

01

“Nous parlons Français?”

“Non. Ingles. English for the Skyman. Speak French if anyone comes up the stairs. They think I’m French..”
“أو نتكلم اللغة العربية.”

”عين الصقر.”

“Ayn -- al -- Saqr. Eye of the Falcon? Falcon Eye?”

“Correct, sir. Eye of the Falcon missiles. And, sir, the Egyptians” An older man spoke in slow, British-accented English. “They said they would attack aircraft of the United States. In the United States. They said they would kill your people in your country.”

In the darkness, a computer screen lit the faces of two men. The screen displayed photos. A young man spoke in quick American jargon:

“Egypto knock-offs of Soviet anti-aircraft missiles, surface-to-air heat-seek, S A M sevens. And you got photos.” The younger man continued in quick American English. “You did it. I’m uplinking to the satellite. The Skyman, my officer in the D.C., he’s got to see these photos now.”

“I did as you instructed, sir. When the --”

“Hassan, don’t call me, ‘sir.’”

“When Egyptians came, when the Egyptians came in the trucks with the missiles, they killed all the others. But I had duty at the fence. I waited all the night to go to the aircraft hanger. There, I found the boxes of the Egyptians. I found one of the boxes open. With utmost caution, I photographed the missiles. They could not see the flash. In the dawn, the light of the sun concealed the flash”

“Hassan, you are brave. You did it, you got photos, this is it. And you placed the G P trackers. You did it. I am uplinking, this goes straight up, right now. I’ll ask the computer clerk to call my officer. I want my

officer to see the photos immediately.”

The American, a young black man, worked the touchpad of the Macintosh G4 PowerBook computer. Panels of photos fanned across the screen of the laptop. With the touchpad, the American created an array of photos, then went to the icon of a star, clicked. An alpha-numeric sequence activated the program. Electronic tones sounded from the laptop as the program engaged an encrypted satellite uplink.

The American wore the traditional North African clothing of a long white cotton shirt and white cotton pants. A white cotton prayer cap completed the costume. A barber had buzz-cut his hair and beard with the same clippers to the same length. The American violated the traditional costume with a black leather jacket with the stenciled winged-Goddess-of-Victory logo of Gauloises cigarettes.

The older man, Hassan, studied the series of photos, then leaned back and closed his eyes. He had the oil-black skin of a Sudanese. He had washed his face and rinsed his short-cut hair and beard. Yet patterns mottled the white of his prayer cap. Sweat had stained the white fabric of his shirt with patterns of white and dust-gone-to-mud.

Slow with exhaustion, Hassan lifted a clear plastic bottle of water to his mouth. He drank, then asked: “The photos, they are acceptable?”

“The photos, they are excellent. And Hassan, you are excellent. You ran all day. Oh, man, hard core.”

The American worked the touchpad to manipulate the images.

A photo zoomed, the screen showing a green tube fitted with a pistol grip and electronic module. Behind that tube, sheets of translucent bubbles wrapped two other tubes. In total, three of the tubes lay in a diagonal stack across the interior of a wooden shipping crate. Stark white blocks of Styrofoam filled the empty corners of the crate.

A photo showed the other side of the crate marked with the stenciled tradename, Suzuki, the product inventory numbers, and a paint-sprayed code in Arabic.

A photo showed four other Suzuki crates. All the other crates remained closed.

A series of photos showed the several Suzuki crates and a Mitsubishi cargo van inside a steel structure. The walls remained splotches of black and steel gray patterned with white squares of windows. Light from the windows illuminated the van, crates, and steel racks. A chain and hook of a hoist hung from steel cross members.

A last series of photos showed a rusting aircraft hanger, then the hanger and an expanse of concrete and blowing sand, then the derelict buildings of an airfield lit by the light of the rising sun. Desert landscape blurred by a wind-storm extended to the horizon.

“The missiles threaten your people. The Egyptians, they want to kill hundreds of your people. Thousands.”

The American keyed the handset of a Thuraya satellite telephone. “Calling the office. I want to speak to the Skyman. Tell him this is Zayd calling. Zayd calling for the Skyman. I want to talk straight to the Skyman.”

The two men sat at a table of a rooftop patio. Beyond the LCD screen of the PowerBook, moments of light revealed a garden. A flickering sign revealed the indistinct tables, chairs, the black shapes of potted plants, the tangled lines of hanging vines. The sign displayed three languages:

Garden Hotel | Hôtel du Jardin | **فندق الجنينة**

The staccato stuttering of a diesel truck came from the highway. Men cheered. A television voice raved in Spanish, sirens blared from the television, men laughed and called out in Arabic.

The American, Zayd, kept the screen of the PowerBook turned away from the stairs. If any of the occupants of the hotel came to the rooftop garden, they would see the two men at the table and the back of the computer screen.

Encoding static denatured the audio. "Skyman here. Ready."

"Sir! It's you."

"I'm working the links." The encoded voice rose and faded through a droning. The droning noise sometimes overwhelmed the words. "At the moment. And I'm simultaneously forwarding the information to the office. You've got images?"

"Sir, I'm transmitting now. Are you receiving the images? Sir, I've screened a digital image of"

"I've got the first image on screen. What are those voices in the background? I am recording this report. Can you block those voices?"

"That's a football game, sir. Soccer. And the wind. And the road out there. We're on the roof of a hotel. We can't transmit from my room. This is the best I can do without driving out of town. If I switch to French, it's because someone's coming up the hotel steps. No one can hear me speaking English. I'm working with my French passport."

"I'll need to edit out that." The background droning rose and fell. "I'm recording audio as I download the images. One ... two ... three ... recording These are the photos from the airfield. For the others who will see these photos, please describe what we're seeing."

"And, sir. There's a noise behind your voice. Can you speak louder? Will that noise interfere with the report?"

"I'm in a jet. I'm recording your voice straight to this computer. The jet noise won't be in the digital track."

Zayd: "First photo. Digital photo of launch tubes.

Three launchers. OD green, gloss new. Black stenciled Arabic script, Ayn As Saqr Falcon Eye. Or Eye of the Falcon. That is the translation. Falcon Eye. That's the name of the S A M - Seven produced in Egypt. Three launch tubes. Do you have a team ready for this? The Chechen? The Cowboy? We need to --- "

Skyman: "Don't talk operations. I'll need to delete the questions. One ... two ... three ... recording I recognize those missiles. And my D V D of Jane's Infantry Weapons confirms your identification. Strela. Surface-to-air missiles, anti-aircraft missiles, type seven."

"Sir, that's what our man's got photos of, that's what he says they delivered to the airstrip. The missiles in a shipping crate. A photo of a shipping crate. Motorcycle crate. Missiles packed in a motorcycle crate, they transported the missiles as a motorcycle. Three Egyptian-manufactured surface to air missiles in that crate. The next photo ... there's a close up of the target acquisition optics. I don't see the battery. Shows the battery socket and the infra-red assembly. Repeat, no battery."

Zayd paused for a moment. "There's a photo that shows four unopened crates. Identical to the first crate with three missiles."

Zayd paused to allow an edit. "And then there's photos of the hanger, the buildings, the airstrip. That's it."

Skyman: "I am continuing the recording. Have you uploaded all the photos? Do armory numbers appear in any of the photos? Inventory codes? I'm looking for any names or codes identifying the point of origin, factory. Perhaps an armory symbol?"

Zayd: "I can't see any codes Sir, here's our man. He'll tell you what he saw, what happened."

"We need American eyes on. Can he take you to see these missiles?"

"Difficult, sir. They killed all the other men working at the airstrip. Hear what he says, hear the

story"

Skyman: "Do not say your name, do not tell the exact location of the airfield, only that you report from Sudan. I recorded the report of your American officer. I am recording your report. Others will hear the reports. And they cannot learn your name, they cannot learn the name of your field officer, nor can they learn the location of the airfield. Repeat. Do not say your name, do not say the name of your officer, do not say your location. Start now. One ... two ... three This is our operative reporting from Sudan"

"بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم...."

"Hassan, an oath is not required. This isn't going to court --"

"I'll start it again. One ... two .. three ... This is our operative reporting from Sudan"

Closing his eyes again, Hassan composed his statement before he spoke. Fatigue made his pronunciation of the English words slow and precise with British intonation. "By the stars that cross the sky, believe what I tell you. I swear I saw the Egyptians. I swear I heard their words. The camera shows you the missiles."

"No oath, Hassan. It's not required. He's swearing to the authenticity of these photos. Sir, our man, he's educated in British and Sharia law. He thinks we're legal. Hassan, we are not legal. Try it again."

"One ... two .. three ... This is our operative reporting from Sudan"

"They came with the jackals, the lights on the highway, the highway from the Port of Sudan ... the highway from the desert, to the airfield in the desert, there we waited for the Egyptians."

The young American next to him laughed. "No poetry! This is a report. Report what you saw. Tell him what you told me."

"Begin again. One ... two ... three ... This is our

operative reporting from Sudan”

“At the airfield in the desert, we waited for the Egyptians. The commander ordered me to the fence. In the nights, alone, at the fence, I watched the road and the desert, I watched through the night to the dawn. And that is why I live and the others died.

“In the nights the jackals came, always I feared the jackals, I had a rifle, an old Russian rifle, a Mosin-Nagant, I had five bullets, but the jackals, I could not see them, I heard them but I did not see them.

“I did not sleep, I listened, I watched the night and the desert. The jackals came, I heard them, I saw the --”

Zayd laughed. “Tell him of the trucks!”

Hassan: “I saw the headlights, in the distance, on the highway through the desert. In time, they came to our gate. I did not have the duty of the gate, I remained at the fence, at my post. The trucks entered --”

The encrypted voice of the Skyman interrupted again. “How many trucks?”

Hassan: “Three Mitsubishis. In the style of Land Rovers. One heavy Mitsubishi transport. Many men. Eight, perhaps more, I counted eight men. The men of our camp went to the trucks. I waited at the fence, I watched, the men of our camp went to the trucks. Then the shooting, they killed the others --”

Skyman: “Shooting? Shooting who? Please identify who did what.”

Hassan: “The Egyptians who came in the trucks, they killed all the hired men, all the men of the camp, the Somalis, the Sudanese, the Pakistanis.”

Skyman: “Egyptians? How do you know they were Egyptians?”

Hassan: “The obscenities they spoke. They spoke obscenities in English and Arabic. As they murdered and ridiculed and laughed --”

Skyman: “English? Could they have been non-Arabs? Europeans? Americans?”

Hassan: "No. When they murdered the Pakistanis, they ridiculed those men in English. It was ... ghetto language, they mimicked the ghetto language of your country. I have heard it in the music of your country, heard it in the films --"

Skyman: "What did they say?"

Hassan: "They said obscenities. **انة غبي** Filth without meaning. Language no good man would ever speak. They spoke the Arabic of the streets, the streets of Egypt. In Cairo and Khartoum, it is heard often, the Arabic of the ignorant and vile, running with vile obscenity as the gutter runs with filth --"

Skyman: "Why didn't they kill you?"

Hassan: "I remained at the fence, they did not see me. I did not move. They searched the camp. The Egyptians laughed at men begging for life. They mocked the men. They killed the men. But they did not find me. I lived. All the others, they died. The Egyptians killed all the others."

Skyman: "How did you see the missiles?"

Hassan: "I waited, I watched. For the long hours of the night. I watched. I did not know when I could go to the missiles, I did not know --"

Zayd interrupted. "That is not necessary. Give me the phone Sir, I screened up all the photos, the photos show a row of motorcycle crates, I count five total, only the one with the sam sevens open. Laid out for inventory in the hanger. They're flying all this out. Sir, we must stop this in Sudan. Three confirmed Ayn Al Saqr, Falcon Eye, surface to air, maybe as many as fifteen in total. Take the phone, tell him, did you see who did the killing?"

Hassan: "I heard their voices. I heard their pistols and Kalashnikovs. I did not see the faces."

Zayd prompted him. "Report how you got the photos."

Hassan: "For the hours of the night, I waited, I

watched for long hours. They disposed of the dead, like trash, in the pit where they throw the trash. I saw the Egyptians in the terminal. When I saw the Egyptians go to the quarters, I waited, then I went to the terminal. In the quarters, in the night, I heard the Egyptians --“

Skyman: "Did you get photos of the Egyptians?"

Hassan: "No. No, sir. That I could not attempt. They remained in the quarters. I went to the terminal, at the airfield. Inside, I saw the trucks and the boxes. I took the photos of what I saw ---“

Skyman: "That crate is open. Did you open that crate?"

Hassan: "No, sir. No, I did not. I found it open."

Skyman: "Did you attempt to open the other crates?"

Hassan: "No, sir. No, that I did not attempt."

Skyman: "Then whatever the other crates contain, that isn't known."

Hassan: "No, sir. It is not known. But I saw the missiles. I saw the missiles, I knew the meaning. I remembered what the Egyptians told us of the missiles -- 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.' That is what they said.

"They talked of airliners in America -- I took the photos, I ran for the highway. I keyed the cellular telephone for my superior, but the telephone did not function --“

Zayd: "A failure of the service out here, sir. Not his fault. But he kept running, he ran a desert marathon --"

Hassan: "For the fear of the missiles, for the threat of the missiles to your people and nation, I ran the dawn, the day, to this night, I ran the distance without a stop. The delay, please believe me, sir, it is

not of my fault, please believe --"

Skyman: "Another detail. What of the tracking devices? Did you place the tracking devices?"

Hassan: "Only one of the devices could be concealed in the crate. The one that appeared to be a piece of plastic white. Styrofoam. I thought only that device correct for the crates. The others, the magnetic devices, I placed under the trucks. The one that appeared to be a screwdriver, that device I placed in a box of tools. I did not possess another device correct for the other crates. I was told not to place a device if the object would be incorrect."

Skyman: "Thank you. Excellent. Please give the sat-phone to your field officer"

Hassan: "I called to my officer. As instructed. But he did not receive the call. I ran all the hours of the day in the desert"

Skyman: "Please give the sat-phone to the field officer"

Zayd: "Don't apologize. You did the job. Telephone didn't. But you did. Sir, you heard, he did exactly as I told him. We didn't know who, we didn't know what would go to that strip -- now we do. Surface to air missiles."

Skyman: "Thank you. I've received the photos. I've recorded the statements."

Zayd: "Surface to air missiles. Three confirmed, maybe twelve more in the other boxes. Maybe fifteen missiles total, one can drop an airliner ... when can you get a team in?"