke from Washington, D.C. "Sir, it's Coltrane. He's calling from the Khartoum airport ---"

"Get him on"

Static and voices scratched the background, the encoding of the signal between Washington and the Gulfstream adding another level of noise. Only a whisper came from the Iridium: "... hearing me, sir? I'm speaking from the main terminal Khartoum ... sir ... hearing me, sir?"

"Take a flight to Morocco. My crew needs you in Morocco. Whatever flight you can take, they need you in Morocco."

The whisper echoed through the electronics, faded in and out. "I am traveling with my friend Hassan. Is it possible ... employ ... you know him from our past research ... our conversation from the uplink ... he is here with ... is it possible to employ Hassan in this"

"The fellow with the British accent?"

"Yes, sir."

"Take him with you. To Zazate in Morocco. Buy two tickets to Morocco, continue to Ourzazate. You.

Hassan. Now. Go separate. Don't talk on the flight. Don't be seen together in Zazate. Do not tell him of the others in Morocco. He is not to know. He goes alone, he waits for instructions. Did you understand?"

"I ... not tell him of the ... operations?"

"You do not tell Hassan of the Moroccan operations. He is not to know of the others in Morocco. He will wait alone, he will work alone until we make a decision on that. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. He will work alone."

"Maybe. We need him. We'll use him as we can. That remains to be determined. When you get to Morocco, you both buy complete set of clothes. Spend cash only. Street clothes, business clothes. I want you to look like European businessmen. Repeat, European. Business. Get civilian cellphones. Get a civilian laptop for Hassan. I want you ready to operate as businessmen -- the line is breaking up. Did you hear me? Did you understand?"

"... sir, thank you ... new clothes ... electronics ... cash only when we arrive in Morocco. I will tell you of our travel when we get to Morocco"

Faces appeared on the screen of the PowerBook. "Colonel Del Cielo, Mr. Feith is here ---"

A voice came through the speakers. "Mr. Feith, Colonel Del Cielo is in flight over the Atlantic"

"Colonel Del Cielo," Feith smiled to the camera. A life-long attorney, administrator, and political consultant, he had the soft face of a child with graying hair. Yet he enjoyed power by association -- he spoke for the man directing the war, everyone in the room knew his power, and all the others deferred. "Professor Hayes showed the video of the photos in my office. Oh, your eye. Are you injured?"

"Minor surgery. A loose chip of bone. They fixed it. Let's talk the missiles."

"Yes, Colonel. The missiles. A very significant threat. Missiles to the United States, to target airlines ... weapons of mass destruction, we can say without equivocation. We will of course provide the personnel and resources required to counter the threat. Professor Hayes told me you have personnel moving to surveil the missiles, but that you want special forces to capture the missiles. At some time in the future. Why not take the missiles immediately? Tonight?"

Del Cielo spoke from the rack-mounted monitor. "I've got the response in motion. The missiles are inbound to Morocco. And my men are there. Waiting. They'll follow, they'll watch. However. They. Will. Watch. Only. And, as the professor told you, I'm moving more men into the surveillance. More men, more equipment. At the right time, special forces can take the missiles."

"We can deploy personnel. Military and contract. Why not dispatch the personnel now to take the missiles?"

On the monitor, Del Cielo shook his head, no. "The Embassy? No. The CIA clerks? No. A military operation would require working with the Embassy, the Agency, the Moroccans. If we involve the clerks at the Agency, that brings in the clerks at the State Department, then the Moroccans -- just the talk would require days. The missiles would be outbound to the United States. Your office created my unit for exactly this situation and we will track those missiles until we can take them. Take them outside of Morocco. No Agency, no State Department, no talking with the Moroccans, no sharing of information, the missiles will disappear, no one will know how or when or by who. They will be gone. Disappeared. And we will back track the gang to the source."

Feith: "How can you be confident your personnel, you admit you do not have the numbers required, how can you be confident your personnel can

maintain one hundred per cent surveillance of those missiles until the interception?"

Del Cielo: "Sir, is that office secure?"

Feith: "It's one of our communications rooms for covert operations. Staff doesn't even know this room exists."

Wycliff: "And the fact that we talked doesn't appear on any official records. Great for back channel deals."

Del Cielo: "And sir, who is there in the office with you?"

"Oh, introductions. Morgan, Wycliff, this is Colonel Del Cielo." Feith laughed. "May we call you, Skyman?"

"All my men do. I imagine you heard that on the audio. We run a very informal operation."

"Yet successful. We will consider this operation the proof of concept. After we deal with the threat of these missiles, we will ask you to expand this concept."

"Difficult, sir. Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, now Morocco. That's why they call me Skyman. Always in the sky. So few doing so much with so little in so many different places."

"Yet you are successful. That validates Secretary's concept of the highly mobile, rapid deployment forces. Intelligent and highly mobile. Kinetic."

"Who else is in that office, sir?"

"Alexander"

Another pale bureaucrat stepped in front of the camera. His short-cut hair had gone gray, stress had lined his features. His eyes fixed on the camera, his lips remained a slash across his face, he saluted with a hand holding a PDA. "Sir, do you want me to meet your plane at Edwards?"

"Not required, sir," Del Cielo answered from the monitors. "You got this action in record time. Get me Special Forces, if you can. The professor and I can

work the targets as we get the information."

"This action? Your video images got this action," Alexander told the colonel. "And I brought military liaison."

"Our technical advisor," Feith continued. "Stan Wycliff, is directing the electronics. He holds a clearance. He is my personal communications technician. He manages many of our most sensitive video conferences. He also manages my presentations."

"And this is Morgan," Feith gestured for a man to step into the camera view. "Contract liaison to several independent units similar your own, Colonel. However, they are authorized to employ deadly force if required. We may use Special Forces to seize the missiles, or we may assign the action to Morgan and his associates."

Morgan gave the colonel a grin and a salute, his face a mask of professional courtesy. A bulky, middle-aged man, his muscles and gut stretched his suit, he wore his collar unbuttoned, his tie loose, as if the muscles of his neck had broken the tie. Scars creased his buzz-cut grey hair like tribal markings.

Feith: "You believe interception of these missiles when they leave Morocco would be the wiser course? How can you be confident your personnel can maintain surveillance of those missiles?"

"I've got G P tags on the missiles ---"

Wycliff laughed, "Wow. Technology scores again!"

Del Cielo: "Radio frequency triggered Global Position transmitters. Almost impossible to detect. We transmit a coded pulse, the tag pulses a position. On. Off. No signal to detect."

Feith: "Why not neutralize the missiles from the air? That ends the threat."

Del Cielo: "Consider this, sir. I don't think the missiles are the number one threat. It's the gang. The gang moves weapons. From Sudan, to Morocco,

maybe to Europe. I want the gang and their network. This time, they're moving missiles. Next time, bomb makers. Or nuclear materials. I want to follow the missiles, identify all the elements of the network, intercept the missiles after the missiles leave Morocco. The gang will never know what happened and we can maintain surveillance. The missiles, then surveillance and back tracking. Maybe we can penetrate the gang, maybe we take them all, the leaders, the followers, the couriers -- And anyone they may have bought in the Moroccan government."

Feith: "Are you absolutely positive there will be no risk of those missiles escaping your surveillance?"

Alexander: "Mr. Feith, more personnel are in motion."

Del Cielo: "I've got people on the gang now. Experienced, multi-qualified operators. But I want to put redundant surveillance on the gang. And ---"

Feith: "Your operators, Colonel Del Cielo. Tell Morgan of the personnel you deployed on this."

Del Cielo: "Marines. Highly qualified non-commissioned officers. Experience in black operations. Combat proven. Officially, they're out of the Marine Corps. We generated paperwork to show that. Officially, they have no connection to the military or U S intelligence. If they're captured, we don't know them. However, on a covert level, they're contractors. Contractors only."

Morgan: "What exactly does that mean?"

Alexander: "The contracts exist only within the Office of Special Plans."

Del Cielo: "To provide pay and insurance. Insurance in case of death or injury. No foreigner will ever know --"

Alexander: "And no Congressman will ever know."

Del Cielo: "We also have some civilians. Again, contracts but no documentation, no paychecks,

nothing linking them to US intelligence ---“

Feith interrupted. “We can deploy more contractors. Military. Surveillance. Communications. That is the specialty of Mr. Morgan.”

“Thank you, but there’s no time.” Del Cielo continued. “There is another detail here. My initial information had the missiles going into Morocco as contraband. Smuggled. To a dirt airstrip. Now the gang’s taking the missiles through Ouarzazate. A major airport with security and inspections. Why? Did they buy an official in the Moroccan security services? If so, I want to identify who works for the gang.”

A buzz came from the cellphone of Professor Hayes. He glanced at the display, stepped out of the office to take the call. Feith continued speaking to the camera and microphone:

“Why not? A Moroccan government official working for al-Qaeda? Morocco is an Arab country.”

Alexander: “And that would threaten any operations against al-Qaeda in Morocco.”

Del Cielo: “We do not know this is an al-Qaeda operation. I have reports of Egyptians, the missiles are Ayn al Saqr. Egyptian surface to air. SAM-sevens. This could be Al-Jihad, this could be Palestinians. Or Iraqis. I want to watch them. And track their network in Morocco.”

Feith: “Colonel, you have it. You will coordinate the surveillance of the gang, Alexander and Professor Hayes will run the briefings here. Anything you need, call the professor, the professor directs the request to Alexander. Morgan can assign units to stand by to seize the missiles, and whatever you require, you just call ---“

Professor Hayes returned. “A moment. Colonel, your staff called me. More meetings. I’ve got to hit other offices. Now. If I get out, I’m on my way to Edwards, I’ll try to meet your plane there --“

Feith: “Professor, I’ll walk with you. I want to

discuss the expansion of this concept. Alexander, Morgan, stay here. Conclude this talk with Colonel Del Cielo. Put this in order. Colonel Del Cielo, I'll send a driver to meet you at Edwards."

Del Cielo: "We'll rendezvous on a street. I don't go to those offices. I do not show up. I do not sign in. A sign in, a video, any record could be subpoenaed."

Feith stopped at the door: "As you say, we'll meet somewhere else"

As the professor and Feith continued to the hallway, Morgan stepped in front of the camera. "Colonel Del Cielo. I'm waiting for instructions. You call, we will take those missiles."

"It may be minutes, it may be days --"

"You make the call, we are your Special Forces."

Wycliff pulled the connector from the PowerBook. The three men in the room remained silent until the outside door closed. Wycliff rushed into the empty waiting room, confirmed the lock on the hallway door. "They're gone. Secure. Gentlemen, I have a production to show you. Look at this"

On a monitor, a satellite image of the Earth expanded. The curve of North Africa filled the monitor, the image zooming to an expanse of desert, the images of a desert airstrip and the rectangles of structures appearing, the video image expanding to the box of the rusting hanger, then the interior of the hanger. Images of motorcycle packing cases appeared, the image zoomed to the open case, then the screen zoomed on the plastic and enamel of the anti-aircraft missile.

A series of cuts showed the missile, a pistol grip, the optical unit, the image withdrew to show the three missiles, then the four other motorcycle crates.

Images of an ocean and a city appeared, the camera flying to an expanse of shoreline strewn with industrial lots, a highway, then a parked truck.

The video cut to an Arab in a black and white

keffiyah pointing a missile launcher, then the extreme close-up of an eye squinting --

Blue sky filled the screen, then the outline of a passenger jet, as if seen through the optics of the missile launcher. A launcher flashed with orange flame, a missile streaked upward ---

"Yeah! How's that for a start? Space to North Africa to the missiles. And I'll run a voice track, 'Anti-aircraft missiles.' And, 'In America, we will strike down airliners.' I'll add reverb, as if he rants in a mosque. A raghead firing the missile at an airliner. I can hack together clips of an engine exploding, a plane going down, passengers screaming, a disaster! We've got the words, in English. All the time, I'm getting documents or intercepted phone jabber in Arabic, Urdu, Dudu -- and someone types out a translation and I've got to make that into a presentation. Why don't they get action? It's boring. No one wants to read subtitles. This will get action. I'll add an audio track to run behind the imagery, the images will run, the words from the audio will run in an M P three track behind the images ---

"And that voice, yeah, that voice. Visualize this, see this in your mind," Wycliff raved. "We run the audio, 'We will open the mouth of hell, and let fly forth the jinn' And the background is some crazy page of hell and damnation from the Ku Ku Ran. I got to scan in a page of the Ku Ku. That would be so cool, Ku Ku cool, that's like a line from a movie, fucking wild --- I mean, Mr. Alexander, you'll get whatever you want in the briefings and I can have all these visuals tomorrow. All these photos and stock shots, assembled by tomorrow. Sir, what do you want as point of origin for the missiles?"

"Iraq."

"Thy will shall be done." Wycliff stood from his chair and bowed like a magician on stage.

Alexander signaled Morgan to follow him. In the

waiting room of the communications office, Alexander confirmed the closed door to the office, then checked the outer door of the waiting room. Only then did he ask Morgan. "Who are these contractors working for him? I only know the files he gave me."

"Criminals and losers," Morgan told him. "Marines discharged for crimes in uniform."

"Names --"

"Degrev. We think he's a Muslim. Because he spoke Arabic and Russian, they used him for Iraq cross border ops. Went A W O L. Worked in Russia for a gangster

"Floyd. His sidekick. Russian speaker. Discipline problems. A W O L. Insubordination. Defamation of leadership. Refusal to obey a direct order.

"We believe Degrev and Floyd got a payoff from a Saddam official during the invasion. We think Degrev murdered one of Scorpion officers -- one of the Iraqi freedom fighters trying to arrest a war criminal before we lost him in the confusion. Degrev betrayed the Scorpions. We know that. But we couldn't prove it. His sidekick Floyd killed the witness, another Scorpion. Again, we couldn't prove it. The politics of the situation didn't allow for a court-martial, so they got discharged. They got away with treason and multiple murder."

Alexander: "And the others?"

"Asad. A Muslim. Immigrant to the U S. We should've never allowed him in the country, never into the Marines. He went over to the hajis. Defied direct orders in combat. Marines died because of him. But the politics of it kept him out of prison

"And the last one, Salazar. Not an American. Actually a Mexican. Joined the Marines to get a green card. Came from a family of illegals. Worked with that crowd of losers because they needed a drummer for a rock and roll band. Came back from Iraq and

went on a drunken rampage, tried to shoot his wife. White girl. Anglo girl. But he was so drunk, she took the gun away, shot him, didn't kill him, and when she tried to escape, she crashed and burned and she and another woman and his baby burned to death. Colonel hired a lawyer to get him off the attempted murder charge. He beat it. But the Marines discharged him.

"Basically, they're a crowd of Muslims and criminals and losers and drunks. Disgrace to the Marine Corps. And they are a disgrace the United States of America. There are reasons the Marine Corps terminated all those losers. But who else would that colonel get to work for him? A colonel who questioned orders? Who thinks he knows better than Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld? Insubordinate. He is another disgrace to the country. I don't know why Feith uses him."

Alexander countered: "Feith praised them. They learned of those missiles. They placed tracking devices. They're on watch."

"They got into by chance. Blind luck. Maybe luck, maybe not. We don't know. This could be a false operation."

"False? What do you mean?"

"Phony. They could be running this operation to generate money. They learned of our group tracking the missiles, so they fabricated an operation. They supply the missiles, they photograph the missiles, then they bill the office for the expenses of capturing the missiles."

"That would be incredible."

"How would we know? How do we know this is a real operation? How did they get a man into that Al-Qaeda cell?" Morgan asked. "We've taken Al-Qaeda members. We've broken cells. But put an agent into a cell? All those jihadis, they know each other ... since Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s. It takes months, years, to put an agent into a jihadi cell. Or to buy a

man who's inside a cell ---"

"But they have the photos."

"How do we know those missiles are real? His losers may try to sell those missiles to us. He may be in on it, he may be staging an entire phony production to score money for his losers."

Alexander: "Then we will require that they capture the missiles. We will sure then."

"Before that, I need my own people in the operation. They could say they got away. They could say they destroyed them. I want to play that colonel's game. Tell him we're going with his idea of surveillance and capture. And for that, we need to send in a legal man to work out the captures and renditions. I've got an attorney to send in. He's a Marine. Marine Corps Reserves. Went up the highway to Baghdad. Served in a US Attorney's office. Weight lifter, weapons qualified, He's done extraditions for the federal Attorney's office. And renditions for us. A natural for this. He'll be our eyes and ears in the colonel's gang."

"We must resolve these questions." Alexander told him. "You do this right. I want to give SecDef Rumsfeld and Vice President Cheney a news event. Perhaps the President could make an announcement to the nation of taking out an Al-Qaeda network in North Africa. That would make the news programs, the newspapers, the news magazines ---"

"And the Colonel and his collection of losers?"

"The questions must be resolved. They could be a real liability I want you to put your personnel into the operation. I want all doubts as to the loyalty and motivation of the colonel's group resolved. I do not want an embarrassment to the Office of Special Plans."

"I know who they're loyal to."

"Who?"

"The money."