

08

"This is illegal! This is insane!" Asad shouted from the Thuraya satellite phone mounted on the dashboard.

Maya kept her eyes on the highway, her foot hard on the accelerator. The headlights of the rented Fiat fanned over an onrushing blur of asphalt, sand, and moonlit desert. The Fiat jerked with the impacts of the tires on broken asphalt.

The notes of "Miserlou" came through the satellite phone, Floyd shouted: "... rock and roll jihadis making a surf video, we're driving into the endless night, in search of waves ---"

Asad interrupted. "Are there police out here? If we get stopped, what if they ask one question, why are we out here? They will close us down. Why are we out here?"

The taillights of the last pickup truck appeared and disappeared as the highway flowed over the desert. Maya glanced in the mirror, she saw the band van a kilometer behind the Fiat. Through the Thuraya, she heard the audio monitor in the band van, the microphones in the pickup trucks capturing a cacophony of Arab rap beat and Egyptians shouting to one another.

Maya: "Location scouting."

"At night?" Asad continued: "Is there a speed limit in this country?"

Floyd attempted to sing to the guitar line: "Driving bat-out-of-Baghdad speed, driving righteous kamikazi speed, into the endless night, into the endless desert night ---"

Salazar screamed: "Stop that jackal wailing."

Asad: "Quiet! They've got a police escort and we don't. Is there highway patrol out here? If we get stopped, why are we out here? What do we say?"

“Say you don't speak Arabic.”

Degrev clicked off the Thuraya. “What is the law situation?”

“There's nothing out here. No police. The only police we will see will be their police.”

In the front seat of the band van, Floyd wore his batman sweatshirt and played his red lacquered Stratocaster to ‘Misirlou.’ The notes of ‘Misirlou’ faded, Floyd clicked off the CD player. He attempted to play the guitar line in Arabic half-tone notes through his battery-powered mini-amp. The guitar notes competed with the noise of the highway and the intermittent chaos of the Egyptians speaking through the monitors. Floyd turned up the volume.

Asad: “Quiet!”

“Hey, I'm practicing. For our next --“

“Quiet!” Asad pushed the headphones tight on his head as distance made the microphone voices fade and scatter to static intermixed with instants of scratchy rap chant in Arabic. The van went up a slight rise, the voices returned. Asad translated:

“They're looking for a truck. They're looking for a turn off. I don't understand what they're saying, they're blasting music as they're driving”

“Salazar, slow down.” Floyd keyed the dashboard Thuraya. “Chechman, calling the Chechman. Slow down, fall back. They are looking for a turn. Slow down, fall back. We may be approaching a location. Redcard, what's the word?”

“I got it, I got it. They're looking for a road.”

Floyd: “Slow. It is confirmed. They are looking for a road.”

Salazar: “Redcard. In the back. There's a flip book of D V D's of topo maps. Diskettes marked in English, French, German. Find the one for Morocco, screen up an overhead of this region.”

Asad: "They're talking back and forth on their radios. They're looking for a road to an airstrip. And a truck."

Salazar: "Check the topographical."

Taillights appeared on the horizon. Maya slowed the Fiat to a roll. The lights rose as the highway passed through a shallow valley, then the two trucks veered off the highway and angled for the darkness of the open desert, headlights illuminating clouding dust. The taillights of the third truck continued into the distance.

Asad spoke through the Thuraya: "One of the truck G P's went straight. The other G P's turned north."

Degrev: "The pickups split up. Where are they going? What's out there?"

Maya scanned the night. Moonlight paled the landscape, the horizon of hills remained a dark band below the star-strewn sky except for the triangles of distant snow on the peaks of the Atlas mountains. The green reflections of the Fiat dashboard appeared more real than the distance. "Desert. Nothing. All the way to the mountains."

"Redcard! Which way did the G P on the Khartoum crate go?"

A single word came from the Thuraya. "Offroad."

"And the toolbox G P?"

"Offroad."

Degrev looked to Maya. "You're the honor student. Figure this one. What's the greater of the numbers? Two or one?"

"It could be a trick. We follow the two trucks out there. They turn around and ambush us."

"Amazing. My thoughts exactly. Where did the Skyman find you?"

Three more words came from the Thuraya.

“They said airstrip.”

Degrev answered. “Cowboy, we're stopping. Gotta to talk this.”

Cold wind rushed from the desert. Crouching in the van, Degrev and Floyd held the sidedoor closed as they looked at the screens on the improvised rack of electronics. Asad and Salazar worked the computers. Maya, the outsider, watched and listened to the Marines from the front seat of the band van.

On one LCD screen, the black and white of the topographical whorls indicated slopes bounding a valley kilometers wide. A selection box appeared, Asad clicked, ZOOM IN. The valley expanded, the lines of the flatland parallel, even.

Degrev: “They said, ‘مهبط الطائرات’ Is there an airstrip out there?”

Asad: “That map shows a flat desert. And nothing. No roads, no towns. I don't see --”

Degrev interrupted: “Do you have imagery? Not maps. Overhead photos?”

Salazar displayed another DVD on a second screen. Oceans, mountains, green landscapes, deserts skipped across the screen as the computer searched the disk for co-ordinates. An expanse of desert appeared. Salazar zoomed down. Patterns of gray and red and beige expanded, the lines of ancient water flows appearing, then dust lines of vehicle tracks emerging from the texture. Pixelation defeated the optics, the lines becoming blurs within smears -- Salazar backed up the zoom, stopped. He pivoted the screen to show the image to the others.

Salazar: “A dirt road. But no airfield.”

Degrev: “That’s a landing strip. Not an airfield. A strip maybe a kilometer long. Match that to the other map.”

On the other computer, Asad typed in the coordinates. The screen flashed to black and white lines of topography, a blank plain surrounded by the lines and whorls of ridges.

The two screens displayed the side-by-side images of satellite photo and topographical map.

Degrev: "There's no landing strip on the map. But the road, the track, it goes out there. That's where we go --"

Asad: "But why? They've got police with them. If the police ask us, why are we out there?"

Floyd: "We're surfers. Making a surf movie. In the desert. Think new concept. Think C G I."

Asad: "Okay, we can explain that, the desert is a big beach. But in the dark? No surf boards, no amps. What scene can we shoot? Skyman told us to play this op by the documents. As if. Our documents say video crew. We go out there, they can question us and arrest us. Legal. This operation is cancelled."

Floyd: "Maybe they're police, maybe they're off-duty soldiers. So what? They're working for jihadis, they die. I'm cool with it."

Asad: Degrev, we got to go to the Skyman with this --- if we go out there and they see us, we've got to kill them. And we're killing police."

Degrev: "They're not working for jihadis, they're working for Egyptian murderers. Allah does not grant murderers, men who would murder thousands of innocent men, women, children the status of warriors of the faith. Period. We will do what is required."

Maya spoke from the front seat. "By the Qur'an, believed by the Muslims to be the voice of Allah speaking through the Archangel Gabriel to the Prophet Mohammed, and by the Hadith, the quotations of the Prophet Mohammed, mujahadeen, often referred to now in the common idiom as jihadis, fight to defend the Faith and to protect the umma. The Egyptians are criminals, murderers. If anyone here is a jihadi, it's

you all, for you are defending the Faith and the nation from Takfiri assault. That is a paraphrased analysis from an Islamic scholar who visited my university ---“

Degrev cut her off. “Forget it. This isn’t college.”

Floyd laughed: “Thank you, Maya! The garage band noisemakers, the Kuwaiti clowns, just became the garage band jihadis, that’s us, we got a name for the band --“

Degrev: “You’re still a clown. Floyd the noise. In a batman suit.”

Floyd: “The bat. The al-Qaeda national bird.”

Degrev: “Shut up. Hear this --- Asad, we’re not going to consult with the Skyman due to signals discipline. We cannot risk betraying our position to the Egyptians. They might have scanners.”

Asad: “The Thurayas? We talked on the sat-phones four minutes ago.”

Degrev: “Hear this, remember this, memorize what I’m telling you. If we’re ever questioned on this ... We. Maintained. Signals. Discipline. An encoded uplink to the Skyman could betray us, therefore we did not uplink. And therefore the Skyman did not know of us going out to that desert landing strip.”

Floyd: “Yes, sir, Colonel Degrev. We will remember and repeat that lie.”

Asad: “We will kill police?”

Degrev: “If it is required, we will defend ourselves. But they will not see us.”

Salazar: “If we kill Moroccan police, we could have every cop in Africa after us.”

Asad: “Moroccan police. They could be hired, working as security guards for foreigners. Maybe they don’t know who the Egyptians are, what they’re doing with the foreigners who hired them.”

Degrev: “They see us, they’re gone.”

Salazar: “If we do it, they’ve got to be gone. Not even a bone. Desaparecidos.”

Asad: "I want a story. We're a video crew. Why are we out there? I've got to have a story. We might not need to kill the police. Maybe just the Egyptians. If the Moroccans aren't part of the gang, they won't know what's in those boxes."

Floyd: "Redcard, the E - gypt - tos won't listen to any story. If they see us, they will kill us, it's kill or be killed, I ain't afraid to kill, I am the jihadi, I am a fearless jihadi killer of E - gypt - to crimanals, there it is! Fearless Jihadi Killers! I am a ---"

"Noise." Degrev. "I outrank you. Молчать!"

Maya stopped the argument: "It's the banshee scene. An apparition of death rising from the sea to announce the coming of the wave of destiny. You'll put the headlights behind me, the camera light on me, you'll video tape the image of banshee and work on it later with the C G I software"

Silence. All the Marines stared.

Maya: "I've got that white silk abayah in the trunk of the Fiat. And you're out here because this is a Muslim country, you didn't want to video a scene of nudity, simulated nudity, witchcraft, the banshee is witchcraft, you don't want to shoot that at the studio, and shooting in the desert requires a location permit, and there's the nudity, simulated, the witchcraft, simulated, so you came out here to shoot it in the desert where no one would know."

Degrev: "You learned this in college?"

Floyd: "You're going to get naked and run around in the desert? Okay. Me, too. I want to get naked --" He sang. "Baby, it's cold outside"

Asad: "Nudity and witchcraft. Forbidden but not illegal. That explains it. That's a story."

Maya: "I've got flesh colored silk underwear and the white abayah. And my black bag. I'll be okay."

Degrev: Okay, we got the camera. She's got her ghost suit. But they won't see us."

Floyd hit chords on his guitar to the rhythm of

'Secret Agent Man': "Naked banshee girl, naked banshee girl, running naked through the desert of the night!"

"Молчать!"

Desert continued to the horizons, the sand and rocks blue under the moon. Parallel tire lines continued into the darkness. Degrev ran a hundred steps, then dropped to a crouch. He turned, covered a penlight with his hand and signaled. A few seconds later, Floyd ran past him in his batman black and moonlight silver flashing boots. He carried his Stratocaster like a rifle.

"Put that guitar in the truck, you clown."

"Where I go, it goes"

Degrev kept the single point of light steady as the vehicles approached, the van and sedan only rectangles of pale blue in the darkness, no lights, no noise from springs or tires, silent, the wind across the desert louder than the vehicles, only the reflection of the moon from the windshields betraying the vehicles. As the van neared, Degrev clicked off the penlight and ran again.

They had covered kilometers from the highway, through gullies in the desert, across a flat expanse, then over a ridge. Sounds from the highway had faded. The darkness around them remained complete. Only the moon and the stars broke the night. Ahead, the land rose to in a pale wall against the night sky --- the topographical map had shown this curve of desert rising to a ridge, then angling down to the wide flatland of the airstrip.

A hand stopped Degrev. Floyd whispered: "I heard a shot."

"I didn't."

A green streak cut the stars. An impossible meteor had risen from the desert and streaked into the

stars. Degrev stared, then came the far off pop of a rifle:

Floyd: "They're shooting tracers. At the moon."

Another green streak zipped upward. Floyd counted: "One, two, three, four --"

A pop came on the wind.

Degrev cupped his hand around his penlight, clicked the switch. "Make the rise. I'll stop the cars here --"

A shadow flashing with moonlight, Floyd continued. The crushing of his silver boots on sand faded, Degrev remained still, the wind chilling his sweat. He counted two more distant shots as the van eased through the sand. Degrev leaned into the van, told Salazar, "Wait."

Degrev ran the hundred meters to Maya, "Wait while we listen." Sprinting back, Degrev scanned the desert, the horizon, the star-strewn dome of the sky.

Tracers meant a signal. Signal to who? Other Egyptians out here? An incoming plane? He had four people in his responsibility, without weapons, without back up, the Egyptians could take them all -- alive or dead, their courage and sacrifice never to be known, their bodies for the dogs and insects -- stop the thinking. Degrev put his mind on the white rectangle of band van, sprinted. "Chechen coming in --"

Asad monitored faint microphone noise. "No voices. Only Thurya number codes. It's the distance. And the terrain. That ridgeline blocks the voices."

Degrev: "Sat phones?"

"Coded signals. They sent up codes. Only numbers. They got answers. Other Thurayas, where ever they are, they keyed codes, but no voices answered. Codes up, codes down. But that was it. No voices."

"Maybe planes?"

"Maybe. I can't get identifications."

Signaling Maya with an upraised hand to wait,

Degrev motioned Salazar to continue. As the van continued onward, he paced the van, jogging over the sand and rocks, listening to the hiss of the transmissions through the van monitors. As hundreds of meters passed, the voices and sounds cleared, the words leaping out of the background -- then he realized he heard the beat and hate of Arabic rap chants over the voices of the Egyptians trying to mimic the lyrics.

Degrev heard the word when Asad heard it, "طائرة."

Asad: "Someone said a plane. It's the plane."

Distinct clicks, rattles came. Rocks on fenders? Through the microphones? Degrev turned, looked for the Fiat. The noise came from the direction of the highway ---

Headlights. A kilometer behind him, headlights zagged the darkness, a truck racing to the white Fiat -- and Maya.

Maya, alone in the desert.

Lights appeared in the rearview mirror.

The Egyptian gang.

Coming upon a woman alone in the desert.

Maya had only seconds to think, her mind flashed through the all the possible horrors of a woman captured in the North African night ---

She powered down the window, cold wind filling the interior of the Fiat. The sounds of rocks banging wheelwells approached,

Do what the enemy did not expect --

What did they not expect? The Egyptians and their hired Moroccan police? The gunmen? What did the Al-Qaeda gang not expect?

A woman alone in the desert, the North African

night --- they did not expect a woman alone.

In a white silk abeya.

Her hand went to the Thuraya, she speed-keyed the Marines as she gathered her leather jacket around her shoulders and stepped into the wind and darkness, the Fiat interior light revealing her ---

They would see an island of light in the desert, the empty Fiat, the young woman in the white wind-flagged film of silk, her blonde hair long in the wind, perhaps her form under the silk as if naked, they would not see the Marines, no threats, the longer she held the door open they would stare at her body, they would keep their eyes on the island of light revealing a woman standing alone in the desert, perhaps they would not see the van hundreds of meters ahead on the ridgeline ---

Maya held the door open until the highbeams blinded her. She let the door close and used that moment to arrange the black jacket over her shoulders and to check the billowing silk of the white abeya -- yes, the slack allowed free movement of her legs.

Shading her eyes with her hand and the Thuraya, she walked toward the headlights. She squinted against the glare, the cold wind blowing her hair around her face, she felt the Thuraya speaking in her hand. As if only brushing away her hair to clear her face and eyes, she pushed her hair back, kept the Thuraya against her ear as she saw the truck, an oversized GMC crew truck with four doors and windows on all doors and sides ---

“Mademoiselle? Pourquoi vous êtes ici?”

The Thuraya spoke in her hand: “ -- they recognize you from the airport, they radioed the others, they're laughing about what they'll do to you, get away from them, run, Maya! Run!”

Read the final scenes of

Fearless Jihadi Killers

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