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**Dedication**

**To my wife and the three lovely angels**

**Epigraph**

The end is not yet.

(Gospel of Matthew)

Be able to fight hard and win.

(Chinese MSS motto)

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**Chapter 1**

**Mount of Olives, Jerusalem**

Truth be told, it was like any other night he had seen descend over the Old City.

Sami Haddad lingered outside the Russian Orthodox Church in Al-Tur district, locking his bleary eyes on a small chapel ahead. Engulfed in bleeding pale light, the small dome of ancient rock was dwarfed by the adjoining mosque’s tall minaret, which seemed to disappear into the dark heavens above.

He was looking at the Chapel of Ascension.

A modest structure, it was built over the spot where Jesus Christ had risen to the heavens.

Sami was thirty, thin, and balding on the sides. He wore a permanent five o’clock shadow, along with a scowl he liked to switch on and off as required. It helped his work as a news reporter. Earlier that evening, he had been told by his shift in charge to be in Al-Tur after midnight, to cover an event near the mosque.

Having worked for the local TV channel for the last two years that now had a real chance of going out of business any time soon, he was considering moving to one of the rich Gulf kingdoms. *To probably end up working as a porter, or a car seller, if my luck held,* he thought bitterly.

Palestine, his beloved country, had ceased to exist long ago. Occupied by the Jews, the motherland now existed as merely an ideology, kept alive in slogans by the nationalists. Palestinian Christians like him, the second-class citizens of Israel, were left with ashes in their hands. No freedom, no prosperity, nothing at all.

Shaking his head, Sami walked slowly. He had been here many times before. The magnificence on display always left him impressed. A ridge just east of the town, the Mount of Olives housed a few churches, a mosque, and some other buildings. It also offered a spectacular view of the Old City.

On the western slope, he could see the Jewish graveyard, the Tomb of the Prophets, and some more churches. The Garden of Gethsemane. And further beyond, the temple mount, with its Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Northwards, he could glimpse the Mormon University and the Beit Orot neighborhood. To the southeast, he saw Bethphage, then Eizariya in the distance. Then, the vast expanse of the Judean Desert as far as his eyes could explore.

Laughter tinkled in the air behind him.

He sighed, turning his head to glance at his cameraman. “What’s so funny?”

Feras chuckled. “I can bet my left nut that Abu Khaled sent us on a fool’s errand. Our old goat is full of crap.”

He was a young man, barely twenty, dressed in an untucked buttoned brown shirt and a knee-length coat. His wavy black hair reached his shoulders, enhancing his air of relaxed youthfulness.

Sami suppressed his giggle. Feras wasn’t fond of the crusty news director, often displaying his lack of affection for the older man in a colorful manner. “Just get your ass moving. We need to do this job here.” Besides, Abu Khaled had sounded excited over the phone, giving them their orders for the night.

“As you say,” Feras replied yawningly, adjusting the heavy bag on his shoulder. It housed his camera and other equipment.

Sami nodded, moving on. Abu Khaled made sure they often drew the night shift. Despite his cameraman's occasional fuss, he obliged. They didn’t make much—merely enough to eat and have some pocket cash. Their employer provided them with a single-room apartment to live in. However, he could not imagine how things would turn out if they were let go. Or if the channel was shut down. Israel did not have much to offer for the poor Palestinians like him, Christian, Muslim, or whatever.

They stayed outside the chapel premises, strolling along the street, which was a little dull due to the late hour. Light traffic, mostly motorbikes and cars, some parked haphazardly. The only activity he could see was near the mosque’s gate. A coffee shop was open to his left, two or three people inside. Soft music playing.

Then he picked up motion ahead.

A gaggle of people was milling around near the street’s end. He looked closely. Shit! Journalists. Lots of them lurking there. What the heck? He heard the hum of noises. Strange. What’s happening here, he wondered. Whatever it was, someone had taken a lot of care to gather so many media hacks to cover it. Intrigued, he stepped closer. Feras was behind him.

The pack laughed at something. Then, they saw him approaching.

“Sami,” a tall guy called out. “You on the beat?”

“Yeah, it seems so,” he said, shaking a few hands.

“Great.”

“It’s, um, nonsense…I think,” another man said, running slow fingers through his beard.

“Maybe,” he shrugged his shoulders.

“Uh, yes,” the bearded one agreed uncertainly.

It all started after the mosque imam had a dream last night. He saw angels, or he heard God while sleeping, it didn’t matter, because the man headed one of the holiest places of worship in all of Jerusalem, and he happened to be a powerful figure in the local religious circles. His word had weight here. He had urged one of his friends in the Palestinian media to cover what he believed would be a major event unfolding tonight. Whether Sami or his journalist friends took him seriously was a moot point.

While it was a real possibility that they were just being jerked around, given where it had come from, and as annoying as it was, he was grateful to be on to something possibly comical here. For a change. They dealt with human misery on a regular basis. These neighborhoods experienced waves of gruesome violence and the agonizing consequences of hatred. Sami sincerely wanted to thank that pain-in-the-ass old man responsible for pulling his strings tonight, whose hallucinating mind, he hoped, would help him create a really good fun piece for his viewers.

Sami had been covering this area for a long time. Sometimes, everything looked the same all over. Nothing different. Nothing at all.

Apart from the odd cloud...

He noticed its white foam-like form settling over the chapel’s dome in slow motion. A rim of gold tinged its braided silver shape. It was floating slowly, imperceptibly. Almost tranquil. Down, down it fell, engulfing the dome now.

“Feras, be ready with your LiveU!” he whispered.

The cameraman nodded and began preparing his broadcasting apparatus for the live coverage. Other crews noticed it too, and a flurry of activity ensued in the street. Nobody had any idea how long the transmission would last before the Israeli police arrived in force. The Palestinian Waqf managed the chapel and the mosque next to it, but the Jews wouldn't hesitate to put their boots and batons to good use.

Sami was standing still, staring out at the cloud.

Seconds earlier, it was a churning fluff of nothingness. Now it had substance; it shifted and flowed, bits and flakes with orange hues, like molten saffron.

“You getting this all?” he asked, not taking his eyes off the scene.

“Yes, boss,” Feras replied, his camera aimed right at the chapel and filming.

Sami could now make out a silhouette in the cloud. It hovered in midair above the dome, its form still fairly indistinct. Puzzled, he looked sideways at Feras, who stared back emptily.

His jaw slackened as the image coalesced into a definite shape, sleek and fluid, moving as if only an outline of black. Yet very much alive.

There was a flowing of soul inside that silhouette.

“My God!” a reporter cried out. Another man, his assistant, either panicked or out of curiosity, threw a powerful light at the chapel. The sudden glare ravaged the patchy veil of darkness.

In the brilliant light, the image became full color.

Sami could see a human figure hanging inside the cloud. It was serene, not at all disturbed by the intense light.

Sami’s breathing quickened. It seemed like an apparition, oddly luminous now. He watched in awe as the seconds passed. It appeared that the very air surrounding the chapel was holding its breath. Mesmerized, he took a dozen steps toward the chapel. He moved cautiously and slowly, paused, and stared at the dome.

Sami was now certain it was a man’s figure. He wore a yellow robe, and his head leaned forward, nearly touching his chest. Arms spread sideways, as if resting on two invisible companions' shoulders.

Or nailed to an unseen cross.

Floating, his feet graced the dome of the chapel, like dewdrops on grass. Soft, easy, and delicate.

Sami halted a few steps from the wall of the chapel, hands by his sides.

The transformation was fully in effect.

The man lifted his head. He was of average height and a slim build. Light brown complexion. He had a flushed face with beads of water glistening on his forehead, seemingly fresh from a bath. Warm, kind eyes gleamed with rich tones of amber. Straight, dark hair, and a beard.

Sami dared not move, feeling captivated by the face taking him in.

From the moment he first noticed the cloud, he had not heard the usual noise of the atmosphere around him. An unnatural stillness enveloped the Mount. It filled him with dread.

*It couldn’t be happening,* he told himself.

He was not a religious man. Quite the opposite. God had been unfair to his people. The fate his nation and his loved ones endured did not bother Him in the slightest. Yet, whatever Sami was witnessing was difficult to miss. He recalled a pamphlet his fervent college friends had shared, the traditions his village folks had discussed, and the discourses of some of the more knowledgeable ones. Now it was happening right before his eyes.

The Second Coming.

The arrival of the Messiah.

He stumbled, clutching at his cameraman’s arm. “Whoa, whoa,” Feras blurted out. The camera shuddered, but he controlled it.

Sami breathed. He was adept at controlling his fear. Living in an occupied country taught him a lot about how to fight off primal instincts and move on with life. That was part of his survival mechanism. Yet, this was overwhelming. The fright wouldn’t leave him, though, clinging to him and trying to find its way inside his inner core. Would darkness prevail again, like it did two thousand years ago? What kind of future might lie ahead?

The Jews now held full sway over this hill. Unlike on that fateful day in the distant past, and yet they managed to...

Sami’s eyes moistened. The last time the Lord had offered himself. All of himself. All of his life. All of his love. All of his pain. All of his body.

Not now, not again. Never.

Once his breathing calmed, he tried to consider what the scene meant and what it could lead to. He chewed on his lip. He felt…lucky. Yes, he was certain that was the proper emotion. He was fortunate enough to witness this vision, making him one of the truly blessed ones. Whatever was set in motion, he sensed, would not stop now.

“Is it really what I think it is?” A journalist colleague whispered, creeping closer. He was a Muslim. His eyes were the size of dinner plates, and his jaw dropped almost to the ground. Others were huddled together nearby.

“See for yourself,” he replied.

“How is it even possible?” he persisted.

“Huh.”

Not knowing what else to do, Sami immediately ordered his cameraman to stop broadcasting with a cutthroat hand gesture and got on his phone. Abu Khaled picked up on the first ring.

“Yes?”

“I need you to halt all live feeds now.”

“Do you think I’m a total fool?”

Sami was puzzled. “What’re you talking about?” Abu Khaled was a Muslim. *Will he understand?* He was aware that Muslims regarded Jesus as a prophet and held him in high regard.

His boss growled in his ear. “I saw the same thing you did. And I took action before you called.”

“Really?”

“This live broadcast would go on, but with a thirty-minute delay. I already ensured it. Called the other channels too.”

“Oh, great!”

“I know. The authorities will soon swarm that ridge. I hope everyone clears out within the next half hour. And I say, everyone. You understand?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Now do a nice job there and send me some cool footage before bugging out. This is going to be the story of the millennium,” the man clicked off abruptly.

Relieved, Sami looked around. The journalists were a hodgepodge of reporters and cameramen from Palestinian TV channels, radio stations, and newspapers. Mostly Muslim, but a couple of Christians too, like himself. His boss had talked to all of their bosses. If they dispersed quickly after covering the event, the precaution would be helpful.

Surely, the Israelis would come looking for them at their workplaces and homes. But they would be a lot busier in the coming days dealing with the aftershocks, he knew. A lot of world media would be descending upon Jerusalem. He sincerely hoped he and his fellow journalists would be able to save their collective skins, though he wasn’t so certain. It would all depend on how the situation developed. *Only time will tell,* he thought.

Suddenly, the night sky above him burst into intense radiance. His head jerked up. A blaze of light flashed through space, a glowing wagon wheel so brilliant, so piercing that his gaze faltered in pain. Hundreds of thousands of streams of fire were igniting, streaking across the horizon in a shower of unearthly brightness.

“Wow!” Feras rasped and squeezed his eyes shut.

Sami gazed skyward, his mouth agape. It seemed as if the heavens had collapsed. The flaming arrows clustered at one point near the zenith, simultaneously shooting forth with lightning speed. The erupting storm seemed to engulf every part of the horizon, yet it remained unexhausted—the fiery meteorites descending in a downpour as rapid and overwhelming as he had ever seen. Like snowflakes during a squall he once experienced visiting his mother’s family in Afrin, Syria, close to the border with Turkey.

As the meteorite show came to an end, the lights in the entire neighborhood went out. No, it was all across the city. Thick gloom reigned everywhere. Only the cameramen had their lights on, rotating them aimlessly around. He gasped as he tracked the lights, which illuminated the buildings nearby.

The crosses on every church he could see had fallen to the ground: the Russian Church, the churches of the Pater Noster, Mary Magdalene, Viri Galilaei, and Dominus Flevit.

Terrified, he wanted to cross himself but stopped.

The lights circled back, painting an eerie glow over the chapel.

The messiah was now standing on the dome, his head on a swivel, eyes scanning around.

Sami greeted him reverently. “Peace be upon you!”

“May God reward you,” came the reply in a low voice. In Arabic.

It was an unusual reply. For a moment, Sami was overcome by a gush of emotions. Before he could say anything else, he heard the running of feet.

A small group of black-clad figures appeared. They spread out and surrounded the chapel. One of them shouted at the gathered journalists to stop filming and go away. Meanwhile, the messiah had got off the chapel dome with surprising ease. His movements were graceful.

The new arrivals formed a ring around the messiah.

They were not there to harm him, he realized. Rather, they were protecting him.

Feras touched his shoulder. “Move. Let’s go.” He had stowed his equipment. Other journalists were already scattering away.

Sami did not want to leave. Feras grabbed his hand. “Come on, Sami. We don’t have much time.”

He turned and looked at the chapel once again. The messiah and his group were walking toward the mosque, mere shadows now melting into the night.

“May your God have mercy on you,” the words escaped his lips like a whisper before he followed his cameraman down the blacked-out street and disappeared.

**Chapter 2**

**Vatican City, Rome**

In the course of his life, Pope Xavier had seen many things and gone through a lot without feeling a dent in his belief. Yet, nothing in his seventy years on this earth had prepared him for the sight he was cursed to behold now.

Born Javier Felipe Avelino in a little-known village in rural Chile, he had ascended to the papacy just a year ago after the demise of the previous pope. Now, he was in the midst of a crisis. As was his beloved Church.

Walking slowly, he saw Saint Peter’s Square laid before him. Designed like a human figure by Bernini, whose genius gave it an illusion of elevation, the piazza, with its two colonnades looking like the arms, beckoned humanity into the welcoming embrace of the Church.

Not at the moment though.

It was a scene of chaos. A security perimeter held back the visitors who were not allowed to enter the square. The place, which was meant to welcome the faithful, now had to turn them away. It hurt him. Several vehicles were present in the piazza. Earth movers, cranes, fire trucks. Uniformed Swiss Guard patrolling the piazza on foot. Italian police in their cars further away.

Cold, biting wind tore into his body, but he ignored the discomfort. The cardinals tagged along, yet kept a distance from the Holy See. To let him carry the burden of leadership in private. His weary eyes, moist with tears he barely held back, flitted to the pieces of fallen crosses scattered in the piazza.

Every cross in the Vatican had come down.

The shaking had begun late in the night. He had been retiring in his quarters in the Apostolic Palace when a tremulous bed woke him up. His first thought was of an earthquake. Being Chilean, he was no stranger to tremors. Even here in Italy, such shakes happened. Then, while getting up from the bed and putting on his robe, he heard the sudden, loud crashes.

He had rushed out to watch it all happen.

The Egyptian Obelisk had come crashing down. It was reduced to a heap of masonry, the once huge cross at its top fragmented and misshapen, lying there beyond recognition. It was rumored to contain a relic of the True Cross.

Mortified, he careened his neck to look around.

St. Peter’s Basilica stood there. He had barely heaved a sigh of relief at seeing the building undamaged when his eyes fell on the empty dome. No cross.

Like a madman, he had cried aloud and run wildly in circles, flailing his arms. The statues atop the colonnades, as well as on the basilica's façade, had also dropped their crosses. It looked as if some really pissed-up demon had decided to snatch the crosses from all the saints, angels, and cherubs in a fit of rage.

Surveying the piazza again in daylight now, he waved at the gathered visitors. They hung around outside the security ring set up by Vatican Gendarmes and Italian police. He was surrounded by his Swiss Guard detail. Nobody was taking any chances with security here.

He was grateful there had been no significant loss of human life. Only three people had died: two pilgrims and a cleaner. He moved through the rubble with utmost care, though the damage had been minimal. No building had collapsed or suffered any damage.

Some of his cardinals were holding a special mass now. At times, the Church needed prayers for itself.

While it had suffered a lot in the preceding decades owing to a wave of sexual abuse revelations that shocked the world, the Church had somehow survived. Even its distant past had been no less tumultuous. Yet, whether it was decadent priests selling out the faith for pleasure and prestige or hostile forces arrayed against Christendom, the Church persisted during hard times and came through stronger.

Good Christians, he understood, cooperated with God’s grace to beat back error and corruption and reform the house of God from within. Such thoughts gave him reason for hope today. He wanted to muster the courage to deal with the trials God had sent in his own time. He could not afford to abandon the sheep.

Xavier found himself standing before the façade, appreciating the travertine stone in the structure. Two marble statues of St. Peter and St. Paul flanked the steps leading up to the basilica. St. Peter had mysteriously lost the key in his right hand, which was inscribed with the cross. Giant columns rose high, supporting a tall attic. A total of thirteen statues used to sit there.

Now, one was missing.

Christ’s statue had collapsed to the ground.

Turning around, he walked to the fallen obelisk. A team of engineers, led by a Vatican official, was attempting to retrieve the holy relics from the shattered cross. Xavier, however, did not feel any loss over the destroyed monument. It was a leftover from a pagan house of worship in ancient Egypt. If given the choice, he would not have preferred to place it in the heart of the Vatican.

Sighing heavily, he continued his tour of the place. Broken crosses everywhere. His cardinals lingered behind, offering him no explanation for the strange occurrence.

The damage to the crosses had not remained limited to the Vatican. On Ponte Sant’ Angelo, the famous Roman bridge over the Tiber River, only one angel statue out of the ten guarding the river had held a cross. Not anymore. It was now lying in the muddy water flowing under the bridge.

Slowing, he gestured for one of his cardinals to join him. Dean Joseph Banfield approached. He was an American archbishop in his previous life, and was now the prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. The man was smart and sensible—exactly the kind of person he needed now.

“Your Eminence,” he bowed.

“We’ve seen enough. Let’s go inside for our formal meeting.”

“As you wish,” he bowed again and went back to the cardinals. Soon, they were filing out of the piazza. The meeting would take place in the Papal Apartments, the pope’s official residence.

Located northeast of the basilica, the Papal Apartments occupied the third floor of the Apostolic Palace. While his predecessor had lived in the newer residence called the Domus Sanctae Marthae, Xavier preferred the traditional accommodation used by a long line of previous popes.

One by one, his most trusted associates gathered in his private library. Dean sought permission from the pope to play some video clips. Xavier told him to proceed.

“All of you must already have watched the clips from Jerusalem. Therefore, I won't bother you further. It’s doing the rounds on every medium conceivable to man on planet Earth. I’ll show you something else.”

He clicked the button on his remote for the wide-screen monitor. The first video started with a panoramic view of New York City. Next, the camera zoomed in on a massive cathedral. Its grand Gothic Revival architecture was impressive.

“As you see, this is the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the largest church building in the US. It’s located in Manhattan. All of its crosses inexplicably fell to the ground yesterday, coinciding with the events here and in Jerusalem.”

The video switched to a series of frames shot with a cell phone camera. The exterior of the church was visible. The cross vibrated, then toppled to the ground with a thud.

Another clip showed the church from within, its ornate, voluminous interior on full display. Due to the late hour, there was no one inside. A security camera most likely recorded the video. The scene ended with the cross falling.

Dean said. “The clip is now showing a crowd gathered outside the church during the daytime. Most likely, after the incident. Whether they look agitated or excited, I’m not sure. We Americans, you see, are hard to understand.”

“You’re right,” a man remarked lightly. He was the Archpriest of St. Peter’s Basilica.

“Anything else?”

Dean played another short clip. In it, the iconic Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, was visible. Then, in its death throes, it collapsed and plummeted to the ground hundreds of feet below. People gathered around its shattered shape, wailing hysterically.

“What do we know so far?” Xavier got to the point at once.

Dean sighed before replying. “So far, every event looks like a natural happening. Not done by a human hand.”

“Are you sure?” Xavier asked.

“Do you expect me to be?”

Xavier studied him for a moment. “Not at all.”

“We don’t have much information at present,” Dean said. “Only a fool would be confident enough to declare anything like that.”

Xavier waved his hand in the air. “This place has had its share of fools. However, we cannot afford any half-wits right now. Our faith has been tested in a cruel manner. If we falter in our assessment or bungle up the subsequent response, we’d lose a lot more than mere stone crosses.”

“We fully understand,” the gathered cardinals replied in unison.

The pope leaned closer, whispering. “What about Jerusalem? Any clue?” Even before some of his cardinals awoke from their sleep, Dean had shown him the clips of the so-called messiah appearing in Israel.

“Nothing, I fear,” a man answered. He was the one who looked after the Divine Worship. Continuing, he said. “The messiah vanished into thin air following his stunt on the Mount of Olives. Even the Israelis don’t know anything.”

“Are we going to call it a stunt as you just mentioned?” the prefect for Evangelization asked.

“We’ve declined to issue a formal response, though our cardinals and bishops are telling the faithful to be steadfast in their belief,” Dean replied evasively.

“That’s it?” Xavier inquired, raising an eyebrow.

Dean looked uncertain as he replied. “For the time being. But soon you’ll have to take to the podium and announce a formal rejection. Or–”

“Or what?” he cut him off angrily.

Dean replied haltingly. “He…he could be legit.”

Xavier fumed, crossing himself. “How dare you say such a despicable thing? We’re the true guardians of the Church. We should not harbor these disgraceful thoughts.”

“My apologies.”

“Don’t say it again. It wouldn’t happen in such a manner.”

A cardinal sat forward. He was responsible for the Eastern Churches. “Why not?”

“Because he’s an imposter!” Xavier blurted out.

“No proof.”

“We’ll soon have it,” Xavier promised forcefully.

“Will it suffice?” the Camerlengo asked them all, looking from face to face.

Dean said. “More importantly, can we find the proof soon enough to restore the faith? Before this matter gets out of hand and brings down our Church?”

The room fell silent as a grave.

Xavier cleared his throat and asked. “What are our people in Israel saying?”

Dean placed his elbows on the table before replying. “Whatever happened is a mystery to our clergymen there. The man came out of nowhere, got his arrival recorded on camera, and vanished like a ghost. Not a trace left.”

Xavier thundered. “Not something I would expect Jesus to do.”

“And the cross on every church fell to the earth,” Eastern Churches added. He had personally checked with all the bishops.

“In all of Jerusalem?” Xavier inquired.

“No. Just at the Mount of Olives.”

“God! Just like here,” the Camerlengo muttered, visibly shaken.

“Do you see any significance?” Dean asked around.

“What’s your point?” the Prefect for the Bishops spoke for the first time.

Dean replied. “Whoever is behind this, he isn’t targeting the Catholic faith only. He’s going after all of Christianity!”

“But how’s he doing it?” the Archpriest asked, removing his cap and scratching his bald head.

“What?” Xavier asked.

The man gesticulated wildly at the gathering. “How does anyone selectively take down the cross while the building stands? Any answer?”

None.

Any natural earthquake would have damaged the buildings and statues holding the crosses alike. Even a manmade tremor would have worked similarly. A quake, natural or otherwise, once triggered, isn’t a surgical weapon.

“What do the seismologists say?” Another exasperated voice boomed inside the library.

Dean shook his head. “We talked to the departments both here and in Israel. There was no recorded seismic activity in the vicinity during that time. Not a flicker, the Italians told me. Same story by the Israelis.”

“So, it rules out the earthquake. What else?”

Divine Worship offered. “A sabotage, perhaps.” He did not look sure about his proposition though.

“Our police investigators pored over everything. We prioritized the collection and analysis of samples. No traces of explosives were detected."

“Any chance it could have been a non-explosive device? Like a slingshot or an arrow? A mega-Taser?”

A few snickers reverberated through the library.

“Haha! Not at all. Some of the crosses weighed several tons. A siege engine might have pulled it off, but the projectiles or their remnants would have been found. And frankly speaking, a Taser capable of operating on such a scale is out of the question,” Dean explained patiently.

“It could be a good priest’s story, by the way. Demons wielding invisible swords," Eastern Churches joked, eliciting giggles from all around the table.

“Stop,” a morose-looking Xavier raised his hand. The laughter died down. The whole coterie of religious men found themselves in a pickle, unable to understand the crisis they faced.

“Damn! A dead end,” someone down the table cursed. Xavier fixed him with a withering glance, but he did not admonish. A little swearing was the least of his concerns now.

**Chapter 3**

**Al Ruwais, Qatar**

Mike Hasser grabbed coffee along the way as he left the chow hall and stepped outside. For one thing, the Agency took great care of its brew, he thought, savoring the first sip.

Blinding, sand-laden shamal winds had been lashing the country for the last week. Thin, patchy dirt from the previous night showed on the ground despite the arduous efforts made by the Bangladeshi cleaning staff. Usually a summer phenomenon, the terrible winds also occasionally occurred during the winter months. The small spy bastion appeared shriveled and insignificant. Easily ignored. The decrepit appearance served as a deliberate disguise. Hiding in plain sight.

He thrust his hands into the trouser pockets. He was joined by an obscure State Department official from the embassy.

“Awful,” the man exclaimed, looking annoyed. Having been pulled away from the comfortable urban cocoon of Doha seemed to irk him.

Sitting at the northern tip of Qatar, Al-Ruwais was a little port town on the Persian Gulf. Hasser preferred it to the flashier Doha. It felt so refreshing to look at the open waters of the Persian Gulf. The safe house's confined interior had begun to grate on his mind.

Hasser nodded. "It is, if you can't just shake off this prison feel that sets in after a while," he winked, "and, ah, the not too infrequent shamals smashing here left and right."

The man winced but did not say anything. Hasser offered him a hand with all the sincerity he could muster. “Brian.”

The man took it. “I’m Danny Martin.”

“Nice seeing you.”

Danny nodded, wondering why these folks always thought “Brian” was a cool cover name, though it definitely sounded better than Smith, Jones, or Bob popularized earlier. The Agency was progressing.

They started walking to the intelligence room, locally referred to as the “Spook Nook." The meeting was still five minutes away.

During the Iraq War and afterward, Qatar had been an important country for several reasons. It had a strong pro-Western ruling family, with close ties to the royals across the border in Saudi Arabia and other kingdoms. The US military’s Central Command was based there. It had a sizable Agency presence too, their main task being to monitor Iran from across the pond. The CIA worked closely with its counterpart, Qatar State Security. During one of his visits, the director awarded the George Tenet medal to its chief for his role in strengthening the cooperation between the two spy services.

With the terrorism story now knocked off of the front pages and network broadcasts in the United States and elsewhere, Iran took center stage. Israel was engaged in a brutal war with two of the most powerful proxies employed by the mullahs in Tehran, namely Hamas and Hezbollah. Both countries had been directly targeting each other for a year now. For the Agency, the region would never be boring by any measure, Hasser knew. Upheavals continued on a regular scale, rippling into Central Asia and beyond. Under the circumstances, a country like Qatar and a town like Al-Ruwais would always hold some secrets, teeming as much with scoundrels and smugglers as with soldiers and spies on a given day.

The CIA was right to be wary. Its presence in the region had not dwindled since the United States exited Iraq and Afghanistan. Rather, some circles pointed out, the Middle East had been left to the Agency and its shady contractors while the real big-league action took place in the Indo-Pacific.

Hasser had joined the CIA following his release from the U.S. Army as a captain. The time in uniform had been his first experience serving the nation. He had set foot on West Point’s hallowed grounds during the peak of America’s war on terror. A decade since 9/11, Stars n’ Stripes still flew everywhere, and the politicians made sure to feed the populace with a constant dose of action. He had successfully completed his training, filled with a burning nationalistic passion. Like most of his friends. After serving a tour with the First Infantry Division in Iraq, he did his Rangers course.

He’d never really planned on staying long in the military. He realized all along that the real fight would take place behind the battle lines, hidden from public view. The enemy would slog on unless beaten at his own game by methods that were both unconventional and devious.

As he looked around, the intelligence services were replacing the military as the portfolio managers for the new kind of war America had on its hands. The CIA, whether it liked it or not, found itself in the driving seat. For fighting it in any meaningful way, the Agency needed another breed of men. Warrior spies were the need of the hour– men who had been soldiers in their previous lives. They would spearhead the shadowy war across continents to fight and win the never-ceasing kind of campaign the world had not experienced before. Soon he joined that elite yet elusive band of warriors known to the world at that time as the Special Activities Division.

Along the way someone judged him to be too cerebral for that job, and he was inducted into the Agency’s National Clandestine Service, the sword arm of the vast empire being run from Langley. After a year of training, they sent him on his initial assignment under diplomatic cover to Europe. A couple more exciting deep-cover jobs followed in the Middle East. All vanilla missions, playing second fiddle to the seasoned guys. Sometimes, just helping with their reports, that's all. Then he landed at the embassy in Ankara, Turkey.

“Here we are,” he said as they entered their work area. It was separate from the living quarters.

“Nice place,” Danny commented, though he did not actually mean it. The compound was nondescript, nestled behind shabby concrete walls. Nothing nice about it. It was merely another modest structure situated in a small town. The business, ostensibly registered in Doha, was involved in several obscure fishing ventures.

Taking his last sip and discarding the paper cup, he stepped inside a hallway, Danny behind him.

Both were met by another man who ushered them into a bland conference room. Danny was checking out the huge mural on one of the walls—desert, horses, and other local items painted in pastels. Hasser nodded to his Agency colleagues and took a seat. They now had to wait.

While in Turkey, Hasser had stayed mostly in Gaziantep, learning the ropes under a motley crew of senior field officers. The Agency was supporting a network of assets fighting the war against ISIS in neighboring Syria and Iraq. He remained an operations officer and worked tirelessly, gaining proficiency in the Arabic language in the process. Unluckily, his nascent career soon hit the doldrums. His disabled first child put so much strain on his marriage that he started thinking about quitting his job.

Then came Doha station. As his seniors offered reassignment back home, he put in the request, knowing fully well his days at the Agency were numbered. The spook business was all about working overseas. Only the laggards stayed back stateside. His transfer orders, still in the pipeline and not yet approved, quickly earned him the label of a slow horse.

The deputy station chief, Chad Moses, arrived. He was officiating for the station chief, who was currently out of the country. He was probably the only Agency official in Qatar who liked to wear suits. Sometimes, really dumb ones. Today, his trousers legs were too short, Hasser noticed.

Trailing him was Kate Armigo. He stiffened.

The woman was in formal office attire, her heels clicking softly on the floor. She shot him a knowing glance before confidently striding over and sitting next to him. Shit. He squirmed in his chair.

Kate was a mid-level operations officer in the Agency, not exactly his boss but a rung above anyway. She ran the shop in Al-Ruwais, whereas the station chief and his deputy stayed in Doha. What made it troubling was that she had the hots for him ever since he had set foot in Qatar six months ago. A divorcee, she had just latched onto him, first casually and in a playful manner, then her tactics had evolved aggressively into something bordering on harassment. The fact that his marriage was on the rocks emboldened her even more.

She had celebrated her thirty-eighth birthday last month. Brunette, and cute in a subtle way, she would probably never have been called a stunner. Her skin showed premature fine lines, thanks to her tours in the hellholes worldwide. After graduating from college with a BA in Economics, she joined the Agency. Building upon her working-class ethos, she had steadily clutched her way up the ladder, though failing to reach star status in the CIA’s notoriously cutthroat National Clandestine Service, aka the Directorate of Operations.

Chad eyed the participants and began without the preliminaries. Hasser noticed that he looked hurried. “Well, people, we’re here to assess the developing situation. Iranians have hijacked a Singapore-owned oil tanker. Around fifteen Americans are onboard as members of the crew. Two men lost their lives during the takeover. Identities unknown so far.”

He paused for a while, looking at some notes before him. “A small naval force launched the operation with lightning speed, seizing the ship. Two helicopters landed on the deck shortly afterward, then vanished into thin air, taking along the hostages.”

“What? They removed the crew?” Danny asked.

“Apparently, yes,” Chad answered. Then, on his cue, a projector clicked to life. Everyone watched in silence. A series of images appeared on the wall-mounted screen showing the hijacked tanker dead in the water. With shot-up bridge windows. Most disturbing were the stills showing a couple of lifeless human forms on the deck. An overflying drone had provided the imagery.

“It’s a mess, by the way,” he commented, quickly going through the slides. “Lots of gunfire, a stranded tanker, dead sailors.”

Hasser asked. "Are we even certain they took the crew alive?" Hasser inquired. "Don’t want to sound pessimistic, but you know what, it’s lot easier to kill people than to kidnap them.”

“You’re right. But whatever little intel is coming from the drones so far supports the hostage-taking,” Chad said, looking at him. “So, we’ll treat it that way until more info surfaces. Mind you, it’s the State Department calling the dibs on this thing. We’re just tagging along.” Danny nodded.

“Anyone announcement by Tehran?” asked Bill Price. He oversaw tactical paramilitary operations and represented Hasser's former division within the CIA, which was now rebranded as the Special Operations Group.

“Nope,” Kate answered tersely. Hasser felt her hand on his thigh. He tried to look calm, hoping nobody was watching.

Kate gave her younger Agency operative a sideways glance. White, in his mid-thirties, an inch shy of six feet with a small waist and broad muscular shoulders. His deeply tanned angular face was unreadable, blue-green eyes sedate yet alert. Straight from an Agency recruiting poster, if ever there was any, she mused. Then, her gaze shifted.

“Who in his fucking mind allows the Iranians to do all such stuff? Why haven’t we bombed them already?” Chad asked frustratingly. “Anyone? State?” he asked again, turning his big frame to face Danny. An operation gone sideways in the boonies a decade earlier had given Chad a big scar on his butt and a nasty grudge for Iran.

“Not me, man. Above my pay grade. To tell you, we are not in a state of war with Iran yet,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

Chad snorted. “Big comfort, pal.” He continued, looking at the attendees once more. "We've been in touch with our contacts in Iran and here ever since the attack happened. They think the kidnappers have managed to move further inland.”

“Based on what?” asked Danny.

Kate stepped in. “For this kind of intel, we depend on our guys inside Iran, who aren’t many, and the Israelis, who aren’t forthcoming. So far, both insisting that the hijacking force is untraceable. They have even suggested that the abductors might be non-state actors. Frankly, neither of them sound convincing.”

“Any further help with the drones?” Hasser inquired.

Chad replied. “Drone ops have ebbed in the region, but that’s changing now, as we speak. We’re watching the mullahs more intently with drones and other means.” By other means, he meant satellites, Hasser guessed.

Danny said. "The Iranians have assured the State through intermediaries that they are making every effort to retrieve the hostages."

“It’s all bull crap!” Chad sneered.

“Of course, we take whatever they proclaim with a pinch of salt under the best of circumstances,” Danny told them.

Kate looked up from some notes in her hands. “Well, our network inside Iran is in shambles nowadays. Bastards rounded up most of my assets and imprisoned them.”

Chad said. “As I mentioned earlier, the information is sketchy. I’m asking you people to look around and see if something pops up.”

Kate raised her hand. Hasser had to stop himself from snickering. She said. “On a side note, someone made quite a stir in Jerusalem last night. The media is abuzz with the news of a messiah there. A major news story all across the globe. Fox News is giving it a lot of air time. Others are not far behind. Top trending on social media as well.”

Chad made a face. “We’d better focus here.”

“I got a hunch. This is going to blow up pretty soon,” Kate insisted. “The region is powder keg, and it’s getting twitchy by the moment. Already lots of traffic on Jihadi platforms, as we speak.”

Chad said. “Kate, I see your point, but let’s prioritize.”

“Very well,” she relented.

Chad spoke by way of announcing. “Kate, you’ll be working closely with your sources in Iran. Try to probe them for any useful info and run any leads thereafter.”

He went on, addressing Hasser now. “Your job is to pay some more attention to the detainees at the local prison. Get some tongues talkin’, boy. See what they could offer us. Okay?”

“Got it.”

The SOG guy was tasked with keeping the JSOC in the loop in case a military option was deemed necessary, while Danny was asked to remain in touch with his department and stay abreast of any new developments on the diplomatic side. With that, the meeting broke up.

Hasser spent the whole day at the Qatari prison, where some Iranians were being held on charges of illegally crossing into Qatar and spying, but could not find anything useful. On the way back, his cell phone dinged repeatedly. He checked the messages.

His wife wanted to chat on FaceTime.

*Wonderful,* he sighed. Rebecca rarely did that unless she was pissed, or worse, their daughter Pam was having another of her flare-ups. His local driver dropped him off at the compound and offered that he could wait if he wanted to go anywhere else. Hasser shook his head absently.

**Chapter 4**

Once inside his semi-dark room, Hasser wearily powered up the laptop and plopped down in a chair, readying himself for the ordeal. He did not bother to turn on the light switch. Lately, talking to her had been getting progressively difficult. No matter what he said, their conversations mostly ended badly.

“Hi,” Rebecca said as the video call connected. Her voice was tired. Something in her tone made him hate himself. It was early morning in Glendale, Arizona. Normally, she would be getting ready for her school job at this time.

He hesitated before asking. “Is everything ok?” She had puffy eyes and was unusually quiet. Her hair was wound into a messy top bun.

He could hear some clatter in the background. Just as he was watching her, a blurred shadow emerged, and something struck Rebecca in the head. He heard an “ouch” and saw her recoil in panic. Pam appeared briefly in the camera, moving too fast for him to track her. The seven-year-old was in a frenzy. He watched slack-jawed as she repeatedly spat at her mother, her wild eyes bulging and her hands smacking nonstop into Becky’s face.

“Oh, God!” he screamed. “Pam, please, stop. Stop it!” he said and stood up, not knowing what to do.

On his screen, another shape materialized behind Becky in the room. His mother-in-law was staying with her daughter. She leaped at Pam and held her in a bear hug, while Becky ran out of the room. She returned holding a net and threw it upon Pam, who squirmed and cried inconsolably. Somehow, both women managed to smother her with the net. Becky's mother, Meryl, squatted next to the child and held her under the net. Pam kept on squealing.

Becky turned her webcam’s angle away from them and stared blankly at him. “You see, Mike,” she croaked. “It’s been going like this for weeks now.”

Hasser just shook his head. During the last visit, the treating physicians and the staff at the special education center briefed him on Pam's deteriorating condition. Her tantrums would only worsen; she might harm herself or others, they had said. Now, he was witnessing it. His daughter suffered from a severe form of autism. She was non-verbal and had poor learning ability. Unable to go to a traditional school. Specialized centers coached kids like her, offering a tailored approach to each child.

Aggression was rampant among this subset of disease sufferers, requiring frequent drug interventions and hospital treatments. Professionals often differed in their approaches to managing such cases. Contrary to Hollywood stereotypes, the majority of autistic children are not savants. In fact, they need continued support from parents and caregivers, living a life of dependency in one or another form.

“Even the center people didn’t know what to do about her,” Rebecca said hoarsely. "Docs simply prescribe more medication each time we visit them. Tranquilizers, to keep her numb, that’s it. But even those aren’t working anymore. She might need asylum care, Mike.”

He sighed. “I’m so sorry, Becky—”

“Are you?” she thundered at him, cutting him off. “Do you fucking care anymore what your daughter’s going through while you’re out there fighting your dirty wars?”

Hasser held up his hand. “Hey, I care a lot for her. Listen up, Becky. I’ve already applied for reassignment to the States.”

“You’re a liar, and you know it in your heart,” she blurted out hysterically. “Look, don’t you see? Doesn’t she mean anything to you at all? What kind of man are you, Mike?” She was in tears.

“Stop it, Becky. It’s not like that,” he replied in a low voice. No point in screaming back. He knew she was goading him into another shouting match, the kind that ultimately led nowhere.

She wiped her face, sniffling. “Doesn’t she need you around? When will you realize she's your responsibility as much as mine?”

“Please, do you even understand me?” he massaged his temple as he spoke, “I’m not Jack Ryan or Mitch Rapp. I didn’t play the stock market, and my dad didn’t leave me with an estate. I simply cannot give up this job. Curse it you may, it provides me the wherewithal to support Pam, including her special care, therapies, and medications. Such stuff costs a dime, if not an arm and a leg.” He did not mention the separate check Becky was getting every month for herself, without a meaningful break.

Rebecca slammed her computer shut, and the call was terminated. Hasser breathed heavily and stared at the screen, as blank as his mind.

Next morning Hasser woke to the buzz of his cell phone vibrating. He scrunched up his eyes to hold on to the leftover sleep, but it did not work. The angry phone refused to let go of its incessant rattle. He rolled over and checked.

It was Becky again!

He had slept late. Had been working for hours before hitting the bed to keep his mind away from the mess his life had become. The people he truly loved had stopped believing in him; his life partner one of them. She argued with him about matters barely within his control or influence. His job required overseas assignments, which was a thorny issue. He did not blame her. But it wasn’t easy on him.

Hasser had needed sleep—a good night’s sleep to come through his misery. But he had just squirmed and tossed around in bed for most of a long winter night, staying up for hours and going over what had gone wrong. Wandered into the dark, worry-filled recesses of his worn-out mind, forcing himself down a road where rage and self-pity, no longer distinguishable, threatened his sanity.

He felt drained out now, lacking the energy for another round of endless bickering. Her words from the previous evening echoed like shots on a deserted firing range. *You’re a liar,* she had said. He wished he had screamed back and said something equally stupid to fend off the tirade.

*Does your daughter mean anything to you?* Her next sentence sent him into a world of pain. What kind of question was that? What man on earth wouldn't give everything for an angel like Pam? She was God’s blessing for him. By being special, she made him feel special in many ways. It was amazing how someone so small and imperfect could have such a huge impact on anyone’s life.

*What kind of man are you?* Becky had asked. He knew the answer to that. Her daughter had made him a better man. A much better man than he had ever been before.

His phone warbled. Becky was only half-finished, it seemed. Since he was not picking up her calls, she had fired off a text message. It read—*You don’t realize what I’m going through. I wish I had never married you.*

Hasser stiffened at once, his breathing picking up. He tossed the phone away. Becky was getting combative by the day, always stocked up on anger. Unlike him, she had not accepted her daughter’s condition.

A framed picture sat still on his study table, shrouded in the early morning darkness engulfing his room. With a sigh, he got up and switched on the lights. The picture beamed at him, bringing back a flood of memories. Rebecca and he stood side by side, with a mischievous young Pam perched on his neck. It was taken five years ago at a family gathering. Before her diagnosis.

Tears flooded his eyes.

More photographs adorned the walls in 3m hangers. Becky and Pam in various poses. His own too few, mostly when he was home and they were all together. Park visits, beach walks, outdoor camping. A lovely family vacation in Greece . Another one to the Bahamas. More mundane things like the ubiquitous mall trips and the backyard dinners. With burning eyes, he saw his whole family life chronicled in those pictures.

A set showed Becky. He met her for the first time on a mountain trail up Piestewa Peak in Phoenix. A freckled twenty-something with crazy cobalt blue eyes. A small grin, and pigtails. She descended from an obscure little town east of Tucson. Dressed up for the hike, she and her group of girls were huffing and puffing once the trail got steeper and the summer heat notched up. He offered her water. She had recently graduated from college and begun working as a junior teacher at an elementary school in Peoria. She was in love with mountains, motorcycles, and romance books. Took an instant liking to the handsome soldier who enjoyed basketball and tough hikes. They started a relationship in short order.

One picture in particular was his favorite. She had sent it after their first meeting. She wore a maroon cold-shoulder tee with hem detailing and striped pants, her short hair sticking out.

The decision to go ahead with the wedding came easily within the year. He had proposed to her on the phone.

She had gushed, chanting excitedly on the other end. “Oh, my god, oh, my god! I’m so freakin’ happy.”

He settled her in an apartment in his native Glendale. Pam was born the next year, a little premature but fine otherwise, at least physically. Her autism became evident only later on when she grew up.

Becky took it upon herself too hard, and their marriage deteriorated slowly. Whenever they visited the shrinks she cried as hard as he had ever seen her cry. Hasser felt his heart bleed. He wanted her to stop mentally abusing herself. He wanted her to live in happiness. To him, Becky was as important as the daughter, but she refused to come together. She fell into a deep depression, and their second child, despite being perfectly normal, did not make matters any better. Hasser Junior often got neglected, he knew.

His head throbbed with cascading pain, brought on by anger and helplessness. He wondered if his life would ever be rid of misery. If he left the Agency, his problems were not going away, he was sure. Jobs were difficult to come by, especially for shaken-up ex-military types. No employer wanted damaged goods. Any veteran exhibiting behavioral issues, regardless of their severity, could easily receive the stigmatizing label of PTSD. The phrase “wrecks of the war” was commonly used.

The road to separation was even bumpier. Most of his savings would go to the lawyers, leaving nothing for the kids or himself. These days, divorces bankrupted the guys. He would probably not get on his feet again.

*Am I headed for the bottle?* *Another damned alcoholic?* His mind screamed, like a noisy spectator to its own agony.

He figured no more sleep was in order and sat up in the bed, his shoulders slumped. A rotten taste had crept into his mouth. He tried to calm himself with different breathing exercises but failed. Seeing no point, he decided to occupy himself with work.

Showered and shaved, he walked back to the office. “Hey, Mike,” someone called.

It was past sunset now. As Chad appeared by his side, Hasser stopped. Without another word, he beckoned Hasser as he typed the code on the door panel and entered Kate's office. Hasser slipped behind him. Blessedly, the room was warm and the woman was not around.

“How’d it go?” Chad asked. He lit up a cigarette after fumbling with his cheap lighter several times.

“Not so well,” he replied, not knowing what the other man meant. He could well be asking about his latest chat with his wife. “Qataris had some poor bumps shackled there,” he continued. "Petty smugglers from a small fishing community on Lavan. I went through them again, but couldn’t pry anything out.”

Chad puffed out a swirl of smoke. “I see. I wasn’t hopeful in the first place. Well, it was worth a try at least. The White House is leaning hard on us to do whatever it takes to retrieve the American hostages.”

“Understood,” Hasser acknowledged.

Leaning back in the chair, Chad flicked his cigarette. “Let me say here it’s a priority task.”

Hasser remained quiet. He wanted to tell him he did not care and wasn’t interested in the big picture or the lives of a few individuals. He had a failing marriage on his hands. And an autistic daughter to raise all by himself if he could not reconcile with his estranged wife. Yet he could not quit what he had signed for. Not when the threats had grown murkier and the fight turned uglier. He had to be on the wall, guarding the realm of freedom against the dangers that lay beyond.

The door to the room opened, and Kate came in, a fiftyish man of medium height and average build with her. Hasser eyed him closely. Wheatish skin, trimmed gray beard, and expensive frameless glasses. Dressed for the weather in corduroy trousers and a turtleneck sweater, he had layered it with a puffed bomber jacket, giving his chest an unnatural bounce. Something about the guy was vaguely familiar. He went straight to meet Chad. His manner was frank. Then he came to him.

Chad simply said. “Mike, meet Zaki Bilal.”

*Holy shit.* Hasser was dumbfounded. He had finally recognized him. He stood there, staring at the guy in bewilderment, who smiled lightly and touched his hand in greeting with a closed fist.

“I reckon you know Zak,” Chad said amusingly.

“Only through social media and cafeteria gossip. Word is, he's the man who helped us kill Osama bin Laden," Hasser said, looking suspiciously at the guy. He felt a little irritated having an outsider around.

“Exactly right. And then he spent most of his reward money on women and booze, the rest he wasted!” Chad roared with laughter. Kate chortled as well. Zaki just shrugged.

“So, if I may ask, what is the Agency’s star tipster doing here in Qatar? Catchin’ up with old buddies? Sightseein’?” Hasser asked lightly, looking at Chad, then Kate. Their faces were unreadable, but he assumed the man’s arrival out of nowhere was not coincidental.

“Uh, Mike, nothing like that,” Kate said hesitatingly.

“What’s it anyway?” he persisted.

Chad answered, his tone serious. "If I were to say a call to arms, it wouldn't be far off. He’s come to assist us in recovering the hostages. Just got off the plane early today. Gonna work with you. As you are aware, he knows the region rather too well.”

“Sort of,” Hasser countered, pointing a hand at Zaki. “He’s an American now who appears out of shape, out of his element to me. Happens to play consultant, interrogator, and interpreter, all rolled into one from time to time. But he’s never set foot in Iran. Chad, he’s now a marked man in this part of the world, with a big, fat bull’s eye painted on his scalp in red!”

Chad shook his head. “A spy never retires. In our present situation, any help is welcome.” He stood up from his chair and began pacing the room. “See, it’s a damn serious matter, and lives are at stake. America’s reputation too, if our citizens are paraded around in a cage or the photographs of their headless corpses are posted on the Web.”

“But why him?” Hasser was not convinced. He gesticulated. “Sorry for being too blunt, but the guy is a walking mess of his own making. He threw every caution to the wind when he put up his pictures all over the internet—mansions, Beamers, high life in San Diego, and whatnot. Fucking cigar-chomping, champagne-swigging spy who came from the east and fucked himself in the ass. What a joker!”

Zaki held up a hand, grinning. “Hey, don’t be so cruel. I had every right to be flying high. I screwed Osama and lived to tell the tale. Nothing else gets headier than that.”

“Whatever. That thing is past now. However, involving you in anything here is too risky for my comfort. Either you’d get killed or someone else would for just being around you.”

Zaki winked at him. “I’m dependable, as you’ll see.”

**Chapter 5**

**Damascus, Syria**

Maxim Sayyaf welcomed the men at the gate of his palatial home, not exactly knowing who they were. He was a pro-regime Christian businessman, originally from Yabroud, now settled in Damascus. He resided in the Bab Touma District, just a short distance from the Cathedral of St. George. Today was his son’s wedding. The ceremony was in full swing.

A business colleague had approached him, asking him to take care of some guests from a neighboring country who wanted to see a Syrian wedding before requiring a nice, quiet place away from the city to retire for a week or so. He had happily agreed. He had not turned on his TV or used his phone much during the last few days, except for calling. Even if he had, he wouldn't have identified the man standing before him anyway. His was not an uncommon face in the region.

He walked them to the hall where all the guests were being hosted. His son and the bride had already taken their vows. Now, the meals were being served. Seated beside his son was Ghassan Khalil, another of his special guests. He was mayor of Damascus and held significant political sway.

The stranger and his compatriots preferred to be seated in a corner, away from the main gathering.

Spotting Maxim, one of his servants approached him, his face grim. “We’ve run out of the wine!”

“What?”

“Some of your guests drank as if there wouldn’t be another day. I’m sorry. The mayor is getting antsy.”

Maxim was worried. Good wines were his weakness, and despite being a friend, Ghassan was not someone to trifle with.

"Everything is all right?” he heard.

Turning, he found one of the men accompanying the stranger looking at him with concern.

“Yes, yes, no trouble at all,” he replied politely.

But the man was already speaking to the stranger, who shook his head vigorously. Maxim stepped closer.

Ignoring him, the stranger asked his associate. “Look, what do I have to do with it?”

The man insisted. “The hour has arrived.”

“I am not sure.”

“Everything will happen as was written,” his associate said reassuringly.

“I cannot say how many times this pen spelled disaster,” he sighed and looked down as if relenting to his fate. Next, he pointed his finger at some empty plastic water canisters. The servant nodded before going away.

Soon, the servant was back with another helper. Maxim watched them carry away the canisters. Minutes later they were back, the canisters filled with water.

Maxim watched. The stranger asked his servant to bring the wine glasses and start filling them from the canisters. The servant, an old man, was confused momentarily.

Maxim gestured for him to carry out the task.

As the glasses were filled up, the mayor ambled by. He took a full glass and began drinking. Maxim was holding his breath.

“It’s a wonderful wine!” he bellowed, smacking his lips. “Domaine Leflaive Montrachet, eh? Or a rare Chardonnay? Never quite tasted anything like this before.”

Maxim was dumbfounded. Is the guy so drunk as to confuse plain water with wine?

The mayor whistled gleefully to call the bridegroom to his side. Maxim watched his son come their way, his face showing bewilderment.

“Hey, your dad is a smart man. He held onto the best item until now. Let's celebrate," he said, toasting the bridegroom and quickly draining another full glass.

Other guests were also served from the canisters, all of whom appreciated the excellent wine.

Maxim was speechless. The stranger placed a hand on his shoulder. “I need to go now.”

“Wait, wait, please.”

“It cannot be helped, dear,” the stranger insisted.

Maxim said. “Thank you for your blessed presence.”

“All praise to God.”

Maxim took his hand. "I've arranged for you to stay in my countryside villa on Lake Zarzar. It’s not more than fifteen miles away. Very peaceful. You’ll like it.”

“I’m grateful,” the stranger pressed his hand and turned to leave.

As the stranger and his men were being led outside through the gate, Maxim was startled by a sudden crashing noise. He jumped. “God! What was that?”

A few people came running out of their homes, talking among themselves. “A cross has toppled,” a voice shouted in the distance. In no time, several dozen people poured out into the dark street.

Most neighborhoods faced power outages in the capital. While the folks somehow managed the electricity shortage in their homes, nothing could be done about the street lighting.

Maxim was poised at the gate, perplexed, unable to move. He had come out to see off his special guests. But something had just happened in the cathedral. As he was contemplating going to the church and seeing for himself what had gone wrong there, a wailing woman appeared in the street. She was wobbling.

He stepped forward, holding up a hand. “Wait, wait, what happened?”

The woman came to a stop near him, panting heavily. Under the gate light, he recognized her. “Mother Lucia, are you all right?”

“Ah, yes,” the old nun sighed, her mouth wide open.

“What happened?”

She replied haltingly. “The…the cross. Oh, my lord. It fell.”

“How?”

“I… I don’t know. Just collapsed.” It looked as if she would also drop to the ground any moment.

“Was anyone hurt, mother?” He was worried someone might have come under the falling debris.

“No, but I’m so scared.”

Maxim saw off the guests and headed for the cathedral.

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The messiah traveled to the lakeside villa in silence. The lake lay northwest of the capital, nestled among low hills, just off the main highway that ran from Damascus to the Lebanon border. Early winter sprinkled its waters with powder snow. A dozen or so picnicking families, two buses of schoolchildren, and some tourists were visible near the lake.

Their villa sat a hundred yards away from the lakeshore.

As his group dismounted from their vehicles and began offloading the luggage, the messiah went for a saunter. He savored the sunlight, peace, and quietness that surrounded him, knowing full well that any bliss was elusive. The path he took was undetermined and haphazard, meandering along the muddy lakeshore. A flock of geese, disturbed by his footsteps, flapped their wings and soared high into the air. Kids squealed in delight.

The solitude gave him his first brush with trepidation.

An ugly phantom of worry derived from some distant memory seemed to intrude on his mind, its black, bony fingers trying to paint a painfully tranquil landscape, indiscernible yet ominous. He wanted to understand it but could not sift through the mess of colors on display, a meaningless yet disquietingly familiar brushwork.

A scream jolted him from his reverie.

His head jerked up. A little boy playing on the beach was pushed into the lake by one of his friends. He went tumbling several feet into the water. Panicked, his father jumped out of his car parked by the road, a hundred feet away.

Without thinking, the messiah went to save the drowning child. Walking on the lake.

When the children saw him walking on the water, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they cried out.

The messiah grabbed the child by his arm and pulled him out of the water. He carried him back to the shore. A wide-eyed father stood frozen like a statue. The child’s mother, meanwhile, had also come rushing over. Sobbing, she held the boy in her arms. The messiah stood by quietly.

The extraordinary feat had drawn the people. He had nearly a hundred men, women, and children gathered around him, staring wildly, as if they could not believe what they were seeing. One of his associates had also arrived, standing back and watching.

“Thank you,” the father muttered softly.

“Be thankful to your Lord,” the messiah replied.

“The Lord sent you to save my son,” the mother said, wiping a tear with her scarf.

Feeling embarrassed, he said. “I’m nobody.”

“You surely are a sign. Sent by the Almighty to strengthen our belief,” the woman bowed respectfully.

The onlookers did not want to go away. They lingered around, shadowing him. Some of them had already recorded the miraculous walk and the rescue on their phones. The others made some more clips and took photos.

His associate came to him. “I think we should move out of here.”

They would go back to the capital and stay at a nondescript place.

**Umayyad Mosque, Old City, Damascus**

The next appearance happened in the Umayyad Mosque.

With the most well-recognized face in the world by now, the messiah was spotted on the mosque’s eastern minaret.

He emerged before the dawn prayers, standing in the open gallery of the minaret, a pale light illuminating the spire above him reflected off his saffron robe.

The mosque was huge, one of the largest in the world. It had a vast open courtyard surrounded by an arcade of arches supported by slender columns. It traced its origin to the earlier eighth century, though the piece of real estate it sat on had been occupied by temples of several other religions in the previous millennia. A shrine inside supposedly housed the head of John the Baptist.

It was an impromptu appearance.

Still, the multitude of early-morning worshippers erupted in cheers. Within no time more people began flooding the mosque. They hailed his presence with such obvious joy that the noise was truly deafening.

He waved to the throng and descended from the minaret. The crowd had already swelled to more than a hundred thousand souls. Men, women and children. Keeping his eyes lowered, he walked up to the people with feather-like steps, almost gliding, as if a spirit. Up close, the horde parted to let him in. He was glad for the whispers and murmurs replacing noisy cheers, and reverent glances substituting incessant gawking.

It was overwhelming nonetheless.

He quickly reminded himself that the people’s veneration wasn’t for him but for his calling. He needed to remember that, needed to shun pride and remain humble. If he found their adoration to be outlandish, well…he couldn’t disagree. Whatever was happening, it was strange. But then again, there wasn’t anything more potent than the triumph of awe over the human mind.

He took the opportunity to shake hands with them and kiss their cheeks. The more he plunged deeper into the mass of humanity, the more charged-up folks pushed against each other to reach him. A police contingent having been rushed to the mosque was standing nervously by. Despite the cold weather, he began to perspire.

Such a big event was bound to attract attention. A tight control by the government notwithstanding, the media people began pouring in. Some were even linked to the ruling regime.

On the other hand, wave upon wave of ordinary Syrians kept coming, thronging the roads and streets leading to the mosque. Among them were many sick people too. Some were on wheelchairs, others on crutches, crying babies on laps. All being helped by their loved ones to move along, inch by inch.

The mosque’s imam approached him, pushing his way through the swarm. The old man was breathing hard, his cloak in disarray. The greetings were brief, hurried. He led him to the main prayer hall inside where the faithful were standing up for the dawn prayers. He requested him to lead, but the messiah declined. “I’m here to stand behind you and offer my prayers.”

The imam nodded, taking his place at the front of the procession. The activity lasted for a few minutes. He came to him again and embraced him. Now, he wanted him to talk to the gatherers outside.

The messiah hesitated, then agreed.

Wiping the sweat from his brow he addressed them, in Arabic. “Brothers and sisters, peace be upon you all. Pray for me, as I’m a humble servant of God. Glory be to Him.”

The Imam raised his hands, mumbling softly. The people followed.

“Send forth the supplicants,” the imam said, his voice croaking.

Among the crowd, a smaller group of sick people emerged and approached the messiah.

The imam let the first man in. He was a cripple, a victim of the civil war. He had lost his left leg in a mine blast near Aleppo years ago. He was using a pair of wooden crutches to walk.

The messiah took a step forward and placed his hand on the stump. His lips moved in a prayer. The imam inched up beside him.

The crowd gasped collectively as the amputated limb grew itself back. “Stand up! With God’s will,” the messiah commanded.

The man threw away his crutches and began dancing wildly. The throng of gatherers burst into excitement. The imam’s eyes bulged in surprise.

People ran off to fetch their friends and family members who were ill. Meanwhile, the imam had called over more patients. There was fervor among the horde.

The next supplicant was a mother who was barely able to carry her small daughter. The child had what looked like palsy. Touched, she immediately opened her blurry eyes. She lifted her neck to scan around as if wondering why she had been brought there.

“Walk, my child,” came the mild command. The girl jumped out of her mother’s lap. Her mom screamed in delight.

Camera lights were flashing all around. Handheld cell phones were recording the miracles. The imam was beyond himself, eyes dripping wet with tears.

The messiah was unaware of this. He merely bowed down before a line of sufferers and kept touching each person. His eyes were closed, mouth muttering prayers.

The healings went on for an hour.

The blind were healed, the cripples walked, and cancers disappeared. It was a sight beyond anyone’s wildest imagination.

The voices in the courtyard had morphed into a rhythmic chanting. “Messiah, Messiah, Messiah!”

When people dispersed in joy to announce their healings, a small pandemonium ensued. Police intervened to control the frenzy, but the mayhem was growing, its pace tremendous. It took a baton charge by some enthusiastic-looking cops to bring a semblance of order to the situation.

“Messiah, deliver me of my sins,” a burly man demanded. He had the small, mean eyes of a thief. The messiah wouldn’t have needed to probe into his soul to know he was a hardened sinner. He replied calmly. “There’s no shortcut to salvation, brother. Repent before your Lord and ask his forgiveness.”

“He has stopped listening. I am beyond redemption.”

“Knock again till he opens his door,” he said, moving on to speak to the next person.

Shortly, the shrewd imam managed to smuggle out the messiah through a side door. He was met by his small, darkly clothed entourage in the street who scooped him to safety without leaving a trace.

**Chapter 6**

**Al-Ruwais, Qatar**

“Wow,” he managed to say. Hasser had listened to Zaki's firsthand account with rapt attention. He could not tell whether he was amazed or intrigued as the man finished narrating his momentous experience of working for the Agency in one of the most historical operations it had ever conducted. Kate had been mostly silent.

Zaki leaned back and sipped Chai from a clay mug. “It wasn’t something I was too proud of at that time. Only later did I realize that I’d helped take out a mass murderer.”

While Chad had excused himself, Hasser, Kate, and Zaki had decided to go dine at a restaurant offering authentic Arabian food. The trio chose a quiet corner table away from the other patrons, who were mostly locals. A television screen was alive, and the hysteria surrounding the messiah was on full display.

Hasser ordered Lebanese pilaf, and Zaki asked for lamb shanks. Kate settled for potato bread and a strange-looking concoction of leeks and chickpeas topped with yogurt.

“So, what happened afterward? How did you end up stateside?” Hasser inquired curiously. They spoke in hushed tones, keeping the conversation innocuous by appearing like dinner table chit-chat. Kate repeatedly stoked his feet but refrained from going further. He studiously avoided looking at her as much as he could, but it was a dinner for three and he was sitting right across her. The woman was stubborn, no doubt.

Zaki grinned. “I was smuggled out on an air force plane two days after the raid. My family had already fled the country. We’re brought to America. Don’t ask me how much I received in cash coz I wouldn’t tell you.”

Kate asked. “But why bust your cover? You kind of advertised yourself.”

“When the lid was blown on the operation by the US government itself, I had no choice but to come out in the open. The Agency forgot me within months after the operation. A Pakistani tribunal comically painted me as the traitor within but did not say a word about Osama’s spree of terror.”

“In our line of business, people don’t seek the limelight. It could be deadly,” Hasser commented, putting the last spoonful of rice into his mouth.

“What I did was a desperate move on my part.”

Hasser understood his problem. His shelf life had been extremely short, even for the immense value he once carried. He should have stayed out of sight, partying and sipping tequila in San Diego on the CIA’s dime. But he wanted to make a difference. Hasser respected him for that, though his was a twisted world of idealism and self-indulgence.

Kate had declined any Chai or dessert. Her meal must have been satisfying. Hasser glanced at the empty platters though he failed to see why. Zaki excused himself and went looking for the restroom.

“How’re things at home?” Kate leaned closer and asked nonchalantly, her head tilting sideways.

“Fine, I… I mean, just okay,” he swallowed hard before answering.

“Yes, yes, I understand it is a tough time for you,” she extended her manicured finger, seductively touching his hand on the table. “You must be feeling lonely through this all.” Her painted nail caressed the top of his hand. A foot rubbed along his leg.

Hasser protested mildly. “Please get your hand off mine.”

Her voice was heavy now. “I doubt you mean it,” she said, pouting her lips slightly, her eyes aglow with mischief.

Hasser was staring at her, suddenly at a loss for words. Her heat could be felt across the table. He finally managed to look away and retracted his hand rather forcefully. Her fingernail scraped his skin before she let go.

Zaki came back and took his seat. “Too much curry in youth, and it makes my bladder jumpy now.” Neither Hasser nor Kate said anything. Getting no reply for his absurd remark, he whispered conspiratorially. “You want to tell me what the hell is going on? You’ve been avoiding looking at her throughout the dinner.”

She stood up abruptly, her face a tight mask of indignation. “Well, I need to catch my sleep. For now, sayonara, pals.”

“Bye,” Zaki uttered after her, but she was already near the door. Without looking back, she raised her hand in a mock gesture as if to acknowledge his words and disappeared into the cold night.

“Hell hath no fury like a woman snubbed,” Hasser heard. He turned and found Zaki grinning at him.

Annoyed, he showed him the middle finger. Zaki batted his hand away, turning serious. “Never mind. Well, I went away to take an urgent call. My niece in London. She’s in some sort of mess. I need to visit her.”

“Oh, I see. Need any help?

“Thanks. I’ll be flying tonight.”

**London**

It was late night when Zaki cleared the customs and grabbed his carry-on spinner at Heathrow. An intense chill was gripping the city. As soon as he got into a taxi, he called Sanya again. No answer. He had made several calls after landing. She was his brother’s only daughter. He and his Welsh wife had died in a road crash. Zaki read off the address to the driver.

Half an hour later, the taxi weaved through Dartmouth Park and dropped him off at his destination. The quaint, upscale neighborhood appeared quiet. It’s usually vibrant streets, adorned with boutique shops, restaurants, and cafes, were half-asleep. Even the glow emanating from the street lamps was subdued, he noticed.

His niece lived with her young son in an Edwardian-style house on the Boscastle Road, one of the many in a row. It was a big, opulent structure, with three floors and large windows overlooking the street. Gifted by her rich husband, a man twenty years her senior, who also had another wife in Iran.

Sanya had talked about the troubles after she reached out to Zaki. Her story was not uncommon—an exceptionally beautiful woman trapped in a terrible marriage with someone rich and powerful. The couple had met in London during one of his business trips. It eventually led to a marriage.

The man had turned out a control freak. He ordered her to live permanently in Iran, don a hijab, and conform to the ideals of a devout Muslim wife. She had refused. Enraged, the guy resorted to physical abuse. It was common in the Middle East, where the societies were male-dominated and the laws against abuse often lax.

She had fled Iran, ostensibly to perform an Umrah, a visit to the holy places in Saudi Arabia, and surfaced in London. He had tried to take her forcefully out of England once she turned down his order to come back. Seeing no way out of the disastrous relationship, she had filed for divorce. The matter was now in a court of law.

The street was dreadfully cold. Pulling his coat tightly around him, he rang the bell. Waited. Rang again. Nothing happened. He hammered on the front gate with his fist, then tried the latch.

It was unlocked. With a sudden sense of foreboding, he gently pushed the gate inward. Stepping inside, he entered a small, dimly lit foyer.

He called out. “Hi, anyone?”

It was strangely quiet. For several moments he stood and listened, his ears straining to pick up any sound. There was no one there but him.

He rushed into a huge reception area with an adjoining open kitchen. The lights were turned on, as was the radiator, judging by the cozy interior. He noticed two half-eaten sandwiches in a plate. A Scooty was resting against the wall. Next to it a glass door, and a darkened backyard on the other side. He peered through the glass. Not a soul there.

Alert now, his eyes constantly moving to see anything that wasn’t right, Zaki walked past the kitchen, then stopped and turned around. Nothing seemed out of place. Acting on instinct, he drifted upstairs, his movements quick and light. On the landing, there was a door to one of the bedrooms.

Silence hammered in his ears like the rumble of gunfire. He knocked at the door. No response. His breathing picked up as panic flared. He slowly opened the door and entered.

Oh God!

His knees buckled. Barely able to stop himself from collapsing to the floor, he gazed at the lifeless form. Sanya lay still in death, arms and legs splayed awkwardly on the bed. Eyes wide and unseeing, mouth open in a silent scream, the expression of horror frozen on her face from the moment she'd taken her last breath. Black tufts of hair matted with blood covered one side of her face.

Sucking in a deep breath, he tried to focus. He felt the neck pulse. It was not there. The body was cold. Two hours at least. A single round, smack in the center of her chest. Burnt gunpowder residue visible around the entry wound. Signs of blows to her head and neck. The killer had not sexually abused her. At least, apparently.

Gasping, stumbling, and sobbing, he surveyed the ravaged scene in silence. As he did, he felt an upwelling of anger. It was total ruthlessness on display, the handiwork of a stone-cold killer.

He gently touched Sanya’s arm and retreated from that harrowing place of death. There was no sign of the boy. Zaki checked the adjacent room. He found the beds made and untouched, suggesting no one had slept in the room. He called his name, checked the closets, and poked around in other rooms. The same person who had murdered his mother had most likely taken him away.

Just as Zaki feared.

He walked down the stairs. As he called the local cops and waited in agony, he went over the tragedy in his mind, wishing he had arrived earlier. Even unarmed, he would not have been easy prey.

Dealing with the police proved more difficult than Zaki had expected. It was annoying listening to their endless stream of questions. In the end, they looked satisfied. An ambulance bore the body away for an autopsy. Seeing his niece wrapped in a pouch broke his heart, yet he was unable to do anything. The cops took his contact details and permitted him to go.

He was weary from the exertions of a long and trying day that had ended with a tragedy. After checking into a hotel, he entered his room and dropped his bag on the floor. The mini bar didn’t offer much, but he poured himself a shot of Martini.

He switched off the lights, preferring to sit in the gloom near the big window. The view of the skyline was not in his focus. Instead, his mind reflected on what to do next.

The cops would carry out an investigation, beginning with the collection of all the evidence at the crime scene. Camera footage of the street to be watched. Witnesses to be sought. After that, a search for the killer would ensue. Sanya’s husband would be grilled by the London police if he was foolish enough to be still inside the country. If found missing, his warrants would be issued.

Then, medical examination, including forensics for any traces of DNA. A review of electronic evidence. Building the case could take a long time, maybe months. At some point, sooner than later, the cops would lose interest. It was a frustrating process, with no guarantee of a successful trial or punishment.

It was no use thinking about the cops or the courts. He tried something else. He checked his phone and flicked through a stream of new texts and emails. One email in particular held his attention.

It was from Sanya, sent just hours earlier. He began to read. The lines of text seemed to acquire a melancholy form, each word dripping with an underlying tension. With every sentence he read, his brows furrowed deeper, and a frown etched its way onto his face.

She had detailed her life story, telling him how she had battled depression after the demise of her parents. She described how she sought comfort in the arms of the charming businessman. The initial euphoria of her marriage. Honeymoon in the Maldives, private jet for travel, shopping sprees in Dubai.

Then, the dream started to evaporate at some point. Her subsequent ordeal at the hands of a psycho and the unraveling of her marriage as it eventually happened. Her escape from his clutches in the end.

His fingers hovered over the keyboard as if frozen while he decided whether to continue reading. The room's atmosphere appeared to grow heavier, as if absorbing the weight of the email's contents. In the background, the sound of a clock ticking away echoed the passing seconds, marking each moment of his growing unease.

Exhaling, he continued.

Back in London, Sanya had picked herself up slowly. Her son needed her. Somehow, the single mother had not failed him. For the boy, the most comforting thing was how little his mother had changed despite her torment. Sanya laughed just the same, and she was just as warm, genuine, and caring as she'd always been.

Zaki stopped reading.

Now she was dead, and the son was missing. He was in a daze, wondering how her life had gone so wrong before coming to such a woeful end. She wasn’t the only London girl who had been approached by a billionaire. They were active on the social circuit and brazen in their attempts. He remained perplexed as to how she had gained his attention.

His eyes were wet. He wished he had spent more time with his niece and had known her better. Instead of stumbling upon her when she was no more—trying to glimpse into a life turned upside down long ago, chasing the echoes of a voice now gone forever.

His eyes wandered over the last part. The screen's light cast shadows across his face.

It was based on her recollection of a series of conversations with her husband over many months. She understood that he had been helping the Rohingyas in Myanmar, a Muslim minority group facing persecution at the hands of the Buddhist population. His charity set up camps, ran medical clinics, and took care of the food supplies.

There was also the mention of a scholar from Egypt, a man sent by her husband on a spiritual mission to Myanmar. She was not aware of any details, except that her hubby boasted of a coming event to reshape the Middle East in a big way.

She had dropped a small stash of documents in a safe deposit box near the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, during her pilgrimage. For some reason, she had not been able to get hold of the stuff once she bolted along with her son during a particularly crowded praying session. Maybe it was due to her fear of being followed around by her husband’s unseen acolytes or her sixth sense telling her to keep the documents separate from her person. Zaki would never know. She had nominated him to operate the locker on her behalf in case of an untoward incident.

Zaki leaned back in the chair, running a hand through his hair as he attempted to make sense of what he had just read.

**Chapter 7**

**Bago, Myanmar**

He slipped, landing flat on his stomach in the mud.

The riverbank was treacherous; its soil and grass coated with a thick layer of slime made movement difficult for someone who did not know the place, especially a lone outsider on the run, trying to get away from his pursuers.

Sadek Diab, clad in faded, earth-toned clothes, crouched low, trying to hide from prying eyes. The sun dipped below the horizon, leaving behind the shreds of its glow upon the deceptively tranquil landscape surrounding the river.

The river flowed lazily, its water a mix of green and brown, bordered by tall reeds swaying softly in the evening breeze. Dragonflies darted through the air, leaving fleeting trails of iridescence behind them. His heart raced with each rustle of leaves and the distant sound of footsteps. He dared not make a sound, fearing even the slightest noise might betray his presence.

The bullet wound in his leg hurt like hell, the pain ravaging his fifty-year-old body. Wincing, he touched his leg, the makeshift bandage wet with the ooze. It took an effort to raise his head.

A lone fishing boat glided across the river, its silhouette reflecting on the water's surface. The rhythmic sputter of its engine, as well as fishermen's occasional laughter, created a stark contrast to his predicament. He envied their freedom.

His darting eyes scanned for any other signs of movement. Across the river, a man with two young boys, probably farmers, returning from a day in the rice fields. Some women were carrying water into the distant huts. He knew he could not linger by the riverbank for too long.

Diab could not stop thinking about the events that led him to this moment of turmoil. He had stumbled upon something at the compound. He had overheard men talking about completing a task. About sending him back. Permanently. Before eavesdropping on that conversation, he had watched a brief news story on television. The appearance of an individual in the Middle East who was doing remarkable feats.

Then the realization hit.

Overcome with terror, he had made his escape. He was now a man marked for elimination, a danger to those who sought to keep everything under wraps. On the run from nasty men whose momentary lapse had allowed him to flee.

As twilight embraced the land, the sounds of the day gave way to the nocturnal symphony being put out by cicadas and frogs. Suddenly, a piercing beam of light broke through the canopy, illuminating the river with an eerie glow. He held his breath, praying that he had gone unnoticed. Time seemed to stretch into eternity as he waited for the coast to clear.

Just as he was about to move from his hiding spot, he caught a glimpse of a pair of shadowy figures patrolling the riverbank. His pursuers. Adrenaline surged through his veins as he flattened himself against the ground, becoming one with the earth.

The men moved closer, their footsteps heavy and deliberate. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest. He focused on controlling his breathing, willing himself to remain invisible.

Eventually, the pursuers moved on, and the sound of their footsteps faded into the distance. He stayed down for a few more minutes, making sure he was truly alone. With utmost caution, he rose from his concealed spot and began to retreat deeper into the dense foliage.

The night was his ally now, providing the darkness and cover he needed to escape. He had to find a safer place to rest before continuing his journey to freedom, hoping that the river's embrace would shield him from those who sought to capture him.

The boat approached. It was pretty downbeat, with a smoky engine at the stern. Diab breathed in, out, and in again. After escaping from the compound, he found it difficult to plan his next move. His life as an academic had not prepared him for any of the skills required to survive in such a situation. He considered himself just an unremarkable man without the courage to do anything notable.

Moving slowly, he sat up and hefted a big rock in his hand. The boat was almost upon him. He opened his arm wide, aimed for the boat’s bow, and threw the rock. It was a piss-poor pitch, but the rock landed inside the boat, startling the trio of men.

One of them barked something, pointing an angry hand at Diab. The boat changed direction. Unable to move, he watched it with a mixture of fear and hope. With the rapid chug of its engine, the boat charged through the reeds. After hitting the thick mud on the riverbank, it stopped. Diab gasped.

The first man to jump off had an annoyed look on his thin, weather-beaten face. Speaking in rapid-fire Burmese, he held an accusing finger at Diab. The second one was more deliberate, moving carefully, his head cranking around. Keeping his eyes peeled for any danger. Unlikely to be a fisherman.

Diab could see the strobe light of a police vehicle on the small dirt track leading to the riverbank. A few moving shadows carrying portable torch lights. Police whistles. He was being actively hunted. The people at the compound had resources. They had enlisted the cops to search for their fugitive. He did not have much time.

*“Mingalaba,”* he whispered, the equivalent of hello in Burmese. It was one of the few words he had learned at the compound.

The man motioned that the stranger should move back a little. Then, Diab noticed the small object in his hands. It was a gun. Fighting a wave of dread, he tried to focus but failed. He needed all his strength just to stand and breathe at the same time.

“Who’re you?” the man asked in broken English.

Even in the darkness, Diab could see the dirty look smeared on his face. For a moment he could not reply. The question was repeated more harshly. He stammered. “I…I am a foreigner. Some people, they…they tried to harm me.”

“I see,” the man hissed. He said something to his companions.

“Help me, please,” Diab requested.

Without a word, two guys held him by his hands and pulled up, almost dragging him into the boat. He barely suppressed a painful cry. Like him, the new arrivals seemed no less perturbed by the prospect of a brush-off with law enforcement. With some difficulty, they pushed the boat out of the reeds. One guy fired up the engine, and they raced through the gathering darkness, down the winding river.

Diab wished he had someone to comfort him. Instead, he extended his wounded leg and stared blankly at the slow-moving countryside.

“Were you shot?” the Burmese eyed the rag tied around his leg with suspicion. He had crept closer to get a better look at it.

“Yes, they tried to kill me. I don’t know how I survived.”

“Hmm.”

“Thank you for giving me the ride. What’s your name?”

The Burmese smirked. “My friends call me Soe. What do you want now?”

“Take me to Yangon. I’ll try to fly out,” he pleaded. Staying in Myanmar was no longer an option. He would also reach out to the Iranian. The bastard owed him a hell lot of explaining.

“You got any money?” A twinkle in his eyes.

“No, no, I don’t have any money on me right now. But I can use my Visa card there.”

The man seemed suddenly unhappy. “You’re useless. Cannot even pay us.”

“I will pay you once we reach there. Trust me,” he begged.

Soe was unmoved. In a low voice, he conferred with his buddies. A brief phone call ensued.

Taking a deep breath, Diab tried to relax himself. Taking advantage of the rampant corruption and deteriorating law enforcement, various gangs had mushroomed across the land. He had no idea who he was dealing with. For now, he was at their mercy.

“I am afraid I don’t have good news for you,” the Burmese said.

“What?”

“Someone is looking for you.”

“Oh.”

“We’re going to leave our boat at Zaynyaungpin. Then, we’ll find an alternate means of transport.”

Diab nodded. Two hours later, they drew closer to the small village. The beat of the engine chugged to a lifeless halt, and they washed up onto the riverbank. It was time to disembark.

As Diab limped into the shallow undergrowth, he heard. “You must stay with us for a while before this hunt is over.”

“No, not possible. I must reach Yangon,” he turned, glancing over his shoulder.

“You don’t like us?” Soe asked amusingly. For a moment, Diab thought he saw a sly grin on his face, which soon disappeared.

“You’re helping me. I’m grateful, you see, but I must—"

“Stop!” Soe rasped, cutting him off. He pulled his gun and pointed it at his face.

Diab flinched. The Burmese was furious. His eyes were glassy, and he was breathing hard. His gun hand shook. It was a bad sign. He was high on something. Probably *yaba*, an illicit stimulant favored by the locals.

Drawing his boot back, he kicked Diab in the shin. He doubled over, the wind suddenly knocked out of him. Soe wrapped his left hand around his throat and began to squeeze. Diab fought to suck in the air.

The vise-like grip was finally released. Diab wobbled. Soe pistol-whipped him, grabbing him by the hair. He wailed in agony. With his body shaking, his lungs heaving for air, and every ounce of his strength gone, he collapsed to the ground. So much pain invaded his senses at once that a gush of thick bile erupted inside him, and vomitus spewed out of his mouth and nostrils. Then a merciful blackness enveloped him.

Diab was trapped in a pit so deep no light could reach it. An invisible beast circled him, given away by the raging malevolence of its gasps and a rotten stench coming off its coat. His stomach heaved.

He tossed and turned, eyes darting around in the dark, looking for a way out of the abyss. The creature drew closer and hissed. He thought he heard the flutter of strange birdlike wings. The beast was reaching out to devour him. Terrified, he tried to cry, but nothing happened.

With a shudder, he came to, soaked in sweat. His head throbbed with a dull ache. A foul, metallic taste of blood lingered in his mouth from the merciless beating. Someone had thrown him into a half-lit lair—most likely a hut; the air was musty and the floor cold.

Standing over him, Soe laughed hysterically.

“Damn, you scoundrel,” Diab jolted upright, uttering a full-throated cry. He threw a fist at him.

Soe batted his punch away with ease. Another figure was behind him, his footfalls steady and purposeful. Baffled, Diab peered through the see-through haze created by the newcomer's failing flashlight. In his other hand, he carried a pistol.

“You’re my prisoner now,” Soe barked.

“Damn you!”

“Nyan here is going to watch over you,” he made a gesture with his hand. His accomplice bared his teeth but did not speak.

“Why are you doing it?”

“I work for a powerful man who told me you are valuable. So, I’ll keep you here until he decides what to do with you.”

“You’re a criminal. I was wrong to trust you,” Diab spat.

“Do not offend me, or you’ll suffer more,” his captor snarled, turning back to leave.

He had to do something now or his fate would be a life of captivity till he succumbed to disease in a rotten hut. Perhaps they would judge him worthless and condemn him to death. He was not sure what awaited him, but it would not be pleasant anyway.

Diab leaped at the guard, going for his gun. But the man was too quick. He moved sideways, giving himself the space to avoid his sudden lunge, and hit back. His kicks landed nonstop. Soe did not participate.

Diab tried to roll away, but the guy was everywhere. Within a minute, he found himself battered and bruised, his entire world transformed into a searing crucible of unimaginable pain once more.

Eyeing his victim disdainfully, Soe motioned for the man to stop. The hut was silent again. Diab lay on the floor, frozen in trepidation. But no more kicks came. Nyan tied him up with a cord. Fighting his pain, he fumed at Soe. As if his display of anger could convey more than just his helplessness.

Soe had tortured him to assert his dominance, Diab knew. He attempted to instill fear in his mind to make him understand who called the shots here. By breaking his will to resist, Soe wanted him to be compliant. It was a technique well known to all psychopaths, men who sought to subdue their victims by any means necessary.

Tears stung his eyes. For the first time in his life, he felt all hope betray him, leaving him powerless and torn from within on that cold, dirty, and straw-covered floor.

For his part, Diab had already made up his mind that he was going to get out of Myanmar and solve the mystery that had its origin in Bago. The only question was how he would do it. Over the last few hours, he hadn’t had much time to piece things together. Most of the time, he had been on the run. Now he was in the clutches of another kind of monster. At least he had time to think now, all the way back to the day when it had all started.

The Iranian had bumped into him at a seminar two years ago. Diab, an obscure scholar, worked at a lesser-known university in Cairo, Egypt. His subjects were religious studies and eschatology. The event had not attracted more than a couple hundred people. While Diab was discussing the end-times prophecies, a man sat among the audience, listening intently. Diab had specifically rebuffed the wild interpretations made by the zealots, pointing out in detail how such a mindset had resulted in disaster time and again. Ultimately, he had been praised by some but booed by the majority.

Shaking his hand at the session’s conclusion, Ali Aqa had made his pitch.

A wealthy businessman from Iran, he was involved in humanitarian work in Syria. His current focus was on Myanmar, where he was trying to help the Rohingya Muslims affected by the ethno-religious conflict. Ali specifically needed someone to awaken spiritual awareness in the area, but he did not want a preacher to convert the local Buddhists. Diab was impressed and agreed to consider his offer. The man thanked him before thrusting a visiting card into his pocket.

Diab took a sabbatical from his teaching job and arrived in Bago, all expenses paid.

His initial work involved interacting with a group of young monks studying at a local monastery. Mostly through an interpreter, as he did not know a word of Burmese and the monks had not been schooled in English.

Soon, Diab was asked to coach the son of a local landowner who wore a mask, his face having been disfigured in a horrible accident, he was told. It was an unusual assignment, as Diab had to tutor him in Arabic and sometimes in English as well.

**Chapter 8**

Wu Zeng took a drag of his cigarette before screaming. “What do you mean he fucking vanished?”

The district police commander recoiled, his eyes blinking. “Yes, that's exactly what happened. My force has not seen a trace of him.”

“Your force? A bunch of lazy morons, huh? They don’t know how to wipe their asses properly, what to say about tracking down a fugitive.”

The commander met his black gaze, but no words came out of his mouth.

Zeng was a colonel in the Chinese Ministry of State Security, the country's intelligence arm. He was of medium height, with an imposing breadth of shoulders and thick limbs. He exuded malevolence, moving with a sinister grace that seemed almost unnatural to the Burmese police commander. Rumors about his past were rampant, and they were just as terrifying as the man himself. Someone whispered that he had once operated in Tibet where a considerable number of anti-government protesters had died under horrible circumstances. Others believed he was a master of unorthodox warfare.

They were standing near the riverbank south of the town. The sunrise was still an hour away. One of the cops, a grizzled man who had some experience hunting down hardcore offenders, had gone to work, putting together whatever manpower he could muster. His marching orders had been crystal clear—do everything necessary to track the foreigner down. One of the guards at the compound swore that he had shot the man in the leg.

The inspector had marked the most probable escape routes and looked at all forms of available transport, of which, fortunately, there were not many. Bago was not a big city like Yangon, a reason why Zeng’s superiors chose it for the operation. Because of its location, there were only so many routes in and out. The cop had accounted for all the traffickers in the area. There weren’t many as well. He had presented the information to his men, who, helped by some local informers, had scouted the routes all night.

The hunt had been long and treacherous in the dark, yet they had not been successful. Zeng left the well-trodden road and followed the river downstream as if looking for a burrow or a shelter.

*What a shitshow,* he muttered. He had already executed two of his men, as well as a half-dozen Burmese crew members. He had assigned them to security duty at the compound, but they had failed badly. Their bullet-ridden corpses now lay buried in a nearby paddy field.

Two Chinese and six natives had been detailed on each eight-hour shift every day. Twenty-four security personnel in total, along with their support staff. Assigned to guard a single individual, who was a foreigner, an academic, and an unskilled civilian. Yet he had made good on his escape right under their noses. One of the thugs had joked about his impending execution, sending the Egyptian into a tailspin.

It wasn’t a joke, after all. It had been the plan all along to terminate him quietly once the operation kicked off. But the director had insisted on keeping him alive for a few more days. To address anything unexpected. Zeng had not been happy. Always a believer in tying the loose ends, he had tried to convince the boss to get over with it. The operation had now developed a tempo of its own. The results had been fantastic, far beyond everyone’s expectations, as he had pointed out. But the man disagreed.

The hum of a hushed argument attracted his attention.

The commander and his subordinates were debating something.

He bellowed. “What’s it?

The argument ended. A man spoke up, clearing his throat nervously. “We think the foreigner got out on a boat.”

“What?” Zeng asked, disappointment and concern simmering beneath the surface.

“Tracks in the mud, a furlong from here,” he pointed with his hand. “A police team picked up damaged reeds and footprints on the riverside, all suggesting someone came for him and took him away on a boat.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Come with us. See for yourself,” the commander offered.

Zeng rode with them. The place was a hive of activity, he saw. He inspected the riverbank under the glare of flashlights. His eyes doubled in size, then his face contorted into a scowl as he paid attention.

Yes, the evidence was there. Ruts, displaced sediment, and disturbed vegetation. The tracks were recent, he noticed. No parallel grooves, meaning no multiple watercrafts. A single boat. The splash marks around the tracks indicated that the boat was heading south. He identified at least three different sets of shoe imprints in the mud.

“Any idea who were the helpers?”

The commander hesitated slightly. “What if I say it was a chance encounter?”

Zeng paused before asking. “Why?

The Burmese said. "You told me he had no prior contacts in this area. The way he fled suggests that he could not have arranged a rendezvous. It seems your quarry just met a random boatman here and hitched a ride.”

Zeng glared at the man without responding.

A good Samaritan, he wondered, pondering over the information. Unlikely, though. The country was a whirlpool of chaos, and its inhabitants were naturally suspicious of everyone around. Nobody would have just walked up to a foreigner and embraced him. Unless they saw a benefit.

A kidnapping, then. Yes, it was a possibility. But who would kidnap a foreign national and hope to profit from him? No ordinary criminal could do it unless he had the connections. That made it a syndicate matter. Only a gang would have the resources to handle such kidnapping and use it for political or financial gains. Especially here in Myanmar.

Unknown to him, his victim had reached the same conclusion about his kidnappers.

His phone trilled. He took it out. It was a special-issue set with built-in encryption. His boss was calling. He walked to his car and got inside before taking the call.

He narrated briefly what he knew. “So, it’s a coincidence?” he heard.

“Yes,” Zeng replied. He was not sure his superior believed it. This wasn’t the first time something nasty happened. This was just the most catastrophic. Intelligence operations often went sideways. Both of them were professionals and understood this fact. But the scope of their current mission was too big. He simply could not pin something untoward on a chance happening.

“I see.”

A long pause ensued. The seconds that passed during the director’s deliberation felt endless. It was unsettling. To wait for his boss to come to terms with the new information.

He ran his hands over his face, wiping the perspiration gathering at his temples before speaking. “Whatever happened back here—it only supports one theory.”

“And that is?”

“Our man isn’t going anywhere soon.”

“Meaning?” the voice asked.

“It means we’ve got time here. To widen our search and dig him out from whatever hole he has been thrown into.”

“A valid point. Spread the word in the underworld. Offer money. A stick would not be helpful. Rather, make use of the carrot.”

Zeng liked the suggestion. “Understood.”

“What are his chances of getting out of the country, provided he’s still roaming free?”

It was a rhetorical question, but Zeng answered it anyway. “Practically zero. He’s got no support at all.”

“I see.”

Zeng probed. “Did you update the minister?”

“No. I wouldn't go to him until I had more information. Anyway, he is my problem. But I’m afraid the Egyptian is yours. Are we clear?”

“Very much,” Zeng replied.

“Now go find him,” the director hissed in his ears. "I don't care where he is or who holds him. Deal with him as you see fit. Do whatever you want to, but don’t make the situation worse.”

The call ended on a final, grim note.

**Lijiang, Yunnan Province, China**

The view would have surely mesmerized the ancient gods, he thought.

Xiaofei Gao terminated the call and pocketed his phone. With a gentle sip of his cinnamon-flavored coffee, he looked out across the Black Dragon Pool. To be in the presence of something so otherworldly beautiful was an experience unto itself, he realized. A wintry coat of pure white hung over the pond after a sprinkling of snow early in the morning, displaying a two-tone vista of alabaster and blue under the pale, hazy sun. Low clouds ran amok across the horizon.

He was taking a stroll in Jade Spring Park, with the bustling city of Lijiang to his left. Jade Mountain's snow-clad summit lay frozen on the horizon. Chen, his trusted guard, was trailing him. A few locals were around to pray. No tourists.

Lights were still switched on in the temples and pavilions, adding modern-day hues to oil on canvas, as if painted by a masterly hand. His breath, warmed by the liquid, left thin, fluffy tendrils of steam in the air.

He had come here to unwind. His temporary office was located in downtown Lijiang. They had chosen the city for the project years ago; its multiethnic population and proximity to Myanmar offered some advantage, but it had mainly to do with keeping everything isolated away from Beijing. He wondered, not for the first time, if the decision was based on ensuring security or maintaining plausible deniability in the event of discovery.

His wife accompanied him, who was now lighting candles inside the Longshen Temple. He had declined to join her in her offerings to the deities. He wanted fresh air. Life in Beijing sapped his strength. The stress of the last few weeks had been too much. Lijiang was calmer. He needed the break, but the job never left him, he realized.

Having just turned sixty, Gao had spent more than thirty years in the service of his nation. He now headed the Seventeenth Bureau in the MSS, its Enterprises Division, responsible for the organization’s front companies operating in China as well as overseas. An unusual choice for his current undertaking, the department had done well so far. The leadership had bypassed the far more influential Second Bureau.

For many reasons. First and foremost, it wasn’t an intelligence venture in the true sense. The concept and development were more akin to those of a project or enterprise. Furthermore, the powers that be wanted to keep it under wraps. Totally. Something blacker than the blackest! Always wary of a mole, they had kept it away from an overstaffed and bloated Second Bureau.

In fact, very few people inside the Chinese government knew the program existed. Even fewer had an inkling of its outline or scope. Those who were privy to the details could be counted on the fingers of one hand.

President Jiang Zemin had officially given the go-ahead back in 2000. The project had had its fair share of hiccups, but it survived. Every successive president had reassessed and kept it on track because what it envisaged could lead to a chain of strategically dislocating events on a global scale. The decision to finally launch it had been taken just two years ago, in the wake of a massive anti-China campaign unleashed by the United States and its allies.

China was at a point of no return now. His predecessors had handed him a fully mature operation. He felt awe, recalling how eager he had been to do everything flawlessly. Now, despite encountering a slight speed bump, he would take the project to the finish line. He would make sure it saw fruition under his leadership.

The Iranians were doing their part too. They carried out an impressive operation against Israel over a year ago, in tandem with the coaching sessions being conducted by the Egyptian in Myanmar. While keeping their traditional puppets, Hezbollah, on a tight leash, they had managed to instigate Hamas, another powerful Palestinian group, into launching a massive, multi-pronged attack inside the Jewish state. Its results had been tremendous, ushering in more violence in the region.

Gao was an old-school Chinese patriot, proud of his peasant roots. However, unlike so many hardliners in the service, blinded by rage against imaginary enemies, he was rational. To the chagrin of his tempestuous colleagues, he often advocated against the use of force to settle scores with Taiwan.

Instead, he believed in cunning. Even his flagship operation was an epitome of subterfuge.

He breathed out, feeling relieved, despite a pang of worry cutting through his gut. Fortunately, he had done enough to bring the program to its current status. Now he could go and tell his minister about the setback, and he would understand. Their most ruthless operative was in the play. Zeng would hunt down the fugitive before it was too late, and the project would be safe.

His wife was standing outside the temple. Gao chose to ignore the Egyptian and his disappearance, at least momentarily. The most important person in his life beckoned him. He walked over and wrapped her up in his arms.

Yinuo let out one of her deep, hearty laughs. “You must be that tenth evil dragon who’s still roaming free.”

“If so, I’m the luckiest dragon in the land,” he murmured, nuzzling her ear.

As the legend went, once upon a time, ten evil dragons terrorized the populace. An Immortal jailed nine of them in a tower, leaving only the youngest black dragon, who still lived in the pool today.

“Your guard is watching,” Yinuo whispered. She tried to wiggle out of her embrace but failed. Gao was holding her in a tight hug, like her body was a lifeline, and without her proximity, he would drown.

“Ignore him. He’s a pervert.”

She gently pushed him away. Gao let go. Stepping away, his wife showered him with a dazzling smile, all squinted eyes, and straight pearly teeth.

They walked over the white marble bridge and reached the Five-Phoenix Tower. “Let’s go inside,” he suggested.

They climbed up the stairs. The tower, a Ming-era relic with a triple roof, was magnificent in its simplicity. A place often taken down by ravages of nature over the centuries but rebuilt by man’s faith. An aroma of burnt joss sticks hung in the air. He looked around, appreciating the interior. The walls were embellished with murals. Holding his wife’s hand, Gao felt himself at peace.

Outside, it was suddenly overcast now, and light raindrops were pouring. The fog lurking over the lake had somewhat thickened. As they came out Chen offered them an umbrella, which his wife politely refused.

They walked leisurely, talking mostly about the weather and local food. The rain was a drizzle now.

**Chapter 9**

**Near Alaingni, Myanmar**

In the dimly lit confines of his cramped cell, a desperate and broken-hearted Diab kneeled in solitude, his spirit yearning for solace.

The weight of his past actions, regrets, and the harsh reality of his incarceration bore heavily on his soul. Spending every bleak moment in the dark confines, knowing that his captors might execute him without further notice, only added to his torment.

In that profound despair, something extraordinary began to happen.

As he closed his eyes in fervent prayer, a soft light slowly bathed the cell, casting away the shadows of his anguish. Amid this ethereal illumination, a figure slowly emerged. It was a vision of the messiah. Diab smelled a whiff of fresh violets in the damp air.

The messiah, dressed in a flowing white robe, emanated an aura of compassion and unconditional love. Deep and penetrating, his eyes held a boundless wisdom that seemed to understand the pain the prisoner had endured. His outstretched arms beckoned the prisoner forward, offering an embrace that seemed to encompass all the sorrows of the world.

Diab felt a strange calm wash over him, and his eyes welled up with tears of relief. The messiah offered no words, but his face exuded a warmth that transcended language. He conveyed an unspoken promise of redemption.

In this moment, Diab felt as if all the burdens of his past were lifted from his shoulders. It was a vision that transcended the confines of his prison cell, filling him with hope and the belief that even in the darkest of places, there was the possibility of revival.

Then, the scene changed before his eyes.

Diab found himself in a small garden. It was nighttime. The whole place was bathed in shades of a soft, pale moonlight. Olive trees stood like sentinels in silence. For no particular reason, he stayed in the shadows and walked with slow, deliberate steps.

Peeping out from behind a tree, he spotted someone. The man kneeled in quiet contemplation. Three more men lay around him, their breaths heavy with exhaustion, as if worn out after a long evening of hard work.

A sense of foreboding hung in the air, as if the very earth under him quivered in anticipation. Diab crept closer, his breathing picking up.

The kneeling man moved away from his fellows. He mumbled something to them, but Diab could not hear it. The man looked troubled. Going a little further, he fell with his face to the ground and murmured, his words coming out in small, incoherent prayers. Diab could now hear well; it was Aramaic, a language he was familiar with.

Diab was stunned. He was witnessing something.

Surely, it was wonderful. Momentous.

The man on the ground sobbed. As he prayed, his words were laden with anguish. “My Lord, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” His voice quivered with raw emotion, tears glistening in the wan moonlight.

His head spun. *It couldn’t be,* Diab told himself.

He looked around in disbelief. A hill nearby. Olive trees. A town in the distance.

He was standing in the garden of Gethsemane.

Unable to move, he stood like a tombstone, his eyes bugging out as he tried to focus. It was unbelievable. He felt…lucky. To be around here. He was blessed to behold the chosen one, one of the very fortunate few. Diab stifled a sigh. It was no wonder he graced countless posters, paintings, and sculptures. His face was a treat to watch.

Surely, Diab couldn’t want more.

Rustling cloth and the sound of wooden shoes scraping on the ground caused Diab to turn.

Jesus returned to his disciples. He addressed one of them, probably Peter, and said something that Diab could not hear correctly. The disciple nodded. Another disciple cried out in a fitful dream before falling back into a deep sleep.

Jesus traipsed off a second time and prayed to God. When he came back, the disciples were still groggy. He left them, went away again, and prayed a third time.

In the shadows beyond the grove, Diab knew, the seeds of betrayal had already taken root. Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus’ disciples, had agreed to deliver his master to the religious authorities in exchange for thirty pieces of silver. Judas had once been a trusted friend, a confidant, and yet he had succumbed to the temptation of greed.

The sky began to darken, though the wind had already slackened. A branch snapped. Diab whirled around. Then another rustle made his hair stand on end. Moments later, he could hear the voices. Somewhere to his left, laughter erupted. Men swearing loudly.

He stood at the edge of the garden and stared out at the churning darkness. It had an unnatural feel to it. No longer was the sky a canvas of glowing light. It appeared as if a sheet of molten tar was being rolled out across the horizon, extinguishing the stars and drowning the moon.

A chill ran through him.

Jesus again came back to his disciples. “Are you still resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners.”

Peter gasped. “What?”

The others, James and John, were aghast. Jesus said. “Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

A crowd appeared. Angry men with swords and lances. A few were carrying torches. A young man led them. He was Judas, identified by his hard features and curly hair. As Jesus prayed, Judas approached, his footsteps muffled by the night.

Behind him came the soldiers and the unruly herd, all pumped up. Flickering torchlights danced eerily upon their faces, casting grotesque shadows that seemed to mock the solemnity of the moment.

Despite knowing that he was a mere observer, Diab felt exposed. The night was still. His huffing breaths were all that disturbed an otherwise deathly silence.

Upon the arrival of Judas and those with him, Jesus met them, the apostles by his side. With the most malevolent smile on his face, Judas walked up to him. He sealed his treachery with a kiss. A symbol of friendship twisted into a mark of deceit.

“Greetings, rabbi," he said, his voice trembling with false sincerity.

Jesus shrugged, his eyes darkening with sorrow instead of rage. “Do what you came for, friend.”

Judas felt his smile vanish. He barely kept a stony expression.

Jesus said. “You betrayed the Son of Man with a kiss.”

Angered, Judas took a step forward but stopped himself. Jesus waved his hand, talking to the disciples. “Shall I not drink the cup the Lord has given me?"

The trio of disciples stared back in agony.

Emboldened now, Judas again approached him. Jesus saw the blackness of his soul flash in those mocking eyes. “You lost, Nazarene,” he said teasingly.

“It’s what the Lord willed,” Jesus replied, looking out at the trees spread around him. They looked so peaceful*. If only everything could remain that way,* he sighed.

Judas leaned closer and clasped him tightly. His breath stank as he spoke, his tone vicious. “He’s not on your side; you must know by now.”

Diab slipped back into his cover behind the old tree.

The soldiers encircled Jesus and his disciples. It triggered a chaos. Peter, ever impulsive and fiercely loyal, drew his sword and swung it in defense of his beloved teacher. As the weapons collided, the clash of metal rang through the night's stillness. He struck Judas. The man let out a muffled cry of pain but desperately held on to Jesus.

Peter swung his sword again, cutting off someone’s ear now.

Jesus in his infinite wisdom admonished Peter. “Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.”

Peter did not look convinced, but he lowered his weapon, saying. “Whatever you wish.”

Jesus touched the man’s bleeding wound. It healed at once. The crowd whispered a prayer. The man, who happened to be the high priest’s servant, did not reply. His head hung in shame, and his eyes lowered.

Judas, meanwhile, held Jesus in a vice grip. Some of the blood from his wound spilled onto his master’s robe. Certainly, he was more than an informant simply fulfilling his contract to earn his silver coins. Here was a man desperate enough to see the deal go through at any cost.

Soldiers fell on Jesus and thrashed him. As his body shook in response to the hurt inflicted, Judas patted him on the back. “Good boy,” he said, his teeth bared in a sneer.

Jesus collapsed to the ground. His body writhed; slow, relentless spasms of agony taking hold of him.

Diab watched the tragedy unfold. He was powerless, a silent, front-row spectator to the greatest betrayal in human history. A lone witness to a debacle surpassing everything he knew. Yet it was difficult not to feel terrified. His heart went out to the badly injured, helpless man lying in the dirt.

He stood no chance—forsaken by his fate, abandoned by his friends, and surrounded by his foes.

In his current mood, as he thought about Jesus, Diab wondered what he had done to deserve all that misery. As time would tell, he realized the man wouldn’t be forgotten. But that was no substitute for the torment he was now going through. All these thoughts passed like a succession of flashes through his mind.

He felt an immense shame for playing the most pathetic voyeur in existence.

Judas, meanwhile, kept Jesus pinned down. In the weak light thrown by the burning torches, Diab could see Judas poised over Jesus, his wolfish face inches away from that of his victim, the latter’s soft features contorted with pain, his mouth open in a silent cry. With utmost dread, he read the distress on his trembling lips and the anguish on his pallid cheeks. Yet, somehow, the suffering he was going through gave him strange dignity.

A glow appeared above the two men.

It seemed to swell imperceptibly. At first, a spark. Growing into a flame. Then, it blossomed into a large orb. As Diab watched, the bubble of white light devoured both men. For a moment they were obscured from view. Then, the light disappeared.

Jesus stirred. When he touched his body with a shaky hand, a gasp came out of his mouth. He was motionless again, gazing up at the dark sky, seemingly debating something with himself. Diab heard him utter a string of prayers.

For the first time in a while, Jesus had the feeling, it seemed, that his most loyal friends were terrified. The soldiers took him into custody and tied up his hands with rope. Realizing their helplessness, the disciples panicked. The soldiers wore scornful smiles, and the jeering crowd scared the dickens out of them.

Without further word, his disciples fled the garden, sobbing and looking back over their shoulders. A young onlooker who had strayed out of curiosity took flight, his cloak unfurling in the wind.

With great difficulty, Jesus rose to his feet. The damage to his body was bad. As he got up, he looked around the garden and used a tree trunk to support himself.

He had no strength left. Diab saw him fall to the ground with a yelp. Diab, crouching and staying low in the shadows, walked in his direction.

Jesus lay beside a small hedgerow. Panting. he used the back of his hand to wipe the sweat from his brow. The night air was cool, but the effort of sitting up coupled with his injury, matted his loose, long-sleeved shirt to his back. His damp hair clung to his neck.

The captors were now prodding and teasing Jesus. A few young men jeered at him. Someone spat in his face. Diab stared ahead blankly. His eyes burned with unshed tears. Jesus had laid his heart open to his destiny.

In a blink, Diab was transported back to his cell.

The messiah was not there. The vision of Jesus remained etched in the prisoner's memory long after the radiant light faded and the cell returned to its dank and austere reality. But the impact of that encounter remained with him, guiding him toward a path of spiritual healing. It was something to sustain him, he hoped, in the darkest moments of his incarceration.

Or, to soothe him one last time if a gun went off in his face to end it all.

**Chapter 10**

**Mecca, Saudi Arabia**

Zaki concluded his pilgrimage at the Grand Mosque by offering the final prayers. As he stepped outside into the vast square, the intense sun dazzled his eyes. He adjusted the white sheet, or *ihram,* over his bare shoulder.

The shrine in the center of the mosque, known as the Kaaba, was built originally by Adam, peace be upon him, as the first house of worship on earth. Abraham and his son Ishmael, peace be upon them, rebuilt it after the Flood and consecrated it again to the service of the true God. The Arabs, however, over time drifted away from the faith, and a new polytheistic religion took form. The people, while no longer worshipping the original deity, still continued to regard the Kaaba as a sacred place. When Muhammad, peace be upon him, arrived, he had to wrest control from the pagans and cleanse it of all the idols. The Kaaba regained its status as the holiest place of Islam.

It was not his first pilgrimage to the mosque. Years ago, on his maiden visit in what seemed like a lifetime away, the air of deep spirituality stirred in him a feeling of awe, a hitherto unknown sensation to his hopelessly flawed soul. Even today, hundreds of thousands of worshippers from around the world filled the place. He could see them engrossed in personal prayers, supplications, and reflections.

Yet he did not fail to notice the altogether different buzz today.

The men and women around him anticipated something. What was evident in the people’s talk far exceeded devotion. Their eyes were gleaming with excitement. And he too felt it. It touched him deeply. A sensation arose from his pores, from the very depths of his inner self. He could barely shake off the primitive, visceral sensation. A muscle twitched in his face as he stared at the sky, praying to God for steadfastness.

Putting on his sandals, he weaved through a group of Indonesian pilgrims and headed for the bank. It was across the road, housed in a big commercial building. Along the way, he bought a meal of jumbo shrimp and chicken sandwiches at the Al Baik. He reached the other side of the road and walked through the crowds surrounding various stores.

The staff at the bank asked for his identity and the nomination before letting him rummage through the safe deposit box. He took the burgundy leather binder that Sanya had left while on the run.

Back at his hotel, he dropped down onto a chair and leafed through the assortment of papers. The papers varied in type; some were printed documents, while others were handwritten, bearing the unmistakable personal touch of ink against paper.

He carefully read everything. There were photocopies of some notes made by Sanya’s husband. Someone in Myanmar sent a scanned progress report. Minutes of a meeting held in Syria. Bank records of money sent to individuals in Israel, Syria, and Jordan. Printed copies of email correspondence. Everything pointed to an elusive network in operation.

“This isn’t good,” he muttered to himself.

As he stood up and began pacing the room in a circle, it was clear to him that the stash left by Sanya was more than just a compilation of papers. While the Iranian appeared to be involved in some sort of shady play, he had been clever enough to avoid mentioning anything directly. He had used vague references and allusions.

Not that it mattered. He was determined to uncover the truth.

Ever since her grisly murder, Zaki had mornings when he woke up from a recurring dream of following Sanya down a winding path through wildflowers and moss-covered trees. She walked in silence, the trail leading to a radiant hilltop, beyond which he couldn’t see anything. Despite the eerie unfamiliarity, Zaki knew the way. When he woke up, he was bone-tired, as if exhausted by his trek in the dream. He couldn’t say if the walk through the glades had been a figment of his uneasy imagination or if Sanya was strangely communicating with him.

Feeling cranky, he rang up Hasser using his encrypted cell phone. “Hi.”

“Hey, how’s your trip going?”

Zaki told him. Hasser was silent for a long moment. Finally, he said, "I'm sorry for your loss."

Zaki summarized what Sanya had stumbled across. He highlighted his suspicions surrounding the Iranian and how he saw him as the prime suspect in her murder.

“What do you want?” Hasser asked.

“I’m going to need technical support.”

“Sure. I’ll talk on your behalf.”

“Ali should be arrested, but that’s going to take a great deal of effort. For now, I want someone to watch the bastard."

“I see.”

“He looks like a devious character. My gut tells me he could be more than just a wife-beater. The way he used a seasoned asset to get rid of his wife speaks volumes about his resourcefulness. He wouldn’t be easy to find.”

“This guy is definitely bad news.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Okay. First things first. I’ll get in touch with Chad to place electronic surveillance on him. Enter his phone number into the system. Emails, bank transactions, and the like. We'll ask around and do background checks, too."

Zaki breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s good to hear.”

“It’ll take time. Maybe days.” Hasser said. Like any supervisor, Chad would need to follow all protocols for dealing with a request like that. To put someone in the intelligence database would entail informing his direct superior of his move and gaining approval for the undertaking and any future course of action.

“No hurry. The poor girl is gone anyway. I hope she’s in a better place.”

Hasser asked hesitatingly. “Are you feeling the guilt?”

“A little. Unfortunately, she reached out to me too late, and there was little I could have done in the given circumstances. Sometimes, things don’t work out.” Zaki buried his face in his hands, trying to make sense of his niece's tragic end.

“Worry not. Chad will help. He understands.”

”My current priority is to explore that guy and recover her son. The much-needed justice or a closure could wait.”

“Sure. We’ll go on the hunt together.”

“Thanks. What’s going on there?”

“Messiah. Messiah is everywhere. We expect him to arrive in Jordan soon. The country is going nuts for him,” Hasser said.

“Yeah, the atmosphere is abuzz here too, at the very heart of Islam. This is the place where the revelations first arrived. A million fellas are praying at the mosque right now. I can see them and hear them as we speak. They're talking among themselves, and then they'll go to their respective countries and talk more. That’s how the upheavals happen.”

“Jesus!”

“Yeah. I wonder where it will lead.”

“Are you worried?”

“Mike, I know my fellow Muslims. They have been waiting for a messianic savior who, with divine help, would restore justice. To right all the wrongs in the world, and to restore their honor and prestige.”

“Zak, I tell you it’s not about the Muslims anymore. The Christian world is also in a tizzy. Our idea of a Second Coming isn’t much different from yours.”

“Another point. The longer we wait, the bigger his following will be.”

“It’s already substantial.”

Zaki pinched the bridge of his nose, then said. “Whatever. He’s set in motion something big—way too big. I don’t know who’s going to stop it.”

“Ordo ab Chao,” Hasser said.

“What?”

“It’s a Latin phrase. Out of chaos comes order.”

“Damn. Sounds cultish.”

“Exactly. The Freemasons adopted it as their motto back in the day.”

Zaki snorted. “Let’s not delve into any crackpot stuff. My head is hurting badly.”

“Haha. Agreed. On the operations side, we’re not yet committed. No mission, no intel. Just watching.”

“As a sideshow, we sort the Iranian out first.

**Doha, Qatar**

“We got something here,” Kate announced as she entered the room. She was holding a small folder

Her eyes stung. The small living room looked as if tear gassed. A blue-white curtain of foul cigarette smoke hung like an ugly tapestry. Chad was exchanging bullshit spy tales with Zaki. The man was back from Saudi Arabia.

Coughing, she stabbed the miasma with her folder and yelled. “Goddammit! It’s disgusting.”

Chad didn’t bother. Mercifully, Zaki crushed his half-remaining ciggy. Or maybe he saw murder in her eyes.

“What’s it?” Chad asked.

She handed him a photograph. “He’s Ali Aqa Karimi, the late Sanya’s husband.”

Passing Zaki another picture, she said. “Our guy is an elusive character, difficult to track electronically with traditional means. His online presence intriguingly combines a mundane corporate profile with an aura of secrecy. Posts about business trips, achievements, and the occasional industry conference pepper the timeline, but personal content is conspicuously absent. No vacation photos, family updates, or glimpses into hobbies are present. Instead, the posts carefully curate an image of a consummate professional, balancing between blending in and leaving no significant digital footprint.”

“Quite shadowy for a businessman,” Zaki commented.

“His cell phone isn’t listed publicly. We asked our Israeli friends for help. Initially, even their famed Pegasus malware didn’t succeed.”

“Damn,” Chad swore quietly. The Israeli program employed zero-click exploits to inject itself into a phone, thereby eliminating the need for the victim's interaction.

Kate said. “I’m not sure, but our friends probably used miniature listening devices, known as ‘StingRays’ in Tehran. They mimic regular cell towers to trick cell phones into giving them their location and identity information. Whatever happened, they got his phone.”

“Slick bastards,” Chad smiled.

“Last night, Ali Aqa received a call from Myanmar. He was asked to talk to a hostage. Sadek Diab, an Egyptian. The captors demanded a large ransom, or they would kill him.

Zaki said. “He’s the same guy mentioned by Sanya.”

“What?” both Chad and Kate asked incredulously.

Zaki told them about the scholar sent by Aqa to Myanmar. “I wonder what he’s been doing there.”

“Proselytizing, maybe,” Kate opined.

Zaki shrugged. “I can’t say. Hard to guess. He isn’t a traditional mullah.”

“Can we get the location fix?”

“Already done. Somewhere near Yangon.”

Chad frowned. “What’s going on here?”

“Our misogynist tied up with something big?” Kate wondered aloud.

Zaki stared at the wall. “I got a feeling we're going to jump into really bad shit.”

“What makes you say that?”

“He’s one ruthless bastard. I’ve read Sanya’s notes. I wonder what really got her murdered.”

Chad gave him a look. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“My first impression was that she was abused and killed by not kowtowing to a crazy husband. It happens in the Middle East. Some guys really are monsters. However, I now feel she lost her life for an altogether different reason. Because of probably what she came to know by accident.”

Kate whispered. “A dirty little secret worth killing for.”

“Let me go talk to him,” Zaki suggested offhandedly.

Chad cocked an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s Iran we’re talking about,” Chad cautioned.

Kate rolled her eyes. “It’s a crazy idea.”

“Of course.”

She objected. “Zak, he’s a ghost.”

“We’ve dug up his whereabouts by geolocating the cell phone. A visit and a few words with him wouldn’t be difficult.”

“She’s right. It’s a loony idea,” Chad muttered.

“Why do you say that?” Zaki asked, his eyes boring into him.

“Sounds like sending you to the gallows. Didn’t know you hated yourself this much. Wouldn’t last a minute there.”

Zaki thought otherwise. “I’m convinced I must go to Iran and run this lead. It’s thin, yes, but so far, it’s my only chance to solve the mystery of her murder.”

“I’m not sold on this, you know.”

“I agree. That’s why I volunteered,” Zaki said.

Chad sat in silence for a second, as did his deputy, absorbing the gravity of the situation. They knew what that meant for Zaki. They could not stop him anyway. He wasn’t officially CIA.

“Where in the hell is Mike?” Chad bellowed in frustration.

“He’s coming back from a meeting with the Qatari officials. Will be here in the next ten minutes,” Kate replied.

Soon, Hasser joined them. He wasn’t amused by the prospect of Zaki going all alone into a hostile country, though he offered himself to tag along.

The trio engaged in a protracted debate while Zaki kept quiet, his face stoic, as if overwhelmed by the odds stacked against him and the risks involved. The pall of smoke stayed thick as ever, being constantly fed by a seemingly endless supply of cigarettes Chad possessed.

Finally, Chad relented. The Iranian intrigued him. He wanted to get a look at him. Hasser and Zaki would go to Iran.

Kate was charged with coordinating the operation. It required paying attention to the logistics. The CIA could do it better than anyone else out there, but it did not just happen by itself. They had to put effort into it and thin out the odds. Under normal circumstances, the Agency would have no problem moving around two individuals anywhere in the world, but Iran was different, and time was of the essence. That made everything a bit more difficult.

Zaki leaned back and sighed. “Cool. Let’s see how our spy adventure plays out.”

Chad warned. “You’re going to Iran, and if you’re not careful, you might not make it back.”

“Good times ahead,” Hasser quipped.

**Chapter 11**

**New Orleans, Louisiana**

“What should be done?” Dean Banfield asked, his voice not more than a whisper.

His question hung in the air. The silence was complete. He looked around. The big hall was packed to capacity; the crowd a diverse group of participants, including church leaders, clergy, and theologians. Laypersons and observers from different Christian traditions were also in attendance.

He was attending an emergency assembly of the World Council of Churches as the pope’s representative. The New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary hosted the session at their main campus. An ordinary assembly of the World Council of Churches is a significant event that typically occurs every seven to eight years. Its primary purpose is to convene representatives from member churches and ecumenical partners to engage in worship, theological reflection, and discussions on pressing global issues.

Today was an altogether different session. And it wasn’t going well.

He saw the fear on their faces.

Dean was growing tired of that reaction. It made no sense. Was it really dread? Was Christianity the true target, or was it simply the religion itself? Or was there any point in making sense of everything?

The audience watched and whispered with confused expressions. He wanted to yell at them. To make them feel ashamed of their doubts. He couldn’t believe for a moment that the messiah was real. He was an impostor. But the Church as a whole was paralyzed, its leaders stunned by the onslaught.

In a world filled with uncertainty and turmoil, inexplicable events were stirring up confrontation between the pope and Vatican City on one side and the mysterious messiah on the other. His appearance had sparked global discussions and debates. Some remained skeptical, but an increasing number of people were convinced of his ministry. Mass rallies and gatherings were taking place worldwide, with ordinary folks praying for guidance and seeking solace in their faith. Though the majority of religious men and women did not accept the messiah as Jesus, they still could not fathom the power of his miracles.

At last, after a painful pause, a black pastor spoke. “I suggest we should denounce the messiah.”

“How?” he asked.

“We need to go to the people. There's a wolf roaming around, and the sheep should be warned.”

“It’s happening,” Dean said. “The pope is addressing the world in a historic broadcast from St. Peter's Square. He will call for unity, faith, and discernment among the world's believers, emphasizing that it is a time for spiritual awakening and moral strength.”

Another man spoke. “Why was he not labeled the antichrist?”

It was a good question. A sticker like this would have made it easier to hate him. But it could be self-defeating. The man was on fire. His charisma would deflect any malicious attacks by the Church. Betraying their helplessness would only further weaken their position.

Inside the Vatican, Pope Xavier and his closest advisors were alarmed by the events unfolding. The pope, known for his emphasis on compassion and inclusivity, was deeply troubled by this emerging figure's actions and his growing influence over the masses. He was consulting with theologians and scholars to discern the truth.

Dean replied evasively. “His appearance prompted us to revisit ancient prophecies, including those in the Book of Revelation.”

He knew the Vatican had also initiated a discreet investigation into the emerging leader's background and activities. The investigation so far had revealed nothing. No ominous connections to a shadowy cabal.

“What’s the pope doing?” Albert Kohler asked. He was an evangelical theologian from Kentucky, a soapbox orator.

“Recognizing the gravity of the situation, Pope Xavier is going to convene an interfaith council, bringing together leaders from various religions, including Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism.”

“Where?”

“The UN, of course. They will meet to discuss the growing global movement around the charismatic leader.”

Kohler hissed. “So the Catholic Church would represent all of Christianity?”

Dean was angered by the man’s petty concern, but he held back a rebuke. “Every denomination would be invited, though we Catholics are the majority, if I must say here.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kohler nodded.

A female pastor raised her hand. “What’s the Muslim clergy saying?”

“As we know, their faith has no concept of a central church─”

“As if we have any,” Dean was interrupted by Kohler.

Dean took a deep breath. The guy was a total jackass. Ignoring him, he continued. “Regional religious leaders deeply influence the Muslim world, despite the absence of a central authority. Unfortunately, the Imams from Al-Haram, Mecca, and the grand muftis from other countries have so far been on the sidelines. Like us.”

“Well, are they confused or frightened?” another theologian asked smilingly.

“What do you mean?”

“A dissent would be likely rewarded with a swift execution by one of his crazy followers.”

His comment elicited giggles in the audience.

Dean did not point out to them that a lot of today’s attendees were avoiding their prime duty as well. Like their hesitant counterparts in the Muslim nations, they just wanted to engage in worship. They merely wanted to celebrate their faith through prayers and reflection. Or participated in ecumenical services that integrated a variety of liturgical traditions and musical genres.

There were also the new moralists, younger folks who woke up every day with the burden of the Church’s wrongdoings and decided to bring about a change. They often engaged in workshops, seminars, and plenary sessions that explored topics such as abuse within the Church and violation of professional ethics by the clergy. While Dean wholeheartedly fought against any wrongdoing, their approach was akin to gunning down anyone who got in their way.

Some hotheads, like Kohler, enjoyed loud theological discussions, going into the minutia without bothering to deepen the understanding of Christian faith and its relevance to contemporary challenges.

It was a dismal situation.

The assembly was supposed to foster a sense of solidarity among Christians worldwide. To emphasize the shared commitment to the Gospel and their common mission of addressing the world's challenges with a united Christian voice.

What's more, he was many time zones away from his companions in the Vatican, without their support in a place where petty men were squabbling over non-issues. They would have been proud of him, though, he told himself. His loquacity was still not on par with some of the firebrands here, but he hadn't turned out badly after all.

In a few hours, he'd be home, back in the Vatican City, under pressure by the pope and other cardinals to answer the question on everyone's mind: *Now what?*

As the charismatic leader's influence continued to grow, his followers attempted to gain control over the Vatican City itself. Security measures were heightened amid a tense standoff unfolding between the Vatican forces and the messiah’s diehard fans. It was an unprecedented development.

Christendom was falling apart. Preserving faith and preventing its total demise would be difficult enough. But that wasn't the only thing on his plate.

A coming clash with Islam and rumors of a possible conflict originating from the Middle East dominated the headlines. New threats that nobody had thought possible were surfacing.

**Vatican City**

Pope Xavier kneeled in silent prayer. His aged hands clutched a rosary, and the flickering candles cast dancing shadows on the ancient manuscripts that lined the walls.

Inside the opulent confines of Vatican City, the high-ceilinged chamber was adorned with centuries-old tapestries and illuminated by the soft glow of ornate chandeliers. It was a serene evening, with a hushed reverence permeating the room.

As the pope continued his fervent prayer, the scent of incense filled the air, its fragrant tendrils curling around the room like a loving embrace. The grandeur of the papal quarters seemed to fade away, leaving only the profound sense of spirituality that encompassed the moment.

In the midst of his devotion, he felt sudden warmth spread throughout his being, as if a gentle hand had touched his soul. He opened his eyes slowly, his heart racing, for something extraordinary was happening.

In front of him, bathed in ethereal light, a radiant figure began to materialize. A visage of sublime beauty that transcended earthly comprehension.

It was the messiah.

As if he had stepped out of a television screen and into the pope's very presence.

His presence filled the room with an overwhelming sense of peace and love. His eyes, pools of infinite compassion, met the pope's gaze. He wore a simple robe.

Xavier was struck speechless. For a moment, his eyes brimmed with tears, and his heart swelled with awe. He knew he was in the presence of someone extraordinary.

The messiah spoke, his voice a harmonious blend of wisdom and unconditional love. He addressed him by name. "Xavier, fear not, for we're not enemies. I am here to guide and protect you."

Overwhelmed, the pope nodded reservedly, his voice barely a whisper, "You’ve come to destroy the sheep of God."

The messiah smiled, radiating warmth, and extended his hand toward the pope. “You carry a heavy burden, cardinal, but you do so with grace and devotion. Go on shepherding the flock with love.”

As the messiah reached out to touch his hand, Xavier pulled away. He could not dispel the doubts burdening his heart.

“You’re the antichrist,” he said accusingly.

“You’ll see the light soon.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, the truth will set you free.”

Opting to remain silent, the pope watched his unusual visitor and smiled to himself. *Well, I’ll be damned.*

The messiah held him in his deep, penetrating gaze, yet he could not insulate himself against the intensity that seemed to emanate from his person. His eyes bored into his soul and grabbed it.

Xavier felt as if he was being teleported.

The messiah first afforded him a quick tour of Gethsemane, where he witnessed the betrayal.

It came as a rude shock to him.

He was still reeling from it when the scene shifted, and he found himself on a desolate hill. As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting the world into an eerie twilight, a hushed stillness fell upon the landscape.

Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, stood like a stark and foreboding mound, its contours etched in darkness. A multitude of onlookers had gathered, their faces a mixture of curiosity and disbelief. A sense of impending doom hung in the air.

At the center of that drama was a convict, his body battered and broken from the relentless scourging and torment he had endured. His form, once full of vitality, now sagged under the weight of an unfathomable burden. A crown of thorns encircled his brow, crimson drops of blood tracing a path down his ravaged face.

The executioners, shrouded in shadows, had raised the instrument of torment—an imposing wooden cross—high above the ground. Its splintered wood was worn smooth by the blood of countless men who had met their fate on it.

With deliberate and methodical cruelty, they laid him upon the cross, stretching out his arms. Crude nails impaled his hands, securing him to the rough-hewn wood. The sound of each hammer strike reverberated throughout the gathered crowd, echoing the collective anguish of those who watched. Two more convicts, flanking him, shared the same fate.

Someone was on the cross but. Pope Xavier was unable to see his face. For a brief moment, a light flashed bright illuminating the scene. It was Judas Iscariot, he realized in horror. Then, the face was obscure again.

The victim, Xavier not certain of his true identity anymore, radiated calm, despite the agony that coursed through his body. He seemed resigned to his fate. His eyes met the gaze of those who watched him in his darkest hour. His breath came in labored gasps.

Above him, the sky had darkened further. Thunder groaned in the distance, and a cold wind swept across the hill, chilling the hearts of all those who stood witness. The world itself seemed to hold its breath, as if awaiting a cosmic reckoning.

As the hours passed, the life force within the victim waned, his voice reduced to a whisper. A soldier offered him a sponge soaked in wine on a sprig of hyssop.

*“Ma Shelem!”* Hislast words were barely audible.

*It is finished.*

And then, with a final, heartbreaking sob, he surrendered his spirit into the hands of the Divine.

The earth quivered in response, and the veil in the temple was torn asunder, a sign the later generations would interpret all wrong. Like almost everything else about him humanity had believed in for more than two thousand years.

With a loving gaze, the messiah began to fade, his figure dissolving into the golden light that had surrounded him. Pope Xavier was left kneeling in silent awe, profoundly touched by the vision that had unfolded in his private quarters in the Vatican City.

In the wake of this extraordinary encounter, he felt drained out, his sense of purpose and strength all gone now. The life he had built for himself lay in ruins around him.

The room, once again bathed in the soft glow of candles, held the lingering presence of those devastating moments.

**Chapter 12**

**Tehran, Iran**

The slow ticking of a clock on the wall exacerbated his headache. His hotel room was luxurious enough that Hasser was tempted to crash for a few hours. But he did not leave the chair. His local liaison had refused to let him come directly to the Agency safe house. It was too risky. His contact would pick him up from his hotel.

He had checked into the Ferdowsi Grand International Hotel upon his arrival. A reasonably comfortable 4-star outfit, somewhat more obscure than the flashier Espinas or Wisteria, favored by the Westerners. It was in an upscale part of the town.

Hasser had repeatedly tried to call Rebecca before leaving for Iran, but she had not taken his calls. He’d finally given up after a dozen attempts.

*Lord, give me patience.* He got up and opened a window, his glum eyes looking up at the sky. Even though the sun had already slipped behind the urban jungle of office towers and apartment high-rises, their contours were still visible in the falling light. He looked down at a row of cars, some new but mostly old, that lined either side of a back street.

Watching the night descend over downtown Tehran, he considered his own life spiraling down a dark abyss. For a moment, he recalled Becky leaning against him in their garden by the house, as if posing for a camera click. A sorority squat, for sure. It didn’t help his mood.

Normally it did, because the image was so wonderful. In Glendale, one cool summer evening in the early days of their marriage, they danced together for an eternity. Alexandra Stan's Mr. Saxobeat played at full volume. Stan was the kind of artist who got her in the mood. His wife liked upbeat numbers by youthful, bubbly singers. Club music was her life. Pitbull, Akcent, and Shakira were the usual culprits, their voices blaring nonstop from her iPod.

She was in her faded shorts, a bright red Arizona University T-shirt, and flat sandals. Her hair cascaded down her cheeks and jawline, accentuating her features. She danced like a devil, her sparkling eyes half-closed, her body gyrating with the wild tunes.

That raucous session outdoors had led to an even stormier one in the bedroom afterwards. It was all it usually took.

A soft breeze had wafted through their window and brushed their sweaty bodies. Its feather-like caresses aroused them. Becky melted under his touch; dazed, slipping into a dream on the edge of ecstasy. Their lovemaking was feverish. In the background, those high notes rising in crescendo lifted them heavenward. He did not know how long the odyssey of their unbridled passion lasted. His whole body shuddered as a thousand pinpricks of delight finally drove home.

Hasser squeezed his eyes shut to roll back the pain brought on by the memory. He tried to think of something else. He contemplated his mission, his impending meeting with Zaki, his quest for Aqa, and the perils he would encounter. Anything, but Becky.

It was part of his coping strategy. Sometimes, it worked. Tonight, all it did was make him miss her even more. Tears rolled down his face. His life was in the doldrums. There were times when he felt almost whole again. And other times when all it took was a word or two to plunge him back into despair.

Despite his best efforts, he struggled to concentrate. In the back of his mind, trepidation ran amok, his attempts at staying positive eroded by the stress of Becky’s sudden aloofness.

Her bitter talk was at least better than total silence. During their last conversation, she had sounded angry. And even though he was angry too, he had replied that he was glad to hear from her and that, of course, he wanted to see her soon. It felt as if she had exiled herself to an island, surrounded by an impenetrable moat that no one, including him, could cross. He feared that she would soon ask for a divorce.

Feeling drained, Hasser thought of leaving his hotel now and going after Ali Aqa. Without wasting any more time. He could storm into his business office, pick up a sidekick, and spend the rest of the night breaking bones to extract information.

But then again, why rush it? As far as he knew, his target was a mystery. He would need a lucky break to unearth him. Zaki would employ all of his tricks once he arrived, so why hurry? What’s one more day? Now that he had made it to Tehran and his target was literally a stone’s throw away, he’d better be cool. Instead of a rash, impulsive charge, it would be better, he finally decided, to hunt his man with utmost care. On assignments like this, the first few days were always the hardest, and he reminded himself to not lose patience. To bide his time until the enemy made a mistake.

When he heard a soft tap on the door, Hasser was almost relieved. At this point, anything that might distract him from the ravings of his mind was welcome. He walked to the door. A polite room service boy presented him with a bottle of Pinot Noir. He gratefully accepted the wine and handed him a hundred-dollar bill as the guy took his leave. Even in a religious nation like Iran, the dollar reigned supreme.

Booze helped him, as he was sometimes more terrified of his sobriety than drunkenness. It took three drinks for his tense nerves to settle. He temporarily pushed his anguish and even his thoughts of Becky to the back of his mind. It was as if he had climbed a mountain and was standing on top. His worries were left far below, forgotten, and laid to rest for now.

Later, he refreshed himself with a warm shower and decided to eat something. The food served during his plane journey had remained untouched. In the dining lounge downstairs, a petite hostess led him to a table.

He discreetly looked around for signs of danger. It was by habit. Three doors led into the hall. Plenty of windows. Since it was early evening and not a rush hour, the number of patrons was low. Mostly locals, but a few foreigners too. He smiled to a loud Australian couple in the corner arguing over some sightseeing destination. Another couple, younger and Brit-sounding, being hosted by a local family. A lone American dressed for a day out on the streets of Tehran. A stiff middle-aged Asian guy in a suit, probably sent on an official errand which he did not like.

Satisfied, Hasser ordered his lunch and waited. It all felt wonderful to him, running a small operation in one of the most dangerous nations on earth. The mission was right up his alley. Kate would be the coordinator.

Thinking about her, his mind raced with indecision and anxiety, no longer certain of his emotions toward the woman. A year ago, she would never have even considered falling for a guy like him, with all his domestic troubles hounding him. But her divorce had done her in. Now she was lusting after a married man for reasons unknown. *Is it her loneliness,* he wondered. Something about the whole affair made him question himself.

His meal arrived, and he went through it quickly. He asked for his coffee outdoors and took the elevator to the rooftop. An anonymous text message alerted him to the upcoming pickup at the hotel gate. He was relieved. He replied, asking his contact to come upstairs. The contact turned out to be a young woman. She had already spotted him.

He noticed her beckoning him to the sitting area. “Hi,” he said courteously.

The woman smiled at him. “I’m Mina.” She was dressed in a long *ruposh.*

A side door took them to the hotel’s swimming pool. Nobody was taking a dip in this cold, he saw. It was deserted except for some goofy statues standing guard in silence. They took seats under the fast-fading daylight and waited for the coffee.

There was a dull thud, like someone kicking the ground, then loud voices giggling. Hasser turned.

A biker gang!

What the hell. Five guys in colorful gear sporting awful patches, complete with sleek, shiny brain buckets and cowhide leather vests. Sun shades, jewelry, studs in the ears and eyebrows.

He slowly sat upright and scanned them. A couple of similarly attired girls, one skinny, the other a short, busty one. Three men wore dark, dirty beards, while two had handlebar mustaches. Their eyes were all glazed. Shit. He could sense the bad vibes tearing through him. Mina looked worried. Nobody from the hotel staff was around.

Spotting them, one guy came over. He could not be more than twenty-five, small, and scruffy-looking. “Hey, whitey, wanna try some fun with us?” he spoke to Hasser, but leered at Mina, his accent fake American.

As his hand touched his skull cap, Hasser saw his tattooed neck up close—a closed fist with a raised middle finger touching his bobbing Adam’s apple. Some eerie reptiles adorning his forearms.

Mina actively suppressed any visible signs of panic and looked him in the eyes. “No, thanks.”

“Ah, come on,” Scruffy got close in her face, holding her wrist. Hasser could smell booze on his breath. The lanky girl chortled something and made a lewd gesture with her fingers. Mina shook her forearm free. The man let it go, winking mischievously at Hasser.

Hasser kept staring, unmoved by his attempt at intimidation. His alertness had bumped a notch, though he had least expected to come across a badass biker gang in Iran, of all places. *Well, the world is changing,* he sighed.

The punk spat in his face.

In a fluid motion, Hasser swung his left arm and jabbed an elbow into the guy’s solar plexus. The man jerked away in visible agony. As he doubled over, Hasser turned around and gave him a strong mule kick in the groin. He wailed and fell to the ground.

Hasser faced his buddies now, who were in a semicircle around him. They looked edgy, eager to make a move against him, but did not commit themselves to a fight they were uncertain of winning. They were leaderless, or perhaps, confused.

For a spell, nothing happened. He stood his ground. Just as their shock abated and another guy dashed at him, a security man hollered from inside the hotel building.

Hasser ducked to avoid the charging bully, leaving him grasping at the air as he fell forward. Then the security guy whistled loudly. Two of his associates at the gate came running. They were armed. *Wonderful,* he thought.

The scene quickly deteriorated into something resembling a bar brawl. In no time, swear words were flying around, followed by a lot of punches, kicks, and bottles. Even Mina could not escape the onslaught. The security manhandled the bikers, who screamed like demons on crack, trying to thrash the guards, who showed remarkable control and did not let loose with their guns. Before the guards overpowered him, one biker grabbed a pool chair and struck one of them.

Their girls lashed out with their tongues and threw around the filthiest profanities Hasser had ever heard. He shook his head in amazement. The girls knew their curses too well. He saw the lanky one scratch a uniformed guard’s face with her nails. The poor guy howled and punched her with all the force he could muster.

Busty came at Mina, her teeth bared in an animalistic scowl. Mina grabbed her neck. “Fuck ya, bitch,” the girl huffed. She smelled of liquor and too much Zara perfume.

“Yeah, yeah, miss.” Mina rotated her around in a whirlwind motion and kicked her ass. She flew into one of her buddies. Both fell into the pool with a tremendous splash.

“Bye, Felicia!” Mina shouted after her. Hasser was impressed.

Except for a few hotel guests talking among themselves standing at a safe distance, nobody had noticed the altercation.

Mina composed herself. She had not broken a sweat during the brief scuffle.

“Superb,” Hasser said appreciatively.

“I guess my daily workout regime helped."

“But next time, tell me in advance if I've got to face any evil gangbangers.”

“You’re good,” she commended him, shaking her head.

Soon the hotel security supervisor arrived with extra manpower. He apologized to them. Scruffy screamed, pointing repeatedly at the security man and them. “I’ll see you, all of you. Anyone messes with Aqa or his brother, he is gone.” The man mostly spoke in Persian, with a sprinkling of English in between.

Hasser saw the security man flinch. He looked shaken. Threatened openly, he murmured something unintelligible to his guards, who were similarly flustered. They helped the bikers get to their feet. The gang walked off haughtily. Busty, all dripping wet and swearing nonstop, gave Mina a middle finger.

Hasser was flabbergasted. Instead of calling the cops or detaining the hooligans for any legal action, the staff just whisked them away helpfully. It piqued his curiosity. As the guys headed for the parking lot, Hasser motioned for Mina to follow him as he set out for the hotel gate that opened on the main road.

A young guy in western dress got out of a car and approached them.

Mina introduced him as Hamid. He looked around for his luggage. Shaking his head, Hasser got in. Mina rode in the rear. The car began rolling at once. Hamid turned out to be a thrill seeker, apparently more pumped up than either of them. He stepped on the gas in no time and jumped into the fast lane without looking left or right. Hasser did not know how much he was involved with the Agency, but assumed it could not be more than running routine chores.

Their car rode smoothly, and the cabin was comfortably warm. The sun was gone. A thin layer of smog began to descend over the city. Maneuvering through the traffic, they emerged in front of the Imam Khomeini metro station and took Khayam Street. Hamid gladly followed the bikers on the congested road. There was no chance the quarry would see him tailing them. A sea of cars and motorcycles flowed on the road. Everyone and his mother, Hasser realized, were out there in force. Most cars had families in them.

Hasser was constantly bombarded by the driver’s nerve-rattling live commentary as he veered his Toyota sedan around equally irascible drivers. He nicked a shiny Honda whose owner honked loudly in protest, but the guy ignored him.

For a half hour they were driven through a cauldron of anguish that was Tehran’s traffic, though not at par with what Hasser had observed in places like Istanbul and Mexico City. The bikers maintained a speed that suggested urgency. To his credit, Hamid had stayed with the target. He took a left turn and got on the Khordad Road.

**Chapter 13**

“Your friends are going to Shahran,” he announced, looking in the rearview mirror. The sedan had crossed into what looked like a residential area.

Hasser did not understand what he meant. “Excuse me?”

“A new housing community, a real nice one,” Mina explained. It was a chic neighborhood for the rich, located to the northwest of town. The car passed through wide boulevards branching into neat streets dotted with opulent houses.

“Got it. Any idea who is Ali Aqa?” he asked nonchalantly, looking up from his cell phone’s navigation application.

The woman’s face darkened. “A real mean bastard. The family hails from Tabriz. Businessmen, investors, and that sort of thing. Both granddad and dad hit it big by supporting the mullahs. He’s followed in the steps of his old men. Pretty tight with the regime and its security services.”

“A requisite step for anyone aspiring for bigger horizons in Iran,” Hasser said derisively, then went on. "I heard he was once friends with the jihadists, too. Is it so?”

She looked decidedly uneasy now. “You know, the Pasdaran regularly host him in their compound. He donates to their cause in exchange for their help from time to time.”

Hasser nodded. He already knew that much. Men like Aqa usually operated at several levels and in cahoots with the law enforcement. Crime, politics, terrorism, family feuds—everything was linked together here. He was not sure what kind of mess Zaki was stepping into.

Hamid inquired. “Why’re you interested in him?”

“Well, we’re trailing his younger brother right now,” he replied.

“What?” Hamid asked in alarm, his hands suddenly tightening around the wheel. “What’s your issue with him? I mean, the guy is sort of nobility here, operating at the very top, but he's a nasty dirtbag. People stay clear of him, I’m telling you. So should you.”

“I just wanna watch where the kid bro goes. That’s all, for now,” he assured him. Hamid eyed him, but he kept mum. Aqa tended to inspire an unwarranted fear here. First, the incident at the hotel, and now one of his Agency contacts suddenly looking like shit after he mentioned his name.

Hasser saw the bikers stop by an open road in an upcoming residential block. Just a few scattered homes.

A lot of their kin was gathered there. Bike engines rumbled, tires screeched, and excited voices soared. He was surprised by the booze on display, with revelers waving the bottles frantically.

The precinct was under development, its roads and streets mostly deserted. It looked like the rich kids used it as a motorcycle drag area. He observed lots of heavyweight stuff, mostly Japanese, but also some European machines. He counted eleven Suzuki Hayabusas, eight Kawasaki Ninjas, half a dozen big Suzuki "Gixxers," and one brightly painted BMW S1000R. A mean-looking Aprilia rounded out the crowd. Some 250ers standing forlornly on the sides, not permitted into the big boys league.

Someone whistled, and a gaggle of heavy bikes tore up the asphalt at once, their bright multi-spectral headlamps cutting sharp swathes of light through the smog-filled night. The main drag was huge enough for a dozen racers who blazed their engines for a couple miles of straight run before turning onto the adjacent branching roads.

The car stopped. The driver looked reluctant. He pointed to a duffel bag on the back seat. Hasser reached into it and took out a Springfield XDM. The pistol looked well maintained, though he would have preferred a Glock. He scooped up three spare magazines.

Hasser left the car and began walking over to the crowd, opting to stay in the shadows offered by the poor street lighting and unfinished buildings. Mina trailed him.

Within a half block, they had to crouch low to stay hidden. Up ahead, the bikers they had been following were readying their machines for fun. He paused and looked around carefully. Some bikers were talking loudly among themselves; others were doing meth in blissful quietude. Hasser and Mina slipped into a narrow side street, tiptoeing to a dark spot where they could discreetly observe them.

A beam of light slashed the darkness to their left. Followed by a solid growl. A big motorcycle emerged on the street. A Harley-Davidson Night Rod! He spotted another monster behind it. It was a late model Ducati. Two dark-clad men, their heads moving left and right, rode the bikes leisurely. Trailing them was a Land Cruiser with armed guys inside, the barrels of their carbines sticking out of rolled-down windows. Hasser suddenly realized his vulnerability.

The Harley guy entered the boulevard. He gunned his motor, clutch and brakes fully engaged. As the rpm shot up, the beast shook on the leash. The rear wheel spun wildly on the gravel. Thick smoke churned. It was what the bikers called a burnout. Heads turned in the biker’s direction.

The man eased out of his opener and roared down the boulevard, balls to the wall. His wingman was behind him. Seconds later, both braked gracefully and did a simultaneous “stoppie,” briefly standing up their bikes on front wheels, crisscrossing each other. Then, the duo performed a clutch wheelie side by side. A few pie-eyed spectators cheered loudly. Some raised their booze bottles to him, their voiced greetings drowned by the din of motorcycle engines.

Both guys returned shortly. They coasted around the corner and came to a stop near the pack of bikers. One of the newcomers removed his helmet and tucked it under his arm; the other man stayed by his side. He saw a deferential attitude among the bikers, who all waved to him or nodded respectfully.

“Brother,” Scruffy cried out, looking animated. Hasser watched intently. Only when Scruffy and Busty walked over to the newcomer and hugged him did Hasser realize that he was seeing Ali Aqa himself.

It was incredulous. He had accidentally bumped into the man. Ali did not appear any different than the other bikers. But looks could be deceptive, Hasser knew. After Sanya’s murder, Kate had dug up further information about him. The man was deeply entrenched in the Iranian nuclear weapons program, serving as an enabler and key player in the clandestine network responsible for nuclear contraband theft and smuggling.

The two brothers conferred briefly, indulging themselves with liquor. They did not seem interested in racing anymore. The younger brother looked agitated. An old guy emerged from the Land Cruiser and joined them. Hasser photographed them with a sophisticated camera designed to operate in low-light conditions. Soon, Aqa departed with one of his underlings, leaving his biker buddies and the girls to their speeding machines and heady drinks.

They trotted back to the car, but Hamid wasn’t there. He had vamoosed. His stock of thrills for the night, it seemed, had run out. Then Hasser spotted a twisted, lifeless form on the ground. It was him.

Damn.

Mina sucked her breath in alarm. The game of hide-and-seek had taken a deadly turn. Hasser thought he saw some movement in the street, and a subdued voice hissed. His hand went to the pistol tucked inside his shirt.

Quickly moving back into the shadows, he thought about their predicament. One thing was clear: they had to get out of this place, or they would end up like their driver. There was no time to search the dead body for the car keys.

He had to improvise on the fly. Spotting a bike parked away from the others, he ambled over to it casually, as if checking a cool machine. It was a red Benelli TNT, a nimble quarter-liter sport model. The owner was not around, but his helmet lay on the seat. He pushed it into the street before pressing the start button. The helmet was loose fit, but it would do. Mina jumped onto the back seat.

The two killers suddenly materialized in front of them.

They had been careful to take down Hamid with silenced pistols. But their long-barreled handguns, made longer still with suppressors, worked against them now at such close range. The longer the gun, the slower one could aim it. Startled, they began raising the weapons in unison. By the time the muzzles had swung Hasser’s way, his own pistol was up and firing.

The Springfield spat out exactly four rounds. There was no chance of missing at twenty yards. Each guy took a couple of slugs. Face, neck, and upper chest. The targets were dead before the echoes of the gunshots faded.

Mina screamed, hugging him tightly. Hasser raced the bike and flew off into the night.

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The man gave him a reptilian look as Zaki walked in. The office was recessed into the side of a big commercial plaza hired by a number of businesses. Firouz Bakht was six-foot-something, balding and portly. He wore a suit, and he was sipping some kind of drink that surely had to be straight whiskey, either single malt or a particular Japanese concoction nobody else liked in the whole world. He pinched the foam from his lips and came forward to meet him.

Zaki said. “Someone recommended you.”

“I see. Who, if I may ask?”

“A mutual friend who told me you wouldn’t ask too many questions.”

“Very well.”

Zaki sank into a sofa across the burly ex-military man who now ran his own private protection business in downtown Tehran. Over time, he had turned into more of a fixer than a mere security consultant. Whether anyone wanted weapons, information, or contraband, he could arrange it for the right price. And it showed. His office was too well decorated for a retired grunt. A radiator unit kept it pleasantly warm.

They inquired about each other and bantered for a while about their past. Zaki fed him a believable story. The guy looked perplexed and a little unsettled.

“Have a drink,” he offered, pointing his thumb at a decanter. Zaki was certain he had a hidden minibar as well.

“No, thanks, Firouz.”

The Iranian shrugged and took a swig.

Zaki watched. Having fled his country after the Osama job meant he should not have participated in another field job in the region. But he had decided to take his chances once more. It meant he had come full circle. *Is it a sense of loyalty to my adopted homeland? Or am I simply unable to overcome my addiction to adrenaline?* It was neither normal nor rational. He knew it.

“I’m here asking for a little help,” he said.

“No time for small talk, eh?” Feroz grinned, taking another slug of his drink. He was trying to sound relaxed. His eyes darting around the room gave away his anxiety, though.

Zaki sized him up. *Can he be trusted?*

“Go on,” Firouz prompted him.

“An innocent woman was killed in London. She was married to Ali Aqa.”

“So?”

“Does the name ring a bell?”

“Oh, it sure does,” Firouz said teasingly, raising his glass in the air.

“Needless to tell you she died in a most gruesome manner.”

“Sad, indeed. It was a robbery gone wrong, the press says.”

“It’s all bullshit.”

“If you say so,” Firouz’s eyes twinkled with mischief.

Zaki shifted uncomfortably in his sofa chair. It was time to make a business offer and get him hooked. “I’m offering you a nice fee for any information about her erstwhile husband.”

“Okay,” he conceded boringly, but his eyes narrowed. A good sign, Zaki thought. The man breathed out and leaned forward.

Zaki smiled at him encouragingly. "Her child is missing at the moment. You can easily imagine her family's misery. They need help, Firouz.”

“For fuck’s sake, let go of this sentimental babbling. We’re too old for it.”

“Sorry.”

“Go on.”

Zaki told him in detail what had happened. He also shared with him the pictures taken by Hasser during his little adventure in Shahran.

Firouz made a face. “I don’t want to mess with an evil business tycoon.”

“Come on, man. I’m not asking you to pick up a gun and assault his home. Just try to find out where the man is. Then, we’ll arrange to meet him in private.”

“Who’re you working for? CIA?”

“Nah. Do I look like a secret agent? I’m here as a facilitator.”

“Don’t play games with me,” Firouz hissed.

Shaking his head, Zaki stood up to leave. “Thanks for seeing me, Firouz. I think I need to explore other options.”

“Wait. Where are you going?” Firouz asked, rising from his chair. He certainly had not expected his sudden departure.

“I can’t waste time. Let me go and look elsewhere.”

Firouz came hobbling after him. “Hey, you’re being impatient. A quintessential Canadian, again.” He loosened his tie. “I can help you.”

Zaki turned and faced him. “Very well. The clock is ticking.”

“Screw you, man,” he laughed heartily, knowing instantly that Zaki was in no mood for claptrap. “Sit, sit. It wouldn’t take long.”

Zaki took the sofa. He felt sick and dizzy, a headache overwhelming him. It was probably only Tehran's cold weather and nothing else, but it hurt. As Firouz started reaching out to his contacts in the security sector, he tuned him out.

He wondered why he was doing it. No doubt he was a spent cartridge, forgotten by everyone who mattered in the Agency. They thought he was a nonentity from the past. His consulting work had been met with skepticism. Someone even insisted on eliminating the candy stripper from all tasks.

But they could not understand what drove him. At some point, he knew he would either snap or face death in a hellhole. Until that time, he had to do whatever it took in his personal battle against evil men intent on attacking his loved ones. Ali Aqa was one such guy. Sanya’s soul would not rest in peace until her killers ate dust. He did not know when he dozed off.

Firouz nudged his shoulder. “Wake up, gaffer! You were snoring for too long.”

He rubbed his eyes, looking at his watch. More than a couple of hours. “Got something for me?”

Firouz smiled. “Of course. That is how I make my living.”

“Great.”

“You’re in luck, pal. I’ve found the whereabouts of your man and a line of action to pursue. It would be a difficult task, though. On the other hand, Babak Reza, Aqa's trusted manager, is one of the people in the photographs. He’s far easier to get to. You know what I mean.” He shared the details with his customer.

“I need a few more things. Weapons and ammo.”

“No problem.”

“Thanks,” Zaki passed him thick wads of US greenbacks. “One hundred thousand dollars for your work, plus another sum to buy me the guns.”

“Bother me again anytime,” Firouz beamed. He clearly had not expected such a big return for a few phone calls he had made to his contacts.

“You know I will.”

Firouz handed him a slip of paper. “Here’s my contact number. Your guns will be available by the evening.”

“Thanks again,” he said, pocketing the number.

Firouz pinched the bridge of his nose as he spoke. "To get to him, you'll need to be creative. He’s a real badass.”

“You don’t know the guys I am hanging around with these days.”

“Good luck then.”

Zaki left his office.

**Chapter 14**

Ali Aqa Karimi had quickly gone through a couple of business meetings by midday, freeing himself to take the call. But it didn’t come. The Chinese man wanted him to wait, to anticipate what he was to go through.

*Play whatever power game, you chink,* he thought.

Ali exuded confidence, dressed impeccably in a tailored suit that hinted at his discerning taste and unwavering attention to detail. His office occupied the top floor of a large tower in the city’s main business district. The skyscraper with its sleek glass and steel construction served as the headquarters for his vast corporate empire. The New Aryan Investment Solutions provided a range of banking and financial services.

The luxurious space he owned was a symphony of rich mahogany, pristine marble, and modern art pieces. Natural light poured in through floor-to-ceiling windows, casting a warm glow upon the room's exquisite furnishings.

Gao called. Aqa let the phone chime before answering it on the eighth ring. “Hi.”

“How’s everything?” the Chinese man asked.

“Our messiah is going to visit America. His visa was approved today,” Aqa told him. One of his men had called from Istanbul. The messiah was currently in Turkey. About to kickstart his world tour.

“Fantastic.”

“I wonder how in the hell they allowed him.”

“His charisma works. Now, his clout will grow.”

“He is going to be in Mashhad tomorrow. Iran is jubilant, but our Arab neighbors are freaking out.”

There was a slight pause before the other man whispered. “I must caution you, somebody tried to infect your phone.”

Aqa shuddered. It was not possible. He countered. “No way.”

“My techie detected the Israeli spyware and blocked it in time. Then he scrubbed it clean.”

The man Gao was referring to worked in the local office of a Chinese telecom firm. He was an expert in digital security. Aqa often utilized his services to keep his cell phone and other devices safe. One never knew who might be snooping. The communications and cyber world is a dangerous place, he often told himself, where thieves lurk in the shadows, ready to pounce on you if you let your guard down.

“Why didn’t he tell me?”

“His task was a complicated one. He almost missed the evil thing. Then he sent home some of the fragments for extended forensics.”

“Shit,” exclaimed Aqa. The technician could not be blamed for his actions. He surely was a Chinese intelligence operative whose loyalty lay with his masters. An alternative explanation could be that the Chinese were already monitoring his phone. The same technician likely installed their own spyware. As soon as a new attempt was made to infiltrate it, they were alerted. Damn.

“What else?” Gao asked.

“Yesterday, some people quarreled with my brother and followed him to where I was having some fun. My men took appropriate action and killed one of them. Then, a foreigner tried to gather information about me. His contact ratted him out to me for extra dollars. The man is related to my dead wife.”

“Who’s he?”

“A Pakistani who is now a Canadian citizen. Runs a small business in Ontario. Nothing significant.”

“It’s not good.”

“I reached out to someone in the immigration services. He again checked his passport and other information. No red flags. Everything was okay.”

“What’s he doing here? She was killed in London.”

“Poor bastard. He’s on some sort of personal mission to investigate her murder. I’m not bothered.”

Gao breathed sharply on the other end. “Aqa, send me his details immediately!”

“Why? He’s a nobody.”

“Now,” he heard before the call terminated.

Irritated, Aqa did as he was told. He shared the documents using a messaging app that the Chinese preferred for their dealings with him.

He asked his secretary to send him the lunch. A discreet sound system piped in soothing music as he picked at the barbecued chicken sandwich and Beluga caviar.

Finished, he dialed another number. The man was a high-ranking official in the Pasdaran, or Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Aqa highlighted the problem and asked him to take care of the Canadian. For the next few hours, he busied himself with office work.

Gao called again late in the afternoon. His voice was nervous-sounding. “Aqa, your man is big trouble.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s CIA.”

“What the hell are you telling me?” he screamed in panic.

“Yes, we ran him through several databases. He was found on the one shared by our Pakistani friends.”

“Who’s he?”

“He isn’t from Canada. He’s a Pakistani-American, and he helped the CIA in bumping Osama off. It was fourteen years ago.”

“The Osama bin Laden?” Aqa asked haltingly, his throat suddenly dry.

“Yes, the same one.”

“But why is he after me? His niece wasn’t an intelligence worker. Neither am I.”

Gao shouted. “It doesn’t matter. He’s hunting you. I fear our entire operation could be in danger because of you.”

“I’m sorry. But it isn’t my fault.”

“Yes, yes, Aqa. I advise you nevertheless to find yourself a nice place to hunker down and arrange for his disposal. Just get rid of him. With everything you have, crush him. I would’ve sent you my best operator, but he’s already committed elsewhere.”

Aqa exactly knew where. Myanmar. The Egyptian had fled the compound, only to walk into the clutches of a crime ring. They were holding him at an unknown location. Aqa had informed Gao about his capture and the ransom demand. The man had wisely advised him to promise them the money. To buy time. So that he could send his own killer after the Egyptian and slash his throat before he had a chance to escape and talk.

“Did you get his location?” he asked.

“Excuse me?”

“I know you. You were probably eavesdropping on my phone when they called from Myanmar. You got your location fix already. No?”

Gao laughed softly. “Your distrust wounds me deeply, my friend. We possess our own means for listening in on air waves. China is resourceful.”

“Not as much as America.”

“We’re catching up. And now this operation. It’s beautiful. We're going to tilt the balance in our favor."

“I hope so.”

“Tell me, Aqa, did you ever work in the field?”

“No. I’m a businessman.”

“Well, I’m surprised by what you said about eavesdropping. Anyway, I want to tell you something, and I’m not even sure if I’m expressing it very well. This operation trumps anything else. We need to focus on our mission. It is futile to engage in arguments between friends. America collaborates with her allies on intelligence missions, and they also spy on each other. The game goes on.”

“So, am I being watched?”

“Haha! Yes, but we’re not the ones doing it. We’re just trying to watch the watchers.”

Aqa groaned. “I’ve never felt so at ease as I feel right now.”

Gao laughed again.

“I need to meet someone,” Aqa said.

**Tehran, Next Day**

Ali Aqa padded down the corridor lined with portraits of grim-looking faces. Dead men, who had sacrificed themselves on battlefields, both domestic and foreign. A few exceptions were the former senior officials who were now living their retirement lives.

He was visiting the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, or the Pasdaran. The compound housing the offices and other facilities resembled a fortress. It sat on more than a hundred acres of prime estate near the old Doshan Tappeh airfield, east of the capital. His escort deposited him at the door and turned back.

He pushed inside.

His host, Major General Omid Mirzadeh, sat at his desk with a cup of tea, engaged in a conversation with another uniformed officer. He was Behnam Vahidi, commander of the Quds Force.

The greetings were warm. Omid handed him tea and nuts. “Something’s bothering you. I can tell.”

Aqa took a sip. After a moment, he shrugged. “Just work stress.”

Omid regarded him.

He squirmed under his gaze.

“I haven’t seen that look, Ali,” Vahidi observed.

He blinked. “Yes, a small trouble.” He told them about the American.

Vahidi put a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry. We’ll take care of him.” Both men had already supported his project a lot through their proxies and contacts in Syria, Palestine, and Jordan.

He said nothing.

“I want you to relocate to our fortified facility in Lavizan district. You’ll be safe there.” Omid suggested.

Aqa snickered. “Your erstwhile guest, Ismail Haniyeh, might still be breathing if he had not put too much trust in your words.”

Both men went quiet, only their eyes flashing with anger. When Omid spoke, his jaw was firmly set. “Our protection unit is now totally reorganized. We did a thorough overhaul. Several men were arrested, some even executed.” The special security outfit, Ansar-al-Mahdi, was responsible for safeguarding important officials and visiting leaders. The Hamas chieftain had fallen victim to a deadly strike carried out by Israel with insider help. Omid had tracked down the traitors in the unit and put them down.

Seeing no other way, Aqa nodded reluctantly.

“Cheer up, man. Whatever you launched has been a huge success so far,” Omid said. He pointed a finger in the direction of a TV screen. “See for yourself.”

The messiah had landed in Mashhad, the spiritual capital of Iran.

The anticipation in the town had been building for days as its residents prepared to witness a historic event—the arrival of the messiah. Word had traveled through the country like a breeze heralding a coming storm.

A million people were gathered at the shrine of Imam Reza, a direct descendent of the holy prophet. The streets were clogged with humanity. People carried banners, posters, and religious symbols. Some held rosaries in their hands, others clutched bouquets of flowers. The atmosphere was charged with excitement and reverence as the Iranians as well as pilgrims from other countries gathered to catch a glimpse of the spiritual leader.

“It’s awesome,” Omid whispered.

“Yes, we’re seeing a tsunami-like effect,” Vahidi agreed.

Local businesses and homes displayed symbols of faith, extending a warm welcome to their honored guest. A convoy of vehicles, flanked by security personnel and clergy members, appeared on the horizon. The messiah's vehicle, a modest yet dignified car, slowly made its way through the streets. The crowd, standing several rows deep along the roadside barriers, erupted into joyous applause and cheers as the car came into view.

Dressed in his traditional white cloak, the messiah sat calmly in the back seat, his presence radiating an aura of serenity and humility. He waved to the crowd, his smile warm and genuine, acknowledging the outpouring of affection.

Omid exchanged looks with Vahidi. He then looked back at Aqa. “Your success speaks for itself.” He slapped his back.

Aqa turned his eyes away from the TV screen, his expression guarded. “We have to pay attention to where we’re going, though. The endgame matters.”

Omid grinned. “The ride itself is no less thrilling.”

Aqa contemplated in silence but did not comment. He watched the screen again.

The messiah’s car moved at a snail’s pace, allowing those gathered to have a clear view of him. The sound of prayers ringing in the distance added to the sacred ambiance. As his car passed by, he extended his hand out of the window to touch the hands of a few lucky individuals, a simple gesture that left them visibly moved. The healings happened instantly, like before.

Throughout the town, mosques and religious institutions had opened their doors, inviting people to take part in special services and prayers to mark the occasion.

Omid asked his Quds deputy. “How’re we using everything to our advantage?”

Vahidi said. “This has been a windfall. Our Shiite brethren are up in arms against the dictator regimes in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Authorities have resorted to heavy crackdowns in both countries, but the man on the street is not backing down. He has gone through the mill. Nothing terrifies him now. Clashes are increasing day by day, and there’s no way the situation would reverse easily. It’s going to escalate.”

Omid nodded. “You’re right. What else are you doing?”

Vahidi went on. "As you are aware, the populace in Lebanon is already highly charged. The Israeli attacks have stirred up unrest on a massive scale. As a result, the political parties and ministers in the caretaker government under our influence, faced no challenge in inciting Lebanon against the Zionists and their regional Arab supporters. Same thing happening in Syria with a different modus operandi.”

“Excellent.”

“Another plot is almost ready in Jordan,” Vahidi said cryptically, eyeing the civilian in the office. Clearly, he was not willing to share any details in his presence.

“I see,” the senior man acknowledged. He already knew the outline of what his subordinate was referring to.

Vahidi leaned across the desk. “We’re unleashing something big in Saudi Arabia.”

“Wait, wait,” Aqa blurted out. “Wouldn’t it violate the détente we reached with the Saudis via China?”

“The agreement means nothing when so much is at stake here. We’d arrange another, more favorable treaty with the future government there,” Omid told him.

**Chapter 15**

**Mashhad, Iran**

“Talking to crowds,” the elderly man said, “is easy. It’s straightforward because you can simply stick to the pattern—then utter something that sounds good every time with almost no effort.”

“All right,” the messiah said, nodding. “I like how you make it sound so simple.”

“What?” the Syrian asked. His name was Aziz Alakabani. He was a religious man with a solid background in teaching at several seminaries. He was now his tutor, and often traveled with him, though he often missed Diab.

It was Diab’s command of Islamic eschatology, his almost encyclopedic understanding of Middle-Eastern politics, and his flawless Arabic that had helped the messiah a lot. He had performed better than either of them had ever imagined. Diab would have been proud of him, he told himself. His people skills were still a bit rusty, but he hadn't turned out too bad after all.

“Nothing,” the messiah said, lowering his eyes. “I should not question.”

The man asked, frustrated by his hesitation. “How do I know you’re learning if you don’t ask questions?” His pupil’s face was haggard and he looked older than his twenty-four years.

The messiah stared at his folded hands before answering. “It’s…it’s just that I sometimes feel awkward in the presence of so many people.”

“Never mind that,” he said to him, standing up. “Just practice what I’ve taught you.” He pointed his finger at the big mirror before leaving the room. “Practice your speech again and again until you can do it by rote.”

He nodded, though his mind was not focusing. Not for the first time, the messiah found himself grappling with questions about his identity. He wondered if he was truly himself.

For someone barely twenty-four, such questions could lead to feelings of existential doubt.

Until a week ago, he had not faced any real challenge in his life.

His parents were dead; he had been told this by the people who raised him. He was an orphan— without a family, without hope. He had spent his childhood in several towns in Syria, always secluded from other children and families. In those formative years, when a boy finds his identity and discovers the world, he found himself isolated and alone. Now he could say that he had always walked through life with a certain loneliness.

The last couple of years had been spent in Myanmar, exclusively in the company of men, undergoing an intense coaching program to prepare for the role he was playing now.

He had been chosen.

And he had no idea why.

Everything had happened so fast. He still had trouble believing it. On the positive side, he took pride in his special abilities to heal the sick and felt a sense of achievement. However, he worried that Pandora's box had just been opened and that the unforeseen consequences of his religious or political manipulation would be hard to contain.

He could not think clearly. He knew what they wanted. It was something he had considered for weeks. But the implications were enormous.

*Is it possible? Is it right?*

He felt a sudden resentment toward those who had decided his fate.

He pulled a towel from its rack and used it to wipe fog off his window. Staring out into the darkness, he saw no moon. No stars glittered in the night sky. Not a soul was visible anywhere. Indeed, there was nothing to see. Just shadows. Fierce winds howled through empty streets lined by darkened office buildings and department stores. Driving sheets of rain pelted the spartan home he was sharing with his associates in Mashhad. Their Iranian hosts had offered a luxurious guest accommodation but he politely refused.

A low-beam emergency light was on in his cramped chamber, its dim glow barely keeping the darkness at bay. But there was no way he could sleep. Perspiration covered his entire body. Once again, he walked to the window, which he managed to open after some tinkering. Cold or not, he sought air. Removing his shirt, he placed it over the back of a chair next to him. Then, he grabbed the towel and wiped his face and torso dry.

A knock on the door interrupted him. Shaking out of his trance, he rose to go to the door. One of his men was standing outside with a small tray of food. “Dinner?”

“Oh,” the messiah said. His stomach growled.

“I brought you some rice and chicken. Don’t work yourself too hard, all right?”

“Do I look like I’m doing anything worthwhile? Anything?”

“You fill the role nonetheless,” he said, still bowing.

He nodded and took the tray, glad as the man retreated. The other men got together for meals, though he often had to turn down their invitations to join. He walked back to his chair and sat. Then he dug in. His food was simple, yet tasty, and remarkably, he found that he was almost enjoying himself.

With a cup of coffee in hand, he let his mind run riot.

The world as he knew it so far worshipped the heroes—men and women—who made outsized fortunes, appeared on gigantic screens, and demonstrated unique virtue and talent.

Heroes who lived on Mount Olympia.

He on the other hand was to remain distant. Had never been allowed to be ordinary. As a result, the things that were forbidden were mysterious to him. He was fascinated by the ways that normal people went about their lives—how they conversed, joked, and laughed. He would have rather enjoyed meandering down narrow alleyways, inhaling the aromas wafting out of spice shops, and haggling with merchants over silly trinkets.

As soon as he thought that, he quashed it. He smothered his longing and dreams until they were mere ash, more easily scattered across his soul's empty wilderness. It always felt like he was standing on the other side of a large glass window where he could see the world passing by, but he never became a part of it.

Regardless of the circumstances, his extraordinariness was already choking him. He did not want to make a spectacle of himself. He did not want any part of it. He was a simple young man who had no desire to take himself—or his fame—too seriously.

Thunder rumbled overhead. He squeezed his eyes shut.

*Is this my destiny?* he wondered.

*How many hours have I lain awake every night begging God for mercy?*

He would continue if his life on earth was an unpleasant duty, a cross to bear until the end. There was no better remedy for melancholy than bowing down to God’s will. To accept his sovereignty. The cruel logic of predestination was enough to turn anyone away from the Lord. But he would not be swayed.

*Maybe, He wanted this for me.*

Before, his naïveté had curbed these kinds of thoughts. Now no such barrier remained. Questions relentlessly bombarded his mind. It was overwhelming. In the end, he often failed to understand the remarkable, if somehow capricious, hold enjoyed by the Lord over mankind.

And there were those strange things bestowed upon him. The powers. His touch, his eyes, and his tongue. They undid the Lord’s own doing and violated his own physical laws.

*Was it also written in the Book of Destiny?* he asked himself.

**Outside Tehran**

The pair of Isuzu trucks, caked with dirt and mud and buzzing like some irate beasts on wheels, rumbled off the bridge over the Karaj River.

They stopped in front of a riverfront hotel. It was small and empty-looking from the outside. Several lights lit up the pale façade. A car was stopped under a worn-out sign board at the gate. Two motorbikes were parked across the road. No one in sight along the river. Hasser watched two figures approach Zaki’s truck idling behind the car. His hand went for the pistol.

Zaki emerged from the car and came his way, the newcomers in tow. One was Mina. Seeing them approach, he relaxed and wound down the window. “Any prob, Zak?” He felt the cold air invade his lungs. Zaki wore a heavy North Face parka and did not seem perturbed by the chill.

“Nope. Mina and her brother here confirmed that the manager, Babak Reza, is lodged down in the village. The local chieftain protects him.” Mina was partially hidden under a chador. Her brother was an unremarkable man, and he looked edgy.

“Lovely,” Hasser muttered.

Zaki said. “Let’s move.”

Zaki was in the lead vehicle. Hasser, along with Mina and her sibling, trailed him. He was picking up speed, Hasser noticed, manifested by his tail lights blinking off and the boxy rear growing smaller in his windshield. To his right, a surly, wafer-thin moon hanging in the sky threw its diaphanous shadow over the water.

Zaki screeched down the road, driving around slow-moving traffic headed for Karaj. As the road emptied, Hasser too stepped on it. The truck was new, built sturdily around a powerful 3.0-liter engine. Certainly, it was no match for his Ford 150 Raptor back home, which owned the roads wherever it went.

They had sourced the trucks and some other supplies from Mina before embarking on the journey to Arangeh, a small village northwest of Tehran, where Aqa owned a country estate. His manager was supposedly there. Mina had a trustworthy network of local informers, it appeared. She also ensured that the two M4 carbines purchased from Firouz were properly hidden under the seats.

Hasser could now see the glowing skyline ahead in the pre-dawn ink. Beyond the lights of the town lay the dark, jagged mountains, arrayed like a cluster of burnt-out candles, holding in their fold the bleak Iranian hinterland.

Hasser and his party rolled into the lovely hamlet at first light. Nestled amidst a grove of cedar trees and neat orchards spread on the side of a narrow road, the village emerged like a sepia-toned picture before his eyes, its glistening green landscape blanketed with a thin layer of dewdrops. A few mangy dogs leaped after the Isuzus and barked lamely before breaking off.

In his peripheral vision, he saw the brother. He was still tense. Mina on the other hand, was relaxed and humming something. “Hey, you okay?” Hasser tapped his knee.

The guy jumped. “Yes, I…I’m fine,” he replied with a stammer.

“Tell me your name, and don’t be scared. We’re not going to die today.”

He straightened. “Rostam is not frightened. I’m worried about you. You’re the guests here.”

“Good, boy,” Hasser said. He knew the region's code of hospitality. They looked after their guests at all costs, no matter what the circumstances. Now he was witnessing it.

“Rostam likes to be quiet, that’s it,” the younger man added. He had a strange habit of addressing himself in the third person.

“I see,” Hasser said, drumming his fingers on the wheel.

“My brother was a cheerful kid once, but he has changed. We’ve been through a lot lately,” Mina said. She was looking out the window.

“Oh. What happened, if I may ask?”

She hesitated, as if deciding whether to open up to a stranger. When she spoke, her words came out like sighs colder than the Elburz wind. “Last year, my father was killed trying to protect me from a forced wedlock. A wealthy man proposed to me; he was an old lecher who had already married twice. He was not an ordinary suitor, as his proposal was based on an ancient custom that allows a man to compel a woman into marriage.

“What are you talking about?” he asked incredulously, his voice shaking. “I mean, in this age and time? How is it even possible?”

She continued, sidestepping his naive skepticism. “One day he arrived with his goons at our doorstep and announced the proposal by firing his gun into the air. Very subtle, you see," she smirked. “My dad obviously didn’t agree, and he paid with his life. To subdue us further, Rostam was abducted. The police eventually saved us, but we were thrown out of the village as a punishment ordered by the clerics on his payroll. Finding nothing substantial against Rostam, they charged him with apostasy because he had not grown a beard.”

“Gawd,” Hasser muttered, looking at her in the rearview mirror. Her face was pallid, and her eyes were soulless.

“My mother died. Grief claimed her, everyone says. But I think otherwise. She was murdered, just as my dad was killed. Only grief served as a different kind of weapon.”

“Sorry, I didn’t know.”

She croaked. “I started working to earn money, but I feel so helpless. Sometimes I think God has betrayed us.”

“I understand your pain. Believe me, we’re not going to spare him.”

“Rostam and I will help you in any way possible,” she said, composing herself.

“Good,” he replied, before going on. “Now let’s go check out Aqa’s estate.” It was far from the village center, and they would have to pass through a tangle of streets.

“Radio check,” Hasser spoke into his mic. He coiled the wire around his neck.

“We need to do it neat and easy,” Zaki’s voice sounded in his earpiece.

“Yeah. My plan is to make it to the compound before someone in the village sounds the alarm.” The place was awake. He could see the folks milling around despite the early hour.

Rostam guided him through the dingy alleys to an empty, grassy area. A large, walled compound sat next to it surrounded by wheat fields. Tall cypresses dotted the vast courtyard.

“We’re here,” Mina pointed at the building. There was no visible security at the compound, but in such remote lands, one could expect armed opposition within.

**Chapter 16**

Zaki lingered at a distance. Hasser drove slowly to the gate and stopped the truck. Mina said. “One more thing. The man you’re after is the same rascal who murdered my father.” She got out before he could say anything and walked up to the gate.

Hasser snapped around and looked at Rostam, surprised. “Is she right?”

“Yes, the manager,” he said offhandedly. “He is from the hills, like us. Used to be a petty scoundrel before he progressed in crime and made a fortune working for people like Aqa.”

He radioed Zaki. “Damn. Why’s she going into his den all alone then?”

"The guards at the gate do not know her. She’d try to bluff her way in.”

“Doesn’t sound too convincing.”

"It doesn't have to be. Local chieftains like to meet with the foreign aid workers. For photographs, and money, of course. I believe we'll receive the invitation with ease.”

“American law prohibits us from posing as aid givers.”

“Mike, you aren’t an American today. Think of yourself as a perv Canuck,” Zaki said laughingly. Hasser heard another chortle in the background. It came from Rostam. He swore to himself. Zak was never going to ditch his totally fucked up sense of humor.

Mina rapped on the huge metal gate. A bolt slid open, and a smaller door cracked ajar. Two armed guards appeared. After a brief conversation, she gestured for Hasser to come forward. He parked and left his primary pistol in the truck. Zaki brought his own Isuzu to the gate.

“You sure about this?” Zaki inquired as he emerged from the truck.

"No, but do you see any other options?" Hasser questioned with a crinkled forehead.

Zaki nodded toward the gate. “Our Mina knows what she’s doing.”

Following Mina into the courtyard, the trio received a cursory pat from the guards, who failed to notice the Glock in his ankle holster. Not really professional, he judged. While Mina was ushered into a side room presumably meant for the women, one guy walked the three male guests to a patio.

Two men were sitting on orange plastic chairs, eating pine nuts and dried figs. No guns were visible. Seeing them approach, one stood up and positioned himself against a pillar. His youthful agility marked him as a bodyguard. Hasser was more interested in the second guy who greeted them with a blank expression. His scruffy mustache and salt-and-pepper beard gave him the appearance of a wily old fox. A long cashmere coat covered him.

Hasser tagged him as the manager. He matched the photos they had captured earlier. Before Hasser or Zaki could say a word, another man rolled in. He was rotund and had the grace of a rugby ball. Probably, the village chieftain. "Who are you people?" he asked, his eyes narrowing. “You do not appear to be aid workers.”

“You really don’t want to know who we’re,” Hasser said. Zaki shifted behind him, opening his parka to reveal a stubby handgun. He had also brought a hidden handgun past the guards.

The guard tried to move, but Zaki had him covered. “Easy, boy.” His pistol was out now, pointed at the quarry.

“You?” Hasser poked the manager's forehead with a finger.

His mouth dropped open. “How’d you find me?” His boss had warned him about the foreigners looking for him, but he obviously was not expecting them. Being ensconced on a billionaire’s estate and surrounded by the local population offered him such sense of security. Now it was gone. He suddenly appeared nervous and a bit guarded.

“It doesn’t matter how. Suffice it to say we managed it,” Hasser grunted. He removed the Glock from his leg holster, holding it level. “Your guards are useless, by the way.”

The plump guy spat on the floor. “I'll kill the bitch who brought you here. She hoodwinked me.”

Rostam charged at him in rage, throwing punches left and right before the man could react. The insult to his sister clearly infuriated him. Zaki allowed him to work on the chieftain for a few minutes. When he finished, his victim was subdued—more shaken up than hurt, though.

“You wouldn’t make it alive out of here,” he scoffed. "The whole village will come to my aid once they know I am being attacked by infidel pigs."

Hasser slapped him across the face. “Nice try, asshole. Now keep your fucking mouth shut.” He turned to Babak. “Well, I wouldn’t kill you, but you’re going to tell me whatever I ask.”

“You’re pitted against someone much too clever, a lot smarter than all of you combined,” Babak replied brusquely.

“Is that you? You think you’re cunning?” Hasser taunted him. Despite his years, he was a strong man, unlikely to fold easily. Such people could turn their fear into defiance. Hasser saw it in him and knew what it meant.

He shook his head. “No, not me. People far above me are running the operation. You and your government will never discover the truth." The disdain in his manner was evident. He was breathing hard, looking all set for a final act of resistance.

“You’re certainly not young enough to be a martyr, but I’ll make you one,” Hasser sneered, raising his pistol.

“No,” a voice caught him. He turned and saw Mina come out of a room, a whip in her hand. “Let me deal with him,” she hissed. Upon seeing Mina, the old man wilted and cried out in Persian. To Hasser, it sounded like a version of the Hail Mary. He struggled to keep himself cool, but his face betrayed fear, and Hasser sensed Mina understood it too.

Zaki whispered. “Now, he’s going to tell us everything. Not a slap is needed.”

Surprised, Hasser looked at him quizzically. “How do you say that? I think he’s shuttered himself pretty well.”

“He did try, but she just changed everything.”

“I don’t get it,” Hasser was confused.

"He has witnessed the angel of death firsthand. He knows nothing good is in store for him now. It is *Qisas* time, my friend.”

“You mean your old custom of vendetta?”

“Yes, the retribution. It’s staring him in the face as we speak. The girl is going to bring it to a close here.”

Hasser sighed. “Then, I’m not going to stop her either.”

Zaki was not pleased. “We need information first.”

“We’ll get it eventually.”

Zaki turned to Mina. “Hey, wait—"

The first whiplash landed with a sickening crack. Babak yelled, his whole body shaking.

“He’s the bastard who killed my father. Ruined all of us,” Mina screamed even louder than Babak as she descended on him, venting her fury with every blow. The old man tried to get up, but she had him pinned under the whip. His wailing was relentless.

Arms crossed, Zaki groaned. “Fuck, she’s going to kill him.”

Hasser offered a dismissive shrug. The woman had cleverly managed to get to her target by using outside help. What made her truly remarkable was that she had done so by riding on the back of an Agency team. The fact that the man who had killed her father was the same guy wanted by the Americans had made the whole affair rather simple for everyone.

Though Zaki was obviously perturbed by her methods, Hasser did not mind. In fact, he was thankful for any help coming his way. Now, in return, she held the once powerful murderer in her clutches.

Rostam joined his sister and started kicking him in the gut. Hasser was unconcerned. He watched them toss the guy around like a rag doll, all bloodied and bruised in no time, his skin a patchwork of nasty wheals laid bare by the tattered remains of his dress. His friend was staring blankly, powerless to do anything. Even the bodyguard was standing still.

Like the uninvited spectators they were, the duo looked on impassively as the man was mercilessly beaten into a pulp. Hasser was not amused by the torture inflicted, yet he found himself unmoved by his plight, failing to muster an iota of sympathy for the man. He had taken everything away from these young siblings.

Babak now lay crumpled on the cold floor, his bluster reduced to a mere whimper. He appeared barely conscious as he pleaded to his tormentors, asking for mercy, but his agony was not going to end soon.

Hasser stepped closer and hovered over him. “Who killed Sanya?” he asked softly.

“Ah, it hurts,” his swollen mouth moved a little as he croaked. The eyes were distant and unfocused.

“Yeah, I can see. Tell me who murdered her?”

“Aqa sent a Chinese assassin.”

“Why?” asked Zaki.

"She got suspicious."

“Where’s the kid?”

He coughed weakly. “Somewhere in Birmingham. My boss wants him brought here once the police investigation has run its course.” He provided an address.

“Go on,” Hasser prompted him.

The man grunted in pain, his breaths shallow. “Aqa is hiding in a Pasdaran base. Out of your reach.”

“What’s happening in Myanmar?”

“I don’t know exactly. Aqa spent a lot of money on Rohingya refugees. Two years ago, he tasked me with arranging for the Egyptian’s travel and accommodation. I visited. Bought a compound and set him up. Subsequently, I made a few more trips.

“What’s he doing there?”

“No idea. Most likely, religious education. Aqa deposited large sums in his bank account in Egypt.”

“What’s the Chinese connection?”

“They’re involved, but he never told me how.”

“Are you finished with him?” Mina asked grimly, her face a mask of insane calm.

Hasser nodded and moved away. With a sudden lurch, she wrapped the whip around her victim’s bruised neck and tightened it. Rostam joined hands too. They gave the whip a final, forceful jerk and howled in unison. Some kind of battle cry, he thought. The neck broke.

The chieftain had averted his eyes, but on hearing the loud snap he threw up his figs.

**Bandar Anzali, Iran**

Before sunset, they were in Bandar Anzali, a small port town on the Caspian Sea. They had spent the day on the outskirts of Chalus. Since hotels were out of the question, they had to find an alternate place to stay. The agency would dispatch a small freighter to pick them up.

Mina proved resourceful, like before.

She made some calls and dug up her contacts while Hasser drove into a residential area. Zaki was behind him. She guided him to a drab neighborhood where they finally parked, carefully selecting an open street away from the numerous cars and other vehicles in the area. In the shadows, with exits available on both sides.

A few sodium lights and gas lamps illuminated the place haphazardly. He saw people gathered in knots, the sound of their voices mixed with a loudspeaker's blaring tone. It was a cemetery, he guessed. The graves were decorated with small flags on pointed wooden staffs. Next to the graveyard stood a mosque with a tall, garishly decorated minaret.

“What’s going on?” Hasser asked, switching off the engine. The folks were dressed mostly in black and looked charged up enough to have come to a battlefield.

“A procession for our martyred ones,” Mina replied. “We’re Shiites.”

“But it’s not Ashura days,” he objected. The Shiite Muslims spend ten days in mourning every year commemorating the martyrdom of Hussain, the prophet’s grandson.

Mina gave him a doleful eye. “Yes, you’re right, but we’ve lost a lot more since Karbala. You’re watching a weekly rally to mark the event anyway.”

Hasser nodded. Iran had seen its fair share of killings after the revolution. The Iraq-Iran war had been a disastrous affair. Even the current regime massacred its dissidents on an industrial scale. Mina pointed out row after row of graves. Most buried inside had died young, he saw, judging by the dates on the headstones.

He watched in silence. The crowd was waving pennants and chanting loud elegies. A few women stood on the terraces of nearby houses. He saw one enthusiastic cameraman perched atop a makeshift tower, filming the whole event. People were carrying wooden replicas of sacred tombs on their shoulders. A decorated horse was moving through the crowd, flanked by swordsmen in colorful regalia.

The scene was alive with a fury he had not seen anywhere before.

Among the mourners, a smaller group, mostly bare-chested young men and boys, were whipping themselves with chains and blades. Blooddrops flew in the air, shimmering bright, like fireflies gone berserk. A kid was drenching their flayed bodies with rose water.

The voice from the speaker soared, and the self-flagellation picked up. A craze appeared to have taken hold of the procession. The passion play was in full swing, enacting the medieval scenes of suffering and trials.

He shook his head and rolled from the truck. Zaki was removing bags from the vehicles. Rostam led them into a tiny house adjacent to the mosque.

Inside, they showered and changed into comfortable clothes. Mina brought some hastily prepared food.

Zaki had his laptop open, an internet dongle loaned by Mina sticking into a side port. He was eating as well as doing online research for the next phase of their mission.

Hasser gave the dongle an uneasy look. Mina waved a hand. “Don’t worry, it’s anonymous. Wouldn’t be traceable to us even if somebody bothered to check.”

“I hope.”

“What are we going to do next?” Zaki inquired, wiping his mouth clean.

“For starters, you need to get in touch with Chad. Get him into the act.” Hasser paused before continuing. “The Egyptian is the key now. Let’s see if we can watch Yangon and its surroundings for any trace of him. By whatever means possible, human or technical. Our target is in the wind. Most likely, they would’ve moved him, but you never know.”

“Okay.”

Hasser went on. “Let’s plan for a trip to Myanmar once we get out of here. We’ll need some support. Country is a Chinese backyard. Unchartered territory, sort of.”

Zaki frowned. “Fine. But what about here? I fear considerable opposition. We may need some extra manpower.”

“I may help you,” Mina said.

“Really? How?” Zaki asked.

“We once raised a group of volunteers some years ago to fight against the Taliban. Most of them are laid off now, but I could whistle up some guys if you like.”

“They any good?”

“Not at par with your special forces teams but they are local. Tough as nails, and they know their weapons,” Mina elaborated. Rostam was his usual mum.

Hasser conferred with Zaki. Actually, they had no other option. Operating in Iran with minimal resources was an uphill task. The situation they were facing was already grim. It would only worsen as they attempted to escape from the grip of the beast. Some measures were essential to lower the odds stacked up against them. If a band of supporters could be on their side, so much the better. Under the circumstances, Hasser would not mind a couple of bums armed with nothing else but sticks.

He said to Mina. “Let’s do it. Money isn’t an issue. How many guys could be arranged?”

She fished out her cell phone. “I’ll call some people.”

“You must be discreet. Keep everything vague, with no details on the phone. Right?” Hasser cautioned her. He was not comfortable with her using the cell phone too much.

Her calls took a few minutes before she raised a thumb in triumph. By that time everyone had finished a cup each of pink tea mixed with ground pistachios and almonds.

“Well?” Hasser looked at her expectantly.

“A few armed men will join us later tonight. I can personally vouch for them,” she assured them.

“Got it, thanks,” Hasser said.

“One more thing, everybody, Zaki said seriously. "It's a hostile land, and we're a clear target now. We stay locked n’ cocked, all the time. Pistol and carbine, both. Not just a handgun, okay? Even kids here are better shots than average soldiers.”

“What about a bazooka?” Mina snickered.

Zaki yawned. “Remind me at Walmart next time. Let's hit the sacks now.”

“Seems we wouldn’t be getting any snooze time,” Hasser said dejectedly, disturbed by the noise of the procession.

“The *majlis* is going to end in an hour,” Mina told them politely, using the Persian word for the gathering.

“It’s all right. We’re fine,” Zaki said. Rostam was already crashed on the floor mattress and snoring lightly.

Hasser excused himself. His stomach was filled with abundant food, leaving him heavy-eyed.

**Chapter 17**

**Tehran**

Aqa fumed as the Quds Force commander pored over the photographs sent by his field workers. They had rushed to the village where the Americans had taken out his manager. The situation had escalated significantly. Babak had died a horrendous death. Foreign agents could not be allowed such impunity. Totally fucking unbelievable, he thought.

“Got anything else?” he said to the uniformed man sitting across the table.

“A little,” Vahidi squirmed uneasily. “My men have taken hold of a few videos recorded by a camera at a checkpoint in Chalus. Early in the day, two trucks loaded with unknown people entered the town. They had come from a southerly direction. Their faces were not clear in the imagery, but we’ve managed to identify the trucks. A local woman was tagged as a possible collaborator. She happens to work as a travel facilitator.”

“What about the trucks?”

“They’re registered in Tehran. The owners are currently abroad.”

“A dead end, then?”

“Not really, Aqa. We talked to the local car dealer.”

“Tell me what he divulged. No need to go into the details of your work.”

“Well, he admitted to having provided the trucks to one of his old friends for a trip to Chalus. For sightseeing, he said.”

“A popular tourist attraction I must say,” he grunted.

“Yes. I had to eventually be more persuasive.”

Aqa recoiled in disgust. “Damn.”

He considered the implications. Americans were desperate. By sending someone like Zaki back into the field, they showed their frustration.

*But how to trap them?* he wondered. “Where’re the Yanks now? Any idea?” he asked impatiently.

“In or around Chalus. My people are working to locate them.”

“May I ask how we get them now?” Aqa asked.

Vahidi did not reply. His mind was preoccupied with determining an effective course of action given the current situation. Any possible altercation with a CIA team was a double-edged sword, which the scheming bastards above him would certainly utilize against him if things went sideways. Any violent confrontation could have unintended consequences. He would not mind a few dead Americans, but such an open war was least acceptable to his political masters.

Well, that left pitting some crazy bangers against the foreign infidels. If they somehow managed to whack some Americans, he would gladly accept the prize. Otherwise, they would take the fall. He smiled at the thought.

“Who’s leading the Basij there?” he asked a subordinate.

“Javad. He is a major. Long work for the Quds Force in Lebanon and Syria before requesting an assignment back home to settle some family issues. An experienced man.”

“Send him the word. Discreetly. “The Basij militia was a paramilitary component of the Pasdaran. Religious zealots.

“Yes, general.”

“Make sure to park a drone over the town and send out your watchers.”

**Bandar Anzali**

“We’re close,” Javad said. He was leading a team of Basij hard-hitters chasing the elusive Americans.

The driver of the Land Cruiser nodded as he dimmed his headlamps and eased off on the gas. Two more similar SUVs were in tow, converging on the mosque.

Javad readied his weapon. He was amped up, feeling the buzz of adrenaline rushing through his body. Eager to bludgeon his way into the enemy hideout. The cocky Americans were playing freely in his homeland. An Iranian had died at their hands.

The American duo had operated with exceptional skill, proving themselves really good at meting out violence with extreme prejudice. Maybe their arrogance dictated their actions, assuming they were the best who could have their way, wherever they went. Now he wanted to best them in any possible way, before putting bullets in their filthy bodies.

Javad had thrown his energy and resources into the hunt. His extensive contacts had finally delivered, digging up information leading to the whereabouts of the enemy.

“Biker is proceeding with the attack,” one of his men sitting in the back reported.

“Superb,” he muttered.

His driver winked at him. “Americans will bleed tonight.”

“Yes, God willing.”

He had devised a simple yet ruthless plan to bag them. A suicide bomber riding an explosive-rigged motorbike would strike at the mosque frequented by the anti-regime young locals. In the ensuing chaos, he and his men would attack with overwhelming firepower.

The attack would be pinned on the suicide bomber working for the evil forces bent on destroying Iran.

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His eyes fluttered open, and Hasser found himself plopped on the air sofa bed under a heavy quilt. The walls were dark and empty, except for the portrait of a bearded saint looking down at him disapprovingly. He had retired to one of the bare-bones rooms after supper and dozed off instantly, despite the constant din of the procession in the cemetery outside.

Hasser did not know what snapped him out of his patchy sleep. For a second, he thought that the mourning rally had broken up and the grievers had gone to their homes. He blinked. Though subdued, the noise was still in the air, seeping through the old walls. Getting up, he put on his shoes and slithered out of the room, a pistol in his hand. His Colt M4 carbine was worn on a sling across his chest. He moved through a corridor.

The building was quiet, asleep despite a constant throbbing of wailing noises. At the end of the corridor was a stairwell. He ascended the stairs, one at a time. Emerging on the roof, he crouched low and walked to the end of the roof. It was pretty cold. Low twenties, he guessed. The sky was overcast, menacing dark clouds ready to burst open any moment.

The devotees in the mosque’s courtyard were still flailing themselves, though the attendance had ebbed. Some onlookers huddled together in front of a small fire in the cemetery, struggling to keep the cold at bay. Cars and vans parked haphazardly on the street had thinned out.

*Brum, brum, brum.*

An approaching motorbike sound reached his ears—a puny 4-cylinder engine, he judged. It was revving up like crazy. He tried to discern the direction.

The next moment, the biker flashed before his eyes. He was coming up the street, cutting through the parked vans, its single headlamp drawing a bead at the crowd. A cop turned in time to see him going for the mosque gate. With too many people clustered together, there was no way for him to stop the biker. The mourners began to react just as the man slammed into the mosque entrance.

“Oh, shit, no!” Hasser managed to utter it before the bomb went off.

The deafening blast came rolling over him as more than eighty pounds of explosive material, fortified with ball bearings and nails, erupted amidst the throng of mourners.

The street below was suddenly engulfed in flames and smoke, and a whirlwind of debris spread outward, obliterating everything in its path. The overpressure wave smacked him square in the chest, and he was thrown off his feet, hitting the parapet. Dazed, he tried to get up, but stumbled, landing on his back. His pistol fell. The carbine was still there, tucked against his chest.

After being disoriented for several seconds, it took him some effort to recover. Rolling on his side and getting up slowly, he checked himself for any injuries. Nothing was damaged.

Below, the noise of the explosion had been replaced by a chorus of new sounds. People, wailing in agony, spread askew on the cold earth like deformed caricatures. Badly hit and maimed, unable to move. Bleeding to their deaths. A few were shocked into inaction.

Panicked rescuers were rushing in, he saw.

Three speeding vehicles, which he identified as Toyota SUVs, converged on the mosque, their lights doused. The Toyotas came to a screeching halt in the cemetery, and armed men disembarked. Hasser swore under his breath, unslinging the M4.

A hit team on the heels of a suicide bomber.

He counted a dozen guys, all carrying Kalashnikovs and handguns. While most men were typical militia types, some wore ski masks and moved with precision. The situation was rapidly deteriorating. It couldn’t be a coincidence. The adversaries were doing a planned raid in the middle of the night. Something only a resourceful state outfit could manage. It also spoke volumes about their desperation. They appeared in no mood to let the hunt go cold.

He pointed the carbine at the shadows materializing in his field of view. Then their leader appeared, briefly illuminated by an upturned gas lamp that was still glowing. Walking amidst the graves, he looked like a ghoul brought to life by the wicked cold night, screaming orders to his band of monsters. He was accompanied by a masked man.

“Damn,” Hasser muttered quietly.

The people who were arriving to help the wounded immediately began to scatter. Even a few injured ones who could get up on wobbly legs struggled to save themselves.

Seeing the attackers turn up seemingly out of nowhere made him realize he was dealing with a relentless enemy here who would go to any lengths to kill him and his pals. A dozen lives had already been snuffed out, and the attack had just started. He spat in disgust, deliberating whether to engage the raiders. His friends were inside the house. If he fired now, it would be like drawing attention to them, but if he did not, he would miss out on taking down an unsuspecting enemy, exposed in the open. *A cruel dilemma,* he thought.

The head honcho raised an arm to signal his goons.

The cemetery exploded with the noise of gunfire. The men were bringing down a hellish amount of firepower upon the mosque. Under a hail of AK-47 rounds, the front of the building began to chip and break off, but it was the remaining mourners, both wounded and well, who bore the brunt. More bodies fell to the ground. Men kicked them or jumped over them and stormed into the courtyard of the mosque, guns blazing.

Hasser watched in shock as the gun attack unfolded. Kalashnikovs blasting away in the shadows, kicking up a racket of noisy death. Muzzle flashes stinging the worn-out, tattered drapery of night. He was also able to hear yelling voices. For a long moment, everything was a blur, gunshots and screams merging into an ear-splitting cacophony.

The leader stayed outside, a pistol in his hand, supervising the bedlam he had unleashed as his men poured into the mosque’s interior after clearing the courtyard.

The unarmed people trapped inside after the suicide blast stood no chance of surviving the assault. Caught by the suddenness of the attack, they could not escape or shelter themselves, and fell victim to the hail of bullets. Their wailing reverberated through the air. The sheer brutality of the scene left him aghast.

Satisfied with their handiwork, a quartet of assailants broke off and made a beeline for the house. Hasser watched them approach on the double, gaining momentum as they ran.

Still, no response from inside the house. *What’s Zaki waiting for?* he thought worriedly.

Unable to restrain himself anymore, he readied his carbine and crawled to the edge of the roof. His location was not perfect for an ambush, but hopefully he would be getting his first shots with a little surprise on his side.

Using the Trijicon night scope, he tracked an assaulter who was focused too much on the front door of the house. His finger came down on the trigger, and a short burst landed in the target’s center mass. Shifting aim, he fired off more rounds, taking down another militant. He was glad they did not appear to be wearing body armor.

The hostiles reacted instantly, and automatic fire sprayed the roof around him. He lowered himself to the concrete floor, covered with thin frost.

More gunshots exploded, and another militant dropped dead. From downstairs, he recognized the familiar sound of an M4 firing in short bursts. His guys were in the fight now.

The attackers panicked. After clearing the mosque, they had begun charging straight toward the house. They now hit the ground and sought whatever cover was available. Clearly, they had come prepared, with solid information about their intended targets and an advantage in numbers, but one thing they seemingly had not prepared themselves for was the likelihood of armed opposition by an alerted enemy. For them, a pitched gun battle in the dark against an unknown force was a serious challenge.

Smoke was churning out of a window on the ground floor. The exchange of heavy fire had doubled, and the hostiles were recovering from their initial setback. He could see flashes of AK-47s emanating from the cemetery, interspersed with pinpricks of friendly fire going in the opposite direction. The racket of bullets ripping through the air was deafening.

His stomach turned with nervous energy.

The enemy still outnumbered his team despite suffering casualties. He was reasonably certain that the residents nearby wouldn't dare challenge the Basijis. At best, they would call the cops. But he was equally certain that the police would not interfere.

The attackers kept firing at his position, their rounds smacking into the roof with sickening regularity. He fired back blindly, his head down, hoping like hell the opposition did not press their attack, because if they did, he and his friends would not stand a chance.

He could hear the leader shouting at his men, urging them on in a mad rush against the house. Far from the sudden, orderly assault he had originally planned, his attack had deteriorated into a small-scale skirmish, and he obviously did not like it. Like any other bully, he had assumed the Americans would either die or surrender to his men instead of putting up a fierce resistance.

**Chapter 18**

Javad’s eyes narrowed. The Americans and their local helpers proved stubborn. His initial euphoria was giving way to a more realistic appraisal of the situation, though he could see no reason for an outnumbered and outgunned duo of foreigners to fight. It was simply incomprehensible to his mind.

He shook his head. Finding an answer to such nagging thoughts could wait. Now was the time to act decisively. He was not the sort to take it lightly in a shooting match. Holstering his pistol, he hefted an Ak-47 and rested his torso against a grave, taking up a semi-prone firing position. His short, controlled bursts were aimed at the house, targeting the rooftop and a window from where the enemy was shooting back. He intended the covering fire to shield his men as they advanced.

He ordered his goons to keep up the pressure while he went for precision shooting. If that was the way his opponents wanted it, so much the better.

So far, it wasn't going well for his men, and he knew it would only worsen if he did not finish the battle soon. The men under his command were not his usual preferred crew. Some of his best people were off the premises when the orders came, forcing him to make do with whatever riffraff was available at the time. They were doing an okay job, he noticed, but he had no idea how long their enthusiasm would last in the face of such resistance. He had no desire to find out.

High-velocity rounds whizzed by over his head. He flattened himself over the grave to keep his silhouette minimal. The smell of dried flower petals and mildew reached his nostrils.

Just as he was trying to hold back a sneeze, a round impacted close by with a solid whack, and someone cried out. The bullet struck the man to his left. He rolled over before going limp.

“Fuck,” Javad rasped. Another loss. One less shooter at his side. Too many men were dropping.

The Quds boss had called him before the assault and assured him of an easy victory. His intelligence had been spot-on, possibly managed through multiple agencies. His overconfidence led him to believe that subduing the Americans would be effortless.

Javad was now seeing everything in a different way. He realized how an operation went sideways when you underestimated the opposition. Especially if they happened to be highly skilled professionals trained in the dark art of killing. He had hoped to get in and out of here and back to his favorite Chalus, with the enemy finally dealt with as desired by his boss, well before daybreak. Now he saw everything grind to a halt.

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Hasser wanted to be in a warm bed and away from this madness, but not necessarily in that order. He’d look for a quick getaway first before thinking about any sack time. He certainly had no desire to kick up the bucket so soon and was prepared to do whatever it took to get out of here alive.

A crouching figure emerged at the rear of the house. It seemed to pause, head moving on the swivel, as if watching and listening. He held a weapon in his hand. In the dark, Hasser could not see the person clearly, but it had to be one of his own. Another silhouette appeared, sticking to the wall and keeping himself hidden. Though the enemy was apparently on the other side, encirclement by a secondary force or simply the presence of a guy or two at the backdoor could not be discounted.

Whoever was out there looked cautious. Any smart opponent was expected to cover the likely exits. The guy lurking at the rear door was a target for unseen hostiles. Hasser felt it was his responsibility to check around for danger. He did it rather thoroughly, scanning the poorly lit area with the scope.

Nothing. No human shape in his view. It was clear, which he took as a first good sign during this shitty night.

At least one other person from his team was actively engaged with the attackers. He was inside, on the ground floor, and probably fired his weapon through a window. A volunteer who had decided to stay back and fight, allowing the others to escape as before it was too late.

The hair on the back of his neck bristled. It was like a stalemate, except that the situation did not bode well for them. They were already outnumbered and outgunned, trapped inside a kill zone, and the walls were closing on them. The militia would receive reinforcements soon. One could not rely on the local police for any assistance. More likely, they would look the other way. The enemy was going to prevail in the end.

He shifted back to the front and resumed firing. The leading attackers had crept so close to the house that he could no longer get a low angle. He'd have to raise his head, but doing so was like inviting a bullet. As he watched, another man moved to the leader's side, replacing a fallen comrade. They were alert, responding to the unexpected resistance at the house.

The fire coming his way intensified. A steady, tense cadence.

At least two rifles were raining down lead on his position. They had him cornered. His only options were to stay a little longer and help his friends get out. If they extricated themselves without serious injury, they could hope to disappear into the streets covered in darkness.

He felt a blow, and something stung his left shoulder. He jerked back. Something wet and warm begin to ooze. He was hit.

Gritting his teeth, he took a few deep breaths. The pain was coming. He fished for the fentanyl lozenge in his vest pocket. After placing the painkiller in his mouth, he quickly applied the dressing.

Controlling his breathing he tucked himself against the low parapet wall and scanned briefly. One guy was immediately spotted. Loading a fresh magazine, he tracked the Iranian. The man was moving in short strides, firing intermittent bursts, the Kalashnikov bucking in his hands. Hasser quickly pulled the trigger. His target whipped around and collapsed in a heap.

It drew an instant response. A stream of bullets peppered the roof. Too close. He pulled back, ducking. He made himself as small a target as possible and waited. Another guy had probably marked his position. Now he was giving him full attention, his fire intense. Hasser remained glued to the wall, waiting intently for the clip to exhaust.

*Click.*

The weapon ran dry.

It was the moment. He quickly popped his head and brought his carbine back to readiness.

The gunman was smack in the middle of his sight, desperately struggling to reload. A three-round burst popped from Hasser’s M4. It hit the guy in the face, and he fell backwards. No one else was visible. Shifting aim, Hasser fired a few haphazard rounds at the hostiles hiding behind the graves. The slugs tore into the tombstones and stunted date palms, splintering them in all directions. Keeping the enemy down.

He hit the floor and rolled away into a new position to avoid the return shots. His teammate on the ground floor fired back at the militants. The air smoldered as the rounds crisscrossed.

After a brief period of shooting, silence returned.

Conserving his ammo, he thought. His opponent did not let his desperation overwhelm him. In such situations, people either disgorged everything in one go or charged wildly at their enemies. A smart operative. Down to his last mag, probably. He was picking his targets carefully, still in the fight with his mind and heart in sync.

The militia popped off a series of smoke grenades at the main door leading into the building. A thick pall rose before his eyes. They were making the final push, which he noticed with alarm. Unsure how long the lone man downstairs would last, he whistled to get his attention.

Someone shouted, a tense voice riding the din of gunfire. “Rostam is standing against these fuckers. You go now.”

So, it was him. Mina’s kid brother. Hasser was crushed as he replied. “I’ll fight here. Along with you, man.” His eyes burned from the smoke, and his throat felt as if rubbed with sandpaper.

He rose to point his carbine downward and unleashed half a dozen rounds at the graves. For a long moment, nobody retaliated. He squinted into the darkness, the pennons on the graves swaying with the light breeze, as if hailing the Grim Reaper on his latest itinerary.

He could spot at least two of his teammates getting away, crouch-walking to a side street. A darkened cul-de-sac. Beyond that were brick homes with their usual haphazard layouts. If they reached there, they could probably climb a few fences and escape. Easy freezy!

He barely saw the small, round object arcing through the air. It landed five yards away and bounced off the parapet, still spinning.

*Jeez!* A fragmentation grenade.

He reacted instantly and smacked the stubby thing with the tip of his carbine. Then he hit the floor. It was a near-perfect swing. The grenade was sent flying back to the earth. On its return journey, it went off above the heads of the men who had thrown it.

The explosion lifted Hasser off the floor before smacking him into the concrete. His ears rang. The spall spread outward and showered the roof. But he was spared, having reacted just in time.

Two masked attackers had already dropped one grenade each into the house through the window. Hasser’s throw immediately killed them, and a moment later their own grenades detonated inside. The whole house shook. He believed he heard a muffled scream, more akin to a death rattle. Rostam was gone.

Another guy, slightly wounded but enraged now, pulled out another grenade. It was a flash-bang type that he propelled with whatever force he could muster. It flew to the roof. Still on the floor, Hasser heard the booms of the twin blasts downstairs recede as the other grenade arrived. It clattered to a stop behind him.

A second later, the thing blew up. A white flash and an ear-splitting noise stunned him. Dizziness came like a giant wave, lapping over him, and everything seemed to wobble around him. He retched uncontrollably.

A shadow swam nearby, and someone yelled. He could not hear properly. A hand reached out and stroked his shoulder. It could be one of his teammates...but who? Unable to speak, he barely nodded.

A gun discharged very close. It snapped him out of his muddle. As his vision cleared, he saw Mina eyeing him worriedly. A pistol was firmly pressed into her hands, its barrel emitting smoke.

“Are you wounded?” she inquired.

“Nah. Just nicked,” he replied.

She fired another round into the street below. “Need help?” She made to reach under his back to lift him.

“No, I’m fine,” he said, still wobbly. “Why’ve you come here?” He steadied himself and lifted his gun. Only one magazine was left.

“To save your sorry little ass,” she remarked, smiling around her clenched teeth.

He jumped back a half-step. “Shit.”

She rolled her eyes. “Let’s move out. Zak is trying to get to the trucks. He needs fire support.”

A noise in the distance. His head turned. It was a wailing siren, its pitch picking up as it neared. Soon the strident note began to drown out the noise of the gunfire. More sounds. A cacophony of multiple vehicle engines and voices speaking on megaphones.

"What now?" Mina asked, her hands gripping the weapon too tightly. She was hyperventilating.

He quipped. "Some lawmen, I guess."

“Hey–”

He tapped his carbine. “It looks like a posse has arrived. Police, or maybe the military. Whatever, this place is going to be flooded with a lot more guns.”

The fire stopped abruptly. The remaining Basijis were confused, it seemed. The situation had possibly taken another adverse turn. He didn't have his eyes on them, but even if the newcomers had come to support the attackers, their presence would complicate matters. They might simply be a cleanup force sent to make the unwanted Americans disappear.

“Time to make a break for it. Clear out immediately,” she said, striding to the corner where the stairs led downstairs.

He heard the snap of several footsteps echoing off the street below. A sudden milieu of voices ensued. The militia was clearing out. They looked perturbed by the new arrivals. He could drop them now. His carbine came up, but he held back. Mina was right. They needed to bug out. He certainly had no intention to confront the local version of a SWAT team.

Shit. He leapt after her. Mina was already descending the stairs.

“Hey, careful,” he whispered, moving into position to cover her as she landed on the ground floor and headed for the small door at the end of the corridor. They were just emerging from the house when a vehicle engine roared to life. Hasser turned.

“It’s Zak,” Mina mouthed, jogging alongside him. She looked pretty coiled up, holding the carbine in firing position. Sirens were now louder, the flashers emitting giddying lights. Undoubtedly, a security force of some type.

He nodded. “Slick bastard.” Somehow, Zaki had managed to slip through the confusion reigning outside and approached the parked trucks unobserved. He powered up one of the Isuzus. Hasser looked back over his shoulder and checked the house. The enemy had left. Nobody was following them.

Rifles cracked.

So much for a quiet getaway. With the lights switched off, Zaki maneuvered the truck and came barreling down the street. The rear door swung open. “Get in! Get in!” Zaki screamed.

Hasser could hear running footsteps and AK-47s blasting away behind them. Mina went in. He slammed the door shut and climbed onto the deck. “Go,” he yelled.

Zaki gunned the engine. Bright headlamps came on. A fast escape was a priority now, and he did not want to slam into an obstacle running at speed through the narrow street. The truck built up speed. It jolted and swayed badly as Zaki drove like a maniac. Hasser struggled to keep his ass from tumbling out of the truck. His carbine jiggled.

Shapes materialized outside the cemetery. Crazy shooters in the open. A hail of bullets chased the truck.

Missed.

As Zaki opened up the distance, Hasser fired a few random rounds in their direction. Soon, they were meandering through the tangle of murky streets. Zaki masterfully dodged around a parked cart. His next turn was not so clean, as he tried to avoid a sagging sign board and dented two milk vans coming his way. Hasser cringed.

The truck emerged on a packed dirt track that cut through farmland and ran southward. The wind slapped him with a cold bitterness. He stayed low. Zaki was now cutting across a plot of land that appeared to be reserved for a housing project. Beyond it ran the main road. It was one of the major thoroughfares in the town. Traffic flowed all night. He hoped it would offer some safety. If there was such a thing still imaginable after what they had gone through.

They hit the road.

Mina was on her cell phone, he saw, desperately calling the helpers she had arranged. They would have to hurry. He immediately picked up the Land Cruisers rocketing out of the cemetery. Three vehicles got on the road, their tires squelching, and they began a frenetic chase. He noticed a few cargo trailers mixed with some vans and cars on the road.

**Chapter 19**

The enemy vehicles were weaving in and out of the two-lane road, the intense glare of their headlamps helping him to track them. They were gaining on their truck.

Hasser scanned ahead. A commuter bus was stopped on a turn, its lamp flickering. Damn. Traffic was slowing. He looked back at the pursuing fighters. The lights drew nearer. Zaki would not be able to shake them.

He had to do something.

His next move came without much contemplation.

“Stop!” he screamed, tapping his knuckles on the rear window. Zaki braked in the middle of the road. A cargo hauler trailer bleated its horn, and its massive brakes hissed. Hasser could extend a hand and touch its giant, angry snout as it stopped just a yard away. A van swerved to avoid banging into the trailer.

He waved apologetically to the frustrated driver and cradled his gun. Two young boys wrapping up their late-night business at a roadside soup stall looked at him expectantly but froze when they saw the gun. Even the trailer driver let go of his nonstop honking.

The first Land Cruiser overtook the trailer. They thundered past, too eager to chase their quarry, whom they had assumed would be surging through traffic. Failed to notice a lone gunman on their exposed flank.

He sprayed the Toyota in full auto mode, stitching a line of dirty-looking holes across its left side.

He paused, adjusted, and fired again.

The second Toyota also received a fusillade broadside. The results of his speed shooting were immediate. The lead Land Cruiser wobbled as a shower of broken glass and dust rose from the squealing tires. Blood splashed at its shot-out windows. It veered left and slammed into the road median.

The second vehicle, its driver now dead after getting slugged in the head and neck, rear-ended the lead Toyota with full force. The night exploded as the hood of the trailing Land Cruiser rammed into the suddenly motionless tailgate looming ahead. It crumpled, yet kept on pushing forward. Then it flipped over and crashed to the ground. Metal crunched and glass shattered in a cascading racket of noise.

Amid the clamor, he heard the third Toyota brake hard. Then, the other vehicles stopping abruptly. Horns blaring. Panicked shouts. The air was filled with a sickening smell of burnt rubber and leaking fuel.

Hasser would have loved to go check on the crashed Land Cruisers and kill some more assholes, but he was wounded and down to his last few rounds. Another enemy Land Cruiser was around. The Glock would not suffice. Jumping off the deck, he opened the door and got inside. “Step on it. Get us outta here,” he bellowed.

Zaki floored the pedal. “Not bad gunplay! Now let me show you some road tricks.”

“Bullshit, Zak. You need to improve your lousy driving habits,” he commented sourly. The cabin was warm. It soothed his cold body.

Mina turned to look at him. Her face was a ripple of emotion as she asked. “Did you see my brother get out of the house?”

He shook his head.

“Ah, my little Rostam,” she said, breaking into tears, suddenly bereft of the flimsy hope she had been holding on to till now.

Hasser was quiet, staring at something imaginary in the distance. He had been around death and loss for a long time and seen many things. Still, he could not say a single word to her. He was certain that Rostam had died inside the house. Hasser had heard his groans, stifled by the pain he had gone through in his last moments. He had given up his life for her sister.

*For me and Zaki too,* he reminded himself.

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His eyes burned. Javad was fuming. He had been riding in the third Toyota when the leading pair suddenly met a disastrous end before his eyes. His driver had stopped reflexively, stomping on the brakes like a man possessed. The two crashed vehicles were in bad shape, one tilted on its side against the median and the other tossed over.

He forced himself to shake off the shock and did a quick on-the-scene assessment.

Twisted limbs and bleeding shapes were visible. A body hung upside down inside one of the misshaped hulks. Bullet holes too, he saw, signifying once again a terrifying level of violence.

The shooter was piling up bodies. No doubt a mean customer, the way he had sprung an impromptu trap on the move and culled Javad’s remaining companions.

*Bastard,* he muttered in disgust.

Javad was certain none of the six guys had seen it coming. One moment, they were a kill team on the go, eager to get to their prey and finish the job. The next, they had been gunned down.

Javad was riding with three other people. In the heat of the battle, he had separated from his other teammates. Now, he reluctantly left a team member behind to assist the wounded. It could not be helped. He had to show compassion to his troops.

Other than that, he would not waste time here.

“Move it! We’re going to get the Americans. At any cost,” his words came out in a shower of spittle, his fist smacking the dashboard.

The man behind the wheel was startled. He swore something under his breath, then pulled out of the lane. Doing so involved nudging a small car out of the way and denting another one more forcefully than needed.

The Americans had slipped again. Javad did not care. All he wanted was to close the distance and jump them with little further warning. If he did not act fast enough, they were headed into the wind again. He had to prevent it. Fulfilling that mission was crucial. Vahidi had been clear with his orders.

He knew the Yanks were in a tight spot. Already, one of their supporters had been killed. The pathetic-looking kid who had gone down resisting till the end. It now left them with only the sister. They had expended a lot of their ammunition so far and had no real chance of replenishing it. Not a soul within a couple hundred miles would offer them any help.

Nowhere to run to, low on ammo, cut off from any support—he mentally summarized their situation.

The game was still not over.

The Land Cruiser made slow progress getting out of the logjam. He seethed but kept his tantrums under check. The road was in terrible condition, plagued with potholes.

Something clicked in his mind. If the Americans stayed on this road, he had a real chance of catching them. A security checkpoint was ahead, he knew, and the Yanks would not be passing it with ease. Papers and permits would be demanded. Searches would be conducted. At the very least, a delay.

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Thankfully, the cops were manning the checkpoint. Dealing with the military would have presented a significant challenge. Zaki had to bribe a corpulent police officer who knew nothing better than to keep a flashlight targeted at his face while he chatted with him. His fellow officers just looked bored. Finally, Zaki was waved through. An intersection lay ahead.

“We got company,” Mina warned earnestly.

The Toyota was lined up behind them, with a few vehicles separating them.

As their Isuzu moved, Zaki asked Mina. “Where’s the help you promised?”

“They’re mobile as we speak. We will rendezvous at the boat club,” she told him. “A klick away.”

“We may not get that far,” Zaki said grimly, his foot pressed to the floor. Hasser reached for his Glock.

The Toyota jumped the lane and shot out of the stopped traffic. A few motorcyclists went flying in the air. Next, the Land Cruiser galloped forward and collided with the Isuzu just behind the rear wheel.

“Crazy motherfuckers,” Mina shrieked, thrown around despite her belt.

As soon as he felt the jarring impact, followed by a spin, Hasser immediately realized what the man had done. The bastard had used a pursuit intervention technique favored by traffic officers to stop runaway motorists. The truck seemed to go out of control at once.

“Watch it, Zak,” he hollered.

Zaki kept his cool and avoided giving a quick panicked twist to the wheel. The vehicle jiggled and swirled, lifting off itself briefly before smacking down hard against the road. As the impact force dissipated, its rotation slowed.

Zaki righted it against a pile of gravel at the intersection. They had made it through, but with the nose now pointed in the wrong direction. Away from the boat club. The road was narrow, and blocked by the Land Cruiser behind them.

They were trapped.

“Stop!” Someone called out. He was using a bullhorn. “I am Major Javad of the Iranian security forces. I order you to surrender yourselves.”

Zaki muttered. “Screw you.”

He accelerated to get away from the threat. Bullets plinked the truck. They had barely covered fifty yards when one of the tires gave way, blown out by a rifle round. The truck skidded uncontrollably. Zaki held onto the wheel as the Isuzu shed speed amid its violent lurching. They were not going anywhere, the realization hit.

Zaki rotated right and used the available speed to cut across the road. The truck shuddered again as it traversed a patch of unfinished road work before coming to rest against a clump of wild hemp.

“Get out, get out, everyone!” Hasser shouted an order. He opened the door. From where he stood, a dirt-coated street led away from the road. A bulb sat on a twisted pole, its pale-yellow light throwing shadows into the trees lining the street on one side. Beyond, some darkened houses were visible.

They ran to the trees. Tires screeching. Vehicle doors opening behind them. Then, the gunshots came.

He saw Zaki and Mina jump over a low wall beyond the trees and disappear. He turned, fired a few rounds at the pursuing men, and went over the wall. Shots chased him in the dark. They ran through an alley. A dog barked in one of the houses straddling the alley. Finally, they found themselves in an open space, like some kind of premises.

And then, they saw the church. It was a plain-looking building. It might have been a collective hallucination—a chapel in the middle of a town dominated by crazed killers. Except in their hearts, they all knew that was not so.

Hasser was taken aback. A light—yes, it was a ray of light. It beckoned him. Beyond that, nothing was clear. A shimmer.

An old man came walking toward him out of the light, as if riding the very air surrounding him. He looked grim, but he smiled when he saw Hasser. Like he was seeing his child. He was dressed in priestly attire. A pale golden cross dangled from his neck.

“Come with me.” His voice was soft.

Everyone felt so unsure of the situation, yet they obliged. Outside, the gunfire was picking up.

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Javad saw his quarry disappear inside the small, grim church. He would follow them and finish the task, he thought, just as shots erupted behind him.

*What the hell?* his head turned.

Assault rifles. The unmistakable sharp rat-tat-tat of multiple Kalashnikovs. And the pistol cracks too. The awful flashes lit up the night. Half a dozen weapons were suddenly in action. The newcomers were likely on the road, blocking his exit.

More than he and his two remaining men could deal with. He felt the danger descend upon him like a dark cloud.

The posse could be a backup force the Americans had somehow arranged or a local law enforcement team appearing out of nowhere. More likely, it was the former. The cops here did not surface in situations like this. If they did show up, they took great care to put as much time and distance between themselves and the bullets flying around.

*Time to bug out,* his mind screamed. Javad had come so close, yet he was struck now. If he pressed, he would find himself trapped between the armed yanks in the church and their helpers outside. He had to back off. Even his operatives were smart enough to have come to the same conclusion. They were looking at him.

“Come on. Let’s get out,” one man whispered. His voice was unsteady, eyes bulging.

Javad felt wrung out. “Yes,” he spat toward the church and started running.

Once again, the American killers had survived. Got lucky, in fact. He'd come so close to wiping them out tonight. He was baffled as to why God was allowing the scum to evade him at every turn. If he had any more firepower now, he would have certainly brought it upon that ugly church and razed it to the ground, along with the godless Yanks hiding under its roof.

Javad and his surviving men slipped away into the darkness.

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Hasser watched Mina talk to her friends on her cell phone. She was slouched on a pew bench. They had arrived just in time, forcing the Iranians to break contact and flee.

They now wanted to bring their vehicles inside the church compound to pick them up, but Hasser expressly forbade any move that could endanger the priest afterwards. Father Ramzi Jabril was a quiet man who had not even asked a single question after offering them shelter. The Church of Saint Maryam was a small, rustic structure with a single nave. Drab, isolated, and forgotten.

Hasser was positioned next to the door, a gun in his hand. Zaki stood beside him, looking completely rundown, yet ready for another round.

Mina announced. “My helpers are waiting on the road.” Seeing nobody move, she asked. “Are we going?”

Hasser eyed Zaki who was hesitant, apparently feeling secure inside the building with a weapon in his hand, instead of being out on the dark roads once again and seeking a new place to hide.

“Anyone got a plan here?” Zaki asked.

“Nope,” Hasser muttered. His wound was aching like hell again. He needed a medic to look at it.

“We’re clearing out as fast as possible,” Zaki said uneasily. He could now see the pain in Hasser's movements. The guy was a gifted gun artist and fought like a maniac, but he was no Superman.

“Why?” Hasser asked.

“Our vehicle, all shot up and damaged, is left not more than three hundred yards away, and we’re static here. We’d be vulnerable,” Zaki answered as he began to walk around, his eyes going over the semi-lit interior.

Mina said. “He’s right. We need to understand that Father Jabril has already risked himself by sheltering us here.” She added haltingly. “I…I don’t want any harm coming to him or this place.” Jabril just kept quiet and watched them.

“Where will we go, Mina?” Hasser inquired, trying to make up his mind. He checked his Glock. Six rounds remaining. His M4 was already dry.

“Once we clear this area, we’ll try to get a boat and catch the freighter,” she said.

“That’s the plan? Zaki groaned.

“I can’t offer much,” Mina said apologetically.

Hasser opened the door. “Okay, we’re getting out. Stay with me.” Zaki patted the priest, thanking him, and followed suit.

They ran on a paved path across the vast lawn surrounding the church building. It led to a darkened corner, where they scaled the boundary wall. The security vehicles and emergency services were on the adjoining roads. They could see the flashers and hear the wailing sirens, but nothing on the street where they were standing.

Mina met up with her contacts. The four men immediately loaded them up and rushed out of there.

**Chapter 20**

**Doha, Qatar**

Kate felt the last twenty-four hours sap all strength out of her body. Unknown to the belligerents on the ground, she had remained trapped inside the small operations center, glued to the screens, watching their handiwork in real time.

The operation had been a roller-coaster ride of sorts.

In the wake of the tanker hostage crisis, an RQ-170 stealth drone was launched on its routine flight to monitor the Iranian coastline. Twenty minutes into the flight, the single-engine bird had been diverted to an urban orbit over northern Iran. Despite being surprised by the sudden change in mission orders, the crew, seated inside a ground unit at a classified location, complied nonetheless. The instructions had originated at the very top.

After tackling the manager, Hasser and Zaki had to swim through a firestorm to reach their exfiltration point in Anzali. The final confrontation with the militia had been hair-raising, culminating in a narrow escape for the duo and their helpers.

Kate could not remember how many times her spine had turned cold as the black-and-white figures scampered around, dodging angry bullets in the dark and playing hide-and-seek with relentless killers.

Chad and Jim Stoll barged in. “Hey, status, please,” Chad asked impatiently.

Startled, Kate looked up, then cleared her throat. “It appears our guys have managed to board the freighter. It’s leaving the Iranian waters, as we speak.”

“Good. Any complications?” Jim inquired. He was a short, bespectacled man who mostly kept to himself.

“Ah, Hasser was wounded during an engagement. He took a bullet.”

“Damn. Is he okay?”

“Yes. He bandaged himself and continued with his mission. I anticipate that a paramedic on board the ship will see him.”

“How long before the freighter docks in Azerbaijan?” It had left the Iranian territorial waters already, as suggested by the slow-moving blue icon on the screen.

“Six or seven hours to reach Astara.”

Perturbed, Jim scratched his neck. “Too long. The mullahs could attempt something stupid.”

Chad said. “I suggest we send a helicopter and evacuate them from the ship. Then, an Agency bird will bring them here.”

“Options?”

Kate stepped in. “We can request the Azerbaijani military to help us with the first part. They’re not pleased with their neighbors these days.”

Jim pondered for a moment before agreeing. “Ok, do it.” Chad moved away to get on the phone with his CENTCOM liaison.

Jim eyed the display screen. “Iranians are going berserk. I see a lot of air and naval activity along the Caspian Sea coast.”

“Our guys lit a fuse under their bottoms.”

“You’re right, but it’s worrying me.”

Kate squinted. “Why?”

“As I said earlier, they could pull a stunt.”

"Raiding a foreign vessel in international waters? It’d be an act of piracy.”

“As if it bothers them.”

The trio waited, anxiously watching the Iranian activity on their display. The military connection worked. An hour later, the drone detected an Azerbaijani navy helicopter heading out to sea. Only when it was all over, with the gray helicopter approaching the freighter’s deck, did they raise a silent toast.

A man poked his face through the door. He gestured at the TV and disappeared again. Kate switched it on. CNN was running a headline story.

The messiah was in New York.

He stood amidst a throng of people who seemed too eager to approach him and kiss his hands. It was a huge crowd. The building in the background looked like a hospital.

Kate watched in rapt attention. Chad took the remote and raised the TV’s volume.

The news host was ecstatic. She talked breathlessly. Apparently, the messiah had visited the Calvary Hospital in the Bronx. It was a hospice where people with incurable, terminal illnesses went to die.

His presence had not gone unnoticed, though. Especially after the news about innumerable healings at the hospice spread like wildfire.

“Dear Lord,” Jim breathed sharply.

Cloaked in plain robes that shimmered with an unnatural hue, the messiah stepped forth with an aura of tranquil authority. As he walked through the streets of the Bronx, flowers seemed to bloom in his wake, painting the urban landscape with vibrant hues. The cacophony of city sounds hushed to a gentle whisper, allowing the melody of wind chimes and distant laughter to dance on the breeze.

An irresistible pull gathered people along the sidewalks. The messiah's gaze held a profound kindness that touched each soul individually, as if understanding their innermost struggles and joys. Some were moved to tears. Others simply stood in awe, feeling an instant connection to this enigmatic figure.

In his transformative presence, conflicts seemed to dissolve. Neighbors who had long been divided by differences found themselves embracing, and long-standing feuds were forgotten in the face of a shared recognition of their common humanity.

The neighborhood became a canvas of unity and compassion as the messiah's footsteps traced a path of healing. Miracles restored the sick and suffering to health, and the weary found newfound strength to continue. Parks and squares transformed into spaces of serenity where people gathered to share stories, songs, and meals.

As quickly as he had appeared, the messiah's departure was equally mysterious. With a final, lingering gaze that seemed to reach into the depths of every soul present, he got into a car and faded into the warren of streets. His miracles left a lasting impression on witnesses.

The news channel interviewed countless New Yorkers who were crying inconsolably.

“I can’t believe it,” Jim said, slumping back in his chair.

“Where will it all lead?” Chad wondered aloud.

It was hard to tell, Kate knew. Before departing for Mexico, the messiah planned to visit the West Coast. Brazil was next. Maybe Argentina as well. The bastions of Christianity in Latin America.

The results of his trips would be unpredictable.

An incoming phone call got their attention. Hasser was on the other end. Chad answered. “Hi, man. I hope you got out in one piece.”

“Yeah. We’re at Lankaran. The helicopter brought us here.”

“It was a rough time in Iran. A jet is in the air for you.”

“Thank you. I’m bringing Mina with me. We need to take care of her,” Hasser said. He briefed his boss about what he had learned from his operation. Toward the end, he also requested him to get in touch with the Brits and ask them to send a police team to a certain address in Birmingham.

Jim said. “Okay. Come here and get yourself patched up. Then, we’ll think of the other stuff.”

“We need to hurry. Must probe the Egyptian,” he emphasized.

“How? He’s missing in Myanmar.”

“Let me go there. In the meantime, you guys try to find anything about his abductors.”

“In fact, we did,” Kate chimed in. “Your recent friend Ali Aqa is involved. Well, we analyzed his voice recording and ran it through a temporary database we established by sorting through all the voice calls originating in Yangon over the last few days. One guy contacted Aqa for ransom. He happens to work for a Yangon-based gang lord. We got the address and other details.”

“Fantastic. I’m going to see him.”

**Near Alaingni, Myanmar**

Colonel Zeng walked through the rainstorm, a QCW-05 submachine gun in his right hand. He loved the feeling his gun gave him. Besides, it was the appropriate choice for the job at hand.

He wore a parka over his warm clothes. A checkered tribal scarf and wraparound Oakleys covered his face, keeping at bay the worst rain he had ever encountered. A small team of operatives accompanied him. After stepping off the boats, they followed a trail identified by their local guide. It made its way deep into the jungle. The path was deserted. Not a soul in sight. They had the narrow, tree-lined trail all to themselves. *Only a fool would be out on a day like this,* he thought.

A bright green blanket of trees and grass covered the landscape. He could see a few abandoned bamboo huts by the lakeside. In the distance, he could see a monastery's golden stupas. Rain would last another hour, the weather forecast had said. He needed to finish his business before the dust settled. Not quite literally, as a matter of fact.

His technical team had traced the ransom call to this location. However, they had squandered a significant amount of valuable time attempting to identify the gang responsible. He had tried his influence with the military to retrieve the Egyptian without any bloodshed, but the criminals had deflected his demands. Now, he planned to pay them a visit.

He hoped the Egyptian would be in the hideout. Zeng had confirmed the location by bribing a gang member. The weasel-faced informer sold his boss out with ease. Zeng had broken his neck to ensure he would not screw anyone, ever again.

Using a drone, he kept an eye on the jungle. His men were also monitoring the phone and radio traffic. Except for the only call for ransom, nothing else had been detected.

Unnerved by the uncanny silence, he had decided to go active. If he remained stuck in inaction, it might be too late.

He had discussed the situation with his director. A targeted attack with a drone was an attractive option, but there was a downside to it. Even if it were successful, it would provide no proof of death. Another solution would be to send the local military on a killing spree, but their rampant corruption meant they could play on both sides of the fence. Eventually, he decided to do it the old-fashioned way by showing up at the doorstep himself.

Zeng had planned everything quickly. His contacts with the ruling junta helped set an operation in motion. The military had provided the boats. Their guide was a local man who worked in the area's rubber factory. Zeng and his men would handle the actual raid.

He had checked in at one of the lakeside cottages yesterday. The prices were reasonable, and the food and wines were okay, but plentiful. A local fellow he had befriended even hooked him up with a lovely farm girl. Such a blissful mix of business and pleasure, he thought, relishing the memory of the playful teenager.

They reached the bungalow without any incident.

He was now out on the prowl. His team did not need any sophisticated entry technique. Too much caution could also be suspicious. He approached his intended building with a practiced nonchalance. He tried the front door, which opened without a noise.

A small lobby with no one in sight. A single light bulb hung from the ceiling, but it was not working. He removed his shades and looked down a hallway. It was empty. He could not hear any generators. Probably no power in the compound, he judged.

He pushed open another unlocked door and tiptoed to one of the rooms, taking care to stay out of sight of anyone peeping through a hole in the door. His eyes checked for any visible security system or booby traps. Nothing. He stood with his ear to the door and listened.

A murmur of voices on the other side. TV? Maybe, but he wasn't entirely certain. Tightening the grip on his carbine, he leaned closer.

As he was about to nudge the door with his shoulder and move in, it burst open.

A man charged him, the gun in his hand coming up. He was twenty, swarthy-looking, and unshaven. He wore casual western attire, yet he was undeniably a local. Another guy was behind him, getting up from a chair in the room, his hand reaching inside his jacket for a firearm.

Zeng took a step back and spun out of the way as the Burmese fired. The boom was deafening.

Staying low and under his arm, Zeng threw a jab at his opponent, dislocating the gun. He barked something in Burmese. Zeng smacked him hard in the kidneys, and as he hollered in pain and staggered back, he kicked his feet from under him. The guy landed on his back. One of Zeng's men shot him in the heart.

The second Burmese did not come out, but opened up with his own pistol from inside the room. His slugs ripped through the wooden door. Zeng crouched near the door, planning his next move. A blind entry into the room was a no-brainer. So, he would wait for the opponent to empty his gun.

He hollered. “Hey, my guys are outside. You wouldn’t escape. Stop fighting, and I’ll let you go.”

A small laugh, followed by a bored voice. “I know better. Try something else.”

“You don’t know anything about me, and that’s why I want you to live. No sense in dying here,” he said loudly. He was up against a young man, probably just starting his gang career. Out of his element, yet so sure of himself. Zeng was uncertain if his master had sent him on a fool’s errand and forgotten about him, or if he was a maverick type who did not like to be on a tight leash.

Zeng was enjoying the moment. He had the guy boxed in, and time was on his side. How long the game lasted was beyond the point. What mattered was that it would end only one way.

For the next two minutes, a tense standoff lasted. The Burmese kept shooting through the door, and Zeng’s men answered every third bullet with a burst. They had plenty of ammunition, but he saw no use in wasting the stuff. A heavy cordite smell now permeated the dusty air, and wood splinters littered the floor under his feet. Outside, the wind howled, as if a procession of *Penghou* had lost its way in the forest. Then he chided himself for thinking about the tree spirits in the middle of a gun battle.

“Come on, man. Let’s finish it,” he taunted his opponent, whose fire had slackened.

“Screw you, Chink.”

Finally, the bullet-ridden door moved an inch. Zeng tensed and began to rise. The door slammed open, and suddenly a powerful light dazzled his eyes. Damn, he cursed, firing blindly into the glare. The Burmese fired too.

Something burned his arm. He recoiled in fear, dropping to his feet. The next round went above him.

His target ran down the hallway in panic. Zeng struggled to clear his vision and brought his gun around. Taken by surprise, his men opened up late. Their slugs went into the wall. Zeng galloped after him.

The man flew headfirst into the door. It flung open. Zeng saw him hesitate and turn, his eyes searching for a way out of the ordeal.

It was a mistake the guy would not live to regret, Zeng thought as he dashed through the door. He should have raced off and vanished into the rain swirling around him.

Zeng aimed and pressed the trigger without hesitation. The guy fell. He approached the fallen man and fired another shot. The Burmese died peacefully, his eyes closing as if in sleep and his face coming to rest in the yellow mud under him.

They searched for the Egyptian in the building. He was to be found nowhere. The bastards had already moved him.

**Chapter 21**

**Yangon, Myanmar**

Hasser was getting agitated by the minute now.

They had landed in Yangon by midday. Earlier in the evening, Zaki had ventured out to search for any useful information about the Egyptian.

He came back after 9 p.m. looking haggard and bone-tired. He was dressed in local garb. “We need to hurry,” he said worriedly. “Our guy is in captivity and could possibly face torture or worse pretty soon.”

Hasser tensed. “Shit. What’re you up to?”

“We have to act on a piece of intelligence I unearthed through my own sources. Our target is the gang boss's favorite mistress. She’s visiting a local shrine. We must get to her and try whatever it takes to persuade her to help us.”

“You’re talking about kidnapping here,” he objected.

Zaki rolled his eyes. “Are you fucking FBI, Mike? Do you see any other options? Is there anything better than what I came up with? If so, please hurry and let it roll because we are grasping at straws here.”

He raised a hand. “Okay, okay. What’s the plan?”

Zaki explained. "The woman is an expensive whore, catering to a wealthy clientele. However, lately, our friend has reserved her for his exclusive use. He calls her Gigi out of affection. She comes from a lineage of courtesans in Yangon who revere various dead saints buried throughout the town. Every Tuesday, she bows before the graves of her patron saints at the Shwedagon Pagoda. In fact, it’s the most well-known Buddhist shrine here.”

Hasser nodded. “Go on.”

“We’re going to stalk her at the shrine. Once she leaves, we will jump her and take her with us. Then we’ll negotiate with Aung.” Aung Nga Phoe was a prominent crime boss in Yangon, and their intended target.

“That’s one hell of a dumbass plan, Zak,” he said teasingly. “Will it survive the first contact with the enemy? I don’t know, but we sure wouldn’t!”

Zaki bristled. “Hey, do whatever the─”

Hasser cut him off and gave him a wink. “Even though it's a shitty plan, it's the only available course of action at the moment. We’re going with it.”

“Yeah, right.”

“How we recognize her?”

Zaki tapped his cell phone. “Her pictures and physical description are here. Sent by my contact. Let me share the file with you.”

Hasser opened the file. A gorgeous woman in a variety of dress styles stared at him from the phone screen. The pictures were grabbed from her social media profile. She had an uncanny resemblance to Gigi Hadid, a famous American supermodel. A clever mix of makeup and styling efforts covered any shortfall.

“Awesome! She really looks like her namesake,” he nodded approvingly. “Our guy has good taste.”

Zaki was looking at him uncomprehendingly. Apparently, he had not caught the drift.

Hasser continued. “What about the wheels and weapons? You’re not thinking of plucking a woman right off the street empty-handed in a cab?”

“Getting information was another thing, but I didn’t go to my contacts for transport and guns. For obvious reasons, you see. I called our Agency man here. He’s agreed to provide us with a car and some handguns. Beyond that, we’re on our own.”

Out on the Lower Mingalardon Road, Hasser and Zaki met up with the courier. The Burmese handed over a sedan stocked up with edibles, bottles of water, and, more importantly, pistols. To their surprise, the Glocks came rigged with superb night sights. Zaki thanked him and took the wheel.

Some kind of dance-pop music was already playing on the vehicle audio. Hasser turned up the volume.

“What the hell is it?” Zaki asked.

“Hey, it’s the bad girl, RiRi.”

Zaki gave him an eye roll. As Rihanna went about mending broken fences with her lover, Hasser bobbed his head in time with the music. *Becky’s kind of music,* he thought dolefully.

They drove around on the side roads for a while as part of their surveillance detection run. Finding no tails, the duo headed south. The car rolled past the impressive-looking Yangon Golf Club and took some more turns before emerging on a roundabout. Zaki rode along the picturesque Inya Lake. A small park, and some boats plying the lake.

“Wow,” he said, admiring the view.

Zaki nodded in agreement, driving on. Traffic was thick as they neared the city center. High rise buildings with glitzy neon signs on the front gave way to narrow streets with tightly-packed old brick homes. He could see the towering pagoda adorning the skyline.

Zaki sliced his way through a plethora of rickshaws, motorbikes, and cars jostling for space on the small road. Shops, eateries, and stalls were all cluttered together. He stubbornly parked his car near the shrine. Like every other major landmark in the town he could see, the structure shone bright with pompous, colorful lighting, its tall, golden dome aglow.

They decided to leave their guns in the car, as the security at the entrance looked rather tight. Any attempt at taking arms inside the shrine would be impossible.

“She’s already here,” Zaki whispered, his eyes on an Audi sedan. Two heavies lurked around the car. They weaved through the crowd, avoiding a jumble of vendors thrusting trinkets in their faces. Zaki nonetheless obliged one guy and bought a toy gun, which he hid in his oversized socks.

They joined a long line at the walk-through gate. A physical pat-down by the guards came next. Entering the premises over the eastern stairway, Hasser looked around casually, scanning the crowd for potential threats. Despite the late hour, he could see a throng of visitors, or more appropriately, devotees, in the vast courtyard. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of people were there, walking by him, muttering prayers. Some were sitting on the cold floor with their heads buried in religious books.

His eyes dwelt briefly on a band of bleary-eyed monks dressed in yellow robes. Some guys danced to the beat of a huge drum. A heady aroma of incense sticks, fresh jasmine, and rose water permeated the air.

Zaki pointed out. “Got her.” The woman was performing a blessing ritual by throwing water at one of the small shrines surrounding the stupa's plinth. Then she walked into a small building.

They began moving in her direction. A disheveled elderly woman emerged from the shadows and stopped them. “It’s a women-only area. You can’t go.” The hag wore a beaded necklace around her scrawny neck and stank badly. She swayed sideways, looking as if high on cheap dope.

Zaki handed her some bills, and they hurried past her. Coming to a semi-dark alcove, they paused, focusing on two large rooms separated by a narrow passage. A gaggle of women was standing outside, talking among themselves, their voices subdued and whisper-like.

“Like her, they’ve all come here to see the spiritual healer,” Zaki told him. They slipped to the rear of the building. It was poorly lit and strewn with trash. Zaki led him to one of the windows, where a murmur of voices poured out.

Hasser tiptoed to peek inside through a broken glass pane. He saw Gigi in a corner, head down, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Two women forcefully held a young girl, dressed in a tattered long shirt. One of them was the same crone they'd encountered earlier. Just then, the girl screamed incoherently, kicking around and banging her head against a wall.

She appeared to be autistic, throwing tantrums, just like his own daughter, which Hasser realized with sudden fright.

A bald monk, probably an exorcist, entered the room. He wore an embroidered ocher robe and skull cap set with gemstones. He placed an urn of burning plant roots on the floor before her and started smacking her with a pole. It was pure violence.

Going on, the healer produced a gilded dagger and placed it over the flames. He touched the poor girl with its fiery tip. Her screams tore through the night.

Hasser staggered back in alarm. Zaki touched his arm, as if reassuring him. He pulled himself together and watched again, just as the hag slapped the girl across her cheeks. She was assisting the exorcist, who, in what looked like a well-rehearsed ritual, wrote prayers on strips of paper and doused them in water before forcing them down the girl’s throat.

Gigi was staring indifferently at the scene.

Feeling sick, Hasser watched as the charlatan proceeded with casting the spirits out of the hapless girl. As her energy ebbed and she lay on the floor, moaning feebly, the man smiled triumphantly. He nodded to Gigi, his next client. Her consultation differed from the previous one, and the healer dismissed her courtly. She didn't leave without leaving him a substantial amount of money. Greed oiled the rusted wheels of spirituality. *Like everywhere else,* he sighed.

As Gigi stood up to leave, Hasser tugged at Zaki’s sleeve. They trotted to the front yard. Gigi was walking off to a pavilion where hundreds of women were packed together, waiting for their turn to kiss the Buddha. She had to be intercepted now. If she ventured into the crowd, she would vanish. They approached the woman.

Zaki jumped her, poking the toy pistol into her side. “Stay quiet, and you’ll live.”

Gigi froze, looking like a deer caught in the headlights. Hasser could bet it was the creepiness oozing out of Zaki by the gallons that did the trick, and not the plastic weapon thrust into her slender waist. He saw her pupils dilate. Her head bobbed up and down.

“Come with us,” Zaki hissed, upping the menace.

The woman was suddenly pale. Whether she was going to scream or faint, Hasser was not sure. They would be screwed either way. Hasser noticed a few people eyeing them as they strolled past, one stooped-over old grandma in particular, who looked like the curious type. But Gigi caved in, her fear getting the better of her. Without further prompting, she took Zaki’s offered hand.

To avoid bumping into her guards, they went through a small side door that opened into a bustling market. Zaki brought the car from the parking lot, and they drove out of the area. Hasser had his Glock out and pointed at Gigi who was quivering now. Zaki dialed Aung’s personal number, shared by the woman. The gangster responded by swearing and making threats against him. Zaki was not cool, either.

He stopped the car abruptly, yelling back even louder. Reaching back, he punched Gigi repeatedly. Her screams convinced Aung that he was dealing with people no less sinister than himself, who would go to any lengths to get what they wanted. The two men eventually agreed on something.

“He’s meeting with us within the hour,” Zaki announced, looking back at him.

“Excellent. Where?”

“At the Karaweik Palace, a high-end restaurant not far from here,” he said, moving the car again.

“What if she hadn’t been bluffed by your plastic gun?” Hasser asked as the car pulled onto the main road.

“I carried a granola bar in my pocket, a really crusty one. Just in case,” he chuckled.

Gigi gave them a blank stare. She looked prettier up-close. Despite Zaki’s recent work that left marks on her face, her smooth, unblemished skin was fresher than her Instagram snaps let on. Her eyes were an unnatural shade of blue-gray, and a trio of moles on her neck added to her sensuality. She wore her hair in a slicked-back bob. Gigi was perfect, ready for a photo shoot or a ramp walk at a moment's notice, if she so desired. Except that she was courting a monster.

*A pity,* he thought.

The restaurant in question was on the shore of Kandawgyi Lake. They parked the car a short distance away, preferring to go to the restaurant on foot and watch out for the opposition that was sure to be around.

Hasser walked up the garishly-lit lakefront, scouting ahead for possible danger. Behind him, Zaki brought the woman along.

The park was bustling with people. He scanned around. A traffic cop was standing lazily by his motorcycle, ogling a well-dressed female on her way to one of the eateries. A gimp, likely one of the street beggars, sat next to a garbage bin. He stared blankly at the sky. A florist and two perfume sellers latched on to their would-be customers, who looked in no mood to buy either the garlands or the knockoff flacons the pushy vendors offered.

A pair of heavily made-up hookers ambled on, one giving him a suggestive look, the other an obscene pout. They were trailed by a small group of transgender prostitutes with loud dressing and padded-up buttocks, swaying as if carried by the wind. One of them hitting on him with smutty blow job signs.

*What the fuck?* Hasser thought. The place offered much more than a simple eating experience.

Hasser was impressed as he saw the building up close. Designed like a barge, its twin gold birds floated majestically on the lake, and its ornate balconies were lit up. Zaki motioned him over and went through the gate, held open by a midget doorman. Zaki tipped the man as Hasser carried out his customary look-see. No overt threats.

“It’s clear here,” he murmured. The patrons coming from the park walked up a narrow pathway to the restaurant.

“We’re dealing with a gangster. Anything could happen,” Zaki warned, his head moving and eyes probing.

Hasser led the way. He noticed that from inside, the place looked like a small museum. The interior artfully blended serenity and surrealism. Art pieces and paintings were on display. He appreciated a collection of wooden poles turned into decorative shapes. Scores of paintings depicting traditional culture were eye-catching. A retro-chic ambience was evident all over. The owners, as told by Gigi, had put in outstanding efforts to make it an iconic place.

“Here we go,” Zaki said as they entered the dining area.

*Game time.*

Hasser was under no illusion about what was waiting for them. He immediately marked the gang boss and his cronies seated together. Four men in total, though one could never be certain in such circumstances. A spotter or helper could be hiding among the patrons. The bad guys were on their own turf, after all.

Out of the four, one pinged him as a hunter. A brooding man of average height and build, he stood out, betrayed by his ordinariness. He was well-dressed for the place but did not look like a gentleman. A bright yellow scarf was wrapped around his neck. His restless, alert eyes were darting around. Hasser knew a player when he saw one, and he was as perfect as they came. The other two were ordinary muscle. As if on a visceral cue, Hasser touched the pistol in his armpit holster.

They were huddled together on a table, with a black Buddha bust standing behind them. Intricate woodwork adorned the sitting area, adding to the air of class evident at the restaurant.

A dozen other diners were around, kids and families included. Three servers were visible, with one picking up a dish from a table.

**Chapter 22**

Aung had brought his trusted lieutenant along. Dwe, as his circle called him, was born transgender. Shortly after his birth, his father, an Indian, was killed in gang violence. Aung’s dad had taken in the orphan kid, making his household the only family he ever knew. He had grown up into a promising young badass over the years.

If nothing else, his old man had left him a stellar legacy. Through his father, Dwe traced his lineage to a cadre of secret assassins that had thrived in nineteenth-century India. They were labeled as the "Thugs.” Starting off as a roving band of highway robbers, they had evolved into a mysterious cult of skilled killers who employed, among other methods, a fine muslin scarf for garroting their unsuspecting victims in roadside caravanserais across the country.

Dwe no longer worshipped the Bhowani, the cult’s mother goddess, and he preferred more modern weapons to do his killings than the flimsy scarves his ancestors used. But he still loved to wear the yellow cloth piece around his neck whenever he could. *For luck, maybe,* he thought. Or, perhaps not. In his line of work, such important matters as taking a human life could never be left to luck or other frivolities of nature.

Aung blinked as he spotted them, a flash of hatred dancing in his dark, malevolent eyes, his face contorting into a smirk. The gangster exhaled and relaxed visibly. The trio took seats across the table. It was filled with appetizers and soup bowls.

“Hi, my friends. We finally meet,” Aung said. They exchanged stares, but no one offered hands for shaking.

“Friends? Not at all,” Hasser replied. He was clearly offended, though he concealed the true revulsion he felt in his presence.

“Hey, what brings you to my country? It’s kind of way outside your area of concern.” Aung asked brusquely, all civility of the previous moment gone now. His henchman was stoic, all business. Despite his boss's attempts at pleasantries and intimidation, the guy cautiously observed the new arrivals.

“Some nasty kids need adult supervision from time to time. That’s what brings us here,” Hasser quipped. Zaki let out a small chuckle.

Aung made a face. “I disagree.” He put a piece of tempura in his mouth. His guard smiled for the first time and shooed away a server who was lingering around with a slight wave of his hand.

Hasser had to roll his eyes as he replied. “Huh, we go where we want to.”

Aung squirmed in his chair, his face flushing. “Times have changed. Rowdy Westerners running around in Myanmar could face serious consequences. I guarantee, you wouldn’t know a thing before you’re put on a skewer and roasted alive.”

Hasser decided to cut to the chase, bored by the threats the gangster threw at him. “I want the Egyptian back.” He pointed at the man’s mistress, “in exchange for Gigi here.”

“I see. The Chinese want him too,” Aung said, his eyes flitting. A grimace was spread across his face. It looked like he had all the bases covered.

Something was wrong. Zaki whispered. “Mike, he looks sus.”

Before Hasser was able to respond, the attack came with no warning. It was a damned server who appeared out of nowhere and almost sent him to glory.

He began to react on pure instinct. The man had a Boker Magnum knife pulled out from under his vest. His strong knife-wielding arm swung wildly in his direction, its black, drop-point blade coming straight for his neck.

Hasser did not so much see as feel the thrust coming. He had sensed the attacker’s presence. The sudden rustle of air as the man intruded into his bubble and the slight shuffling of his shoes, gave him away, maybe half a second earlier than he had intended.

Hasser jerked a little, and the knife sliced past his neck, missing by a hairbreadth. His hand shot out at the attacking arm, hitting it hard. He dislodged the knife with a snap. It clattered to the floor. Hasser latched onto his wrist and twisted it savagely. The man hollered in agony.

Aung’s eyes widened. The patrons struggled to puzzle out the scene unfolding before them.

Hasser did not let go of the offending arm and forced it upward, exposing his ribcage. He delivered three hard palm strikes with his other hand and dropped him. The man was now out of the fight, gasping for breath. Another server was right behind him, similarly armed and equally fast.

Panicked diners began shrieking now.

Ignoring the frenzy around him, Hasser rotated in a swirling motion, dove under the lunge, and kicked forcefully. His right foot crashed into the guy’s knee with a sickening thud. The man buckled, suddenly losing his balance at the most critical moment of his attack.

Hasser punched him in the flanks. Despite getting his kidneys bruised, the attacker was strong enough that he did not lose his knife. Seeing that, Hasser maneuvered his frame into a tackling position and grabbed his shoulder, at the same time kicking his battered knee again. The guy wobbled and crashed to the floor. He pinned him down. Immobilizing his arms, he head-butted him in the face. His priority was to loosen the opponent’s grip on his knife.

Dwe looked on impassively. He had chosen the hirelings for their brute strength and nothing much else. Under the circumstances, it would have sufficed had they successfully delivered the surprise blows. Now they looked doomed. Any fighting skills they possessed were no match for those of the foreigner.

The man pressed under Hasser made a last-ditch effort to save himself by folding up his uninjured knee and gouging him in the back. Hasser fell forward. The knife came up to meet his face. He eyed the tip; the satin finish of its high-end San Mai steel was frightening. The weapon was expensive and meant for combat, definitely not something what a restaurant owner would issue to his workers.

Turning away from it, his fury building to a sinister crescendo, Hasser used one of his hands to catch the man’s wrist. With the other, he snapped it violently. He heard the bones crack, and the tendons give way in audible groans.

“Here you get it, you son of a bitch,” Hasser puffed. He gripped the knife and thrust it into the side of his chest, the layered steel cutting deep into the vital tissues with ease.

The man howled in pain. A spurt of hot blood gushed out, spraying Hasser’s face and torso, the sickly odor invading his senses.

Through a bloody smear, he saw the blade sticking into his victim’s ribs rise and fall, in rhythm with the death throes he suffered, as the failing heart fought to undo the damage. With a final wail, the attacker went quiet. Hasser ripped off his uniform jacket and wiped himself clean.

Meanwhile, Dwe had charged Zaki. Pushing away the table, he leaped hungrily at the older man, who had maintained his situational awareness despite a brutal knife fight happening right beside him. He had kept his attention divided between watching Hasser and monitoring the opposition.

The beast descending upon him was lightning-quick, however. Unlike anything he had ever encountered. Zaki tried to track his movement and blinked. The next thing he saw was a mighty fist connecting with his jaw. His head swung sideways, and he felt his teeth rattle inside his mouth. The guy raised his hand and feinted with another jab.

Fighting a wave of red-hot pain lapping over him, Zaki flinched, his hands going up to cover his face. Dwe twisted slightly and kicked his shin with brute force. Zaki stumbled and collided with a panicked couple who had watched their gourmet dinner go south the moment the knives had come out.

As her portly husband swore, the woman landed clumsily on the table already groaning under too much food they had ordered. Platters flew into the air; scattering away sago balls stuffed with chicken, fish gravy, and noodles.

An overpowering smell of condiments invaded the air.

Wobbling on his feet, Zaki shook his head in an effort to clear the cobwebs of pain. Dwe freed his yellow scarf and wrapped it around Zaki’s neck. As Dwe pulled it taut, Zaki felt its deadly grip. The pressure threatened to cut his air off. He began to choke. Sensing his end was near, he shook like a leaf before launching himself into the man’s midriff. As the guy staggered back, Zaki reached for his balls–

And failed to grab anything. “What the fuck,” he muttered in alarm.

Overcoming his surprise, he laughed hysterically. “You, fucking eunuch!” Despite being badly bruised, he did not stop taunting him for his obvious lack of certain merchandise. Hasser smiled thinly. Zaki was a class act, no doubt.

Standing above him, Dwe grimaced like a man possessed, his nostrils flaring. He punched Zaki so hard that his neck whiplashed. A follow-on chop to the face disoriented him. Next came a body blow to his right side that sent him crashing into a chair. He landed on his ass. His cry of pain came out like a whimper, and he doubled over.

“Such a pussy, you asshole. Need a pair of really big nuts to punch. You ain’t got nothing,” Zaki teased again, his voice hoarse from pain. Dwe gave him another smack.

The bounding footsteps behind them set the alarm bells ringing in Hasser’s mind before Aung made his move. Some kind of reinforcement had arrived for the opposition, he realized.

He saw a flurry of motion near the table. Aung was standing up. Next, a deafening roar suddenly pierced the air as the first handgun discharged. Hasser had already ducked. Three more pistols added to the chaos, going full bore at once. Getting away from multiple lines of fire inside such a confined place was more of a chance thing than any real art. He felt the cracking rounds pass over his head, tracing invisible yet lethal arcs of heat through the air.

A monstrous racket echoed off the walls.

*Jesus Christ,* he muttered through clenched teeth. His own pistol was already in his hand.

The gunfire triggered a bedlam, turning the lounge into a shooting gallery. A crowd of diners, already shocked by the knife fight, found themselves at the receiving end of flying lead. Tons of it, in fact. They screamed and knocked over tables and chairs in a rush to escape. Others sat frozen.

Aung and his pistol-packing trio unleashed unimaginable pain and death. An elderly woman and her family were hit several times. With multiple rounds stitched across her chest, she screamed in terror. Her son toppled over his two children; their bodies were already riddled with bullets. Another table full of snazzy college co-eds and their dates caught a part of the fusillade. Their screaming and sobbing were incessant. A server, not one of the knife-wielding impostors, took multiple slugs in his pelvis and fell.

Hasser lay motionless, frozen by the moment. His heart was fluttering, and his mind darkening under a cloud of rage. The enemy had unleashed unprecedented violence. He saw Zaki sprawled on the floor, less than ten yards away, his head resting against an upturned chair. He appeared alive, but pretty beat up.

His assailant had ignored him momentarily to join the sudden gun battle his boss had set alight. Gigi was lying down under a table. He was uncertain about her well-being. Maybe she had the good sense to hit the deck and stay low once her trigger-happy lover had gone over the edge.

Two heads poked inside. Shit. Gigi’s guards. The boss man had likely summoned the pair to help sort out the mess of their own making.

Hasser and Zaki were hemmed in now.

He decided to cull the opposition quickly. His Glock was out, cradled in his hands, and pointed outward. The light was not adequate; he was flat on the floor, and his targets were moving.

He tracked one of the men on Aung’s flank with the TruGlo Bright sight on his pistol. The night sight allowed for operating under varied light conditions. With the three green and yellow dots aligned perfectly, eyes level, and breathing under control, he fired. And repeated it.

Considering the poor angle involved, the double tap was not too bad. It thwacked into the man’s torso, tearing jagged holes through flesh and burying deep inside his tummy. He fell like an oversized puppet with its strings cut.

Another quick scan. Dwe was reloading. Aung and another guy found shelter behind a damaged table.

“Contact, at your six,” Zaki mouthed a feeble warning. His pistol was rising for a shot against the goon who had come up the stairs. He was back in the fight, making good use of a wooden balcony that had several bullet holes in it but offered some protection nonetheless.

Hasser rolled away and drew a fast bead on Dwe.

As his shots erupted, Dwe dove for cover. Hasser fired off another burst to keep him down and shifted his aim. Someone appeared in his view, head raised and moving. He was the muscle gangster—the one who had been sticking to Aung like a limpet.

Another pull on the trigger by Hasser gave him a nice hole in the neck. He crumbled to his knees, a geyser of blood gushing from the severed arteries in his neck. Hasser changed the magazine and stayed low, eyes darting around.

Zaki was keeping the man behind him in check by his repeated fire. It made him a credible threat again. Dwe responded by firing in his direction.

“Fucking shitface,” Zaki cursed aloud and shot back. Switching to Urdu, he kept on swearing, his mouth going as fast as the gun in his hand.

While Zaki was engaged with Dwe and Gigi's bodyguard, Aung was the only one in play against Hasser, shooting at will without a pause. He probably had more than one gun at his disposal.

To break the impasse, Hasser did something desperate. Rolling on the floor, he cut across Aung’s line of fire and came to a stop beside a corpse. Aung adjusted, chasing him with a steady stream of bullets. He heard the thump of rounds slamming into the dead body. He silently thanked the dead man for sheltering him.

Now he either needed a small miracle to take on both Aung and Dwe. Or sheer courage bordering on insanity.

The latter came from an unlikely source. A wounded girl, not more than twenty, and one of the co-eds at the table close by, rose abruptly and threw herself at Aung. It was her last act of defiance against the barbarian who had murdered her friends in cold blood.

Aung was bewildered for a second before he shot her in the face and shoved her out of the way.

“Goddammit, you bastard!” Hasser swore. He was chilled to the bone at once. The man was evil incarnate. Enjoyed taking lives as though he had been sired by the Grim Reaper himself.

Hasser had slid to the floor with incredible speed. Half-prone now, he trained his gun at Aung and shot out his legs from under him. A scream escaped his mouth as he collapsed. For once, Dwe found himself caught off guard. His inaction lasted for a second too long.

Hasser plugged him in the arm. The pistol flew out of his hand, and he stepped back.

Hasser charged both men and pistol-whipped them mercilessly, knocking whatever little wind was left out of them. He would have loved to drill neat holes in their heads; the bastards deserved it, but he needed them alive.

Seeing his bosses overpowered, Gigi’s surviving bodyguard relented. Zaki disarmed him. Hasser motioned for him to check on Gigi.

**Chapter 23**

“Never knew you roamed the Wild West in your previous life,” Zaki said in appreciation, looking the scene over. Gigi squirmed as he patted her cheek. She appeared unharmed.

Hasser shook his head ruefully. “Whatever we did doesn’t look sufficient to me. Far too many innocent lives were wasted. Scores wounded too, all for no reason.” He pointed at the gangsters. “Motherfuckers here, on the other hand, are still breathing. It’s all fucking unbelievable.”

“Do we let her go now?” Zaki inquired, glancing sideways at Gigi.

“No. She stays until the Egyptian is recovered.”

“Right.”

“Yeah. We need to take a hike before this place gets flooded by law enforcement.”

Under a seemingly relentless barrage of fists and kicks, Aung had readily agreed to take them to his den and hand over the man. Hasser allowed no conditions, even though the man was in too poor a shape to insist on any. Given the need to clear out immediately, Hasser deferred his plan to work on him some more.

They needed only a minute to move out. Hasser herded the duo outside, the muzzle of his pistol jammed into the small of Aung’s back. Dwe was shouldering his boss, who could not walk by himself. He had wrapped a small towel over his leg wounds. He was unsteady on his feet, but the cold steel of the handgun kept nudging him on. Gigi was by his side.

Zaki trailed them, his gun pointed at the guard. Along the way, they also saw a couple of corpses on the ground outside.

A bespectacled guy stood shaking at the reception counter. Probably the manager. His face appeared sullen, as if he had seen a ghost. Hasser spoke to him as they walked past. “Lots of hurt people up there. You need to arrange help for them.”

He merely nodded in acknowledgment. Zaki spent another minute in a back room, smashing the hard drive for the restaurant's closed-circuit TV cameras.

Hasser and Zaki had hoarded extra 9mm magazines, taken from their captives, in case the going got tough again.

They got out of the building, carefully stepping into the open, keeping their eyes peeled for any threats. Aung, assisted by Dwe, shuffled along because of the injured leg. Blood soaked his shoes. Unsurprisingly, a full-blown ruckus had ensued following the shootout upstairs. People were scrambling to clear the street. Some shaken-up patrons were getting out of the neighboring restaurants. Nobody paid them any particular attention.

Or so they assumed.

Three different people were waiting outside, a ruthless kill team. Someone had positioned them in advance. Rather than hastily entering the restaurant, they had taken their time. Now they saw their targets approaching and went kinetic.

The first shooter happened to be the gimp, who, like the other two, had lingered in the street, waiting for his chance. The beggar had not changed his position, unlike his fellow shooters, who had moved into more advantageous places. Seated against the garbage bin, he tucked one half leg under the other, covered by a blanket. A begging bowl brimming with coins and paper bills rested on his lap. The ugly-looking Chinese pistol came out of the blanket.

His first shots were fast and unexpected, hitting the entourage sideways, having been fired with a quick draw from a seemingly nobody who was part of the background.

The smack of the bullet was the first thing Gigi registered as she stumbled, her arms flailing in the air, before slamming into the ground. Despite being alert, Hasser's gaze was elsewhere, catching him off guard. A slug grazed his leg. Gigi uttered a terror-laced scream and began to writhe in pain.

“Damn you, sucker,” Hasser cursed and dove away, hitting the pavement hard on his side. More rounds cracked. His gun hand moved reflexively, the finger coming down on the trigger twice. The weapon boomed.

The gimp slumped against the bin, a part of his face missing.

Zaki pulled Gigi’s guard in front as a human shield and did a fast scan of the area, his right eye behind the weapon’s sight. He had the sinking realization that if there was one shooter, there could be more. He was proved right. One of the perfume sellers was sitting up from a bench across the street, his pistol held high above him. He was pushing another man out of his way.

Another, even more dangerous gunslinger was spotted to his left on a reciprocal heading from the gimp. She was the streetwalker they had marked earlier. He remembered her as the one with the hungry look on her face. The woman appeared to have changed, which Zaki noticed immediately. She was no longer a coquette; her eyes were more bloodthirsty, her jaw set firmly, and she was armed with a real gun instead of the plastic grin she wore earlier.

The enemy had a really simple attack plan. It transpired into a sudden, three-pronged charge: subdue the opponents, grab the gangsters, and disappear into the night.

“Two hostiles. Engaging the shooter on my left,” Zaki shouted. He did not know if Hasser heard it amid the racket on the street.

He opened up against the woman first. His trigger work was relentless. As the shots exploded, the pistol bucked in his hands. Though he admired Hasser for his ability to shoot single, aimed rounds, he did not relish the idea of holding back the metal only to regret it later. Especially in situations like the one at hand. Besides, the guy was younger, and one hell of a better shot than him anyway. Zaki rather enjoyed watching how he handled himself in such close-quarters fights.

He went ahead with the “spray and pray” method instead, burning through his first magazine in a second. The gun smoked in his hands. Most of his slugs went into a curry stall, but at least one stopped the female killer dead in her tracks. Her weapon discharged on its own as the finger tightened around the trigger in a spasm of death.

A fraction of a second later, Dwe lifted his boss over his shoulders in a fireman’s carry and took off running.

“Shit. They’re getting away!” Zaki shrieked to no avail. Banged up pretty bad already, he knew he could not muster any strength to give a futile chase. He began reloading the clip.

The man was incredibly fast. Strong as well, for sure. He ran as if encumbered by nothing more than a toy doll. He dodged through a clump of people and kicked some chairs out of his way before jumping onto a well-manicured grassy field. It stretched all the way to the other side of the lake.

Hasser was in a low crouch, tracking the perfume peddler with his gun as he emerged through the crowd. He watched him manhandle a guy and power him to the ground. At the same time, he noticed the gangsters slip away. He now faced a dilemma.

If he did not eliminate the current threat and ran after Aung, the killer would take him or Zaki out. Maybe, both. But if he engaged him as a priority target, he risked losing the two assholes, and the Egyptian would die at their hands. His primary goal of rescuing the hostage would also fail, as Aung was the only lead available at the moment.

He chose the middle ground and fired a number of rounds over the perfume seller’s head. The idea was to unnerve him but avoid collateral damage as well. Then, without thinking much, he bounded after the fleeing men.

The killer had an imperfect draw on Zaki who offered a reduced silhouette, and was never still. But Zaki had just been busy with another threat. The killer took advantage. He was the one who fired first, squeezing off his initial rounds a little earlier than he should have, before he had the man square in his sights.

His slugs tore into the bodyguard, who had been forced to act like a bullet sponge. Zaki held him by his shirt collar and stayed behind him as his body jerked several times. The perfume seller was surprised when Zaki shot back, placing a round in his chest. A couple more bullets dropped him for good.

Hasser was sprinting. Dwe had a head start anyway, but Hasser was not carrying another man. He jumped over the wrought-iron fence and ran full steam across the park. He was gaining on them in no time. The flat ground offered no meaningful cover and led nowhere. The gangsters could not have chosen a worse escape route.

Without breaking his run, he fired off a warning shot. A small puff of dirt appeared on the ground in front of Dwe. He stopped abruptly and turned around. His chest heaved as he struggled to calm his breathing. Aung was still astride his shoulders.

Hasser was upon him. “Don’t do anything more stupid, or the next round will end your miserable life,” he thundered, his weapon pointed right at the man’s glistening face.

“Okay,” he said meekly.

“Hey, offload this scum,” Hasser, his eyes burning, waved the pistol at Aung who looked terrified. Defeated, perhaps. His desperate gamble had failed. Dwe lowered him uneasily.

“Fucking dipshit,” Hasser snarled, spittle flying out of his mouth as he kicked Aung hard. He would have liked nothing better than emptying his pistol into him, but he relented.

In the next few minutes, Hasser loaded the two men into the car. Zaki had brought the sedan right up to the street corner. Gigi had succumbed to her wounds.

Soon, they were on the move, getting out of the area. Plastic rolls secured both guys in place. No sooner had they started rolling, then Hasser poked his pistol into Aung’s wounded leg. “Well, hotshot, it’s time you started telling me whatever I asked. No fucking games. Okay?”

The man sobbed, his whole body tremulous. Hasser just looked on, waiting for a reply. Dwe sat morosely.

“What…what do you want?” Aung managed to ask.

“First, I need you to take us to the place where you’re keeping the Egyptian. And he’d better be alive, or I’ll bury you in your own shit up to your fucking eyeballs.”

Before his boss could answer, Dwe spoke up. “Let me take you there. He’s at our farmhouse. Unharmed, except for a few bruises he gave him. Totally fine, otherwise.”

An elbow smacked into Aung’s side. He grunted in pain.

“You’re just a shit-faced bully, that’s it, but he saved your life. His own too.” Hasser patted Aung in mock glee.

Zaki bellowed from the driver's seat. “Tell us about the other shooters. Who else is involved?”

“I…I don’t know,” the man mumbled.

Hasser roared. “I've already saved your life, even though it might appear as useless as tits on a daddy gorilla. The promise only binds me, however. Now give me something before I tell my friend to throw you against a speeding bus.”

Zaki shrugged, pointing at a heavily loaded commuter bus on the road. It was swaying badly.

It finally loosened Aung’s tongue. He moaned. “They could be the Chinese. Earlier, they had put pressure on me to turn over the Egyptian. I dallied. Then, they raided one of my places and killed two men.”

“Shit.”

They arrived at the farmhouse late into the night and managed to retrieve the Egyptian without a hitch. Hasser released the gangsters as promised. Zaki did not object. Rather, he kept quiet and gave them first aid for their injuries. They knew Aung would not hesitate to kill them if he could. Like all criminals, he would want payback.

Vendetta ran in his blood. But Hasser had no stomach for unnecessary killings.

He wondered if it made him a good operative.

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Zeng saw the carnage impassively.

The restaurant was wrecked and littered with dead bodies. While he had been focused on the seedy club used by the gang as their headquarters, Aung and his cronies had come here to tie up something. Obviously, the outcome was not to their liking. A number of Aung’s men were dead, and he himself was missing. Zeng had posted three killers outside the eatery, just in case. Aung had often dined here. Unfortunately, they had not survived the gun battle.

He felt he wasn’t seeing the whole picture. Some vital pieces were missing.

*Who else is in the play?* he wondered. He wanted to know how the gangsters had come under attack. How had their opponents known they were there?

Zeng had not run an operation like this before. Frustrated, he turned his attention to the Burmese security official, who had arrived on the scene and was immediately taking over. He was supervising the police and other emergency services.

He narrated his initial report. "Unknown individuals reportedly confronted the crime lord at this location. They looked like foreigners, the eyewitnesses say. We’re investigating further.”

“How many?”

“At least nine people were killed and six wounded.”

“Screw them,” he spat. “I was asking how many foreigners were involved.”

Taken aback by his callousness, the Burmese fumbled for an answer. “Two…two guys. Could have been more in the park.”

It was unbelievable.

Zeng glared at him. “Just two?” The man was a high-ranking official who required delicate handling. Right now, though, Zeng was not in the mood to be subtle.

The Burmese replied. “Yes, the pair was skilled. They took Aung once they left.”

“Where did they go?”

“I don’t know. We’re trying to determine.”

“Shit,” he muttered. His deputy was already on the horn with Beijing. A satellite would be helpful in locating the foreigners. Myanmar was under China’s thumb. Her security services were at his beck and call. There was not a hole deep enough for them to hide. He would find them. It was what he was good at.

**Chapter 24**

Several grim-looking farms appeared in the pale light of dawn on both sides of the winding road. Everywhere Hasser looked, he saw brown earth, deep furrows, and rotting straw. Dark fields were soaked with water. Tall electricity poles dotted the landscape.

An old Burmese man was behind the wheel of a silver Changan sedan. Hasser held his cell phone in his hand, with a navigation app running on the screen. They were heading to the coast. The man drove skillfully, maneuvering through the farm country on poor roads that led them out of Yangon and southward. Zaki and Diab occupied the rear seats.

With Diab recovered, they were getting out of Myanmar. The Agency was sending a seaplane from neighboring Thailand. It would pick them up on the coast.

“It’s a dangerous territory for foreigners,” the Burmese said.

Hasser nodded. “I know, but I had no choice.”

Hasser had immediately decided to move out of Yangon after grabbing the Egyptian. It was no longer safe trapped inside those desolate warrens. They had set out late in the night. Late-night travel on small country roads from Yangon to the coast would look suspicious if they were stopped by law enforcement. Another factor was the involvement of the Chinese. Aung had confirmed this.

He had arranged for a local driver to help with his road trip. The elderly man asserted that he knew numerous police officers who profited from the smuggling activity in the region. Hasser had not let him in on the secret that they were trying to fly out of the country.

The old man watched Hasser sit motionless, as if in a trance, staring vacantly out the window at the deserted landscape. Though no one told him as much, the Burmese seemed to understand that the men he was dealing with were no ordinary sightseers. Despite being gracious, they oozed malevolence.

“We’re nearing a checkpoint. Slow down,” Zaki cautioned. The driver nodded.

As their car approached the wooden barrier laid across the road, three highway policemen holding flashlights converged to block its path, eyeing them curiously. One of them raised his hand and asked, “Stop. Who are you people?”

The driver rolled down his window and let out a pained cough before mumbling a reply, saying they urgently needed to get to Kadatpana. He handed out a stack of currency. Seated next to him, Hasser watched in silence as their money did the trick. The man threw a salute as his buddy raised the barrier and allowed them to proceed.

Ten minutes later, something interrupted their journey once more.

“Halt now,” Zaki said as the vehicle turned a bend in the road. Another checkpoint loomed ahead. A widespread insurgency in Myanmar had been going on for a long time necessitating such measures. But Hasser knew more security inspections meant more trouble for them.

“As you say,” the Burmese yawned before pulling over. Hasser squirmed in his seat, tense with a sudden unease.

“Stay inside the car and keep quiet," the old driver whispered. “They’re militia soldiers, not traffic cops. I see they are awake, despite the hour. The current situation has them on the edge.” He alighted and walked to the militia checkpoint beside the road.

A cool gust blew off the distant shore. Hasser glanced left and right, then up, scanning his surroundings for any sign of a threat. Even in the darkness, he could make out the hulking silhouette of two watch towers soaring above the militia post. An alert sentry would not hesitate to rain down accurate gunfire. Moreover, a drone could be airborne and watching them. The fields on either side of the road were barely alive. The driver had chosen their travel time well. If the militia soldiers did not insist on a proper inspection, there was a reasonable chance they would slip past and head for the shore.

Hasser had a pistol ready in case things went wrong. He waited, uncertain of how the old man was dealing with the soldiers. He had been a truck driver all his life, plying on this road, moving contraband in collaboration with the same officials whose duty it was to prevent such practices. Now he was making effective use of his vast experience.

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Several miles behind them, in another vehicle, Zeng was preparing for his own kill. China’s orbiting eyes in space had done the trick. They had identified the car leaving the restaurant immediately after the shootout. Its course had already been tracked. Following a brief stopover at a farmhouse, the vehicle was left on a roadside and another car taken by the foreigners. They traveled in a southerly direction, studiously avoiding the main highway, instead choosing the network of smaller roads and tracks crisscrossing the countryside.

He had orders to execute the Egyptian and deal with the foreigners in whatever way the situation demanded.

There was little traffic on the road. His operatives were traveling in two SUVs. His somber, almost dark mood made his team uncomfortable. The Egyptian had proven elusive. The pursuit had been long and arduous. The tension in the vehicles was palpable.

While they knew that Zeng’s cheerlessness would evaporate the moment they got hold of the Egyptian and terminated him, they could not know that it was something far bigger than a middle-aged academic that was foremost on the mind of their boss.

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The driver hobbled back, two soldiers towing him. “This isn't good," he announced. When he saw Hasser wince, he paused, his eyes despondent. “I fear the worst. They want all of you to come out and stand aside while they search the car.”

“No way,” Hasser growled. He watched Zaki dismount and walk toward the soldiers.

A soldier bristled. "Follow my instructions, or I'll seize your vehicle and force you to stand outside the whole day."

Hasser did not immediately respond. Instead, he rubbed his chin, staring at the militia building across the road. There were more armed soldiers inside, he knew, their number unknown. Maybe, three or four. Another pair manning the towers, most likely tired and bored by a long shift. Now, if only he could keep it quiet.

He unsheathed a dagger strapped to his leg and asked lightly. “Are you certain you'll see another day?”

The soldier held his gaze, mulling over his question. After an uncomfortable moment, he stepped closer, his manner arrogant. “What’s your point?”

From the corner of his eye, Haaser caught Zaki staring at him. When their eyes locked, he gave him a thumbs-down. That sealed the soldiers' fate.

“It’s been long said that only God knows how long a man is going to live.” Hasser swung the door open and got out. “Yet, I fear he’s not the only one who knows about your end today.”

The man opened his mouth for a retort, but Hasser thrust his dagger through his teeth. The soldier stiffened, an expression of shock registering on his face. In a flash, Zaki grabbed his companion by the neck, twisted it forcefully, and broke the vertebrae. Hasser carefully laid both dead bodies on the ground.

“Contact, rear! Contact rear!” Zaki hollered.

Hasser stole a glance at his six. Two large SUVs were inbound, possibly a thousand yards behind them. He saw pinpricks of gunfire.

“Go,” Hasser hissed, rushing to the tower, while Zaki and Diab crouched down and scanned the militia building. It was a one-story cinderblock structure with a barbed outer wall, further protected with sand bags.

Their only chance was to storm the building and get inside before the new arrivals came. It was their only chance. In the open, they were defenseless.

Zaki motioned for the driver to sneak away into cover, as they had agreed. The old man had done his work, and this was no place for him. Zaki was aware that chaos could erupt at any moment, as two additional guards appeared. Both Hasser and Zaki opened up.

Ahead, inside the building, there were flashes of gunfire. A panicked shout came from the second tower. Soon, the building's equally ferocious return fire matched the intensity of their pistols' clatter.

Hasser saw a soldier popping up over the edge of the tower as he fired down on the road below. He killed him with a single burst, sending the dead man headlong out of the tower and into the compound below, surprising the men inside and disrupting their efforts to bring their weapon to bear on the intruders assaulting the building.

Hasser reloaded and, in a single bound, was leaving the road and running for the militia building. Zaki provided covering fire. Both he and Diab were on the run behind him.

Just short of the gate that led into the militia compound, one of the militia men suddenly threw his arms out and went sprawling across the gravel. He had been taken out by Zaki. His legs buckled, arms flailing, as his rifle flew out of his hands. Without pausing, Hasser picked up the rifle and continued past the dead man.

He went through the open gate and into the compound. As he entered the courtyard, Zaki and Diab unexpectedly collided with a pair of soldiers who were fleeing the building.

The soldier, who was his first target, took the full burst in the chest and was thrown back by the impact. Even before the first man had crumpled into a bloody heap on the floor, Zaki turned on the second guy. He threw his rifle and raised his hands in surrender.

“Coward,” Zaki screamed, shooting him in the face.

Hasser took a knee behind a parked truck in the courtyard. Across from where he crouched, Zaki, who served as the backup, took turns firing out into the courtyard and in the direction of the road. A reek permeated the air; whiffs of burned gunpowder mixed with smoke from the burning trash somewhere nearby.

Hasser turned slightly and began to raise his head in order to see what was going on. A volley of rounds arrived, some smacking the ground near him, while others streamed overhead. *Are they trying to flush us out?* he wondered. The increased rate of fire suggested he could be right.

It was time to make their stand here.

He whistled to Zaki. Without looking back, Zaki led Diab in through the door, twisting about every few steps to check for danger from behind. As they slipped inside, Hasser feared an ambush at any moment.

He froze as he saw Chinese men come out of the SUVs.

Some of them stayed outside the compound while a quartet tried to charge the building. It proved costly. Hasser and Zaki were now in possession of AK-47s. They opened up. Their rounds caught the leader in the open. He collapsed to the ground. The others fell back. The wounded guy lay squirming in the courtyard.

His deputy darted over to him and helped him back onto his feet, calling out to his comrades. Within seconds, they were all over him, three of them firing at the building for no reason while the others helped him into the back of an SUV. Firing blindly, the rest of the shooters sprinted to their vehicles and rode away.

Hasser waited as the silence prevailed. He could not believe his luck. The Chinese had fled. It meant the wounded man could have been their commander.

Shortly, they were moving out. As Hasser climbed onto the passenger seat, he turned and asked, “Where’s the driver?”

Zaki had no answer as took the wheel. Diab also shook his head. They had instructed the elderly Burmese to avoid the gunfight. Most likely, the grizzly old bastard had made a run for it, taking advantage of the chaos. Then Hasser spotted him—a short distance away, down on the ground, motionless, his neck shredded by a bullet. He glanced at him for no more than a solitary heartbeat, but it was still long enough for a small prayer. He slammed the door shut and told Zaki to floor it.

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*I’m still very much alive,* thought Zeng, breathing in pain. For the moment, anyway, though for how much longer, he was too terrified to even guess.

He lay on his back in the rear seat, his heart pounding in waves across his chest. A sharp pain spread from his shoulder, the throbbing agony completely taking over his senses. He saw nothing but whiteness. Everything swam in and out of focus. His eyes watered. He blinked hard to clear his vision.

The latest setback was an extension of his ongoing turmoil. Somehow, he had survived the wild gunfire, save for a single round hitting him in the shoulder. He marveled at his luck, or its lack thereof. Even a confrontation with his armed operators had not subdued the enemy. Instead, they had fought with stunning efficiency.

He knew it would not be long before he met them again. Patience was his not strongest virtue. He had no idea when the next confrontation would occur.

He understood that the enemy team, most likely the Americans, had to leave in a hurry after their standoff with his operators. Now, they would be on the move again, seeking another hideout.

If only his operators had stood fast after his injury and carried on with the assault.

Zeng was feeling light-headed as the opiate kicked in. His deputy held his hand as if it would make the peril go away. Zeng pulled away a little, yet the touch seemed to unfreeze him.

“Thank you,” he murmured, acknowledging his closeness.

“It’s going to be all right, sir," said the man, patting him back.

Zeng felt a lump in his throat. He could do nothing but stare blankly at him. He wished he could smash his balls or, at the very least, yell at him, but he felt too weak to do anything. His shoulders sagged with helplessness.

**Chapter 25**

**Bangkok, Thailand**

Upon landing in Bangkok, Hasser asked for the most secure room inside the CIA compound to debrief the Egyptian. He had not done any talking on the flight. The noisy Twin Otter seaplane had ruled out any meaningful conversation. Aside from that, he did not want the Thai crew to overhear anything.

The Bangkok station had chartered the bird for the mission. It had landed in the waters southeast of Yangon. Hasser, along with Zaki and Diab, made a run for a deserted part of the beach. Zaki raced the sedan through the sand as close to the water as possible until its engine died. The plane did not stay on the water for more than five minutes. Once on board, they instructed the crew to fly at maximum speed and hug the coast. Still, they kept their fingers crossed until they were inside Thai airspace.

The debriefing session with Diab lasted over an hour.

It was explosive information. Hasser made a full audiovisual recording of the whole session and sent the copies via secure, encrypted channels to his bosses in Doha. He also sent a copy to the director. To brief the president.

Within minutes, Chad and Kate were on video call with him. Chad told him that the director and one of his deputies would be talking to them. In the meantime, Kate gave her usual intelligence talk. It contained all the routine stuff. Even the hostage issue had simmered down, with both parties avoiding bluster for the time being. A behind-the-scenes game of diplomacy involving intermediaries was underway.

Their discussion eventually drifted to the appearance of the messiah. The man was causing significant agitation throughout the region, posing a threat to the undemocratic rulers' authority.

“All hell is breaking loose around us. Can anybody tell me what’s happening? How’s he moving around freely?” Chad asked hoarsely, as if he had been chain-smoking his way through a day of discussion. A broken curtain of smoke floated in the air.

“No idea, Chad,” Kate replied.

“Langley is breathing down our necks,” Chad fumed. “Jim is stateside. In fact, every station chief from Rabat to Doha is in Virginia, and the director is tearing each of them a new asshole as we speak. He wants answers.”

"It seems these events have the intel agencies baffled as much as the rest of the folks,” Kate said.

“What are the Israelis saying?” Hasser asked.

“They’re flummoxed. Their security services did a thorough investigation, but in vain. The guy apparently disappeared without a trace and turned up in Syria, right next door. Their working theory is that he made use of the secret tunnels dug under Gaza.”

Chad mumbled. “If it were only that simple.”

“Yes, I know,” Kate admitted. “The Israeli military has nearly destroyed the entire underground tunnel network since their new war began with Iran and its proxies. Whether anything survives today, I’m not sure.”

"Or maybe, he rode a magic carpet,” Hasser chuckled. Kate was right. The Israelis had come down really hard on the Hamas network, wiping out their clandestine routes. It was quite impossible for the terrorist organization to smuggle weapons and people into or out of Israel at this time. Even if a hidden tunnel still existed, the Hamas leadership would not risk it for the messiah.

Chad hunched over his desk and fumbled with another cigarette. “What’s his current status? Is he back in Turkey?” The man had wrapped up his whirlwind tour of the US and Latin America.

Kate replied. “Yes. But my sources inside Jordan have indicated that he’ll be visiting the country soon. Some influential religious figures have reportedly requested him. He already has a lot of followers there.”

“Why would the king allow such a thing?” Hasser wondered aloud.

Kate answered. “To say that Jordan is a difficult country to rule is an understatement. The king’s hold on power is more tenuous than we often admit. With mounting calls for reform and a heightened risk of polarization, he simply can’t ignore the sentiments of his deeply religious population.”

Chad said. “She’s right.”

“Amman station has its hands already full. I’ll ask Barlowe to send you and Zaki over there and observe him during the visit.”

“What do you want to achieve?” Hasser asked, eyebrow raised. For some unknown reason, he still had not talked about Diab’s vision in Myanmar to his colleagues. It altered the fundamentals of everything his faith taught him.

Chad churned out a ring of smoke. “Mike, go to Jordan. Watch him closely. Try to identify who’s supporting him. Spot anything odd. I know we’re catching at the straws, but that’s the way it is.”

Hasser nodded. “Got it.”

“Zaki will be traveling separately.”

“I understand.”

“Gus wouldn’t like it. He’s so fucking territorial,” Kate said. Gus Swinburne was the Agency’s chief of station in Amman.

Chad raised his hands. “Once the orders come from the seventh floor, he would have no choice.”

“Why can’t we just dump everything at them? Pardon me for being blunt, but this is their backyard. They need to take care of it,” Kate objected.

“Awww, I’m so sorry,” he said teasingly. Then raised a placatory hand. “That’s not up for discussion anymore. The task is of utmost importance and I’ll strongly recommend it."

Kate opened her mouth to reply, but then closed it.

Zaki joined him in the communications center. He had stayed away during the debriefing session, taking his time to refresh himself and indulge in the local food.

Kate spoke to him. “Our British friends managed to recover Sanya’s kid. He’s being taken care of at a secure facility.”

“Thank you,” he said with a sigh.

After a few minutes, Chad formally announced. “The director and the deputy director will be joining us now.” The virtual meeting with the top executives commenced with a meticulously arranged digital conference room popping up in their view. High-definition video feeds of participants from Langley filled the screen.

Director Tom Barlowe, and Alice Hope, the deputy director of the National Clandestine Service, sat together. The latter ran the operational arm of the Agency.

“Good job, both of you,” Barlowe addressed Hasser and Zaki. Both men nodded.

Alice said. “It’s alarming, what you sent us.”

“Yeah, I never came across anything like this before,” Hasser replied.

“Well, let’s start now.”

“Sure. Do you want a blow-by-blow, or should I skip to the bottom line?” Hasser asked.

Reaching for a writing pad, Barlowe said. “I want the blow-by-blow.”

Hasser did as ordered.

He began with what the Egyptian had told him about his academic background. His extensive knowledge of eschatology and the way he projected end-time events in his lectures and articles. His coming into contact with Ali Aqa and his subsequent enrollment in a secret coaching program aimed at a single person in Myanmar.

Hasser described the compound in Bago, the mysterious student, the guards, and the visiting Asian man, who most probably was a senior Chinese.operative.

Then, Diab getting suspicious after watching the messiah on TV. His escape and capture. Hasser took his time and described everything in detail.

When he concluded, there was silence on the other end. He inquired. “Hey, you guys there?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Chad replied hoarsely.

“What do you think? Is he legit?” Alice inquired.

“Diab’s got no reason to lie, especially after what he’s been through.”

“You’re right,” Barlowe said.

“Besides, he’s here. Send another team of experts to talk to him. Perhaps he can provide more information.”

“In due time,” Alice replied, glancing at her boss.

Hasser asked them. “What’re you going to do?”

“Let’s think over it,” Barlowe said, lifting his eyeglasses. “Frankly, he’s given us more questions than answers.”

Alice said. “The director is right. We know someone went to enormous lengths to prepare a religious figure for a particular role on the world stage.”

“But why? To what end?” Chad asked.

Zaki muttered. “For unknown reasons.”

“It appears the Iranians and Chinese are behind this scheme,” Hasser pointed out.

Barlowe rolled his eyes. “What scheme?”

“See around yourself. The whole world is in turmoil. It’s something I've never seen before. Whoever designed it must be having a wonderful time.”

“Let me pose a question here,” Alice said. “Who’s this messiah?

Chad answered. “Nobody knows. And it frightens me.”

“Why?” she asked.

“He seems to have arrived from another planet all of a sudden. It appears as though the man was nonexistent until this moment.”

“Not exactly. He isn’t an alien. An orphan, actually. Raised by a Syrian family.”

Hasser said. “Intel dossier we've got on him is pretty thin.”

Alice raised another question, changing the tack. "What about the work he's been doing? Miracles. Healings. Could it be all fake or manufactured?”

“It can’t be explained anyway,” Hasser relented.

Barlowe’s eyes squinted thoughtfully behind his glasses. “Exactly. Even if the Egyptian tutored him with Chinese or Iranian backing, we don’t know who’s given him the power to heal.”

“What’s your point?” Hasser asked.

Barlowe allowed himself a smile. “If I had my way, I’d thank my Lord for the blessing he sent on this earth. The messiah is a godsend. Let him heal, repair, and regenerate. He’s giving us all something, not taking anything away in return.”

Hasser was speechless for a long moment. When he spoke, it was in a low voice. "Sir, don't forget, this entire operation is tied to two nations that are currently hostile to America. They started playing brutal hardball with us long ago. This could be a new playoff.”

The Langley bosses conferred with each other, ignoring his comments. Chad shrugged and lit a cigarette.

Kate looked at Chad like he was an annoying creep and glanced back at the screen. "Since his visit to the United States, a mysterious illness has been spreading among the farm pigs. A million dead already. American farmers are panicking. As we speak, the ailment has surfaced in Europe and South America as well.”

Hasser replied. “Diab has attributed it to the messiah. According to an ancient Islamic prophecy, he says, someone like him would come to break the cross and kill the swine. It’s happening.”

“If it’s supernatural, it’s out of our league,” Alice commented nonchalantly, before asking. “What do you say?”

Hasser said. “For the moment, it’s beyond my understanding, but I’ll try to figure it out.”

“To begin with, the guy needs watching,” Chad suggested.

“He’s already a celebrity, one of the most watched faces on earth,” Barlowe laughed.

Chad was not amused, but he spoke softly. “We’re going to need surveillance. I guess the president will order the NRO to retask a satellite, but I want to get some actual eyes on him.”

Barlowe raised a hand. “Hey, slow down. What’re you thinking?”

“Let’s say we send someone there. An ideal candidate would pretend to be a journalist and actually get close to him."

The director took a moment to consider it before responding. "If a state is conducting an intelligence operation, there will be strict security measures around him. An asset like him is only going to meet well-known or vetted journalists in a protected setting.”

“We can work around that,” the deputy director offered.

“Such as?”

“Ralph Verlice can be requested for this assignment,” Alice said lightly. Ralph was an eminent journalist, employed as CNN's principal security analyst. He was rumored to have a close working relationship with the Agency.

“Nah. The time frame here sucks. He wouldn’t want to stick around the messiah for days, maybe weeks,” Barlowe argued. “If he agrees to the proposal at all.”

The director was right, and Hasser had already thought of that. "I request this task for myself. Myself and Zaki, in fact.” He winked at him.

Zaki flipped him a finger.

Nobody spoke for a full minute. It was a serious gamble. If the messiah’s mentors suspected that he was being probed, he was going to be a lot harder to get to. Additional layers of secrecy would be added to the already thick veil of mystery surrounding him. Should it turn out that the CIA was attempting to penetrate their operation, the consequences would be serious.

Finally, Barlowe said thoughtfully. “Okay, fine. Mike and Zaki, I’m authorizing your deployment to Jordan. Take the next available flight. And keep the Egyptian close by. He may be needed to help us understand whatever way this thing turns out.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Alice,” he said, turning to his deputy. “Arrange top-of-the line credentials, complete with fake work histories and personal biographies.”

“You got it.”

Barlowe nodded. He asked the team to keep him informed. With that, he and Alice signed off.

Their discussion dragged on for another half hour before Chad finally called off the meeting.

**Doha**

The next day, Hasser flew out of Bangkok and landed at Doha for his flight connection to Amman, Jordan. It was a short layover. Zaki and Diab would fly separate routes to Jordan.

Gus Swinburne had reluctantly agreed after throwing a royal tizzy. The messiah had become a priority. Hasser would have liked a chic Agency jet for travel, but it was out of the question. He wasn’t an executive. A Qatar Airways business-class seat was the next best thing.

Getting hold of his small carry-on, he padded down the marble floor amid a gaggle of passengers. The terminal at Hamad International Airport rivaled any luxury hotel in the world; the swooping curves of its ultramodern, gleaming hallways and concourses were a treat to watch. The place had a quaint air of sophistication. Multimillion-dollar art works, both traditional Arabian and modernistic, vied for attention.

The crowd was diverse, as would be expected in any major Gulf city. Workers of Pakistani and Indian descent. Lots of Westerners and Asians—mainly Chinese and Japanese—rubbing shoulders with a plethora of Arabs in their traditional garb.

Walking along, he looked at the status display. The flight to Amman experienced a fifty-minute delay.

He roamed past a knot of people, mostly kids, swooning over a giant bronze statue of a teddy. To avoid exposure to the crowd and extensive CCTV coverage in the main lounge, he indulged himself to make beneficial use of the delay. Traveling in business class allowed him access to the airline's exclusive Al-Safwa First Lounge for an additional hundred bucks. A relaxing massage in the Qspa, as well as some Jacuzzi time, did wonders for him.

His flight was announced shortly, and he boarded a Qatar Airways wide-body plane. The Airbus A-350 was new, making for a pleasantly quiet ride.

He ordered a light lunch of grilled sea bass with a platter of prawns but did not touch the tomato sauce or amuse bouche. He finished with a couple glasses of Fox Creek-McLaren Vale, a sparkling Australian Shiraz of 2013 vintage. Pretty excellent for airline wine. Middle Eastern carriers, in his opinion, offered far better wines than did their American and European counterparts.

He dozed off during the three-hour ride.

**Chapter 26**

**N-40 Highway, Amman, Jordan**

The sun's early rays bathed the long convoy of vehicles outbound from Amman in a warm golden hue. Hasser could scarcely believe his eyes. The procession was huge, stretching for miles on the highway. He sat in the passenger seat of a rented sedan. Traffic seemed to crawl along at a snail’s pace over the Na’ur Intersection. Zaki wasn't with him; he was busy meeting with a group of clerics in town. Diab was staying in his hotel room. He had been sent to Amman after his detailed debriefing by the Agency.

The messiah had surfaced in Jordan the previous night.

Today, he was heading west, toward the Israeli border. It signaled the beginning of a momentous day. People from diverse backgrounds, dressed in a vibrant array of traditional garments, had gathered in the heart of the city, their hearts brimming with hope and anticipation. The air was filled with a palpable sense of unity and purpose as the large procession embarked on a painfully slow journey. The participants probably numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

Banners with religious slogans atop the cars, trucks, and vans fluttered gently in the breeze. They carried the aspirations of those who saw in him a force to change the world around them.

“I haven’t seen anything like this before,” his driver commented in broken English.

“How did you come to know about him?” Hasser asked.

“They announced it on TV. Radio and social media too.”

“The authorities allowed him? I mean, it could be difficult to control," he said, gesturing at the sea of humanity around him.

“Who would in his right mind try to deny him anything he desires?”

“But the security people probably would have considered stopping him from holding a rally on such a scale. No?”

Instead of replying, the man posed his own question. “Did you notice the huge compound half a kilometer behind us?”

“Yes, I did. What about it?”

“It houses the powerful Public Security Directorate. Its gates were shuttered today, not a single man was present.”

“So?”

“People were ready to storm it in case the police or the security forces tried to disperse the rally. Riots would have started immediately.”

“Oh, I see.”

“And where would the fire spread once it ignited?”

“It’s unpredictable.”

“Yes, my friend. You got it right. Our king is not a fool. His place would have been reduced to ashes by now if he had so much as stopped a single vehicle or arrested any participant.”

“And he would have been riding a plane out of the country,” Hasser added.

“Or worse.”

The procession was a vibrant tapestry of cultures, as participants from Jordan and various parts of the world came together. Musicians played the traditional nasheeds, their melodies providing a harmonious backdrop to the march. Children, their faces painted with swords and Arabic letters, held hands and skipped alongside the adults, their innocent joy infusing the event with an undeniable optimism.

As the procession inched forward, local residents gathered on the sidewalks to offer their support. Cheers and waves of encouragement echoed through the streets, a testament to the widespread euphoria. Many street vendors handed out water and refreshments to the participants.

Hasser got out of the car and walked on foot. He wanted to blend into the crowd and find out for himself how the people were going through the experience.

In a short time, he learned a few things. Most people attended simply because they saw it as an obligation to do so. Attendance defined them, and not attending undermined their identity. Though grueling, it was not off-putting, like any large rally. It was precisely what made it a meaningful sign of commitment and belonging.

To his mild surprise, the journey itself was not just a physical one; it was a journey of the heart and mind, the people said. Along the way, speakers narrated stories of shared history, emphasizing the common threads that connected them. Poets recited verses that spoke of a future unburdened by conflict, their words resonating deeply with the crowd. Some people shared personal anecdotes and experiences of healing, fostering empathy and hope among the participants.

Outside the town, a horde of villagers approached the messiah’s SUV. He was standing in the open roof hatch, waving at the jubilant gatherers.

Hasser bumped his way through the bodies to get closer to the vehicle. It was a daunting task, but he made some progress.

The guy appeared to be young and bearded. His voice was mesmerizingly calm, enticing the people around him without any effort at all. He was a natural at what he was doing, Hasser observed.

A couple brought a young man forward who was stumbling. He carried a white cane in his hand. Near the SUV, he was manhandled badly. It appeared he would fall, but the man and woman supporting him prevented it. The messiah bent down and spat in his eyes.

The blind man jerked his head up. A cry of joy escaped his lips. He turned around and let go of his cane.

Hasser was stunned. The man was now able to see normally and was pointing his hands in various directions with excitement. People hooted loudly. It was incredible. More devotees threw themselves upon the vehicle.

“Did you see it?” he heard a voice.

He turned around and found himself looking at a young man. He was a journalist, as evidenced by the presence of another guy beside him who was holding a camera.

“Yes. Marvelous, I must say,” Hasser said.

He offered a hand. “I’m Sami, from Palestine across the border.”

Hasser shook his hand. His partner introduced himself as Feras. “It's a long way from home,” Hasser commented.

Sami nodded. "I've been following him from day one. Or night, more precisely.”

Hasser was intrigued now. “Really?” He leaned in to listen clearly amidst the din of music and voices.

“I covered his arrival on the Mount of Olives that night,” he beamed. “Feras here filmed the whole event.”

“Wow!”

“Where are you from?”

“Canada,” Hasser lied.

“Wonderful country. I must visit it,” Sami said excitedly.

“You’re welcome, my friend.”

“Are you working as a journalist too?”

“Yes, I’m a freelancer. I write features for a small news outlet.” He handed him a bogus visiting card. It was part of his cover identity.

“Excellent,” Sami said, pocketing the card.

Hasser wanted to probe them further for details, but opted to go slowly. He did not want to spook the men. Journalists usually had a gift for spotting bullshit. It turned out, he did not need to be cautious. Sami poured it out like a punctured garden hose.

“You say he just arrived at the chapel out of the heavens?” Hasser inquired as the man recounted the messiah's arrival.

“Yes, yes. It was so sudden.”

“Did you find anything unusual?”

“What do you mean?” Sami asked seriously.

“Well, it’s not an everyday thing that people descend from the heavens,” he said lightly. “Even Hollywood sucks at it. Never produced a captivating scene that showcases such things."

“Before the event, the senior man at our channel instructed us to be at the chapel. Something big was afoot, he’d said.”

“What? And you didn’t find it suspicious?”

“Are you a Christian?” Sami fixed him with a cold stare.

“Yes, you can say that.”

“Well, me too. I was a skeptic once, like you. But I was transformed that night.”

“Good for you,” he quipped.

“It was the best thing ever to happen to me. I was taken into his fold.”

“Come on, man. You sound like those born-again whackos.” Hasser knew he was manipulating the poor bastard, trying an old trick of reverse psychology on him. But he had to do it if he wanted information.

Sami blurted out. “You don’t know how the Jews treated me.”

“Enlighten me,” he said boringly.

“We were rolled up by the police at gunpoint. Feras and everyone else too. They kept us detained for days. They forced us to stay awake for an entire day. No food or water was given. Cruel bastards.”

“What did they want to know?” Hasser knew the Israelis often played rough.

Feras spoke for the first time. “We narrated everything as it happened, yet they tortured us to no end for more information. It was a nightmare.”

“So, how are you roaming free now?”

“They threw us outside our homes and offices after grilling the shit out of us.”

“I’m sorry to hear.”

“We came here with much difficulty,” Sami hissed. “Being a free citizen of Canada, you cannot understand our plight. They treat us worse than the slaves your forefathers captured from Africa.”

Hasser bristled, but kept his voice even. “Life’s tough sometimes, pal.”

“We hope the messiah breaks our shackles. Then the Jews wouldn’t find a place to hide,” Sami sneered. His hatred was palpable.

Hasser scoffed. “Your animosity is misplaced.”

“Not at all,” both men replied in unison.

Frustrated, he asked. “Tell me how the messiah got out.”

“He had some help. A small team of guards took him away. Thanks God. Otherwise, he could have faced unspeakable terror. The Israelis apparently failed to locate him in time before he slipped into neighboring Syria.”

“What else can you tell me?”

Sami was enthusiastic again, his voice cracking up. “One of my journalist friends in Syria contacted Maxim Sayyaf, a rich man. He told my friend that the messiah attended his son’s wedding and turned water into wine. Also walked on the water. I’m sure you have already watched the videos.”

“Yes, I did.”

Hasser spent the rest of the eight hours taken by the procession to reach the Israeli border talking to a number of people. What he learned was sufficient to give him stomach ulcers. The average citizen was charged up, willing to go to any lengths to support the messiah. No media channel or intelligence agency had been able to read the mood properly. Now, the world would pay.

A klick short of King Hussain Bridge leading up to the border crossing, one of the three connecting the two countries, the messiah veered off the road. His SUV took a right turn and trundled over a dirt track. Some vehicles followed him, while the procession stayed on the road.

Hasser told his driver to stick with the messiah.

The SUV came to a halt at the bank of the Jordan River. Israel beckoned from the opposite side. He could also see a large crowd there. A couple of fishing boats were plying the river. The messiah alighted from his vehicle and walked to the water’s edge.

“Friends, did you get any fish?” His voice boomed.

The men shook their heads morosely. It appeared the day had not been favorable for them.

The messiah asked them to cast their nets again. One guy replied. “We've worked hard all day and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will try once more.”

And they did.

An uproar arose among the onlookers on both shores of the river. The nets were bursting at the seams with the catch. The fishermen were frozen. Nobody had caught such a big haul here in decades. The messiah motioned for them to pull in the nets. They struggled. A few men accompanying the messiah got into the water and helped them.

Hasser stared wide-eyed at the scene.

Both small boats were filled up by the catch, but it looked as if they would sink at any moment. The boats eventually made their way to the shore. An enthusiastic youth did a quick count of the fish.

It stood at over one hundred and fifty.

Hasser’s mind spun. It could not be happening. He tried to come up with some logical explanation for what he saw, but failed miserably.

The messiah got back on the road, leading the rally onward. Now it was pandemonium. Slogans were being shouted nonstop. As they neared the border crossing, the Jordanians wisely stood back, letting the procession pass through the gate. But the Israelis had closed the entry point. The gate on their side was shut and barricaded.

Hasser eyed the nervous-looking guards readying their weapons.

A few young men were trying to scale the gate and the adjoining fence. Hasser caught up with a member of the messiah's protection detail. The man, probably a former soldier himself, wore a sour expression. The situation could ignite in a moment.

“Whoa, whoa, what’re you waiting for?” Hasser demanded hotly.

“What can I do?” he muttered.

“Push everyone back. Call your team now.”

“I’m not sure we can do that here.” The guy was paralyzed by fear.

Hasser started moving with a purpose, looking left and right, trying to find the other security men who had been protecting their principal. If they were gone or shaken up, it was bad news.

A rifle burst exploded.

The Israeli guard fired at the men trying to breach the fence. It had been inevitable. Hasser cursed aloud.

Three men fell to the ground after taking multiple high-velocity rounds in their torsos. For a moment, there was utter silence.

The messiah stepped ahead and held up his hand. The crowd backed away from the gate. He stood valiantly as the point man, telling the people to vacate the bridge. Surprisingly, they obeyed, despite being enraged at the Israelis. Hasser could not blame the guards. They had done what their training dictated.

The men were carried away. They were clearly dead. As the dead bodies lay on the road, a few mourners wept over them.

The messiah sat near the dead bodies and fondly caressed their foreheads. Hasser watched his lips move.

He felt his pulse quicken. *No, no, it can’t be.*

A tremor rippled through the bodies, akin to the stirrings of life awakening from a long slumber. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, their fingers twitched.

Breathless anticipation held the witnesses in its grip, their eyes wide and unblinking as they watched the impossible unfold before them. Hasser stood motionless, his face drained of all color.

With a sudden, jolting convulsion, the bodies arched, a sharp intake of breath piercing the silence like a clarion call. A collective gasp rippled through the crowd, an audible symphony of shock, disbelief, and wonder.

They watched nonetheless, unable to tear their eyes away.

In that moment, the boundary between death and life, between the known and the unfathomable, seemed to blur into an ethereal mist.

As the boys stood up, snatched from death's clutches, a silence settled over the onlookers. The weight of the miracle hung heavy in the air—a moment frozen in time that defied rational explanation.

With his heart beating like a bongo drum, Hasser felt as if it would tear itself apart.

**Chapter 27**

**New York City**

As was expected, the messiah, even in his absence, seized the spotlight during the special session of the World Council of Religious Leaders.

Dean sat among the Vatican delegation, a few rows behind the pope. The venue was the huge General Assembly Hall at the United Nations headquarters. The assembly hall exuded a charged atmosphere, making it immediately clear that this would be no ordinary session.

More than a thousand religious and spiritual leaders representing every major world religion were attending. Their colorful regalia, ranging from saffron cloaks and purple vestments to white turbans and black cassocks, did nothing to mitigate the grim atmosphere.

It was a bad time for religion on earth.

Every religious community around the world was failing badly. The Catholic Church had lost millions of its members to the messiah’s charm. They were now the church’s biggest foes, openly antagonizing it at every level. They'd also found support in the media. Islam was doing no better, as hordes of its followers joined the new bandwagon, openly challenging their mostly autocratic governments. Other religions were also in a state of crisis.

Before coming to the session, Dean had stopped by the Church of the Holy Family. He had spent an hour kneeling before the statue of Jesus Christ. With tears rolling down his face, he had cried out to God for help, realizing that to stop the messiah, creative ideas and strategies alone would not suffice. God himself must blow the breath of life into the endeavor if it was going to work.

The summit's opening day began with several hours of prayers, one aim being to "spiritually prepare" the hall for the subsequent discussions. A group of Bulgarian men and women emerged, wearing the “martenitsa” ornaments made of white and red wool. The shamans from East Africa, their faces covered with Sukuma masks. Mayan priests from Mexico, with painted faces and feathers in their hairs. Saffron-clad monks representing the Tiger’s Nest Monastery in Bhutan. Half-naked Semang pygmies.

Dean tried to hide the distaste from showing on his face.

He had no interest in watching the Stone Age headhunters, savages, and primitive wacky tribesmen the world body had invited in the name of inclusivity. His church had, in fact, sacrificed a lot to bring Christ's word to these same people and their ancestors. Over the centuries, countless priests, nuns, and volunteers lost their lives to violence and disease in the far reaches of Africa, the Far East, and Latin America. *How could shamanism and witchcraft be bundled together with religion?* he thought in disgust.

Then he stopped himself. The way he was thinking was not right. Stress, probably. A dark cloud blanketing his mind. It had been piling up for days, turning him bitter. Hostile, judgmental. He was failing to keep his emotions in check. His rosary was never out of his hands, yet he was cracking.

Dean took a slow breath. He had come here in defense of God’s church on earth.

His Lord wanted him to act like the Samaritan who helped the unfortunate man on the road without asking for anything in return, and without first establishing whether he was a Jew or a pagan. God wanted him to love and protect his sheep. Jesus himself took care of the fallen, healing the wounds their souls bore.

He would fail his mission if he thought or acted otherwise. If he behaved like a pompous priest standing at the altar under an incense cloud, looking down upon his fellow human beings, his church would lose the battle it faced. He recalled with a shudder how Jesus had placed the blame for the spiritual crisis his nation endured squarely on the shoulders of the religious leadership.

Finally, the speeches began.

The UN secretary general welcomed the guests in his inaugural address. “Your presence here is without doubt one of the most inspiring gatherings ever held. This summit is unique because many leaders are meeting face-to-face for the first time. We will see the global interfaith movement really evolve from this session." His talk was not long.

Then, Pope Xavier took the podium. For all of Christianity, he was the high man on the totem pole. Fluent in both Spanish and English, he chose the latter to address the gathering. He spoke with authority, frequently quoting from the Bible and other holy books. People said the ink of the gospels flowed through his veins.

He said. “We are members of one big family. One great light sustains our lives. People have sometimes used religious beliefs to create divisions and fuel hostilities, but real peace cannot exist until all groups and communities acknowledge the cultural and religious diversity of this human family in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding. It is time for us to come together instead of drifting away.”

The messiah tended to overshadow the substance of his speech. It was not the greatest performance of Xavier's life, but it was a decent one indeed. He was addressing the world with aplomb.

Dean listened intently as the man went on. “Humanity stands at a critical juncture in history, one that calls for strong moral and spiritual leadership to help sail us through these difficult times. We as religious leaders must recognize our moral responsibility for the well-being of the human family and peace on earth.”

Dean felt energized by the words his boss uttered. The pope continued. “If our faith is lost to this messiah who corrupts minds and souls, the world is lost, I caution you. We'd simply be walking into the darkness, and our coming generations would live and die under the shadow of Satan."

Xavier recounted how faith, despite many challenges he faced as a young man, gave him inner peace and the meaning he had sought.

“Whatever our background, whatever our calling, and whatever the differences among us, our presence here at the United Nations signifies our commitment to our global mission of tolerance. No individual, group, or nation can any longer live as an isolated microcosm in our interdependent world, but rather all must realize that our every action has an impact on others and the emerging global fraternity."

There was polite applause at his words. Some hands also rapped the desks. Xavier paused to let the noise die down before continuing. “I condemn all violence in the name of religion. My faith tells me to respect the right to freedom of religion. God save us all!” He stepped off the podium.

Dean eyed him closely. He had looked off over the last few days. Even today, he seemed distracted, as if conflicted from within. *Something eating at him?* Dean wondered.

Other leaders echoed the pope’s call.

Eli Meir, the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel, said. “We’re seeing a historic moment here. Today’ is a vital step forward in creating the necessary mutual respect and cooperation among religious leadership, without which world peace and the prosperity of humankind are probably unattainable.”

Rabbi Meir added. “However, there is no quick fix. Hatred ingrained over centuries will not vanish overnight." He deftly avoided any reference to the messiah, clearly not wanting to align himself with the Christian Church. It was understandable, Dean thought. One of his fellow cardinals had talked to the rabbi, but in vain. Dean had not bothered to convince the man. It would not have mattered anyway.

The next speaker stirred some hope. He was a Zoroastrian leader. “We should not allow anyone to damage the core values common to all religious and spiritual traditions. Ahura Mazda, the universal, transcendent, all-powerful God, is stronger than evil, but we have to stand with him. To show our love for him. We need to understand, to hope, and to inspire confidence. We must not give up.”

A Jain elder came to say his brave words. “The time has come to embrace each other's religion as one's own. So, we must not allow the saboteurs to work against this spirit."

The leader of the Bha’i community stated. “Every action, whether by an individual or a group, has an impact on others and the emerging global community." He indirectly disapproved of the messiah. It was a positive sign, but not enough, Dean observed. They needed more support here—a direct and forceful condemnation of the messiah by the summit participants.

Then, something drastic happened and ruined any chance of unity at the forum.

The Dalai Lama walked in. Seeing the old man in his flowing robe, the Chinese delegation was agitated. Their head monk jumped out of his seat, all riled up and spoiling for a fight. Dean was also flabbergasted. The controversial Tibetan monk had long been an unwelcome presence at the U.N. because China rejected his call for an autonomous Tibet. Dean was unaware that he would be attending such a significant session in the middle of a huge crisis the world faced.

It looked like the UN had decided to rub it in China's face.

Dean did not appreciate it. The world body and some of its powerful backers—the US, for instance—were playing a political game here. Not invited to the mainstream UN sessions for decades for fear of upsetting China, the Tibetan leader had been a consistent thorn in China's side. Now, some dickheads saw an opportunity and brought him directly to the main hall. It was terrible timing.

The Chinese delegation had a few heated words with the secretary general. It was followed by a brief discussion among themselves. They eventually opted not to walk out. Their body language was tense, though, as Dean saw.

The Dalai Lama was asked to address the session.

He began. “The world's religions can contribute to world peace, but there can be no peace if there is grinding oppression. Stability is impossible as long as the mighty and powerful continue to oppress the weak and small. The world's spiritual leaders need to address these real and pressing issues.”

He further talked about unity among the men of faith to better cope with new challenges surfacing at every level. He offered his assistance in working hand in hand with the entire religious community to tackle the dark forces working against humanity.

Finished, he quickly left the hall.

It was the turn of the Chinese Buddhists now. Their senior man was invited to the podium. He began his bombast. “In my opinion, the primary problem here is that the so-called secular United Nations is not maintaining a clear separation from religion. Anything else is just a sideshow. The Dalai Lama is a separatist and a rabble-rouser. We should have kept his poison away from a place like this. His presence has interfered with the normal process of the summit.”

He rolled on. “The world body appears to be working in cahoots with the imperial powers to subjugate certain people. These evil forces want to trample on the sovereignty of other countries under the pretext of protecting religious rights. Religious leaders today, like always, have not spoken out when their voices could have helped combat hatred.”

As he left, the hall was stunned into silence.

A Hindu leader, Sri Ram Nirbhay, was next. “We've gathered here today to discuss a perceived threat to organized religion. The messiah is attracting his followers, but we’re worried. I think free and generous preaching of any religion should not be a problem.”

Dean sat upright, the unexpected words sending a chill through him.

The speaker went on. “The Christian Gospel is welcome in India and other places, but the use of coercion and religious proselytism should be condemned at this forum."

An uproar ensued among the attendees. But the man did not stop, raising a hand to placate a group of Baptist bishops who were gesticulating madly. “I reject the exploitation of poverty in religious outreach and missionary work. We will not allow altruistic work to be a means of conversion in our country."

The man concluded with a smirk and a namaste.

He was about to leave when the unruly bishops stormed the podium. The scene turned really ugly as the gang of clergymen bullied the lone Indian. One guy even grabbed him by his cloak and gave him a thrashing. The rest of the Indian delegation came to the aid of their leader, and a brawl ensued. Security was quick to intervene. It took a serious effort before the two sides disengaged.

Dean felt nauseated. Such behavior was totally uncalled for. He would have a word with the American Baptist missionaries. They did a lot of good work spreading the gospel in India, but their highhandedness was shameful. Moreover, their conduct here might elicit a backlash in India, where the right-wing Hindutva movement was already pretty strong. Its supporters opposed the missionary work, often by attacking the churches and murdering the priests.

A senior ayatollah from Iran followed. Then came priests from Africa and Russia. The podium witnessed a lot of passionate speeches, finger-pointing, and stern warnings. The diplomatic language got increasingly strained, and tempers flared as each nation vehemently defended its position.

The core issue of religion was sidelined.

They talked about abstract things like Western hegemony, evangelism, and religious crusading. The UN faced criticism for its failure to resolve any global issues. Several references were made to church abuse. Everything seemed important, except for the ongoing crisis.

Dean seethed in anger.

As the storm raged on, the attendees struggled to find common ground. The gathering, marked by contentious debates and impassioned speeches, reflected the complex and challenging nature of global diplomacy, where diverse nations with divergent interests came together to lock horns with each other instead of addressing the pressing matter that needed attention.

At the end, the session deteriorated into a bedlam. No joint declaration was issued.

**Chapter 28**

**Amman, Jordan**

“I think,” the Syrian said, “you’re doing an excellent job. You’re, um, a superb young man.”

The messiah spread his prayer mat on the floor and sat on it, his expression distant. A radiator heater kept the room pleasantly warm. The house they were staying in was a modest one, but it did have basic amenities.

Aziz seemed to sense his disquiet from a distance. He could feel his anxiety transmitting itself without needing to talk to him.

*What have I got myself into,* the messiah thought. In the beginning, he had no idea what he was doing. Not really.

*And what if I had?*

Would he have resisted these hard, unsmiling men who held power over him? Men who worked for their respective states. Probably, not.

He liked being a preacher. What was more, he was a healer too. He loved his fellow beings, but suddenly, he felt disgruntled. And angry. But he was not sure why.

He sat silent for a long time. Finally, he shook out of his trance. And when he spoke, his voice was not clear and loud; it was thick and choked with emotion. “I am mad. The torment in my heart is driving me nuts. I never sleep. My nights are heavier than my days.”

The old man came close and laid his hand on his arm. “The world is saying a sudden brightness was born in the dark, and that is you,” he said softly, leaning forward to smile at him.

“I was born in his shadow, but I’m not him,” he protested.

“If you had a choice, you would certainly not have chosen to exist, but we don’t get to decide how we are born. All such things are predetermined by a higher being. It’s important, therefore, that you focus on the future, the only thing that you can change.”

“I cannot change anything.”

“Yes, you can, and you must,” Aziz stressed. “Humanity is suffering now, and we all stand on the brink of disaster. You alone possess the power to revert us to a period of peace and stability."

The messiah whimpered. “You are a tough man.”

Aziz saw him trembling with silent sobs, fearing that he was on a downer. It was not good. If he broke down, it would jeopardize everything. Aziz could not allow it. His masters had been ruthlessly clear. They wanted results.

“You have done a tremendous job, but we need to go on,” he said, feigning affection. They had been through this so many times. Yet, he had to be tactful. Being too hard on him would be counterproductive. He could not afford to berate him for something as trivial as expressing his emotions, especially when he knew the guy still needed to fulfill his role in the mission.

“Will it mean anything in the end?”

“It certainly will.”

“I am skeptical.”

Aziz put an arm around him. “What makes a life worth living?”

“If I only knew.”

“It’s the purpose. A higher calling makes all the difference. Great men choose a short, meaningful life over a long, empty existence.”

“Where am I going?”

“You are on your way up, and nobody is going to hold you down. You get it?”

“Yes,” the messiah replied before lapsing into another spell of silence. Aziz let him brood for a while. Even though he had an unusual, overly protective upbringing without any meaningful contact with the outside world, Aziz did not fail to realize the irony of his life. He was scared. His fear made him question many things.

“I feel as if I am waking up,” the messiah said abruptly. “Something inside me is changing.”

Aziz held his breath. An unnerving silence engulfed the house. He wondered if everyone else had gone to bed. “What do you mean?” he finally managed to ask. His voice was low. It held a note of dread.

The messiah hesitated before speaking up. “What am I doing? I ask myself this question over and over again.”

Aziz did not answer. *What is the messiah going through? Introspection? An attempt to reconcile the supernatural with the everyday reality?*

He had no idea if the young man would seek meaning and purpose in his life or grapple with a lingering sense of disorientation and uncertainty. Only time would tell.

The guy was a bit antsy today. Usually, he was compliant. Aziz taught, and he listened. In any case, he didn't give much thought to his sadness. Like every other person, he was entitled to his sulking. As far as his extraordinary powers were concerned, the messiah was a gifted one.

Yet, eager to know what was going on inside his head, he broke the silence. “Tell me, what do you think you are doing?”

“I feel lost,” he said, tears prickling his eyes. “I smile and go about my work, but I am clueless about myself and what is happening to me.”

“Listen, your little world, which was your cocoon, collapsed around you. Now, you are confused and frightened, like a passenger on a rudderless boat in the middle of an ocean. I guess many people must have experienced similar feelings at some point in their lives.

“Well, if you say so.”

Aziz sighed. "The work you do is truly noble. At least you are not wasting your time.”

“But pain and sorrow can never be completely undone.”

“You would not be held responsible for anything once you are received at the Pearly Gates,” he said. His role as a coach also offered him the opportunity to provide much needed psychological support.

“I wonder how God is going to judge me.”

“We all believe in the ideal of God, yet we don’t know whether he is friend or foe.”

The messiah smiled. “I think you just quoted some wayward Sufi.”

“I am impressed,” Aziz said with a chuckle. The man was an avid learner. His appetite for knowledge often amazed the tutor.

“Sufism intrigues me.”

Aziz stroked his beard. “By the way, the mystics know more about the divine than the pedants do. They believe in connecting with God through inner purification. An intriguing concept.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“What about your spiritual journeys?” Aziz went in another direction.

“Going well,” he said dryly, as if not wanting to elaborate.

“How did the pope take it?” The messiah had already briefed Aziz in detail about his transcendent encounter with the leader of the Roman Catholic Church, but he still asked.

“I guess he was petrified. Whatever he saw was too much, even for the pontiff.”

“What about tonight?”

“Tonight, I am going with another one,” the messiah replied.

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It was not lack of sleep that overwhelmed Hasser in his room, though earlier in the night he had stumbled out of the dimly lit hotel bar, his steps unsteady and erratic. He had been drinking heavily for hours, and the liquor had taken its toll on his body and mind. Both Zaki and Diab were in their rooms.

As he sat upright in his bed, his bloodshot eyes darted around wildly, and he could not quite make sense of his surroundings. The walls around him seemed to blur into a kaleidoscope of colors, and the soft bed under him felt like a boat in choppy waters.

As his head swam, his imagination began to play tricks on him. Vivid images danced before his eyes. He saw neon pink elephants with polka-dotted tails prancing through the streets, and the parked cars morphed into giant, talking mushrooms. Buildings leaned in towards him menacingly, their windows resembling the eyes of judgmental onlookers.

His perception of the world was badly distorted. He thought he was lost in a bizarre dreamscape, unable to differentiate between his drunken imagination and reality. Shadows seemed to whisper secrets, and even the most subtle noise resounded like thunder in his ears.

As he engaged in animated conversations with imaginary friends, his nonsensical babbling filled the room. He laughed uproariously at jokes only he could hear and argued vehemently with unseen enemies. Strangers gave him a wide berth, casting worried glances his way. Many passers-by were staring at him. Some of them shook their heads in disgust, and others looked away.

His body finally gave in to the stupor as it swept over him like an ocean wave. Still yelling and pointing at his ghosts, he fell to the cold floor.

He did not know how long the nightmare went on. It was a blurry and terrifying journey into a netherworld until the loud, trumpeting sound of a ram’s horn startled him awake. As he picked himself up, a shroud materialized before his eyes. It floated through the air, alive and breathing. A soft glow emanated from it.

The messiah stepped out of the shroud.

Hasser’s mouth opened, and his eyes suddenly flared wide. “What the hell?” his voice squeaked. His foggy mind was slow to process what his eyes were telling him.

The messiah beamed a smile at him.

Hasser lay still, holding his breath, as if mesmerized. The air seemed to throb. Then, in a blink, he was standing in a narrow alley. The town around him was old, with limestone houses. More like ancient, he decided after a second glance.

It was Jerusalem, way back in time, judging by the splendid Herod’s Temple high above the town. He had studied some AI-generated imagery of the temple in recent days.

People strolled in the narrow, unpaved streets, but nobody paid him attention. He was not dreaming. It was real. He could smell the cypresses and see the pigeons. On a more visceral level, he had an impending sense of doom. The place reeked of death.

He roamed the town at will.

Somehow, he was able to make sense of what the folks were saying among themselves. Last night, authorities arrested a rebel east of the town. The ruling Roman government first brought him to the Antonia Palace, a military garrison. From there, he was transferred under heavy guard to the high priest’s house in the Upper City, an affluent part of Jerusalem. Now he was going through a trial before the religious court for heresy and inciting the people against the rulers.

Delving deeper into the Lower City, he walked by the hippodrome. Unsure of himself, he wandered the streets, surveying the town with bewilderment. The people he met in a tavern were reserved, not the boisterous type often encountered in such places. The glum merchants he visited in their shops were no longer peddling their wares. Travelers from lands far away unloaded their camels without any banter. Even the children appeared subdued.

The populace understood too well what an iron hand meant.

Yes, it was Roman Jerusalem, where the empire made the rules, and a vagrant Jew would not be allowed to get away with his defiance. Whatever the cost. The Roman governor would fully endorse the verdict handed down by the Sanhedrin.

On the other hand, the rebel was one step ahead of everyone, he realized. While the Jewish elite, in collusion with their masters, engaged in a sham trial to punish the man they accused of stirring an uprising, he was convalescing in a nearby house.

In the afternoon, Hasser witnessed the crucifixion in Golgotha.

As the crowd dispersed, Hasser found himself looking at Jesus. The real one. Despite his injuries, he was up and about. He moved surreptitiously through the crowd, trying to cover his face with a scarf. For a second, Hasser thought he saw a grin there. The man was quietly rejoicing. His God had turned the tables on his enemies.

Hasser followed him.

He took a circuitous route, entering the city through the northern Tower Gate and carefully navigating the Mishneh neighborhood. A deserted Temple Mount offered him access to the Golden Gate on the eastern side. He left the town and headed to the Mount of Olives. Hasser stayed on his heels, wondering what the man was up to.

Just as Hasser was about to give up a seemingly futile chase, the sky above the hill lit up. Alarmed, he staggered back. A brilliant flash of light erupted and engulfed Jesus.

Before Hasser could shut his eyes to avoid the sudden glare, the man was gone.

Taken up to the heavens.

Hasser screamed in terror. Then, his eyes closed, and opened again.

He was back in his hotel room, lying on the floor and staring blankly at the ceiling.

**Chapter 29**

Hasser was badly shaken. The dim, hazy glow of a night lamp engulfed the room. His clothes were drenched in sweat. He swallowed hard, suddenly aware of his thumping chest and ragged breathing. Getting up on unsteady legs, he switched on a light.

For a moment, his gaze drifted aimlessly across the white-painted walls as he walked through the encounter with the messiah in his mind. The otherworldly scene was seared into his brain, the recurring flashbacks burning like red-hot embers.

His eyes, once familiar with the mundane, now held a glint of something extraordinary, a lingering reflection of the things he had witnessed. His ears heard a wind that was centuries-old, beating through the trees and touching off strange symphonies.

He wondered what it had been all about, not sure of what message it brought from that strange world.

Someone banged on the door. “Mike? You okay? Are you awake? Let me in.” Zaki was there. The banging got harder, as if he were trying to break through.

Hasser did not move. Zaki hollered again, knocking fast now. “Mike, what the hell is happening? Open, open, please.”

He went to the door, hesitated for a moment, and opened it. Zaki swept in, looking wide-eyed at him. “What’s going on, man?” he asked.

Hasser smiled wanly. “A terrible dream.”

“I guessed as much.”

“Why are you here? I’m fine.”

“Uh-uh.”

“Did you find me curled up and sucking my thumb?”

Zaki yawned, looking him over, but did not say anything. He ambled across the room. Hasser shuffled uncomfortably as Zaki noticed the empty liquor bottles resting on the floor.

Zaki, now appearing more amused than concerned, gave him a fist bump. “Let’s go outside for a walk. You need fresh air.”

Seeing no point in arguing with the man, Hasser got hold of his down jacket. Zaki grabbed his hand and dragged him out of the room.

The night clerk on the ground floor reception gave them a worrying look. It was past midnight. Two foreigners going out for a stroll in the cold, one of whom certainly appeared hung over, was not a good sign. His drunkenness earlier in the night had not gone unnoticed, Hasser thought as they walked past the front desk. Zaki nodded at the clerk, who relaxed.

A soft clacking came from behind them. Diab stepped out of an elevator and hustled after them as they emerged on the deserted, moon-soaked street. The night was a bit nippy, its chill stabbing into their bodies. A car turned the corner, half a block away. Headlights danced on the road further ahead, briefly illuminating the storefronts and residential buildings.

They continued across the road and started down another street after skirting past a heap of construction material piled on an empty plot.

“Mind telling me what happened?” Zaki asked. He struggled with a Zippo to light his cigarette. Diab merely looked on, his hands tucked into the armpits. He was clearly not enjoying the late-night stroll at all.

“What?” Hasser asked.

“Tell me about the dream you had.”

Hasser stared at him for a long beat before speaking. “It…it wasn’t a dream, actually.”

Zaki clicked his tongue. “Then, what? Alcohol-induced psychosis?” His cigarette was finally ignited.

“Come on.”

“Come on? I’m freezing my butt off here, and you’re holding over.”

Hasser took a slow breath. “Okay, it was more like an out-of-body experience.” He narrated what he had been through. It greatly fascinated the Egyptian, who leaned closer to listen to every detail. He himself had a similar experience.

Zaki was not particularly perturbed by what he heard. Either he did not believe a word of what Hasser had said, or he was not the type to lose sleep over religion—any religion, in fact. Hasser could not blame him if he dismissed the entire narrative as the ramblings of a drunken mind. More likely, he thought, Zaki did not give a damn.

Hasser was a different person. Raised as a traditional Southern Baptist in a middle-class white American family, he took his faith seriously. Though he did not wear religion on his sleeve, his strong sense of right and wrong and the moral compass he carried within owed a lot to the faith he adhered to.

Now his beliefs had taken a beating.

He had been on a trip to places buried back in time and seen people hidden away in the realm of the supernatural. Now full of doubt, he suffered in his own mind, fighting a losing battle against himself. The scenes on Golgotha and the Mount of Olives were driving him insane.

For some unknown reason, he glanced over his shoulder a number of times, as if half-expecting to see Jesus Christ making his way through the crowd after the crucifixion of Judas, a sly grin plastered on his lips.

While the biting cold relieved his hangover, it did little to help Hasser overcome his inner turmoil. To say that he felt miserable was an understatement. His whole world was turned upside down. He was stunned by the intensity of the conflict tearing his soul apart as well as his obliviousness to a vulnerability he carried inside. A sucker for the truth all his life, Hasser now realized he saw a different, truer reality that had been there all along.

Sighing, he pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. He wondered where he would stand if God judged him. *Would I be granted salvation?*

“What’s bothering you, Mr. Hasser?” Diab asked politely. “I feel something is not right.”

Hasser did not want bare his soul to anyone. Yet, a part of him wanted to trust these guys. They were open-minded, easy-going men who did not judge. Diab in particular was a true scholar of the religion, not your run-of-the-mill bigoted mullah. Hasser could rely on him to understand the predicament he was confronting.

“My…my dream,” he hesitated. “Could it have been a mind trick? Was I mesmerized by the messiah?”

“I went through a similar experience, as you know. Don’t think it was a trick. More like a higher form of extra-sensory perception. Perhaps, a retrocognition.”

Hasser nodded, preparing himself to ask another question. “Was Jesus Christ ever crucified?” He hoped he was not embracing disbelief by confessing his doubts before Diab and Zaki.

Diab smiled. “The answer to your question depends on which side you’re playing. Christians believe in his death on the cross. Islam asserts that he never underwent crucifixion or resurrection, but instead ascended directly to the heavens. His enemies were tricked into thinking that they had killed him.”

Hasser groaned. “Why was such deception necessary, if we go by the Islamic version of the event?”

“Nobody knows what God had in mind when he saved Jesus Christ, peace be upon him, from a humiliating death at the hands of his own people. Maybe, it was part of a grand scheme. Like Adam, who was predestined to eat from the forbidden tree, because God had planned to send Adam and his progeny to earth.”

Hasser wrinkled his forehead. “I see. Go on.”

Diab continued. “Both sides acknowledge his ascension, but the crucifixion is all shrouded in mystery. I understand Jesus was raised in the heavens one way or another to play his role once again when God sends him to this world. This concept, the Second Coming, or the Parousia, is one of the core beliefs in both Christianity and Islam. It figures prominently in the messianic prophecies. I, as a student of eschatology, studied the whole thing in detail.”

Zaki asked lightly. “Why couldn't Jesus, peace be upon him, accomplish his goals the first time around?" Why redo it?”

“He did not fail in his mission,” Diab emphasized. “His second arrival would be a sign of the Hour, and he would restore justice in the land.”

“When will he come back?” Hasser questioned.

“Toward the end times, though only God knows when it’s going to happen. Views about the nature of the Second Coming vary among the Christian denominations and the Muslim sects. People have predicted many specific dates for the Second Coming, some in the distant past and others still in the future.”

“What role would he be playing?”

“The Church believes that at the moment of his arrival, the living will die, the universe will be transfigured, and the dead will be resurrected, judged, and recompensed. According to the Islamic tradition, Jesus and the Mahdi, known in Islamic eschatology as the redeemer of Islam, would confront al-Masih ad-Dajjal, or the last antichrist, and his followers.

“Well, who died on the cross then?”

“It hardly matters who actually did. Probably, it was Judas. Or Simon of Cyrene, maybe. Along with a couple of thieves. The point is that Jesus remained unharmed. You see, it was one of those extraordinary moments when God himself intervened on behalf of his chosen ones. The way he saved Abraham from the fire, and parted the sea for Moses and his people. The religious texts describe many such miracles.”

Hasser looked in the distance as if searching for the demons out for his soul. “This messiah guy walks around with a shitload of miracles himself. Should we stand with him? Or against him?”

It was a poignant question, and Diab clearly did not want to answer it immediately. He hesitated for a moment before speaking. “Something is wrong with the whole affair. It makes my antennae go up. A true messiah wouldn’t need coaching lessons from me hidden away in a shithole like Myanmar. I hope you get your answer.”

Hasser closed his eyes, thinking the man could not be further from the truth. “Yeah, you’re right.

Zaki asked. "If he isn't the real deal, then who is he?"

“Antichrist!” the Egyptian deadpanned.

Hasser gasped, unable to speak for a moment. He had detected a hint of loathing in Diab’s voice. *Is it guilt?* He had tutored the messiah after all. Hasser was not sure, but it was possible. The man could be struggling with shame.

“Why do you say it?”

Diab gave him a pained look. “The holy prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, warned of many Dajjals, or antichrists, coming before the day of judgment. Christian literature echoes the same theme. Jesus, peace be upon him, also told his disciples about the impostors who would perform great signs and wonders. Our so-called messiah could be one of those false messianic figures whose coming was foretold. He could be trying to take the place of Christ and drive us away from the true worship of God.”

“What about his spirituality? His miracles?” Hasser inquired, barely concealing his exasperation.

“He is misleading the masses,” Diab said forcefully. “He is in the churches; he is in the mosques. He is everywhere. You see, over the last couple thousand years, the common man has worked on his religion through penitence, charity, and the promulgation of God’s word. Little by little, one moment of introspection, one step toward the light, one word of prayer at a time, we came to know God and the connection we built up with him.”

Zaki sneered. “Quite frankly, it's been a long and slow, mostly boring process.”

Diab said. “That’s the point. We, humans, are, by nature, thrill-seekers, going after the grails. Now the messiah has blinded us by introducing sensation into the faith, sending everyone on a wild roller coaster ride. The man is a charlatan. He has taken away the prayer and given us the miracles and the drama; substituting our tedium with the exciting, the mundane with the exotic.”

“I get you. He’s a deceiver,” Hasser said. “What the hell do we do now?”

He got no answer.

They walked in silence on their way back to the hotel. Hasser feared that Diab might be shivering now.

“You believe in God, right, Hasser?” Diab inquired as they entered the hotel's comfortably warm lobby.

“Yes, I certainly do.”

“And do you?” He turned to Zaki.

“On a good day, yes,” he said glibly.

Diab gave a grim smile. “We’re all flawed, and we are not alone in our failures. In fact, there is a long list of messed-up Bible heroes. God made us like this and knows us well.”

“What’s your point?” Hasser asked.

“An unholy night has descended over us. The world is holding its breath to greet a new ruler. The messiah is not what he appears to be. We need someone to do background digging and other stuff to uncover his true self. It is people like you who have to go down this rabbit-hole, not priests or scholars like me.”

Hasser chuckled. “God damn it, Diab. We’re the fucking CIA. We don’t solve religious puzzles. Besides, we’ve already dodged enough bullets in Iran and Myanmar.”

Zaki laughed too. “Thanks God, Mike. You ain’t half as dumb as you look.”

“I’m appalled, as usual,” Hasser said, making a face.

“Man, this isn’t our shtick anyway.”

“Well, try telling him.”

Diab remained serious, ignoring their petty arguing. “Please, you must carry out this task. Take it to a logical conclusion. Otherwise, may God have mercy on all the souls inhabiting this earth.”

Hasser eyed his partner helplessly. Neither man had any experience arguing with a religious man.

Under his frowning brows, Diab’s dark eyes flashed. “I wish I could offer you some help, but I'm sorry. Just go with your instincts and handle this matter like an intelligence gig. Keep your head down. Just do your job the way you’ve been trained.”

Hasser groaned, tapping Zaki on the arm. “He now sounds like my instructor at the Farm. Always kept me pushing deeper into the shit.”

**Chapter 30**

**Beijing, China**

Gao wanted to slam shut his computer and call it a day. Lately, his stomach ache had worsened, and antacids did not seem to work. His wife had made him try a lot of traditional herbal remedies, to no effect.

He was in his office in the main MSS building, having just returned from a grueling talk with the minister. As the mission encountered headwinds, the man had lost his nerve. In Gao’s personal opinion, it had more to do with the sweeping success he saw than with any hiccups. The messiah had performed beyond anyone’s expectations. It seemed to overwhelm the minister and, by extension, the president.

Reasoning with him was a waste of breath. Their daily interactions almost always resulted in pointless finger pointing by the boss, and his own bitter retorts. It was not a good thing, he knew. Their mutual acrimony could further jeopardize one of the most significant undertakings they now supervised.

Despite rapid modernization, the Chinese culture still echoed the country’s feudal past. In an organization like the MSS, the top man was always right, and losing control in front of him was considered a show of insolence. It was not a career-enhancing trait; he knew it too well.

Gao was past caring now.

His only wish was to see his current assignment come to a successful conclusion. He would then ask for retirement and dedicate himself to his home and to his Yinou. She had already made plans to visit numerous places in China and abroad, which he knew they wouldn't be able to see even if given another chance to live.

He glanced out the window.

The view overlooking the Summer Palace was enchanting, with the Kunming Lake’s once-clear waters, now partially frozen at the edges, glistening under the sunlight. Wisps of steam rose from the surface. The entire palace complex appeared to float on the water, like a graceful sentinel, the vermilion and gold hues of its wooden structures standing out brilliantly against the backdrop of the now-barren trees.

Looking back at the computer screen, he tried to focus. He was still unsure how the Americans had gotten involved. His compartmentalization was airtight from the beginning. Somehow, they had come across a tidbit of information and worked on it. Most likely, it was the murder in London. The Iranian’s trophy wife. By a fluke of luck, it involved the Pakistani-American guy who happened to be an informer for the CIA.

Once triggered, the Americans, true to their reputation, had proved stubborn. Maybe a little lucky as well. Eventually, their doggedness paid off. The CIA team in Iran had staked out Ali Aqa and his people. Despite their failure to grab Aqa, they had probably separated enough grain from the chaff to go after Diab in Myanmar. He was in their custody now.

It did not bother him much.

Contrary to his minister’s worst-case scenarios, the Egyptian did not pose any significant risk to their mission. He had played an important role in preparing the messiah for his appearance on the world stage. Other than the coaching sessions he imparted to the man, Diab did not know much. Even Ali and his bosses were in the dark about the messiah's deepest secrets, particularly his origin.

Yes, Gao agreed; Diab should not have been allowed to escape from the compound. It had been poor fieldcraft. But when you relegate your best operators to the role of watchmen for months with no real challenge to face, complacency often sets in.

Whatever had happened was past now. It was time to focus on what lay ahead.

His trusted hound, Zeng, was up and about and back in the game. Eager to face off against his opponents once again. His failure at the hands of the American operatives still stung him, even more so than did the wound in his shoulder. He wanted to undo the humiliation at all costs.

His phone rang.

It was Ali Aqa. “Yes?” he growled.

Ali said. “We’re ready for the task in Jordan.”

“Superb.”

“The American duo is also in Jordan,” the Iranian said by way of announcing, his voice quivering with excitement.

“It’s understandable. They want to watch the messiah,” he replied, jotting down the information on a pad. His own people had not yet been able to locate them.

“Will they be content with watching? What if they’re going to take him out?”

Gao said it dismissively. "If the American government decides to get rid of him, he'll stand no chance." Gao, a senior official in the Chinese intelligence community, knew too well about his enemy's reach. They had demonstrated it time and again, all across the globe, and on many occasions.

“Just like that? Will you tolerate it?” the Iranian asked in bewilderment. His words reflected the mindset of a hardliner. Even the regime in Tehran, which supported him, behaved similarly. To them, statecraft was nothing more than a vendetta. It had cost them a lot since the Islamic revolution, but they had not given up their confrontational approach in dealing with the US and her Western allies.

“Listen, Ali. We wouldn’t go to war against America over one man, however high-value an asset he might be. It’s simply not our way.” The blueprint for the Chinese strategy revolved around Sun Tzu’s thinking of defeating the enemy without fighting. The rest of the world knew him as a military thinker, but the Art of War, the treatise he wrote centuries ago, was a source of guidance in many endeavors, including espionage, culture, politics, and business.

“If you budge now, our common enemy will win,” Ali warned.

Gao shuffled through some papers on his desk, holding back a reply. The man on the other end of the call was a zealot who was mesmerized by the idea of a new kind of war against the United States.

Gao was painfully aware of the risks he was accruing by launching the messiah. It looked as if he had bitten off more than he could chew. The upheaval that had already gripped the world was massive. To be honest, he had not been able to predict the outcome for his superiors. His estimates had been modest. It was one of the reasons the minister now challenged everything he said.

The long-term results could be quite unpredictable, to say the least. So much of the road ahead was foggy. The ongoing crisis had the potential to reshape the Middle East in a way that could be fundamentally detrimental to Chinese interests. Some senior analysts at the MSS warned that the crisis would likely result in the breakup of existing states, with new, perpetually unstable kingdoms taking shape in the region. Others, including himself, understood that the messiah had certainly emerged as a central figurehead with all the essential clout required to establish himself as the united leader of a large common wealth of Islamic nations.

Unfortunately, some traditional Chinese allies, like Pakistan, were in dire straits. The intelligence coming out of that country was bleak. His counterpart in the Second Bureau was chewing nails. Pakistan could fall to the extremists at any moment. Well, tough luck. He could not help it.

“We’re not going to budge, Ali,” Gao reassured the Iranian.

He laughed nervously. “I thought you hung up on me.”

“Don’t you act like my girlfriend here.”

“You’re too old for that.”

“You’re right. I was going over what you said.”

His words triggered the guy. He blurted it out. “We will persist in resisting the Great Satan using all available methods, and your hesitation to pursue our shared goals will not deter us.”

Gao tuned him out. Ali and his mullahs wanted another holy war, with no possibility of a truce or cease-fire. A bitter fight till the end.

He stared out the window, trying to ignore how ordinary people went about their lives. A few visitors walked along the paths that meandered through the gardens surrounding the lake.

His nation had come around. The Chinese finally emerging from the centuries-long poverty they had endured. Since opening up to foreign trade and investment and implementing free-market reforms, China had prospered. No one could be allowed to mess with that prosperity.

The MSS would go on supporting the messiah with as small a footprint as possible.

**Doha, Qatar**

Kate screamed at one of the staffers. “Call the boss now!”

“Okay, okay,” the young man replied, startled by her sudden outburst. He got on the phone. He seemed competent but was a newcomer and clearly unaccustomed to her operating style.

Kate and Chad had been pulled back from Al-Ruwais. Jim had wanted both of his senior people close at hand. She turned her attention back to the secure cable she had just received from Langley. Her mind churned over the information.

The Pakistani government had fallen.

A coup without any warning. There were lots of killings involving the senior leadership. Their powerful military was desperately trying to combat the situation. By all accounts, the zealots had an upper hand so far. She tried to appear calm, but the small team managing the operations center instantly knew it was really bad.

“He’s not answering,” she was told.

“Damn. Try Chad.”

By the time Chad arrived in the room, she was back in her usual mode. To the staffers, she appeared to have entered a state of Zen calm. In addition to acknowledging the information, she had also gathered all the relevant data and come up with a quick contingency plan.

Chad read the message. “My God!”

She whispered. “Yeah, fucking nutcases in control of an unstable country, armed to the teeth with nukes.”

“So, it’s no longer an imaginary scenario now. We’re face-to-face with the real thing,” he sighed.

“Our messiah visited Pakistan just days ago. He triggered it.” The guy had merely spent a few hours there after wrapping up his visit to neighboring Iran. It had been enough to tip the scales in favor of the extremists.

“Such a terrible event,” she said, her eyes closed.

“That’s right. Anything to add? Details?”

“Nothing, except for the fact that the vaunted Pakistani military lasted not quite as long as a sneeze.”

“What’s going to be our reaction?” she asked

“The president doesn’t have many options,” Chad answered. “If he uses the military to snatch their nukes, the chances of grabbing the whole arsenal wouldn’t be high. Besides, any kinetic operation would definitely send the fundamentalists over the edge. They would surely use any remaining weapons to retaliate.”

“Shit. Would they be able to strike us?”

“Their missiles don’t have the range to reach the continental US, but they could easily hit the bases we use in the region. Even Israel could be a target.”

“She’s got her own stockpile,” Kate commented pensively.

Chad nodded. “Yes, an overt military action against the new ruling junta in Pakistan seems less likely.”

“Trust me, the zealots would tell us to sit back and suck it up.”

The door opened, and Jim Stoll entered the room with a sour expression on his face. He was on his cell phone as he walked in, his manner curt and businesslike. It was now afternoon, and he appeared exhausted.

Kate updated him on the situation in Pakistan.

He listened intently, his features darkening. As she finished, the room got quiet. Chad frisked out a cigarette and rolled it in his fingers, waiting for the boss to break the silence.

“So,” Jim said. “Where do we stand now?”

Kate began the litany: the tidbits of information flowing out of Islamabad, the high-level analysis at Langley, the tenuous relationship between the two countries, and the messiah’s growing influence all over. She rounded off the discussion with a few recommendations.

It took several minutes. As she finished, Jim's brow furrowed. He cleared his throat. “We could be facing similar upheavals in our own neighborhood.”

He was right. Many kingdoms in the Middle East were already rife with unrest, their societies teetering on the verge of collapse. It was only a matter of time before the messiah unleashed a firestorm there.

Chad was quiet. Kate eyed him surreptitiously. It was possible he had something to say, but he did not speak. Maybe the guy was in no mood for hypothetical rumination.

Seeing his reluctance, Jim tapped his arm. “I’m interested in hearing your views on the current situation.”

“What exactly are we talking about?”

“Possible fallouts.”

Chad warmed up, and soon both men were engrossed in a passionate conversation.

Left with her thoughts, Kate shook her head. She wanted to be out of here; she didn’t care to what end they would like to discuss this matter.

She had to find a way to excuse herself and take care of the routine stuff pending at her office. The Agency was beset by the same issues as any bureaucracy. Her daily tasks were as routine as those of a mid-level manager in any large corporation. It involved exchanging heavy cable traffic with the headquarters, filling out expense claims, and keeping the spreadsheets updated. Made all the more difficult by the need to stick to the byzantine processes laid down by generation after generation of civil servants.

She waited a while and then, satisfied that she was not required to participate, took her leave with a mumbled excuse.

**Chapter 31**

**Amman, Jordan**

It was funny, Hasser thought, how he and Zaki often found themselves in the middle of a shitstorm wherever they went.

They were driving through the heart of Amman. Barricades, burnt-out vehicles, and the acrid smell of tear gas marred the once bustling metropolis. The streets, once filled with the sounds of commerce and conversation, were a cacophony of frustrated shouts and the occasional crack of gunfire.

Zaki slowed almost to a stop as they encountered another security checkpoint. The battered Toyota stayed behind a line of vehicles.

Within days of his arrival in Jordan, the messiah had lit up a fuse. The ever increasingly popular voice of dissent ceased being a whisper and began building to a sustained thunderclap. Those who were outraged wanted a political role for him, and those who had the power chose to sideline the extremists. The unrest continued to escalate, and the crazy followers came to the conclusion that they had no choice but to take matters into their own hands. If the king and his cronies would not listen, then they would act decisively.

Meanwhile, the pope arrived to meet the messiah.

The government, already under tremendous pressure from an increasingly agitated population, resorted to heavy handedness. Beginning last night, raids conducted by the security services continued all day. Hundreds of homes, businesses, and madrassas were targeted, with several thousand people rounded up.

And so was unleashed a mayhem.

At the center of the turmoil, protesters, young and old, bearing placards and wearing gas masks, clashed with heavily armed riot police. A mixture of defiance and despair masked their faces, their angry voices echoing through the streets. They hammered home their full support for the messiah and demanded their fellow countrymen's release.

Hasser and Zaki were stopped on the main Istiqlal Road, before the Al-Nasha intersection.

There was not much traffic on the road. Hasser took a look around. Smoke billowed from smoldering debris as shops, once thriving, now stood boarded up and abandoned, their windows shattered by rocks thrown in anger. Graffiti adorned the walls, expressing the discontent that swept through the country. The scenes of unrest extended beyond Amman, he knew, with other cities and towns experiencing similar upheaval.

The government, struggling to maintain control, imposed a curfew and declared a state of emergency. Tanks and armored vehicles patrolled the streets; their presence was a stark reminder of the escalating crisis. Social media channels crackled with videos of confrontations, galvanizing more citizens to join the protests and adding to the chaos.

Ethnic and tribal tensions, suppressed for years, resurfaced as rival groups clashed in different regions. The turmoil threatened to fracture the delicate balance that had kept Jordan relatively stable for decades. Now, armed mobs clashed with authorities for sway over the country. At stake was the nation's social and political order.

Outside of the borders, regional powers watched with concern, their own interests intertwined with Jordan's fate. Diplomatic efforts to mediate the crisis were underway, but uncertainty persisted.

In the midst of this turmoil, ordinary Jordanians struggled to maintain a sense of normalcy. Schools closed, businesses shuttered, and families huddled together, anxious for what the future might hold. The country's rich history and cultural heritage felt overshadowed by the pressing need for change.

Jordan was at a crossroads, its people torn between the desire for reform and the fear of further instability. The road ahead was uncertain, and the once-steady nation grappled with the weight of its own discontent, hoping to find a path toward a more stable and just future.

A fully geared-up soldier showed up at the window. Zaki handed him their fake passports and other credentials. The man was satisfied with their identities, paying particular attention to the special entry permits issued to them for the royal residential complex a short distance away. The intersection was closed, they were told. They had to take a detour.

Zaki nodded and cut left onto a side street. He meandered through small alleyways dotting a housing community. The Toyota approached one of the royal complex's gates. A thorough scrutiny for a full twenty minutes ensued before they were allowed entry.

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The sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm, citron-tinged glow over the tranquil landscape of the royal residences. Cardinal Dean Banfield took in the surroundings with mild interest. The complex housed the palaces and royal courts. The soft hum of anticipation filled the air as a selective crowd gathered to witness the historic arrival of the pope. The premises included nearly a hundred acres of land and buildings, meticulously cleaned and prepared for the momentous occasion. To protect the area, multiple layers of security were in place.

Dean was not happy at all.

He had opposed this meeting. In fact, he had tried to convince the pope to call off the visit. The timing was not right, he said. Following the debacle at the UN-sponsored interfaith meeting, he saw no chance of consensus among the world leaders on what to do with the messiah and his spreading malevolence. The pope had better focus on Christendom instead of coming to the epicenter of tribulation and trying to convince a rabid populace.

Dean saw no chance of it. Even the king and his cronies seemed to have lost their grip. But the pope had politely overruled him. He wanted to stand united with the other Abrahamic religions in his crusade against the messiah. It was a noble cause, the man had declared before retiring to his suite at the royal guest palace last night.

Dean doubted it would achieve anything.

In the distance, the distinctive sound of approaching vehicles grew louder, heralding the arrival of the pope. In the center of the convoy were two identical, sleek, black-painted Maybachs, their neat matte finish gleaming in the fading light. The crowd's excitement intensified and the atmosphere charged with fervor as they neared the designated reception area in front of the Raghadan Palace.

The King of Jordan, dressed in his traditional white robe and a ceremonial headdress, stood at the foot of a grand red carpet that stretched for a hundred yards. His face was a mix of solemnity and pride as he awaited the arrival of the spiritual leader. The royal guard, dressed in their ritualistic uniforms, stood at attention on either side of the carpet, their swords glistening in the setting sun.

As the cars braked gracefully, the crowd fell into a hushed reverence. The door opened, and Pope Xavier, resplendent in his white cassock and miter, stepped out. A gentle breeze rustled the Vatican flag pinned to a nearby pole, as if nature itself were welcoming this historic moment. A group of children hurled petals at the guest.

The pope approached the king, and their eyes met, conveying a deep respect for each other's roles. They exchanged warm smiles, and the king offered a welcoming hand to the pontiff. The pope accepted, and the two leaders walked side by side down the scarlet carpet. As they progressed, the crowd erupted into cheers and applause, a testament to the unity and goodwill that this meeting symbolized despite the growing conflagration around them.

The pope's visit to Jordan was not just a religious event; it was a moment of unity and peace. As they reached the end of the carpet, the king and the pope turned to face the crowd, their hands clasped in a symbol of solidarity. The crowd's cheers reached a crescendo, echoing through the ancient city of Amman and resonating with hope for a brighter, more harmonious future.

A hope Cardinal Dean did not share. Severe political turmoil and civil unrest in Jordan had already plunged the nation into a spasm of instability. Unless the king stepped down, there was no chance of reproach. And even if he did, nobody would be able to guarantee peace in the aftermath. The country had no prior exposure to democracy. It would be chaos.

Xavier appeared more haggard than usual. Bags were visible under his eyes. Dean knew he was not sleeping well. As the pope was ushered inside the Raghadan Palace, where the messiah awaited him for a formal one-on-one meeting, Dean wondered what might transpire between the two men.

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The messiah had chosen a small room to receive his high-profile guest instead of the stately grand hall preferred by the king for such purposes, though the palace's ornate architecture and lush gardens would have certainly provided a stunning backdrop for this momentous occasion.

He stood at the door.

A single glance at the pope. *Is he nervous?* It was difficult to tell. Most men who rose to high positions would know how to conceal their emotions. It was time to test the one in front of him. At least they shared a common bond, which would make it easier to engage in conversation with him.

As it happened, it was simple enough to start the conversation, but after that, it was uphill all the way.

The messiah paused, as if he had expected him to be upset. His gaze lingered.

Pope Xavier wilted under his stare. “I…I came to talk.” His voice was feeble as he spoke.

"Talk, you will,” the messiah replied cryptically, taking his hand and leading him into the room.

The messiah regarded his visitor indifferently before asking. “How could you lose it?”

Xavier was confused. “What? What did I lose?”

The messiah snarled. “The Holy Grail. Your church lost it.” He made it sound like an accusation. It was also a totally unexpected question.

Xavier went deathly pale. *So, he knows.*

It was the church’s best-kept secret, and yet it wasn’t, he realized.

There had been a time when the church still held hope. When the pope and his senior cardinals thought some mistake had been made that might yet be rectified, they initiated a covert manhunt to track the perpetrators and retrieve the lost treasure. The massive effort had gone on for years before fizzling out, yielding no results.

Except for the fact that it had been one of their own who had aided the thieves. It always happened that way. Like on that fateful evening, when a group of friends shared supper and one man gave in to greed. Two thousand years later, his act of betrayal, like a never-healing sore, still hurt the soul of humanity.

Xavier tried to feign ignorance. “I don’t know what you’re saying.”

The messiah shook his head. “You sound lame, Xavier.”

“It’s a legend, nothing more. The Grail doesn’t exist.”

“Yes, it doesn’t anymore, thanks to the incompetence of your people,” the messiah spat out.

Xavier flinched before relenting. “We were robbed.”

“I know.”

“So, what’s the trouble now?”

“The Grail was a real thing. Over the centuries, countless noble men and women have protected it like a treasure, with some even risking their lives to ensure its safety."

They sat for a while without speaking, each regarding the other as if deciding how best to use the tool of silence.

“Some of those good souls belonged to my church,” Xavier pointed out half-heartedly.

“The Roman Catholic Church was the last custodian. Previously, the responsibility was held by the early church leaders and the Armenians. Their Apostolic Church did its solemn duty well before your church fathers decided to lay their hands on the ultimate prize.”

“It wasn’t a prize. Rather, it was more of a trial.”

“And you weren’t worthy of either. A pity, I must say.”

“You don’t know to what lengths we went to keep it safe.”

“And yet you failed miserably in the end,” the messiah said painfully, his voice raising an octave. “You proved incapable of saving the blood of Christ!”

*God. He knows everything.*

The pope sweated profusely. The church had created an elaborate legend around the Holy Grail even before it possessed the treasure. On the church’s behalf, countless artists and writers were encouraged, or bribed sometimes, to insert it into folklore, pseudo-history, fiction, and conspiracy theories. One of the most well-known examples was Arthurian literature. Over time, the traditions described the Grail as a cup, a dish, or a rock with miraculous healing powers. Several relics were deliberately highlighted, like the True Cross and the Holy Lance. Wild stories were spread about some castles and other locations.

All in an effort to deflect attention away from the truth.

The messiah went on. “When the altercation happened in Gethsemane, Judas was wounded and his blood stained the clothes worn by Jesus. By the way, Jesus was also injured. The shredded robe was saved in an earthen jar. It was a secret known only to a chosen few. Some of the disciples were also unaware that it existed. Thaddeus and his helpers later smuggled the jar out of Jerusalem. He was one of the original twelve disciples, better known as Jude the Apostle.

“Why did he do that?”

"Palestine was a cauldron of chaos at that time. The Romans imposed an endless tyranny on the Jews, and the new faith had not yet gained traction. Insurrections were common, though they were ruthlessly put down. Transporting the jar to a relatively safer place was considered appropriate.

“Smart thinking,” Xavier said.

"It found its way into a cave in Maaloula, Syria, deep in the Qalamoun Mountains. At that time, it was an isolated place, lost in the wilderness. Even today, the nearby village is mostly Christian, and they speak Aramaic. Can you believe it?”

**Chapter 32**

Xavier just nodded. Although he knew the story because of his position as the pope, he was fascinated by the details.

The messiah continued. “Later on, Thaddeus himself asked Thecla, a convert to faith, to protect the jar. She was an eccentric girl who dressed up like a man and became a traveling preacher. As you know, Paul, a misguided zealot, had started propagating his new Trinitarian religion by that time. Thaddeus did not agree with some of his fundamental views, but he considered him a necessary evil, an extraordinary orator who could bring rapid numbers into the fold. Thaddeus preached alongside him. He especially focused on bringing faith to Armenia by meeting in secret with some of the visitors from that country.

“On the other hand, Thecla did a marvelous job until the Romans tracked her to the grotto where she was hiding. As she ran up the mountain in panic and disappeared into her cave, the mountain miraculously closed behind her.

“A small chapel was built there when she died, and the jar remained in the custody of her diehard followers for almost three hundred years. The monastery was added much later.”

Xavier said. “Yes, I know. It was bombarded by terrorists in 2013, as I recall. They abducted a dozen nuns. They held the hostages for three months before releasing them." His sidetracking was intentional. He didn't like where it was going.

“Well, the work of God isn’t easy,” the messiah commented somberly as he went on. “In the early fourth century, something, possibly an internal rift or persecution, forced the band of protectors to look elsewhere. One night they embarked on a perilous journey eastward to Armenia through bandit country.”

“I can’t even imagine the hardships those early Christians faced,” Xavier whispered.

“Of course. By that time, Armenia had already turned into a Christian country, the first nation to adopt the new faith as its state religion. Saint Gregory the Illuminator took a personal interest in preserving the holiest relic of his faith.

“A devout man, he baptized King Tiridates and his people and traveled throughout Armenia, razing pagan temples to the ground and building churches in their place. When the relic reached him, he came up with a clever plan.

“He quietly deposited the jar deep inside the newly constructed Etchmiadzin Chapel in eastern Armenia. To deflect any unwanted attention, he chose another church further inland at Geghard, where he managed to place a Roman spear and publicize it as the weapon that had wounded Jesus at the Crucifixion.”

“Wonderful,” Xavier said.

“Mind you, it was part of the wider effort being undertaken by the church elders to churn out legends. And it worked. Nobody bothered to look beyond Geghard. A monastery is still there, by the way.

“Over the centuries, wars and natural calamities raged, but the relic was guarded well. Gregory actually inspired the holy men who came after him. They devised backups and fail-safe procedures.”

“What?”

“During a crisis, the relic was quickly moved to a number of alternate sites. One was in close proximity: Saint Hripsime Church. More such sites were located further away, like the Zvarnots Cathedral outside Yerevan and the Yererouk Basilica near the Turkish border, both in ruins today.

“The most distant place favored by the secretive priests was the Black Church, or the Monastery of Saint Thaddeus, in present-day Iran. It’s one of the earliest church buildings in the world. It took its name from the first man who ensured the relic's safety.”

Xavier listened with rapt attention.

The messiah continued. “The Persians were about to plunder the main Etchmiadzin Cathedral in 1604, during their conflict with the Ottoman Empire, when a mercenary group working secretly for Pope Urban VIII successfully negotiated the peaceful transfer of the relic to Rome amidst the prevailing chaos. Marauders eventually looted and ransacked the place, but the pope's men had managed to whisk the jar away just in time.”

“It was a job well done,” Xavier said.

“The relic remained in papal custody until 1999, when it was mysteriously stolen. So far, it’s been missing. Or so you prefer to assume."

“It’s the truth,” Xavier emphasized.

“Speaking of the truth, don’t you think you should announce the whole truth to the world? It’s long overdue.”

“Stop! Who do you think you are?”

“I’m a man, just like you.”

“What do you want?” Xavier asked.

The messiah came up with a question of his own. “Haven’t you seen the error of your so-called faith?”

“It’s a source of solace for more than two billion people on this earth. Why do you want to take it away from them?”

“You saw it, Xavier. The man you’ve been revering for the past couple of millennia wasn’t the son of God. The Lord raised the real Jesus to heaven."

“Was he the Son, your real Jesus?”

“No. He was a messenger and a holy man. A mortal like you and me.”

Xavier sighed deeply. “I’m telling you the truth doesn’t matter. What matters is faith. We need to preserve it.”

“Why do you want to keep the falsehood alive?”

“Look, I want to preserve the relationship that exists between God and humanity.”

“By worshipping an illusion created by your church?”

“Goddammit, messiah!” Xavier threw himself into a chair. “Why can’t you see the danger here? If we denounce our beliefs the way you insist, do you even know what will happen?”

“Nothing happens. People will see the light.”

Xavier shook his head. “No, it wouldn’t happen like this. Instead, the common man will simply lose all faith and walk away from God. Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism—you name it. All religions will eventually face abandonment. The earth will become a godless place, under the darkness of Satan.”

“The Lord wouldn’t allow it,” the messiah countered.

“Yes, I know. And His light would certainly prevail in the end, but by the time He reclaimed his kingdom, the devil would’ve taken billions of souls under his wing and sent them to the deepest pits of hell.”

“I see your point, but it’s a moot one. I’ll stand by the truth,” the messiah said forcefully.

Xavier snorted. “Yes, I heard you. But what’s the truth about you?”

“What are you saying?”

“Your appearance is shrouded in mystery. Will you care to elaborate on who sent you here? Are you Jesus? Has the hour come? Is the end near us?”

“Too many questions, Xavier,” the messiah leaned closer. “Well, let me answer one by one. I’m just an ordinary human being, and no, I’m not a prophet. At least not for now. My Lord hasn't decreed it yet. I wait for his word. So far, I've focused on easing the pain of my fellow beings by utilizing some gifts bestowed on me by the Lord. That’s it.”

“I truly admire your noble cause.” He slumped back in the chair once again and held his head in his hands. It was beginning to hurt.

“I’m honored.”

Xavier did not let it go. “Don't you see that your following has caused a lot of trouble around the world? Isn’t it suspicious?”

“Oh, suspicious? How?”

“Your influence appears to be working against the established order.”

“Isn’t it a good thing? To stand against the status quo?”

“Maybe, in an abstract sense. Good might come from it as easily as evil, but once the established power centers fall, who will step up to fill the void? Won’t another kind of oppression be replacing the current one?”

“You’re accusing me of being a threat to the unseen powers by choosing to wield my own?”

“No.”

“Pope, you speak for an institution that has always supported and sustained oppressors. It’s understandable that you speak against any change.”

“Change is acceptable. A cataclysm would be horrendous.” Xavier’s voice came out moan-like.

“You’re so good with words,” the messiah said. For a moment, his piercing brown eyes were looking beyond Xavier, and then they held him with an unremitting tenderness. “I ask that you cleanse your heart and announce it to the world.”

Xavier felt his head swimming. He dared not move. The strength within him seemed to shrink. He willed himself up, but it did not work. A strange weariness overpowered him. He quickly inhaled a big breath.

“Will you tell?” the messiah asked.

“Mon Dieu!” Xavier blurted it out in his native tongue. He looked like he was about to have a seizure. The burden on his soul was too much.

The messiah hissed again. “Will you, Xavier?”

A sob escaped the pope’s lips, and dewdrops appeared on his brow. His words came out in a whisper. “Yes, I will.”

Minutes later, standing with his back to the imposing royal palace, he spoke to the media. It was a brief talk.

His words shook the world.

Pope Javier Felipe Avelino, the Bishop of Rome, the Supreme Pontiff, and the Vicar of Christ, resigned his papacy and announced his oath of allegiance to the messiah.

He declined to answer any questions.

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Hasser was stunned.

For a full minute, he stood in silence, his mind trying to process the impossible. He dared not move. The pope climbed into his car and drove off to his quarters in the guest palace.

Hasser realized that nobody had anticipated the speech. Cardinal Dean Banfield, the pope’s right-hand man, was indignant, his head bowed and face streaked with tears, cowed as he was by the incredulity of times.

The king wiped sweat on his face with his keffiyeh scarf. In the immediate aftermath, the guy was most likely to lose. International media broadcast the pope's capitulation live. It had just given the radical forces within his country an impetus beyond anyone’s imagination. They now held the keys to his kingdom.

Despite the persona he had cultivated for himself over the years, the king had no real roots in the increasingly dissatisfied young population he ruled. Hasser thought he was weak and selfish. His end as the monarch was near, and if he would not act quickly enough now, maybe his days on earth were numbered as well.

Zaki took out a cigarette and stuck it between his lips, though he could not find a lighter. His own Clipper had been confiscated at the entry gate. It seemed to bother him more than anything else at the moment.

Hasser saw the cardinal mount a car. He looked incensed.

“Let’s move,” Hasser said. Something about the cardinal did not feel right. Zaki followed him without a word. They trotted to their own Toyota.

They drove down a road lined by date palms on both sides. As their sedan followed the cardinal, who was heading to the guest palace, Hasser noticed the first troublemakers pour into the royal enclave. A number of young men were scaling the walls. Soldiers fired in the air, then into the swarming crowd. The agitators fired back, and a fierce gun battle ensued. The sound of homemade bottle bombs exploding was audible.

“Damn. He murmured, staring at the gray smoke rising into the afternoon air. "It's started."

“What exactly are we doing here?” Zaki asked, glancing at him, his hands tightened around the wheel.

Hasser snickered, trying to sound brash. “It’s not our first rodeo.” It was true that the situation was not new to either of them. Part of him was wary of the risk he was taking by going deeper into a violent revolution. Another part relished the prospect of danger.

Zaki replied with a nod. “Enjoy the spectacle, then.”

Hasser looked out at the brown hills in the distance and the rooftops of the buildings nearby. Then a pair of AH-6 light helicopter gunships arrived on the scene. They had been flying above the town, but now they swooped down, adding their deadly firepower to the fray.

It enraged the protestors even more, some of whom tried to engage the little choppers with their rifles. However, the aptly named Killer Eggs cut them down relentlessly. The crowd swelled up too quickly, and the frenzied people were not at all deterred by the violence. Rather, it was drawing them in.

Hasser cursed under his breath. It struck him that the government was really going full bore against the miscreants. The king wanted to stand up now.

Usual guards outside the guest palace were nowhere. They went straight through the gate and stopped at the entrance to the palace building. The cardinal was already inside.

“Hurry up, Zak,” Hasser urged, jumping out of the sedan.

The high door to the main lobby was unlocked. He entered. The place reminded him of a snooty members-only club. It was unusually quiet inside. No staff was in sight. Even the servants had fled. He dawdled, taking stock of the interior, looking for any hidden threats. They were not armed. And just outside, a battle was raging.

He moved carefully, motioning for Zaki to follow him.

A gunshot boomed.

They dove into an alcove and crouched low. The sound came from deep inside the palace. No more shots were fired. Then he heard a muffled scream. Hasser sprang to his feet again. Zaki was behind him. They ran down the lobby toward the guest suites.

Another shot erupted, followed by more screaming. Hasser turned and flew through an open door. Beyond it was a richly decorated, spacious room.

Cardinal Dean Banfield stood menacingly against a wall, a gun in his hand.

The pope lay on a bed. Two ugly-looking gunshot wounds were visible, one in his chest and the other in his gut. They bled profusely. The man sobbed.

The cardinal was panting hard. He tracked the newcomers with his gun, wild-eyed, without saying a word. Hasser and Zaki stood still.

Between his moans, Hasser could hear the pope pleading. “Please, please.” His eyes bore the weight of years of life and the anticipation of what lay beyond. His breathing was labored, each exhalation a painful reminder of his fading vitality.

Hasser said softly. “It wasn’t required.”

Dean snarled. “He embraced the darkness. I had to cleanse him.”

Zaki said. “He needs medical attention.”

Dean waved his pistol. “You’re not taking him.”

Hasser watched him. His trigger finger started to tighten. Hasser could not think; he could not move.

Xavier whimpered. “He knew everything. And he was sad that we lost the blood of Christ.”

Dean spat at the pope. “You’ve forfeited your soul to the devil. Repent, you miserable wretch.”

Xavier replied feebly. “I saw the light.”

“What you saw, Xavier, was a beacon of evil,” Dean said, his words laced with bitterness. “Ask forgiveness before you descend into the valley of the shadow of death, though I wouldn’t offer you salvation.”

The dying man turned his gaze to the cardinal holding the gun, his eyes searching for understanding. “Leave me to die in peace.”

Dean spat again. “It’s time for reconciliation with your sins.”

The pope moaned one last time and went limp.

**Chapter 33**

Hasser grabbed the cardinal by his shoulders. “What was he saying? What’s the blood of Christ?”

Dean was frozen. Hasser gave him another shake. “Come on. Talk to me.”

“Why on earth would I do that?”

“Damn it, man. The head of your church renounced his faith, and you executed him. I need some answers,” Hasser pleaded.

Dean looked as if slipping into stupor. He did not speak for a minute. Hasser eyed him warily. Finally, he croaked. “Why do you seek answers? These things are of no concern to you.”

“I’m seeing a lot of bloodshed. It need not happen. I want to prevent it.”

Dean pursed his lips. “It…it was one of our most guarded treasures before it was stolen.” He haltingly narrated the story.

Hasser and Zaki listened, though they were unable to grasp the significance.

“Who was the thief?” Hasser asked.

“David Costello,” Dean blurted out before collapsing into a chair. Exhausted and disconnected, he was at a loss for words; the heavy burden of his act was weighing him down. Sighing, Hasser leaned back and closed his eyes.

“We need to move out,” Zaki suggested.

Before Hasser could reply, shouts came from outside the palace. Men armed with pistols and rifles barged in, several taking wild shots along the way. It was a swarm. A rifle round pinged off the wall to Zaki’s right. He dove and raised his hands. Hasser did the same.

Above them, the rifle discharged again, and debris peppered them. Hasser did not know whether someone had aimed and missed or just shot into the air. More gunfire sounded in the lobby. The unruly crowd cheered.

He suddenly realized their cover as international journalists would not protect them from an angry mob here.

Another shot rang out, this one different from the bolt-rifles and pistols. Hasser lifted his head. A man in blue denim trousers and a loose, short-sleeve white shirt hovered over him, holding a compact MP-5 submachine gun in his hand.

“Don’t move!” he screamed at Dean, who spun around and stood up abruptly, only to see multiple guns pointed at him.

“Okay,” Dean replied, his shoulders sagging.

The man glared at them one by one. “Who killed the pope?” He stepped closer.

For a moment, nobody answered him. Then Dean raised his hand. The man’s face twitched. With one motion, his hand shot out, and he slapped the cardinal.

He waved his gun at them. “I’ll kill you all for murdering an old man in cold blood.”

Hasser stared directly into his dark, hate-filled eyes. “We tried to prevent it, but we’re late.”

The man considered his words before asking. “Who are you? Don’t you all work together?” He paced the room like a caged hyena, his voice a sinister, low-pitched growl.

“He’s one of the cardinals, the dead pope’s colleague. We, on the other hand, work as journalists.”

It confused the man briefly. “Is it so?” He gazed long and hard at the priest’s pale face.

“Yes.”

His voice dropped. “So, our cardinal here was not pleased with the pope after he decided to join the messiah? And he killed him for that, eh?"

“Apparently, yes,” Hasser replied.

“Very bad. What is he? A priest or an assassin?” The man asked sarcastically, his swarthy features crinkling in a wicked grin. He lowered his gun and poked the cardinal in the shoulder with the barrel's tip.

Dean tensed. Hasser saw it in his eyes first. Resignation, then defiance. He lifted his chin. “Yes, I did it, and I’m not ashamed. He was an apostate.”

The man tackled him to the floor and let loose with the ferocity of a ruthless kickboxer. It was a blur of rapid punches and kicks, his fists and feet moving with incredible speed. The mob erupted in cheers as their leader made short work of the priest. Dean struggled to get back on his feet, his face bloodied and battered. With every ounce of his strength, he stood toe-to-toe with the brute, as if he did not care about his plight.

It infuriated the man so much that he went at it with renewed vigor. His beating was furious now, his blows relentless.

Hasser tried to plead with the man but failed. The guy did not stop. Dean looked no better than a bleeding pulp. At last, one of his goons interrupted the savagery by pointing out that the infidel was probably going to die if he did not stop. Evidently, they had another plan for the cardinal.

The man took a long breath and got off his victim.

Hasser said. “Hey, the security forces could be reaching here at any moment. Why don’t you just wait for them and hand him over to them?” He wanted to buy some time for the cardinal before the mob and its leader came up with another excuse to maul him.

The leader laughed uproariously. “Is that what you expect now? Are you a fool? The government is falling apart as we speak. Soldiers began to lay down their arms after our people invaded their homes and took their wives and children as hostages. The Saudis sent a plane to an airfield outside Amman, where they plucked the king out of our hands.”

“I don’t believe you,” Zaki said, shaking his head.

“It’s happened, my friend. Jordan is ours now.”

“But the king eluded you."

He looked at him, irritated ─ then he grinned. “Our king had planned it in advance. A shrewd man, indeed. Somehow, my people just focused on the main airport and missed him. But we will reach him and his friends in Riyadh."

“What’re you going to do now?”

The leader said it darkly. "The decision to stand with the messiah led to the death of an innocent man. The revolutionary forces have captured the murderer. We’ll conduct a summary trial here.”

Hasser asked, bewildered. “A what? Who gives you the authority to dish out vigilante justice?”

“I’m in charge of this part of the capital on behalf of the revolution.” He sounded high on his achievement.

“He’s a priest and an official representative of the Vatican.”

The leader snapped. “A man of God who was led astray by the devil. Now, he must pay for his sin.”

Hasser felt chilled. His words strangely echoed those uttered by the cardinal minutes ago, as he had stood over the dying pope.

“You’re a cruel man.”

“I don’t care much what you think. Too terrible you’re unable to understand what I say.”

Both Hasser and Zaki tried to reason with him, but he was not listening. Again and again, he repeated the arguments that justified his actions. He passionately outlined the things the messiah had done to give the oppressed their voice and how the people who sided with him were fighting the holy war against the forces of darkness. Even more grandly, he insisted that revolutionaries like himself had a mission to spread light across the globe. He emphasized that his purpose was to expose the evildoers for who they really were.

It did not make sense to Hasser. Everything was happening in a blur.

They were taken outside as the afternoon wore on, the sun dipping in the sky, poking its scraggy fingers into a slate blue horizon. The cardinal was frog-marched all the way. The gun-wielding young men around them were grim and stone-faced. Their hostility caused Hasser's skin to crawl.

He tried to force the dread from his mind.

Dean was made to stand against a pillar and filmed as he held a slate pad chalked with his name. An English-speaking man read the charge to him. He stared blankly. They clutched him and wrenched his arms behind his shoulders. Several guns were pointed at Hasser and Zaki, who watched in horror.

The leader approached the priest. He smacked him hard across the face. “Go to hell, cardinal!”

A man placed the tip of his pistol against the back of his neck and pulled the trigger.

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An hour later, Hasser sat inside the secure communications facility run by the Agency’s Amman station. At the moment, it was bustling with activity. He watched the screens and listened to the voices. He had already briefed Chad. Zaki had opted to stay out of the room Following the cardinal's execution, the revolutionaries and their leader released the two men.

Their time in Jordan had been frustrating. Nothing of value had been found. With no other viable lead to pursue except a name the cardinal had mentioned before his demise, Hasser had requested his superiors to focus on the man.

The CIA is the master of digging up information, and nobody can beat the Agency at its game. While the world reeled from the shock of the events taking place in Jordan and elsewhere, the head honcho issued a discreet order to his army of spies and analysts.

To unearth everything about David Costello.

In Agency speak, it was a top-priority directive, effectively relegating all ongoing stuff to the back burner.

The first reports of the pope’s assassination had surfaced on X a mere thirty seconds after the revolutionaries gunned down his killer on camera. Two short video clips followed, one showing the murdered pope in his royal guest suite and the other with Dean Banfield taking a bullet. It spread like wildfire on social media. Minutes later, all major news platforms had caught up.

The world's reaction was divided along religious lines. As was expected.

In no time, the Christian speakers and commentators condemned the dead pope but praised the cardinal as a martyr. They projected the latter’s killing as an act of brazen religious barbarism, demanding an immediate arrest of the perpetrators. Muslim talking heads, on the other hand, fully sympathized with the late Xavier, offering prayers for his redemption in the hereafter.

The overall support for the messiah had jumped manifold.

Despite a strong negative reaction pouring out from their clergy and the media, a sizable portion of the Christian population was staying on the sidelines. They saw what the messiah was doing. It was not magic or trickery. His detractors could not explain his healing powers. The resurrections were even harder to ignore. Ironically, a constant stream of negative propaganda added to his allure.

His biggest following was in Muslim nations around the world. In some countries, fed up with their rulers, youth took matters into their own hands. The violence had been really bad. Thousands lost their lives, while others found themselves imprisoned in shadowy prisons. His followers were already in control of Pakistan and Jordan.

Hasser feared even more grim news. Bahrain was teetering on edge, as were Egypt, Tunisia, and Sudan. Places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Somalia were seeing an influx of jihadists, lured by the prospect of another holy war.

Kate appeared on the secure video call monitor.

“What gives?” he said.

“We went over everything with a fine-tooth comb. It did not take much effort, though,” she said.

“Did you find anything?”

“Dave Costello is an American national. Born into an Irish-American household, he hails from a small town in Pennsylvania. As a young boy, he attended seminaries in his native state and Louisiana. Before receiving his priesthood ordination in 1969, he earned a degree in theology from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. He served as a chaplain at several stateside seminaries and universities. During that time, he also stayed overseas in Austria and Belgium before assuming his position as a bishop in a parish in Newark.”

“Impressive bio, isn’t it?” Hasser commented, not really comprehending.

“Mind you, it was his time in Newark that’s significant.”

“Enlighten me, please.”

Kate yawned. “We’ll come to it later. Fast forward to the late nineties, when Father Costello assumed the role of archbishop. He worked as the pope’s personal treasure keeper in Vatican City. Pope John Paul II had entrusted him with safekeeping his highly sensitive items. Next to the boss himself, he had access to the most valuable documents and relics owned by the church, as well as some stuff stored inside the Secret Archives.”

He kept his eyes fixed on the screen, listening.

Kate kept talking. “Dave roamed the hidden passages in the Borgia apartments at will and explored the underground catacombs with apparent ease. People say he was familiar with the Templar treasures hidden within the Vatican walls. Most importantly, he had the Holy Grail within his reach.”

“God!” he exclaimed.

“At the time, he was probably one of the two or three people in the world who knew exactly what it was.”

“So why did he steal it?”

“Let’s now come back to Newark. At the time, the archdiocese struggled with many scandals related to clergy abuse. The priests molested scores of young boys and male seminarians. However, the church responded with either apathy or cover-up to the allegations of misconduct. A number of priests faced charges of pedophilia and similar offenses as pressure mounted on the clergy to clean house. While some priests faced conviction, many managed to reach out-of-court settlements with their victims.

“Shit.”

Kate nodded. "An in-house inquiry revealed that our guy was one of those offenders, but he survived because the top man himself in the archdiocese was a bigger piece of shit. To avoid any further embarrassment, the church shamelessly reassigned the offending priests or sent them abroad. Forgotten missions in hard-to-pronounce towns in Guatemala and Honduras. Small parishes in mosquito-infested swamps of the Congo. Everything was done quickly but in a hush-hush manner.”

Hasser was disgusted. “Let me guess. David Costello was one such guy who went overseas.”

“Yes,” Kate muttered. "Later on, the pope received additional information about his misconduct and deemed him a liability."

“Was he fired?”

“Despite every wrongdoing on the record, it was decided to dismiss him quietly instead of handing him over to the police.

“Holy crap.”

“It’s about to get interesting here,” she said balefully. “Once Costello got a whiff of his imminent dismissal, he flipped. Without further ado, he grabbed the relic and made a run for it.”

“Was it that easy?”

“Not at all, but he was an insider. He surely would have learned enough to bypass security, both physical and digital.”

“I got a hunch here. Are you going to tell me that he's been untraceable since then?"

“Wow! You’re right. He disappeared as if he hadn’t existed at all.”

“No family or close friends?”

“He was an only child, and his parents were dead long ago. All his extended family lives in Pennsylvania, but nobody has seen or heard of him. Same story with his former colleagues and friends.”

Hasser sighed. “Just tell me what’s going on. What are we getting ourselves into?”

“So far, whatever we’ve discovered is easy stuff. Nothing special. Now, an uphill task lies ahead. We need to track him down and ask a few questions.”

“So?”

“I’m going to catch a redeye to Brussels now. Zaki and you may join me later.”

“What’s the plan?”

Kate cleared her throat. “During our current workup, we came upon certain references to his time in Belgium. Need to probe further.”

**Chapter 34**

**Leuven, Belgium**

Kate walked out of Café Beige. The cobble-stoned piazza was lined by stylish gabled buildings, their classic architecture and heraldic banners vividly on display. Trendy bars and restaurants dominated the area. A light rain had come and gone. Despite a chill in the air, the area bustled with a lot of people, both locals and tourists.

After arriving in Brussels early in the morning, she took a bus ride to Leuven, an old historical town east of the capital. For a couple of hours, she rested in her hotel room before checking out and embarking on her quest to explore Dave Costello’s link to Leuven. Strong coffee helped soothe the queasiness brought on by inadequate sleep and jet lag. The crowd was steadily thickening around her as she made her way to the university.

Kate looked at her wristwatch. 11:30 am.

She entered the Katholieke Universiteit at a brisk pace. Established by a papal bull in the early fifteenth century, it was one of Europe’s oldest institutes of higher learning. Leuven attracted intellectuals from all over the continent who dedicated themselves to the practice of science and the arts. There had been ups and downs, as it once was a bastion of resistance against the Reformation.

Costello had spent three years here, studying for his Masters in Theology. Before coming to Belgium, Kate had tracked down a professor at the university who had once been Costello’s colleague and fellow student. Now she wanted to have a word with the man.

She was met by Luca Naessens in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. He was a portly man with disappearing gray hair. His chubby jowls glowed pink under the ceiling light. His eyes were soft, yet curious, behind round glasses.

“How was the journey?” he asked, rising from his chair.

“No complaints. Thank you.”

Luca nodded. As she sat down opposite him, the man waited a moment, then settled back in his own chair. “Someone called from your embassy,” he said. “Told me you’d be coming to talk about a missing person.”

“Yes. I work for the US State Department,” she said. "We're looking for one of your former classmates, an American citizen.”

“Oh, I see. What’s his name?”

“David Costello.”

Luca frowned. “I remember him, though I haven’t heard from him for a long time.”

“He’s disappeared without a trace.”

“His family? What do they say?”

“No close relatives. The other members of the family are unsure about the situation. Same story with the few colleagues we reached out to."

Luca leaned forward. “What’s your focus here? I think he returned to the States after completing his studies.”

Kate replied coldly. "Yes, he did return at that time, but he came to Europe again. It was much later. You’re being evasive.”

The Belgian squirmed before asking. “What’s going on?”

“I told you. It’s about Dave.”

“No offense, but it’s hard to believe.”

“Listen, David disappeared after leaving the Vatican. He didn’t go back to America. We know that for a fact.”

“If I were you, I’d try to probe the vast network operated by the Catholic Church.”

Perplexed, she asked. “I don’t get it.”

“The Church employs thousands of workers in its global effort to spread the word of God.”

Kate nodded, silently prompting him continue.

Luca went on to explain. “To do its job effectively, the Church needs the services of priests, nuns, and laity, besides a host of other support staff. Churches, religious institutions, and missions around the world employ this workforce of specialized and non-specialized personnel. In addition, there are numerous charities that offer healthcare and education services. David could have slipped into any of these operations and disappeared from public view.”

“It’s not happened,” she deadpanned. Luca was not privy to the knowledge she possessed. Dave would have been a fool to stray near a church after what he had done at the Vatican.

“So? What else do you want to learn?” The professor was either naturally cagey or felt uncomfortable talking about a fellow student from his past.

“I understand you don’t know me, but the man we’re talking about has been involved in serious wrongdoing. I want to learn more about him. Please help me. However, if you think I’m bothering you, you may tell me to take a hike. What’s it going to be?” She could not let him in on the entire story about Costello’s role in the fiasco. Even the Vatican had managed to keep it a tightly held secret.

He looked uncertain for a moment before shrugging his shoulders. “Okay, what do you want to know?”

“Everything you can recall.” If Kate had sufficient time, she would have applied her people skills to him. The art of coaxing and cajoling taught to her by the Agency had been perfected over the years. For a moment, she wondered how insincere compliments and false promises would work on a priest, because men like him did all that stuff to their flock on a daily basis.

Luca pressed his lips into a thin crease and nodded slowly. “Well, David was a complicated man. Brilliant, no doubt. His knowledge was phenomenal. He could effortlessly quote from Scripture and enthrall the whole audience with his enthusiastic style. I have yet to see anyone who could connect so well with people on an emotional level. Yet, I knew in my heart he needed help.”

“What do you mean?” She sat upright.

Luca crossed himself. “David had trouble taming his own devil.”

“Care to explain?”

“He used to live in the Beguinage, a housing area owned by the university south of the town. From time to time, certain unsavory characters came to visit him. Oddballs, pot smokers, perverts, you name it.”

“How on earth were such weirdos ever permitted near a religious institution?”

He smiled. “Our priests and their students are encouraged to reach out to society at large. We actually seek out the scum and try to revive them.”

“Sounds righteous.”

“I now realize the crowd we labeled as sinful was usually interesting and talented. Fun, sort of.”

“That’s one way to put it,” she agreed. The professor was open-minded, at least. His tolerance was touching. Such a rare trait among men of religion, she thought.

Luca sighed. “Your man hit it off with one guy in particular. He was a student at Ghent University who used to visit the big hospital in Leuven from time to time.”

“Was he a doctor?”

“No. He was studying something else, but I fail to recall what exactly.” In addition to being a center of religious studies and philosophy, the Catholic University was a leader in the sciences. People hailed its Rega Institute as one of the top-notch medical research facilities in all of Europe.

“I appreciate your help once again,” she said, standing up. Her meeting with Luca had not been very fruitful.

Luca walked her to the door of his office. “I want you to see Basile in Ghent. He is a friend.” He handed her a visiting card.

Kate put it in her handbag. She would have liked to visit a few places she had already identified as worth seeing in the town, but there was not time now. She strolled down the Oude Markt and caught a De Lijn bus to the railway station. An hour later, she was in Ghent.

Basile Cronje turned out to be a retired university administrator. He lived in Oostakker, a quaint neighborhood east of the port.

He provided her with a name. Norice Vanhoutte. Costello's buddy. He was a geneticist by profession and gay by orientation. Surprisingly, he was also missing for more than two decades. It was another dead end. She was frustrated.

Kate took another train, this time to Brussels.

The ride was not long, and she used it to type a progress report on her cell phone. It was brief. She sent it to Chad in Doha. Arriving in Brussels, she first checked into a mid-range hotel. While she was enjoying a light lunch, Chad contacted her. He gave her another name and an address in Slovenia.

Kate used a cheap burner phone to call the man. Her call went on for a minute. The contact was in Bled, near Ljubljana. He agreed to meet her.

A couple hours later, Kate boarded a Brussels Airlines flight to Ljubljana.

A nicely warm cab ride from the airport to the small resort town of Bled really lifted her spirits. She loved every mile of the route. The road went through a breathtaking landscape in the shadow of the Julian Alps. The room she was booked in at the Hotel Park offered a stunning view of the lakefront. It was a high-end establishment, but the fares were surprisingly low.

She moved out after changing into fresh clothes. The hotel lobby was empty. Stepping out into the afternoon, she made her way along the lake shore. It was dotted with bistros and cafés and was not crowded. Her stroll took her to a small bar. The place had a laid-back vibe. It had half a dozen patrons, mostly Slovenes. After a cursory glance, nobody paid her any attention.

Kate was seated by a lone barmaid. She requested a glass of water and waited.

She would have preferred a noisy bar for the meeting, but the choice had not been hers. Gabriel Matej had selected it. The old man had started his career as a cop in his native Slovenia before moving to Rome, where he worked in the Corps of Gendarmerie at the Vatican, serving as a member of the pope’s personal security service. He had once headed the covert hunt for Costello. He now led a retired life and did not participate in any active work. Kate had no idea how Chad had tracked him down.

She understood that men like Gabriel did not advertise themselves. There were no web addresses, no LinkedIn profiles, and no social media following. All interactions with them had to happen via word of mouth. Her service valued such assets. They were often consulted on a diverse array of issues. From espionage to terrorism to money laundering, the indirect support they rendered to the operations was considered vital by many in Langley.

Although the pope did not own a traditional intelligence service like the CIA, the network of apostolic nuncios as well as the high-level contacts that members of the clergy and their henchmen had in much of the world ensured that men like Gabriel knew a lot.

He arrived ten minutes later. A wiry old bird, almost bald but with a few wisps of thin white hair, with wrinkles upon wrinkles of mottled facial skin and thin lips. He made his way over to her table.

The waitress hovered close. Gabriel said pleasantly. “I’ll order *kremsnita* and coffee for you. Steaks too, if you like.”

“Thanks,” Kate said.

The waitress jotted down their order. As she left, Gabriel positioned his elbows on the table and inquired. “What brings you here?”

Kate eyed him carefully, as if deciding whether he could be trusted. Then, she slowly narrated what she knew, albeit with certain omissions. She was direct in her talk as well as in her responses to Gabriel's questions.

“Don’t like it,” he said. “It's been more than two decades, you know. We carried out the investigation, but it led nowhere.”

“It would be an even tougher job now.”

“Yes.”

“How do you want to do it?” Kate asked.

That was a good question.

Gabriel looked around as he thought. “Here’s what I think we need to do,” he said, a plan coming together as he spoke.

He looked around before answering. “I’ll need to go through a lot of records first. Police, hospitals, morgues, etc. To see if he had an accident or an illness that could have led to his permanent disappearance. I hope you’ve been thorough with your own investigations in the US.”

“Absolutely.”

“Well, having done that, the next step would be to explore the Church. He could be hiding among the clergy.”

Kate dismissed the idea. “Skip it. We already went through it.”

“I’ll do my own probing, just to be sure.”

“Fine.”

Gabriel nodded. “I assume his friend, Norice, is another piece of the puzzle.”

Kate shrugged. “I’m not sure, but he needs scrutiny.”

“Okay. He will be my next target. Thorough background checks, along with a peek into his finances and travel.”

“Do whatever you think is necessary.”

He flipped open a small notebook and began scribbling. Then, he got on his phone and made several calls.

“You following the news about the messiah? Gabriel asked nonchalantly.

“Yes, of course.”

“Is it related to what you’re trying to investigate?”

“No,” she replied, hoping she had her best poker face on.

He stared at her, considering her answer.

Her admiration for the man notched up. He had sifted through her bullshit. Kate felt uneasy. She could not fill him in on everything she knew. He hoped the man would refrain from pressing her further. He was a seasoned guy who understood such matters. Thankfully, Gabriel obliged her by not asking any other question, though a glint in his eyes remained.

Their food arrived. Kate especially liked the *kremsnita.* “This cream cake is bussin’. Love it!” she oohed. The coffee was even better.

He touched the corners of his mouth with a napkin. “Give me time. I’m going to Ljubljana. We’ll meet again. For now, you can roam around my beautiful town and discover its charms. I’m sure there’s a lot to see.”

“Well, I’m headed to an old brewery I discovered online.”

He raised his glass in a mock toast. “What a way to start your trip.”

**Chapter 35**

**Mecca, Saudi Arabia**

Hasser jostled his way through the crowd. The Grand Mosque was bustling with more than its usual share of worshippers today. The media reported the presence of more than a million visitors.

The messiah had arrived in Mecca on his most anticipated visit. It was causing quite a stir. Hasser saw a lot of security in and around the mosque. The Saudi government had reluctantly granted the messiah a pilgrimage visa, but it was unclear whether he would behave himself.

Worry gnawed at him as Hasser moved slowly. He shouldn't have been here. A non-Muslim inside Islam's holiest site. Since the Prophet's time, Mecca and Madina have been off-limits to infidels. Visitors to these two places invariably journeyed either after publicly professing Islam or in disguise of a Muslim.

Hasser wondered whether it had been a sane idea to accompany Zaki, who, in his characteristic style, had made the pitch without considering the repercussions. While touring Jordan, the messiah had suddenly announced his intention to visit Mecca. Both CIA men had no time to arrange another set of forged documents.

They had simply entered the kingdom using the Canadian passports in their possession. After landing in Jeddah, it took them a cab ride to reach their destination. Following a cursory inspection by the cops, their driver, a local Saudi, managed to pass through the security checkpoints.

Hasser knew he was impersonating. It was a big crime here. He could be arrested by the Saudi authorities. Or perhaps his Western features could arouse the suspicions of a fanatic and land him in trouble. But Zaki had told him not to bother. With the hubbub surrounding the messiah, the older man said, nobody would be eager to pay attention to him.

Hasser hoped it was true. For one thing, Western faces were not uncommon in the mosque. If his passport was not checked, he could easily pass for a Turk.

Earlier, they had made ablutions in the underground toilets. Zaki had helped him go through the ritual. He was at his side now. They were trapped in the middle of a swelling crowd at the King Fahd Gate. Thousands upon thousands of people from all over the world gathered outside the gate. The turnout was dramatic, even by Mecca’s standards.

He wanted to be near the mosque entrance, but it was out of the question. He could barely take a step in that direction. Craning his neck, he saw the rooftop prayer areas filled as well. If they wanted to go inside, it would have to be another way.

A sudden commotion on the road caught his eye. Several vehicles made a rolling stop outside the mosque. The lead Fortuner discharged a bodyguard. A moment later, the messiah appeared. His trusted lieutenants, though unarmed, accompanied him.

The sight galvanized the crowd. The policemen on duty were trying their best to maintain order and shield the messiah from the frenzied herd. Men chanted slogans. Women cried. A tide of frustration rose as the officers pushed everyone back.

The messiah was led inside the mosque.

Hasser and Zaki were not so lucky. It took them almost an hour of pushing and shoving to reach a spot where Zaki pleaded with a construction supervisor of Pakistani origin for help. Reluctantly, the guy allowed them to enter the mosque through a designated side door for his crew.

As they stepped inside, they were welcomed by an even more tightly packed crowd. Hasser had never experienced agoraphobia, but the seething swell of humanity gripped him with panic. Despite the cold weather, he felt the warmth of all those bodies pressed together. The sickening odor of sweat overwhelmed him. He barely kept himself from falling and getting trampled over.

The messiah, meanwhile, had carried out his *tawaf*, or circumambulation, of the Kaaba. He wore a plain two-piece white cloth, like all the other males inside the mosque. A simple man who did not pursue wealth or status, did not seek any prominence, yet he was a celebrity anywhere he went.

Now, he stood against the square-shaped stone structure in the center of the mosque. Men, women, and children were all over him, trying to kiss his hands and seek his prayers. Grinning broadly, he shook hands and posed for selfies with his followers as he interacted with the public, clearly enjoying every moment. He seemed to be handling his fame with composure. The man had a magnetic persona, Hasser realized, looking with utmost fascination at the burgeoning horde gathered around him.

Soon, he lifted a hand in the air and began murmuring. The crowd chanted after him in one voice, hands raised. The chorus echoed off the mosque's walls, disturbing the hushed sacredness of the place.

“What’s happening?” Hasser asked.

Zaki replied somberly. “It’s *bay’ah*, an oath of allegiance. They’re offering him their support.”

Hasser said nothing. The ritual went on for a few minutes before a small group of mullahs emerged. They were being accompanied by armed cops. They went to see the messiah. It looked like they were arguing with him, their hands gesturing wildly.

The onlookers gathered around them, some of them filming and photographing the event with their cell phones. Everything was probably already on live television, as the Saudis did a routine broadcast of the prayers 24/7, but it was also possible that the transmission had already been stopped.

A pair of cops grabbed the messiah by his arms and pulled him away. They lifted him off his feet and forced him to march out of the mosque, eliciting shouts from the crowd. Hasser and Zaki followed them into the vast outer courtyard. Several of his supporters tried to interfere, but the messiah told them to stay back. He gracefully made his way to a prison car brought by the cops. Getting into the car, he waved at the throng.

Zaki was suddenly pale. Hasser turned to him. “You alright?”

He nodded, the skin around his mouth tightening. “This is not good.”

“What do you mean?” Hasser asked. Zaki was not a zealot caught up in the moment. The messiah's well-being was of no concern to him. Yet he was grim.

Zaki let out a shallow, frustrated breath. “Someone just threw a burning matchstick into a river of gasoline. The fire will not stop until it consumes everything.” His unease was worrying. He sounded nervous. Anxious. Maybe fearful too. Hasser had no idea the bastard was capable of such human emotions.

He pondered his words. Zaki was probably right. It was easier for him to understand religion and politics in this region. So far, despite the messiah’s growing influence, the ruling Saud family had skillfully avoided any major upheaval in the kingdom. While the neighboring countries faced existential challenges, the king and his son poured billions into social welfare schemes to keep the populace on their side.

It was a tenuous hold; everyone agreed, but their ship was still afloat. The monarchy was walking a tight political rope to keep peace between wildly different camps within and outside its borders. Some insiders said the crown prince was at his wits’ ends, though. He had nearly exhausted his patience handling the recent Iranian-backed uprisings in the eastern region.

Now he was showing his fangs, demonstrating to the world that he was ready to crush the troublemakers with an iron hand.

It seemed his gamble was going to fail miserably. Before their eyes, the crowd started to boil. People booed the cops when they attempted to assert control. Within seconds, the herd swelled up enormously. Not realizing their precarious situation, the policemen manhandled a few hotheads. It was enough to start a scuffle. Fists and kicks were exchanged. It was no contest. The crowd grossly outnumbered the cops. The resentful youngsters led the charge, as expected.

As the terrified cops pulled out their handguns, the fight turned ugly. The cops fired a few dozen rounds before they were overpowered and turned into minced meat. The pissed-up youth, now in possession of police weapons, fired blindly into the air.

Hasser watched the unfolding scene of terror in stunned silence. Both men were flat on the mosque floor, trying their best to avoid wayward bullets.

The angry mob spilled out of the mosque like a deluge. They converged on the Al-Safa Palace, a royal residence across the road. While in town on pilgrimage, the king and his family made use of the palace. It was empty now, but protected by a contingent of the royal guards. It did not deter the mob.

They swarmed over the place. Hasser noted the green Saudi flag rippling in the night breeze. The guards let loose with their automatic rifles and pistols. The mob, too, had some guns snatched from their early encounter with the cops. Both sides exchanged fire. Although the carnage lasted for less than a few minutes, it seemed like an eternity. Over a hundred people were gunned down, with many more injured. It was a horrendous sight.

“God!” Hasser cried out. Zaki was stone-faced.

They watched in total helplessness as the indiscriminate gunfire enraged the people beyond control. After subduing the guards, the rioters stripped them naked of their uniforms and strung them upside down from the palace walls. They stoned each poor bastard before executing them with a kill shot to the head. The palace was ransacked and set ablaze.

The pissed-up mob went on a rampage. Yelling, they hurled rocks and bottles. They smashed the windows of businesses. Some entered the shops to loot. The more violent ones began setting fire to cars in the vicinity. Everywhere he looked, they were destroying government property, killing cops, forcing the workers to flee from their job sites, and barricading the roads.

Helicopters appeared overhead. Soon, more cops arrived by the trucks. Several floodlights were turned on, and megaphones broadcast announcements, urging the miscreants to cease their rioting. Then, seeing no response to their warnings, the security forces resorted to heavy tear gas shelling.

The wind was not much, but the smoke still dispersed wide enough to reach them. Hasser felt his eyes sting. Zaki sneezed uncontrollably. He ripped off a corner of his shirt and soaked it with water. Hasser did the same. Covering their faces with pieces of wet cloth, the two men faced the wind. It was basic protection against the gas.

People picked up the gas canisters and threw them back at the police. The police were prepared for the confrontation. They hoped that fear would drive the rioters away. The kingdom was a true police state after all. Large-scale civil disturbances were unheard of, and law enforcement was strict, even Draconian. The Grand Mosque had seen its share of brutality unleashed by the government forces in the wake of a takeover by the extremists in 1979.

However, it was not a terrorist situation they faced now. It was something totally different. Unlike the cult leader who had seized the mosque decades ago using violence, the messiah had come and won over the people's hearts. The masters running the country and their abettors in the clergy had not yet fully understood the influence exerted by him over the masses. They most likely took him for another rabble-rouser who necessitated a swift pickup and eventual execution. The people who were offering him the oath of loyalty were, in their eyes, just as reprehensible. They would also not escape unpunished.

The police action was progressing slowly. Since the cops had already violated the mosque's sanctity by resorting to bloodshed inside the premises, the agitators reacted without any moderation. They openly fired back at the police with the weapons they held. They had the numbers on their side, and they were furious, ready to fight like maniacs. The cops stood no chance against that army of hornets.

Zaki snapped his fingers, shouting over the din of chaos. “I suppose God wouldn’t much mind if we took our leave here.”

The worshippers were running around in panic. Hasser heard a lot of screaming. A family raced past them, down the courtyard’s end, and away from the melee. A mother gripped her young daughter by her shirt on the run and pulled her into an alley. Another group of pilgrims, Egyptians mostly, just stood there, frozen in place, paralyzed with fear. Some young men hollered as they dashed toward the cops.

They set out on foot. Finding a cab was out of the question. Hasser followed Zaki without a word. He figured it was time to get away. It looked like the bedlam was only going to worsen. The government's action to desecrate the Grand Mosque was a vile attack against the faith, a personal insult to every believer. People would not let it go. They were tackling it with the utmost mercilessness.

Hasser spotted a small boy coughing and sneezing badly. No adult was around him. He appeared to have separated from his family. Hasser stopped. The child stared at him with a blank, glassy look. Hasser froze, unable to take a step further.

Suddenly, he heard Zaki shouting. “Mike, Mike, come on. We need to move!”

He heard the words but kept standing there, fixed to the ground. Zaki jumped at him, reaching for his arm. “Go.”

But he could not leave. “The kid!” he screamed. “We need to take him.”

Zaki hesitated. Hasser shook his head. The boy was terrified. Without wasting another moment, Hasser scooped him up in his arms and took off. The child squirmed uncomfortably but did not cry.

On the double now, Hasser and Zaki burst into a side street. Around a corner, they spotted some people. They were also trying to get away from the turmoil at the mosque. Hasser could hear the sounds of gunfire and panicked human voices behind him. They ran headlong across the First Ring Road and passed a sprawling bus stand, where they met a group of cops.

Zaki handed over the boy to the police officers, who thanked them for their kindness. Only after they were assured that the child would be taken to a secure location and rejoined with his family did Hasser and Zaki leave.

**Chapter 36**

**Jeddah, Saudi Arabia**

The two CIA men managed to reach a safe house in Jeddah after an arduous journey from Mecca. It was late afternoon. The chaos in the kingdom triggered by the messiah’s arrest was snowballing. They had watched violent confrontations on the road westward from the holy city. Once near Jeddah, both men had taken necessary precautions before heading to the safe house.

The first cab out of Mecca had been left at the outskirts of the sprawling port city on the Red Sea. Another ride had dropped them off in the Zahra neighborhood, where they completed a thirty-minute surveillance detection run by going on foot and checking for any tails.

Both men walked on the pavement around a traffic circle, then left the main road, entering a zigzag of streets. They approached the small residential building, satisfied that no one was following them.

Once inside, Zaki plonked himself down onto a sofa in the lounge. Hasser took a chair and waited for the call from Doha. The lone caretaker, a Sudanese guy, showed them to their rooms and readied the food he had already cooked. A takeout meal would have been a better option, Zaki groaned, chomping on the hard-boiled chicken offered with bland rice. To his dismay, all food delivery services in the city were on hold. The government had shut down everything.

Chad rang him up an hour later. “Hi, Mike,” he heard. “I assume your trip wasn’t too bad.”

Hasser snorted. “Of course. No problems.”

Chad giggled, obviously ignoring the derision. “Good to hear.”

“What’s happening?” he asked, stroking the three days stubble on his chin.

“As you know, we’re already neck-deep in this shit, but the latest developments have been downright frightening. The zealots have brutally murdered the Saudi royal family.”

“What?”

“Yes, it has happened. The arrest was a tipping point. It enraged the people so much that they stormed the palaces in Riyadh. The security forces killed hundreds, maybe thousands, but it wasn’t sufficient to roll back the tide of rebellion. The mobs totally overpowered the security forces. The king was shot dead in the Yamamah Palace; his bullet-ridden body was dragged out of the royal suites and paraded before the agitating masses. They apprehended the crown prince on his way to the airport, attempting to escape. He was taken to the infamous chop-chop square in Deerah and beheaded.”

“Shit.”

“What’s even more disgusting is that we watched the whole thing live,” Chad said somberly.

“What? What do you mean?”

“It’s true. As the meltdown was underway, we parked one of our stealth drones over the capital city. A couple of satellites too.”

“And we didn’t do anything to help them?” He was incredulous.

The US intelligence was always monitoring events in this part of the world. The region was never short of trouble. The decades-old Arab-Israel dispute was one big issue. Another was the oil. More than half of the global oil was drilled here, and shipped abroad through contested sea lanes. If that wasn't enough trouble in one place, Iran, a fiercely anti-US country with an ambitious nuclear weapons program, was positioned in the Persian Gulf. Time and again, the ruling mullahs threatened to shut down oil traffic and bring the world to its knees. The messiah was delivering a new kind of seismic shock to an already fragile land.

“Our military was planning an extrication when the balloon went up,” Chad said. “It happened so quickly that we ended up wringing our hands in despair.

“Damn,” Hasser breathed heavily.”

“The rebel leaders have claimed that they also killed the king of Jordan. You know he fled his country after the revolution. Reports indicate that he was captured from another palace in Riyadh. Met the same fate suffered by his hosts.”

“We’re in a serious shit.”

“Bingo, Mike.”

“Who’s in charge here now?”

“Apparently, no one. A number of princes are currently vying for control over the government. The slain king’s younger son is leading the military in a battle against the rebels. There have been many desertions among the rank and file. A large number of personnel have either mutinied to join the revolutionaries or simply left their camps. Same happened to their police.”

“Why did they crumble so easily?”

“It surprised Langley as well. The monarchy made significant efforts to avert this type of disaster, but its efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. As you know, the Saudi state was run like a close family business. Nepotism ensured the protection of mutual interests. A robust intelligence and internal security network supposedly protected the entire apparatus.”

“But the state was beaten from within. Is it so?”

“Not exactly. Our initial assessment suggests that outside forces actively supported the revolution. Iran, to be specific.”

“Anything to back up this assumption?”

“That’s where it gets interesting. Although we still don’t have a smoking gun, a lot of unrest happening in the region gives it credence.”

“What?”

“Shiite protesters have taken over Manama, the capital of Bahrain. The king has abdicated in favor of a Shiite leader. His whereabouts are not known. Mind you, Bahrain is a Shiite-majority country with a Sunni ruler.

"In eastern Saudi Arabia, another place with a Shiite majority and Sunni rulers, large scale riots are underway. It’s a matter of time only before the Saudi sway comes to an end there. And you know what, almost all the Saudi oilfields are concentrated in that region. With its eastern province gone, the kingdom would be a pauper.”

“God in heaven,” Hasser sighed.

Chad coughed roughly. “I’m not finished here. Kuwait is going down the drain, too. The royal family is evacuating, as we speak. Two of our air force transport jets are on the ground at Ali Al Salem air base, engines running. Qatar and the UAE are still holding on, but we don’t know how long. It’s a total mess.”

“What are our marching orders?”

“The boss has told me to send you guys to Belgium, as per the original plan. I’m trying to get you out on an air force flight. A massive airlift is being conducted by the military to evacuate the Americans, as airlines have stopped operating.”

“Got it. We’ll be ready.” The call was disconnected.

Hasser decided to sleep, having nothing else to do. Zaki was snoring on the sofa.

Both men were informed by Chad late in the night to head to the Saudi air base. The Sudanese caretaker dropped them off at the gate. They were surprised to see a large crowd there. Thousands of American workers and their families gathered outside the base, desperately attempting to enter the premises and fly out of the country. Other nationals were also visible, mostly Europeans, with a smattering of Asians and Arabs. In addition to the usual Saudi guards, a platoon of American marines was also visible.

Zaki whistled. “We don’t stand a chance here.”

They hung out at the entrance for an hour before a man in civilian clothes sought them out. He happened to be the Agency liaison and introduced himself as Kevin. His smooth efficiency was evident as they were let in without any fuss. He drove them to the main tarmac where a gaggle of transport planes were parked haphazardly.

Hasser spotted nearly a squadron of giant C-17s. They wore the distinct insignia of the US Air Force. Some Saudi C-130 aircraft stood forlornly in the dark. Some of the birds were running their engines. The crew handed them earmuffs to protect their hearing.

Hasser was staring at the horizon when Kevin touched his shoulder. “Let’s meet someone.”

“What gives?”

“Come with me.”

Zaki shook his head. He looked bored. Leaving him there, they moved to the side of a large hangar. It was away from the crowds. Hasser observed a group of people. A pair armed with automatic rifles were clearly security personnel. Three in civilian clothes. One guy in particular caught his attention.

He was thick and of average height. He sported a plain mustache, and a short goatee, à la Saudi style. Seeing Hasser approach, he nodded but did not talk or offer a hand.

Kevin introduced him. “Colonel Otaibi.” He left unsaid what his service was, though Hasser could have guessed. Otaibi was most definitely the Directorate of General Intelligence, the Saudi counterpart to the CIA.

Hasser raised two fingers and touched his forehead in greeting.

A small convoy of vehicles pulled up next to the hangar, and men came out. Despite the low light, he could not mistake the guy in a white flowing robe.

It was the messiah.

“Hot damn,” Hasser murmured in astonishment.

Kevin put a finger to his lips. “Shhh!”

“Excuse me,” the colonel said as he got busy with the new arrivals.

Hasser and Kevin watched. The messiah was taken inside the hangar. He heard an aircraft engine spool up.

“What the hell is happening?” Hasser shouted. The engine's noise was deafening.

Kevin screamed back. “He’s being released.”

“Where are they sending him now?” Besides Saudi Arabia, the miscalculated arrest had plunged many other countries into crisis. Violence had forced out the governments in Egypt and Tunisia as well.

“No idea. Will ask Otaibi.”

The aircraft taxied out of the hangar. It was a newer-model Gulfstream business jet with civilian markings. They observed a C-17 coming to a halt just short of the main runway. The smaller Gulfstream was assigned a priority takeoff. It rolled down the runway and thundered off into the night sky.

The colonel appeared, shaking his head. He walked to the two Americans and waited until his men were out of earshot before speaking. “Now, look, this is strictly close-hold. We’re flying the messiah to Syria.”

“Really? I mean, not to sound callous, but I think he should have been handled carefully in the first place,” Hasser said.

“I agree. It was a blunder to arrest him," Otaibi said uncomfortably before continuing. “The man responsible for giving the order is dead now.”

He was referring to the crown prince, whose hotheadedness had cost him his life. The consequences of his decision were even more tragic for his country.

“I see.”

Otaibi hesitated, looking at their faces. “I…I can’t disclose any details. Hell, I'm not supposed to say a word about it, but I believe it's important for you to know.

“What?”

“The rebels have taken control of our two missile garrisons.”

Hasser gasped. “Oh, God.” Kevin was stunned too.

“The royal forces are fighting hard to retake the bases, but it’s going to be really tough. We face many challenges.”

“What missile bases are you talking about?” Kevin inquired.

“Al-Watah and Shamli.”

“Shit. We thought Shamli was at least a year away from achieving full operational readiness.”

Otaibi gave him a wan smile. “Your estimate is fine. It’s still not fully operational, but we transferred some assets there only recently.”

“What’s the significance here?” Hasser asked, looking sideways at his liaison. He clearly knew more about the Saudi missile forces and their installations than Hasser did.

Kevin replied. “Shamli is situated in the eastern desert. Israel is only five hundred miles away.”

“What kind of assets were you talking about?” Hasser asked the Saudi in alarm.

Otaibi waved his hand. “I would rather not answer.”

“Chinese DF-21 ballistic missiles,” Kevin said nonchalantly.

Saudi Arabia had initiated its ballistic missile program in the 1980s by importing an undisclosed number of CSS-2 missiles from China. They were big, crude weapons with liquid-fuel rocket motors, but they gave the kingdom a chance to own such an arsenal for the first time. The missiles had a range of more than two thousand kilometers. The Chinese also assisted with the support infrastructure, allowing the Saudis to operate and sustain the weapon system.

Over decades, the Saudis lusted after the more advanced goodies. Their old supplier China initially hesitated but then relented. The latest DF-21 missiles came with solid-fuel engines and accurate guidance packages. Despite violating the missile technology restriction regimes adopted by the global powers, both countries proceeded with the deal in the mid-2010s. Not only did China supply the weapons, they also went one step ahead by setting up a factory to indigenize certain components locally.

The Chinese also helped with building the missile garrisons across the Saudi wilderness. By this time, even the Americans and Europeans had joined the program. It was a lucrative business after all. Western firms obviously stayed away from arming the kingdom with any ballistic missiles, but they participated in propping up the logistics.

“What about the other bases?”

Kevin said. “Saudi operates two or three more missile garrisons. Don’t know what’s happening there.”

“Hey, Otaibi, please tell us,” Hasser implored the colonel.

The man rubbed a hand down his face “Yes, yes, the other sites are secure. We’re in contact with the commanders.”

“Okay. What kind of payloads?”

Again, the colonel remained quiet, but Kevin answered. “All conventional stuff. High explosive warheads.”

“Is he right?” Hasser asked Otaibi.

“Absolutely.”

The colonel left with his entourage. Hasser and Kevin walked back to the tarmac.

The military flight to Berlin took off thirty minutes later.

**Chapter 37**

**Ljubljana, Slovenia**

Zeng stared at the message on his phone. It was not long, but he had to scroll several times to read it all. This was not ordinary information.

“What’s it, boss?” Tian Kai, his deputy asked. He was also looking at the screen.

“I think we might have found something, boys,” Zeng replied. His voice was calm, but his heart raced. He took a couple of deep breaths. As they had traveled at short notice without necessary intelligence support, Zeng was dependent on a local underworld fixer. The man, Teo Ducic, was of Serbian ethnicity, and he worked for the infamous Balkan clan based in Ljubljana.

Zeng had been edgy, with all his hopes pinned on the man’s untested abilities. It appeared he had delivered. He explained to his deputy what the Slovenian had conveyed in his message.

Kai asked with a slight frown. “Do you really think it’s solid?”

“Yes.”

“Wonderful,” Kai beamed. He was a man of action. Sitting idle was not his style. He ran ten miles a day and was as fit as a Balikun horse. Since arriving in Ljubljana hours ago, they had been sitting around doing nothing. The safe house did not offer much, not even a gym. It was the kind of place where a covert operations squad would be bored to its death in no time.

At least Zeng knew he had a lead now. A vendor in Germany had tipped off the MSS that someone was probing suppliers across Europe for the details of specialized medical equipment bought by a Chinese front company decades earlier. A name had come up, triggering his bureau’s sudden interest.

Norice Varnhoutte had made those purchases for the Chinese.

Zeng had reached out to Teo through an intermediary. The crook proved resourceful. His digging identified the man behind the inquiries. Once Teo identified Gabriel Matej as the culprit, he offered to have some hired ruffians pick him up and torture him for further information. Zeng decided to play it cool, keeping in mind the man's previous record as a cop and his occasional CIA trysts.

He asked Teo to hire a crew of professional watchers to keep an eye on him while he flew with his men to neighboring Croatia. A direct charter flight into Ljubljana would have looked suspicious. They crossed into Slovenia by road.

From what he learned from his message, Teo’s men were keeping a nonstop surveillance on Gabriel. His eagerness to learn about the transactions had given him away. His own scent was in the air now, attracting the hunters.

Meanwhile, Zeng came up with a plan. While Teo’s people watched Gabriel, Zeng and his boys would wait for any opportunity to identify his potential contacts. If an American team showed up, he'd love to confront them.

His men were nervous. Word of their failure in Myanmar had reached Beijing, resulting in a series of nasty reprimands from the top down. His bosses seemed to ignore the fact that the Americans were redoubtable in their own right, and they never shied away from a fight. Even now, they might be nearby, hoping to track and ambush anyone coming their way. Europe was their playground, where they closely worked with the host governments, exchanging information, and sharing databases.

Zeng had brought a team of just eight operatives. For one thing, he needed to move fast, but he also felt it was necessary to even the odds before moving ahead. To do that, he had sought additional support from Teo—both to hunt Gabriel and his friends and to fight off any hostile attempts against his own bunch.

“Kai, we got to go.” He began packing his gear. Another man stuck his head out from under a sleeping bag. “I’m not done with my recuperation.” He was still nursing an injured ankle sustained during a martial arts class.

“Neither am I, but it doesn’t matter,” Zeng glared. “We got bigger problems. You must get off your lazy ass," he said, offering a hand to help him up. The man laughed. Zeng had undergone surgery to his shoulder after the shootout in Myanmar. He was not completely fit, and he knew it, but the mission took priority over such things. Now was not the time to be bothered by small inconveniences. He would go on serving his nation relentlessly.

Kai joined him, and they began pacing the room. They engaged in an informal mission planning session, reviewing the maps of Ljubljana and Bled. Though they had traveled to Slovenia by road, their chartered jet was standing by at the airport in Croatia for any speedy extraction if the need arose.

Soon, Teo sent two vehicles to collect them. They loaded their stuff. The drivers took them through many side roads and narrow streets before ending up at another location. It was an isolated building near the yacht club. He surmised that if someone bothered to check, an obscure trucking company would turn up as the owner.

Teo gathered the Chinese in a big room. Zeng and his host sat facing each other.

“I appreciate your coming here,” the man said, rolling a piece of hashish in his fingers. He was a meaty-faced scoundrel who owned numerous shady businesses in and around Ljubljana on behalf of the multinational Balkan criminal gang. Zeng had no idea how many intelligence agencies had him on retainer.

“Thank you.”

Teo lit his cigarette. Zeng watched him in silence. Minutes later, a young man brought trays full of dumplings and pork sausages.

Teo dug into the dishes with abandon. Zeng did not show much interest and asked the boy for a bowl of fruit salad.

Teo sat with Zeng and Kai around the dining table afterwards for their detailed mission briefing session. The coffee in the kitchen was excellent, and they continued to drink it as the discussion progressed.

“I must appreciate your ability to find people and track them,” Zeng told his host.

“It’s nothing. We got a lucky break.”

“Still, it’s a damn good job. Such types of men are not easy to trace.”

“A fucking retired cop!” Teo snorted. In the past, the combined efforts of Slovenian intelligence and law enforcement had damaged his clan. Even now, most of the elders were hiding overseas. The authorities had subjected him to harsh treatment, yet he chose to stay. Zeng could understand his bitterness.

Zeng tried to soothe him. “You did okay, bro. Sometimes, it's luck. We all know how the best of us can’t win every battle.”

Teo looked at him, his eyes full of concern. “What happened to you?”

“We encountered the Americans. They murdered one of my friends in a gunfight. I was wounded.” He omitted the details.

“I hope we teach them a lesson tonight,” Teo fumed.

“Don’t worry. We’ll do our best,” Zeng replied. He was a pro who had no interest in imparting lessons. His job usually hinged on a good plan, augmented by hard work in the field to cut down the odds. Besides, it was foolish to make promises to a gangster.

He was a secret warrior. People tried to probe him but often failed. Teo tried not to let his frustration show too much and suppressed a sigh. Zeng did not care. The man reminded him of the typical scumbags he had come across everywhere.

The goon sensed his discomfort and said coaxingly. “We are partners.”

“So?”

“We may have different nationalities, but we both want the same thing. We must trust each other if we are to succeed.”

“Agreed.”

Kai could feel the tension in the room. He cleared his throat, tapping his watch. “Time to go.”

The chatter quieted, and they all stood up.

**Bled, Slovenia**

Hasser rang up Becky. His call went unanswered, but a text message arrived after a long wait. *Am fine. Take care.*

He and Zaki met Kate in her hotel room. The duo had checked in at a different hotel after their arrival. She treated them to snacks and coffee delivered by room service.

“Here’s what we know so far,” she said, draining her mug. She was looking at her laptop, sifting through the pages and images displayed onscreen. The MacBook sat on a small dining table.

Hasser listened as she brought them up to speed. Her talk was naturally very brief, for the simple reason that she had practically learned little about the missing priest.

As they discussed their further course of action, Gabriel called. He wanted to see her now. The small island in the lake was the meeting place.

By all accounts, Slovenia was a European country and Gabriel was a trusted source, but certain precautions were to be taken while interacting with a contact in a foreign land. It was decided that Zaki would linger around, staying out of sight but remaining available, while Kate and Hasser met Gabriel. Langley had assigned additional manpower from the Berlin station. Their two men were now in town, discreetly watching and reporting.

As Zaki left the room, Kate pulled him into a hug. Hasser jumped. “What’s this?” he asked in alarm.

Without letting him go, she crooned. “Such a lovely place, Mike.”

He tried to move away, but her embrace was tight. “Hey, it’s all right. Now, lemme go.” He could feel her body's heat shoot through him.

“I don’t know how to say it, but I feel so lonely. Please, let me stay in your arms,” she whispered, rubbing her face on his shoulder like a wayward kitten.

Hasser stood there motionless, confused by the moment. Something was not right.

Kate dug further into his body, her breath hot on his neck and her heart hammering against his chest.

“Let me go,” he repeated sternly, unable to keep the anger out of his voice.

She mumbled unintelligibly. Her eyes, riding a red wave of desire, were questioning. *What’s wrong with you? Why can’t you understand?*

He wriggled out of her clasp.

A shudder went through her, and she straightened. “I’m sorry, Mike. I…I didn’t mean to–”

Without a word, he stepped away. His mind was reeling.

Then his radio burst into life. “Mike, I think you need to be out right now. Looks like your guy is up for a boat ride,” a voice sounded through a thin, flesh-colored wireless earpiece Hasser was wearing. It was Carl Shaeffer, one of the assigned operatives. Hasser was in contact with the other team members. Kate had described Gabriel’s features in detail to everyone, making the identification easier.

He drummed his fingers on the table. Gabriel was already at a boat rental. Many of these outfits operated on the lake, taking tourists around. Some were still open despite the cold weather and a gray day.

“We’re on it,” he replied, speaking softly into the throat microphone. He sprang to his feet. Kate followed him.

Heading to the hotel gate, he contacted Joe, another operative, who was downstairs in the lobby. “Go look for a boat, pronto.”

Joe was a burly New Englander who surprisingly demonstrated incredible agility. He was already out the main door as they arrived on the ground floor. Hasser caught a flash of his flowing green bomber jacket.

Rushing out into the cold air, he radioed Carl. “You looked the place over?” Carl was watching the immediate area around the lake from a street corner. He had been constantly on the move for the last hour, walking the shore and snapping lots of pictures disguised as a nature watcher. He carried a diary and promised to show all his sightings and nature entries once the surveillance operation wound up.

His tinny voice crackled. “As much as I could. Nothing seems out of place or suspicious.”

“Stay sharp,” Hasser emphasized before ending the call. Coming out of the hotel, he turned right and walked briskly to a boat marina nearby where Joe was talking to a Slovenian. The man had a few row boats at his disposal. He gladly offered one to him.

Hasser looked around as if taking in the surroundings. In the distance, he saw Gabriel get into a *pletna*. It was a traditional big row boat with an awning over it. Since the town authorities did not allow motor boats in order to preserve the lake's ecosystem, row boats were the only option for a lake ride.

A few local families had monopolized the business since the thirteenth century after a quirky regal edict permitted their ancestors—and no one else—to ply the lake waters.

Hasser motioned for Kate to get into the wooden boat as he untied the rope and grabbed the oars. She extended a hand, wanting him to take it and help her get aboard.

He shrugged but did not offer his hand. Kate jumped into the boat with a thud.

The *pletna* Gabriel rode was heading out to the small picturesque island in the lake where a serene medieval-style building stood proudly. It was the Church of the Assumption.

“Seems our guy is scheduled for a meet-and-greet with God,” Hasser chuckled. He was comfortable rowing the small kayak.

“Yeah, I wonder whether he’d be conducting the service. He’s a half-priest anyway, if we consider his Vatican career,” Kate said lightly. She was leaning closer than necessary.

By the time they reached the island’s small pier, Gabriel was moving up the stairs that led to the church. Hasser had barely broken a sweat while rowing all the way to the island—a hefty one and a half klick.

As he secured the boat with rope, Kate was courteously helped by one of the oarsmen who stood at the pier. She took his hand and jumped to the platform. Before climbing the stairs, they used their cameras and binoculars. To look like a tourist couple.

Kate zipped her well-worn Boss wool jacket against the winter chill. “Isn’t it here that the groom has to carry his bride up the stone stairs? All ninety-nine of them,” she asked half-jokingly. The glint in her eyes conveyed a longing. Like a swirling wave of passion arising from the undercurrents.

Hasser groaned. “I’ll pass for now. I may like to row, but this bride carrying stuff is a killer.” Her hunger was suddenly apparent, and he was not at all comfortable.

Kate laughed aloud, patting him. “You really know how to make a woman feel special.”

"I try," he said.

They climbed up the stairs. The oak and ash trees on the island were bare; their remaining foliage turned smoldering orange by the winter and was covered by small clumps of snow.

Still, no sign of Gabriel.

The church was magnificent in its simplicity as they stopped right before its entrance. It was built in the seventeenth century baroque style. Ever since the pagan times the place had been a sacred site. Back then a temple dedicated to the goddess Ziva was erected which gave way to a succession of churches later on. He paid at the gate and crossed himself.

As they approached the building, Hasser noticed a vigil in progress. Outside the church, a few dozen people gathered, carrying candles and murmuring prayers.

The faithful in support of their faith.

As they entered the church, he spotted Gabriel in a corner.

**Chapter 38**

Hasser looked around. White-painted walls and ceilings added to the air of calm inside. Several fragments of religious frescos adorned the walls. The main altar sported rich gold-plated carvings.

The storied wishing bell was right above them!

Kate stood on the glass floor below the altar that housed the remains of earlier churches. She pulled the rope hanging from the ceiling. The bell tolled with a clang.

“They say you need to make a wish before ringing it thrice. For luck and good times,” someone spoke behind them. They turned in unison and found Gabriel staring at Kate.

She smiled briefly. “Ah, I didn’t know that. Need to do it again?”

“I’m all for it,” Hasser said, stepping in. He rang the bell three times for her.

Gabriel looked at him for a moment. The trio shook hands before walking out of the church.

Outside, they navigated the crowd to a quieter area where it was easier to talk. “Let’s have it,” Kate said, wasting no time in getting to business.

Gabriel gave a slow nod. “I got something for you. Costello went into hiding after betraying the Vatican. A month later, he came back to Belgium. To see Norice, his lover.”

“Is it true?”

“Of course. The two guys went a long way. Now reunited by a twist of fate, the duo had to find a way out of the deep shithole they had dug for themselves. The pope and his men, like me, were hot on their heels. They had no chance in any Western country, including the United States. As you know, the church is omnipresent in the Christian world. With time running out, the desperate lovers finally discovered a solution.”

“What was that?” she prodded.

“They sought shelter in China.”

“What a nice place to hole up,” Hasser commented.

“Exactly.”

She said thoughtfully. “China isn’t known for its acceptance of queers.”

“True.”

“So, what prompted them?”

“No idea, but an impending sense of doom, I guess,” Gabriel said with an uneasy smirk. “Somehow, they managed to evade the Vatican’s dragnet and fled to China.”

“Wow.”

Gabriel rubbed his chin. “Norice reportedly made many trips to Belgium later. Once or twice, he even visited Sweden and Germany. He wasn’t accompanied by Costello.”

“What was the purpose of his so-called home visits? Reconnecting with the family?”

Gabriel smiled, looking out at the cathedral’s dome. “Not at all. He came for shopping.”

“Really?” Her eyes grew wide.

He drew a deep breath. “The guy purchased equipment. Lots of it.”

“What sort of equipment?”

Gabriel took out his cell phone and tapped at the screen. “His shopping list included advanced PCR machines, MiSeq, and NanoDrop spectrophotometers. Also, centrifuges, microscopes, UV-equivalent light boxes, and modern labor rooms and neonatal intensive care suites.”

“What the heck?” she groaned.

Gabriel stared directly into her eyes. “The experts I talked to said he must have been trying to set up a high-end genetics lab.”

Hasser was confused. “But why the birthing and neonatal units?”

Gabriel heaved an exhausted sigh. “Maybe he was planning to conduct human trials.”

“Damn.”

It was scant information, though as career spooks, both Hasser and Kate were used to it. There was a good chance that nothing would come of it. Yet, with some luck and the Agency’s substantial resources, the fugitives could be traced. Beyond that, it was hard to predict.

To go to China and meet them face-to-face would be a Herculean undertaking. They were unaware of any charges against Dave or his partner in Belgium. Even if the Vatican had bothered to register a case against him, extraditions would be next to impossible to negotiate with China.

Gabriel reached inside his coat and came up with a folded envelope. “Take this.”

She looked at him questioningly.

“I got some photographs of the two men you’re looking for,” he tapped the envelope, handing it over to her. “Plus, addresses and contact details of the vendors Norice dealt with. I also managed to retrieve the scanned copies of their passports. I’m sure your computer experts could use some photo aging software to determine how would they look like now.”

“Thank you, Gabriel. I ordered the transfer of your fee before coming here.”

“Yes, I received it. Let me know if you need anything else.” He raised his hand in a mock salute and left.

As he headed to the trees behind him, she called after him. “One last thing.”

Gabriel stopped. “Yes?”

“Are they still living in China?”

Gabriel wore a sheepish grin as he replied. “I tried to get information about their current whereabouts but failed. It’s as if the pair just got sucked into a black hole.”

Hasser was quiet. His mind kept on drifting aimlessly. *Is it really possible? Did someone actually succeed?*

He had no answers, but he could not discard the possibility of it. Human cloning was a fascinating science, frightening yet seductive at the same time. Cloning a sheep was one thing. It was already done. Artificially creating a human being by cloning was an altogether different undertaking. A molecular biologist, whom he had discreetly contacted, confirmed that it was feasible if given the necessary freedom and lavish resources. However, cloning a man from a stained cloth who had lived two millennia ago seemed impossible.

*Or was it really?*

The Holy Grail. The Vatican's traitor. A gay scientist. The China mystery.

A messiah appearing out of nowhere.

*Is it all connected?* he wondered.

Shortly, Gabriel and Kate left in his *pletna.* Hasser took the time before boarding his own boat for a ride across the lake.

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Something was troubling Zeng as he headed for the thermal spa at Toplice. The wellness center, Spa Luisa, had its pool built in the style of a Roman bathhouse, with round columns under the roof. Like the church he had seen earlier, everything was painted in white. Must be a local fad, he thought. He liked Slovenia. An insignificant yet peaceful country in Europe. The intelligence services didn't give it much attention. Unlike England or France.

After arriving in Bled, he had done a walking tour of the place. His men were in their rooms while Teo’s crew was out, reconnoitering the town. Teo and his guys were typical hooligans, in contrast to his own team, which was disciplined. They acted too cocky for their own good. Such behavior eventually led to disaster, but he had no options.

Zeng suspected the old man, Gabriel, or more precisely his clients, were up to no good. Yet he could not send his men to do the job. It was not tourist season, and a band of young, fit Asian guys suddenly roaming around in a small place like Bled would certainly draw attention.

He filled a glass with mineral spring water and drank it. It was refreshing. Nobody else was around. He had the spa all to himself. Felt like he needed the solitude. He removed his dress and got into the warm pool. The hotel claimed the water originated from an underground spring that had magical healing powers. He did not care. In Europe, they marketed everything that way. He let his body relax.

His previous encounter with the Americans had been a scary one. Kind of a close escape. He did not want to tempt his fate again too soon.

While the game of espionage on the continent had always been a restrained affair during the Cold War, with neither side giving in to violence, the wars fought on foreign lands nowadays posed different problems. He could never be certain if he was on someone's radar, or even worse, on a kill list. Surveillance had come a long way, as had lethal weapons and the means to deliver them in an innovative way.

He swam in silence, contemplating what to do next.

A shadow materialized over him. It was one of his men. He stood still, waiting for him to emerge from the water. Teo, looking perturbed, followed him. “We need to talk,” he said impatiently.

“Yes. What’s it?” he asked, drying himself with a towel. He put on a robe that his underling had handed him.

“Gabriel met a couple on the island. Foreigners.”

“Okay. Were they photographed?”

“Of course. My people also spotted another foreigner wearing wires. He was talking into a throat microphone."

Zeng took it calmly. “Sounds exciting.”

“I think he is with that couple we saw on the island.” Teo was not a total nut, Zeng realized. A lot smarter than he actually let on.

“Come with me, Teo,” Zeng whispered, looking around carefully. “We must sort this thing out.” He took him by the arm and made him sit on a pool chair.

Facing him, the man hissed, his lips twisting into a curl. “We marked him with a long-range spotting scope. He watched our hotel from across the street. Then we obtained high-resolution pictures and video of him. The radio wire was identifiable, though well concealed. Video confirmed he was continually speaking into his microphone.”

“He could be talking to himself or into his cell phone. People do such things all the time. What makes you think he’s on to us?”

“Ha, your humor, Zeng,” he waved his hand dismissively and went on. "Once he spooked me, I made arrangements to watch him. He turned up at Hotel Park fifteen minutes ago and went straight to his room. There was a slight delay before he was supposedly called into another room—a suite, actually—on the same floor. The island couple, along with three others, gathered there.”

“Seems like poor tradecraft, if they’re who we suspect. Or some clever bastards want to shake the tree and see what falls out.”

“Shit. What are you saying?” Teo inquired, his eyes flitting across the spa, searching for unseen threats. He acted as if the foreigners would grow out of the walls. Despite being smart and aggressive in everything he did, including facing his adversaries in the underworld and law enforcement, he now clearly felt rattled.

“Hotel records?”

“I checked. Canadian and German identities, but I suspect they’re Americans.”

“I think we’re dealing with the CIA or their contractors,” Zeng analyzed calmly, getting up and walking slowly on the pool deck. He placed a hand on his shoulder. “They could have photographed us. Like we did. Most likely, they came to meet with Gabriel.”

“I see."

“Nosy bastard. He knows a lot about our activities in the past,” Zeng said.

“I suggest we take them down. Then, we leave and go our own ways.”

Zeng considered it. His primary objective was to eliminate the old man. He did not want any unnecessary entanglement with the Americans, though a part of him wished for a chance at payback. Their arrogant operatives had nearly killed him in Myanmar. He could not forgive them easily.

“Come on, man,” Teo thundered. “It’s an operational compulsion for me. I feel vulnerable, with these American pigs sniffing my backside all the way to Ljubljana. We must cull them.”

“And what will it bring to you? The wrath of the American government?”

“Whatever. Such supposed wrath has not stopped you people from carrying out assassinations anywhere you want,” he retorted. “It will send a message that no one should fuck with us. And if they still decide to push us too hard, we'll start dispatching shiploads of jihadists to America. Imagine what would happen on their streets.”

“Damn,” Zeng hesitated for a second. He knew too well what the criminal mafias were capable of. The MSS routinely employed the Chinese Triads, now considered one of the most fearsome networks in the world.

“So?” Teo stared at him impatiently.

“All right. But how will you do it? I mean, we’re just here ourselves.” The idea of inflicting some pain on the Americans suddenly excited him. Moreover, he could not stop a mafia boss from killing his hated enemy. So why not join him? he thought.

Teo spat into the water. “I’ll use some muscle. To tell them I’m not some *peder* they could pussyfoot around with!”

With that, he got busy on his phone. Zeng looked him over amusingly. If he wanted to murder some Americans in order to prove he was not a queer, so much the better.

Before he could say anything, one of Teo’s men called. He listened before screaming in excitement. “Get the old man at any cost. We’re on our way.”

“What happened?” Zeng asked.

“Our friends are on the move. It looks like they are leaving. Their vehicles are starting up.” His team had eyes on the hotel where the Americans were staying.

“Damn.”

Zeng alerted his guys and jumped into action. In no time they were filing out of the hotel.

**Chapter 39**

Multiple gunshots cracked.

Kate and Gabriel had been chatting. Hasser had opted to stay among the milling crowd on the lakeshore. As soon as the gunfire erupted, he was on the move. Gabriel was hit. Kate was also on the ground, unhurt and rolling away from the threat.

The sounds of automatic weapons going off triggered a bedlam on the lakeshore. People ran helter-skelter, screaming. Everyone was trying to get away from the sudden chaos enveloping an otherwise serene place.

Several dark shapes emerged on the beach.

The men were armed with automatic rifles and knives. At first glance, they looked like a band of crazies intent on unleashing terror. Despite the recent decline in such violence in Europe, it was still all too possible.

The guys however did not seem interested in fanning out across the lakefront and killing indiscriminately. Rather than making their way to the clusters of panicked people in ones or twos, they remained in a tight tactical group and flowed across the promenade in a measured dash.

Hasser cursed silently. The original mission, assumed to be nothing more than a simple stakeout, had suddenly turned deadly in the blink of an eye. He carried only a handgun. Being lightly armed to watch over one of his teammates seemed like a blunder now.

He slowly scanned the scene.

What he saw was not encouraging.

He resisted the urge to run, even as his whole body tensed. Amidst a sea of panicked folks scattering away, his sudden sprint toward the danger would only make him stand out. Instead of making a hasty beeline for the spot where the wounded Slovenian lay, he closed the distance in a low crouch. By staying in the shadows.

As much as he wanted it, charging the attackers seemed out of the question. It was an open place in which a group of gun-toting goons had every advantage over him. There was little chance of a surprise move against them. Even if he counted his two partners on the scene, it would not make much difference, but Joe and Carl could help if they kept their shit together.

He described the situation to his pals on the radio.

Kate had crawled behind a clump of grass. While he watched, she pulled Gabriel into the grass. It was not much cover. Zaki came out of the hotel looking baffled. Hasser saw a cloud of parakeets descend over the Sycamore trees to his right. The birds darted, flitted, and danced across the sky.

Suddenly, an SUV came charging up the road. It was a Kia Sportage with Carl driving. He had stormed out of the hotel parking lot after getting Hasser’s call. Braking hard, he came to a rolling stop near them.

Zaki opened up with his pistol, taking shots at their assailants. Hasser sprinted to where Kate lay. She rose when she saw him on the move. As Zaki provided covering fire poised in the Kia's open door, Hasser shouldered the wounded man and walked him to the SUV. Kate was right beside him. He jerked open the door and pushed them both inside.

Zaki emptied his clip and slipped into the SUV. Carl gunned it.

Just then Joe showed up in their second vehicle, a Toyota Rav4. Hasser kept on shooting while retreating toward it. The enemy weapons churned out a steady stream of fire.

The team pulled out of Bled in their rides. Hasser and Joe were in the Toyota while the other four occupied the Sportage. As they got on the road, he saw his pursuers riding three different vehicles.

A loaded M4 carbine lay on the rear seat under a stack of supplies. He opened the glove box and retrieved two Glock pistols. Plus, extra magazines. He handed one pistol to Joe.

Joe was driving skillfully, maintaining a sufficient speed. Carl followed them. A dreary overcast nearly eclipsed the midday sun. It was so bleak that the hamlets along the highway to Ljubljana had their lights turned on.

“We need to leave the A2. A highway run wouldn’t save us,” Joe said after twenty minutes of driving. The opposition had stronger, faster vehicles.

“Focus on the road,” Hasser growled. The beautiful Dobrusa bridge was close.

Joe slowed down, exiting at Brezje. It was a country road, snaking through the farmland and into the hills. Soon they drove into the mining town of Kropa. The road appeared narrower and had more hairpin turns than he had ever seen anywhere else.

“It goes through spectacular scenery, but a bitch to drive on,” Joe commented, holding the wheel tightly in his hands and looking hyper-aware.

“Trying to lose them in the country?” Hasser asked, an eyebrow arched. This stretch of the road was rough, making their SUV bounce up and down. He tried but failed to draw a bead on the pursuing vehicles.

“That’s the idea,” the man responded tensely. He had a GPS device sitting on the dashboard for road information, though it offered little help amidst the jumble of hills.

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Zeng tried to calm himself. He sensed the climax was fast approaching. Before leaving Bled, Teo had called his contacts in the Ljubljana underworld for help. Instead of taking the straighter highway route all the way back to the capital, the Americans had exited the autobahn and turned right. The three vehicles diligently followed.

He wondered whether he was being led into a clever ambush, though a simpler explanation was that the Americans were trying to shake them off. The haphazard operation, with everything decided on the fly, worried Zeng. The good news was that Teo planned to hit them on the road, where they were most vulnerable. Maybe Teo knew after all what he was doing.

All of Zeng’s men had armed themselves the moment they boarded their transports. One guy protested humorously over an unplanned early departure from Bled, but everyone had turned serious without further telling. Zeng had learned to trust his well-trained crew.

They were nearing the picturesque village of Dražgoše. The small hamlet had seen one of the earliest partisan uprisings against the Nazis in Europe during the Second World War, Teo told him. After subduing it, the Germans burned down the village, executing its entire male population as punishment. They passed through its quaint streets in rigid silence.

Another series of switchbacks came, and they descended into a pristine valley, the road bordered on both sides by thickly forested hills. As they rode past another hamlet, Theo told everyone to get ready.

Zeng checked his submachine gun. A Skorpion Evo 3. The Czechs had crafted a dependable compact firearm. He chambered a round and chose the three-shot burst mode on the selector. With a full thirty-round magazine inserted and another clamped together for quick reload, he was ready.

“Now!” Zeng muttered. He spotted two armed men jumping out of the woods to his right. Their rifles began spitting rounds on full auto, the burning coals of fire going after the Americans. The lead vehicle received a hefty fusillade, stitching a line of holes across its right side.

Theo’s reinforcements had arrived.

The report of gunfire echoed off the mountains. The SUV was an ordinary commercial model, without any armor protection or other special safety features. The driver braked and rotated left in panic, giving the wheel a more than required tilt. The Toyota’s tires screeched, as if in protest. It lurched badly on its side before whipping around in a fast, out-of-control turn. His own driver, meanwhile, had stopped.

“Come and cover me,” Zeng shouted to Kai. The man nodded. He was carrying a short-stock Kalashnikov.

They stepped out of the Skoda and stayed in its cover. Zeng slowly moved his head in an arc, taking in the situation. The Rav4 had not flipped or tumbled over after receiving the initial hits. It had swerved violently, done a complete about-face, and stood stuck in the mud along the road. Its hazard lamps were lit up, and the alarm bleated nonstop.

It had turned out a less than perfect ambush, he noticed. The second vehicle did not drive blindly into the kill zone as his team had hoped. It braked immediately. Three armed figures got out and positioned themselves behind the Kia. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw Theo and his men scrambling to join the fight.

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“Go, go,” Hasser spoke feebly through his clenched mouth. He was rattled and disoriented by the sudden attack. Might also be wounded, he thought, as he was beginning to feel pain in his right leg. A ricochet, perhaps. He tried to control his breathing. An errant round missed his face by less than an inch, shattered a portion of the front windshield, and sprayed him with glass fragments.

“Come on, come on, dammit,” Joe was screaming uncontrollably. With his foot planted on the gas pedal, he was manipulating the wheel with his shaking hands. The SUV’s engine groaned savagely, sounding as if about to come apart. The soft mud, topped by snow, refused to let go of the tires.

His sudden giddiness brought on by the violent swerve was subsiding. Hasser reached back and grabbed the M4. Aiming for no particular target, he fired through the smashed windshield at the guys pouring out of the forest. Firing the carbine from inside the cabin was a tough call. The recoil was a bitch, and the sound nearly deafened him. The gun felt clumsy shifting across widely dispersed targets. Perhaps a special forces trooper could have done a better job, but they did many outrageous things anyway.

He heard Kate calling in his ear. “Hey, Mike, you guys okay?”

“Yeah, I guess,” he replied, sending another couple of bursts in the enemy's direction and reloading.

“Get yourselves on the road. Bad guys are all around.”

“Workin’ on it,” he answered back tersely, ducking as the enemy fired again. He noticed that several rounds plinked the metal body. They were in the thick of a battle they had no hope of winning. A superior force was seconds away from killing them all.

The attack was evolving quickly, he assessed. The initial one-directional encounter had progressed into a two-pronged assault, with the opposition now closing in on his SUV from behind.

Joe pushed his foot down on the gas. The Rav4 shook in a spasm of renewed energy and shot forward. Hasser was thrown backward. The carbine slipped out of his hand.

The vehicle was wavering now, struggling to gain momentum as the front tires broke free. Finally, it stormed out of the treacherous muck. What followed was a violent skidding motion to the left. Joe tried to offset it, but it was too strong.

It exposed their vehicle’s flank to the enemy fire for a second too long.

Out of Joe’s window, Hasser saw a Chinese guy take a knee. He was forty feet away. Or perhaps fifty. He could not tell exactly. The shithead looked vaguely familiar, but Hasser was not sure where he had seen his face.

He opened his mouth to scream.

The gun in the Chinese man’s hands exploded. High-velocity metal jacket slugs tore into the SUV on the driver’s side, slicing right through the door panel. Metal crunched and glass flew off in a sickening shower. Rounds zinged through the air, so close to his face that he felt their heat on his skin. Joe jerked violently and cried out.

God!

Wasting no time to go for the carbine, he pointed his Glock at the Chinese operative and snapped off a flurry of rounds to pin him down. At that distance, he saw no chance of hitting him. The man dropped low and rolled away.

Hasser swore loudly. His heart was galloping, and the nervous energy coursed through him like a bad drug. The vehicle had stopped.

One glance at Joe reminded him of the immense peril he and his team were in. He had taken multiple rounds and was on the verge of dying. The rest, including himself, would meet the same end if they did not get out quickly enough.

Kate’s trio was thinly armed—a single M4 and individual pistols—while Gabriel carried no weapon. As the firefight progressed, their arsenal appeared increasingly insignificant. Whatever ammunition they had was also rapidly depleting.

“Joe’s hit, really bad,” he wailed on the radio, his voice hoarse.

“Move, move,” Kate screamed back.

More shots impacted the SUV. Hasser tried to pull Joe out of the driving seat but failed. He was no longer responsive. Hasser remained ducked under the dashboard and extended his left leg, trying to reach the pedals with his foot. At the same time, he kept the wheel straight. With his foot depressed on the gas pedal, he fired another few rounds at the attackers.

Keeping himself low, he moved the wheel, and the SUV began to turn right. It hit the road. A hail of bullets smashed the back window glass. Then, more hits on the driver's side. Both groups of attackers were directing their deadly fire at the escaping SUV.

Hasser saw an enemy vehicle pull left sharply and skid off the road. It tried to take up a blocking position by executing a hard turn.

He suspected one or more tires had taken hits as the vehicle was not picking up speed. Some rounds smashed into the engine grill.

“Keep going, keep going!” Kate radioed in. “We’re covering you.”

Hasser was in no position to answer her or to maintain decent radio contact; he was too busy driving blind and firing his pistol. The RAV4 was moving slowly, running on dead tires. If not something else, the rims would soon rip apart.

He had barely covered a hundred yards before the engine gave out.

“This thing just crapped on itself. I’m stuck here,” he announced on his radio, slamming the dashboard with his hand.

Kate's reply was quick. “Stay sharp. On our way." His SUV was now taking a steady stream of rounds. One lucky shot and the enemy would be dancing over his corpse. He reached up and placed two fingers on Joe's neck. No pulse. He was gone.

He lifted his head slightly and watched the Kia. It thundered in. Carl was driving madly in reverse. It looked as if the Kia would lose control any moment and crash into the snow piled up on both sides of the narrow road.

It screeched to a halt next to his SUV. Kate jumped out, pistols in both hands. She discharged one Glock at the Chinese man, who was only thirty feet away. He hugged the frozen ground. His entourage spread out in a wide semicircle, approaching the beleaguered yet defiant Americans from multiple directions. It was a precarious situation.

Quite dramatically, Kate shifted pistols from one hand to the other and kept her suppressive fire up, pinning down the Chinese guy in his place.

Hasser got out in a low crouch, picking up the carbine along with the pistol as he left the SUV. He tried to swing around and go for the driver’s door to extricate Joe’s dead body, but the hailstorm of bullets was too dense. He crouched helplessly by the SUV.

“Joe?” Kate inquired breathlessly.

He just shook his head. Aiming his gun, he began firing at the enemy. Their concentrated fire took the attackers by surprise. At last, two hostiles went down. One was certainly dead, the other maybe scratched only. Then, one of his shots found a lucky mark. It was the Serb. The bullet landed in his beer gut. Hasser watched him spin around from the force of the blow and fall to the ground.

**Chapter 40**

Hasser felt the air ripple with bullets zipping past him followed by a dull thump. Kate let out a cry as she was knocked backwards off her feet. She was hit. He saw her clutching with shaking hands at her leg, blood trickling between her fingers. She was barely holding back tears. He lunged to his feet, scampering near her.

The bullet had gone through the soft tissues of her leg. As he bent down to inspect the wound another round hit, a little too close for comfort, kicking up a spray of dirty snow.

“Damn, it stings,” she said, clenching her teeth.

Must be hurting bad, he knew. Despite her pain, she continued to hold onto her pistols and appeared determined. She fired one Glock from under the SUV with her non-dominant left hand, aiming it at the approaching Chinese boss man. With the other, she sent a wide burst over Hasser’s head against what he assumed were his fellow operatives.

He cradled his carbine again and opened up, taking care to fire short, controlled bursts only. The idea was to keep the assholes at bay. For a few seconds, the Chinese showed no movement. He could also hear someone in the Kia firing a stream of rounds at the men who had charged out of the forest. Both the carbine and a couple of pistols were in play. The Kia’s alarm was blaring.

He kneeled and lifted Kate by getting a shoulder under her arm. “Come on, let’s move.” With his free hand, he fired the carbine.

“No, we must get Joe’s body,” she protested, refusing to go.

Hasser was pulling her. “We’re in no position now to do anything about it. It’s time to save ourselves.”

She glared at him accusingly. “You–”

He cut her off, “Joe would understand,” and scooped her off the ground. Dumping her unceremoniously into the Kia, he slid in beside her.

“Go, go, go!” he shouted. Carl stepped on the gas immediately. Tires smoked on the road as the SUV began to speed away. Zaki was firing his gun out the window. Gabriel was pale with fear.

The Kia skidded onto the main road. Carl executed a savage right turn, barely avoiding a collision with another enemy vehicle trying to prevent their escape. Hasser could feel the Kia lifting off the road. It careened on two wheels before Carl managed to bring it back on the road.

Hasser had not buckled up. He was thrown around, and his head bumped the window. Kate hit her wounded leg against the seat and swore in pain, not amused at all by Carl’s tactical driving. But Hasser knew they had no other option. Escaping with their lives was the only priority.

As the Kia barreled down the road, a white-painted Land Cruiser shot out of the woods to their left and came charging at them. It was racing across the open ground, a rooster tail of mud in its wake.

“Contact! Vehicle inbound from our left,” Carl warned. The road was not heavily traveled, it appeared, but it was not deserted either. Hasser could see a farm truck approaching from the opposite direction. Behind it was a sedan. Another car trailing their own vehicle stopped abruptly, its driver sensing danger.

Hasser, meanwhile, had strapped his seat belt. The gun in his hands went up, and he tracked the incoming Land Cruiser. Sighting it on the windshield, he fired. His shots landed where he had desired. But nothing happened. Even though the driver was probably incapacitated, the massive vehicle maintained a frenetic pace, only slightly veering during the last twenty yards as it closed like a wounded beast from hell.

“Shit, shit! Brace for the impact,” Carl barked out the warning.

The farm truck had been just a car’s length behind the Kia when the Land Cruiser broke through the frozen mud and slammed into it with a tremendous force, missing its intended target entirely.

Carl pumped on the brakes. The ABS fiercely engaged, groaning and vibrating in an attempt to stop the vehicle on the slippery road.

Hasser muttered a curse as his head whiplashed. He heard Kate yell in alarm. He was certain that Carl had lost control, and they would crash in the next second. Somehow the impact never came. He was unable to understand why it didn't happen, but they were all fine, the Kia still intact. Carl let out a loud sigh and slammed his hands on the wheel.

“Bastards,” Kate cursed, recovering herself on the rear seat.

He tapped Carl on the knee. “We’re going after the guys in the Land Cruiser.”

Carl nodded. Hasser then turned to Gabriel. “You stay put. Keep the ride up and running.”

“Got it,” the Slovenian acknowledged, getting behind the wheel. His role would be crucial if they needed to make a swift escape after dealing with the opposition. That left Zaki as the only uninjured person in the Kia who could fight.

Hasser and Carl slid out of the Kia and went to the Land Cruiser. It had broadsided the truck. It now lay in the snow alongside the road; its front end caved in, and engine hissing. The truck had upended, its cabin blocking half the road. Some supplies were scattered around. A few locals had come out of a building nearby, shouting at them. The car behind them had stopped, and its driver opened his door in panic.

Hasser trained his carbine at the men inside the stalled Land Cruiser. Their inflated safety bags momentarily trapped them. Feeling no emotion, he killed the driver and another lowlife in the passenger seat. Carl took out the rear seat occupant. Hasser limped around to the turtled truck and took up position behind it. The driver, an old man, was trapped inside the damaged cabin. The guy needed help but he had to wait.

Another Land Cruiser materialized out of the forest. It was zigzagging its way to the road. Its driver apparently knew how to avoid fire. Hasser nonetheless aimed the gun and began pumping out rounds.

“Contact rear!” Zaki shouted. He was out of the Kia and firing.

Hasser radioed Carl, who was on the other side, facing the enemy. “Get clear, now.” The enemy vehicles converged on them. Just as the lead SUV stopped on the road, the doors opened on both sides, and men rolled out.

Carl had just reached the truck. Before he could circle around the tailgate to take cover, a hail of rounds was in the air. Hasser heard the thuds. Too many. Then, Carl groaned in agony and fell to the ground.

The Chinese had played a trick.

While an attack was directed against Hasser and his now-dead partner, some of their operatives converged on the Kia. Kate fired at them until the Glocks ran out of ammo.

Zaki fired his last rounds and jumped into the dubious safety of a roadside ditch as the bullets came his way. Not knowing if he was empty, the enemy kept firing. Zaki stayed in the mud. Some operatives sprinted to the Kia and dragged Kate out. Another guy went to the driver’s window. Without showing any emotion, he shot a hapless Gabriel at point blank range. Kate was manhandled into an SUV.

Hasser could not do anything to help her, standing too far away from the fleeing SUV to lay effective fire with his gun. He engaged the hostiles in the second Land Cruiser. Their shots were impacting all around him. With Carl hit, he had lost half the firepower. His own ammo was seriously low. They would not last more than a minute in this battle.

He decided immediately. “Zak, get back into the Kia. Now, now!”

“Shit,” the man muttered, but obliged him. Hasser got into a crouching run. His last clip went in. That was it. He trained his carbine in both directions a number of times and fired random shots before trotting to the Kia.

They got in, and Zaki throttled the engine to the maximum. Gabriel’s lifeless body lay in the passenger seat. “Go, man. Go, go,” Hasser said unnecessarily.

He caught a glimpse of the lead Chinese operative rushing to the crashed truck where Carl had fallen. Another man was flanking him. They had their guns up and at the ready. Together, they looked poised for a celebration. Or an execution.

Hasser gasped.

Before he could bring his carbine out and engage them, the two men started firing their guns into the truck.

“Motherfucking bastards,” he screamed, his eyes turning bloodshot in an instant. He opened fire, hoping against hope that it would stop them. His action was futile. Undeterred, both Chinese men poured bullets into Carl’s body. If there was any life left in him from the initial wounds, they made sure he died by the roadside. *Such animals,* he thought in disgust.

Zaki was pale. “Did they just kill him? I mean, how could they?” he asked plaintively, not believing what his own eyes told him.

Hasser ground his teeth. “Carl was wounded. They murdered him in cold blood.”

“Fuck,” Zaki rasped.

“Yeah.”

“You took out Teo. Gabriel told me.”

“Who was he?” Zaki asked.

“A crime boss. Big, nasty guy.”

“Good riddance,” Hasser spat.

He could see Cesnjica, a tiny roadside hamlet, in the distance. Beyond that was the town of Zelenziki. If they could reach there, they had a chance of coming out of this hell alive. The crashed truck partially blocked the road behind them, giving them an advantage. He hoped that this would give the bad guys a slight handicap.

The head start they got served them well. The hostiles pursued them into the town, but backed off when they spotted a couple of police cars. Someone had alerted local law enforcement about the roadside gunfight.

From Zelenziki, Zaki turned left and drove onward to Skofja Loka. Hasser rode in silence.

**Ljubljana, Slovenia**

By nightfall, they had landed at a safe house in downtown Ljubljana, where an Agency medic catered to his injuries. Hasser was grateful for the painkillers he provided. The scratchy bullet wound in his leg was insignificant, but it still hurt. Only Zaki had escaped unhurt. Hasser retired to a bedroom but did not sleep. Feeling too worn out but fired up at the same time, he badly wanted some alcohol to calm his nerves.

Chad called. “Mike, what the fuck happened?”

“We were up against mixed Chinese and local opposition. They ambushed us on the road. Three KIA, including our contact. A Chinese man personally shot and killed Carl. Kate was taken.” He gave him the rundown of events.

The older man sighed. “Shit. Who screwed up? Any idea?”

“Most probably, they marked one of us somehow. I can't tell whether it was a mistake on our part or luck on their side. It doesn’t matter at this moment anyway,” Hasser seethed. "A Chinese hit squad, collaborating with well-known organized crime figures, hit my team. An otherwise plain recon mission turned into a deadly encounter. They’ve upped the ante.”

“We’ll even the score in no time,” Chad promised darkly. "Either those suckers or their kin would suffer in some other place. The retribution will happen.”

“I think I killed Teo. Gabriel saw him eat a few slugs and drop down.” Hasser briefly outlined the Serb’s criminal background.

“Good. He was well served. What else?”

“I’d like your folks to watch the airports and border road crossings. The photographs we've obtained would be helpful. One Chinese guy in particular who was really tight with Teo.”

“Fine. Send me everything. Plus, make a detailed report on whatever happened and move it up the chain.”

Hasser was astonished by the man’s apparent callousness, and he let it show. “How about you pull some fucking strings here to get the bodies retrieved? Like contacting law enforcement and asking a favor or two. Carl and Joe deserve it.”

“Well, of course. I didn’t stop you.” The voice trailed off.

“Hey, they were Agency,” Hasser said.

Chad said. “I know.”

Hasser barked. “Screw you.”

Holding back a rebuke, Chad gave the order, his tone business-like and level. "I'll send someone to handle the dead bodies. Get some rest and come back here. Langley will allocate additional resources to investigate the involvement of the Chinese. They’re off our backs for now.”

Chad was a certified asshole, Hasser knew, a man almost bereft of human sensibility. Yet his crassness grated too much at times. Like now. Feeling exhausted, he walked to his room for a little rest.

**Chapter 41**

**Damascus, Syria**

Xiaofei Gao felt giddy.

More than two hundred dignitaries had gathered inside the grand hall, adorned with flags representing the participating nations. The air was buzzing with anticipation as the leaders from across the Middle East immersed themselves in an intense debate. The summit meeting coincided with the messiah's return from Saudi Arabia two days earlier. Speculations were rife as to the purpose of the conference.

While the Western media tried to brush it off as a mere public relations exercise by the increasingly isolated ruling regime in Syria, those with a deeper understanding of the politics of the region thought otherwise. Their working theory was that the event would prove to be nothing less than historic.

They were going to be proven right.

Gao lurked outside the main hall. It was a side room, though spacious enough to accommodate a multitude of key staffers and aides brought in by the big honchos. Faceless men and women, like himself, who worked in the shadows, making things happen for their masters. In another hall, journalists readied themselves for action. At least, Damascus felt better than Beijing, he observed. The winter was milder, and the air was a lot cleaner. He watched the attendees with mild interest, then looked away, seemingly satisfied with what he saw.

His thoughts drifted momentarily to his early days with the project. It had not taken a lot of effort to build the ultra-secret lab in Lijiang. On the other hand, the two foreigners proved a royal pain in the ass for the MSS. The Belgian geneticist and his lover, the American priest, gave the project their full commitment but in return wanted a bohemian lifestyle for themselves. They wanted tons of money. The president’s office sanctioned everything they demanded, often overruling the objections raised by the MSS.

Despite their fugitive status, the couple was often visiting exotic locations and settled for nothing less than first-class travel, five-star accommodations, and fine dining. Sometimes, he thought, the idiots acted like those spoiled A-listers from Hollywood. The MSS arranged for plastic surgeries on their faces, and Gao formed tactical teams of undercover MSS minders who shadowed the foreigners everywhere they went.

Luckily, most of the western world was out of bounds for them, facial surgeries notwithstanding, but they still partied a lot. They frequented the trendiest hotels in Hong Kong and engaged in reckless gambling in Macau. The bean-counters at the headquarters would start endless bickering whenever he sent them bills to be paid out of a special stash fund, which was the blackest he had ever seen in his career.

Norice was a genius nonetheless. With seemingly little difficulty, he managed to scrape off the dried blood stains from the robe tatters. One day, he came running to Gao's boss at the time and broke the news: the blood on the fabric belonged to two different people.

While he delved into the genetic material of one individual with ease, the other refused to budge. The second set of stains seemed to have locked Norice out of the DNA and its genes. It was perplexing, he’d said. The scientist and his small team of Chinese assistants struggled to uncover the hidden mystery of that blood, but they failed. Eventually, they let it go and focused instead on the first sample.

They took multiple nuclei from the blood cells and inserted them into eggs sourced from a woman. Norice stripped the egg cells of their own genetic material. He fused the mystery genetic material with the host eggs using electric current. The technique was later labeled as Somatic Cell Nuclear Transfer. Though Norice had not pioneered the method, he perfected it. The resulting hybrid cells began to grow, and he implanted the early-stage embryos into several Arab women. To his consternation, every surrogate mother aborted. MSS recruited more women.

Eventually, one progressed to full term, but had to undergo a Caesarian section for delivery. The MSS team immediately took care of the child and transferred him to a separate hospital, where he suffered from numerous ailments. In the end, he survived.

Then there were those bizarre happenings. The lab and its adjacent maternity unit caught fire on three occasions, killing many technicians and destroying precious equipment. A number of workers went crazy; some committed suicide, the others disabled for life with intractable schizophrenia.

All those troubles were past now. Here he was witnessing the endgame. Days ago when someone close to the messiah had reached out to him through the Iranians, Gao felt overwhelmed. The proposal was outrageous, so much so that when he called his minister late at night to discuss it, the man refused to believe, slamming the phone shut without listening to him.

Eventually, the matter was reviewed at the highest levels. The president heard all the arguments, sifted through all the intelligence, and asked all the questions. In the end, he agreed and ordered his foreign minister to reach Damascus. The man was now conversing with his opposite number from Russia. Gao had accompanied his own minister to take care of some security issues.

Another good news was that Zeng had captured a senior female CIA operative in Slovenia. Apparently, she was part of the same team that Zeng and his men had encountered earlier in Myanmar. During the shootout, they had managed to eliminate the Slovenian, who had been asking too many questions about the Chinese operation. They had lost some valuable men in the process, but such was the price of going head-to-head against a capable enemy.

Zeng had flown the captive to Syria. Admittedly, Gai had misgivings about using the MSS team to abduct an American spy in Europe and transport her all the way to Syria. Such actions invariably left traces that could be identified and traced back to the perpetrators.

His minister had not been bothered. After all, Zeng's job was, as the minister had observed, to oversee the prisoner's transfer to a deep, dark bunghole inside Syria, where the Iranians wanted to have a word with her. No doubt they had a long history with the CIA.

The messiah came out of the hall, flanked by more than a dozen leaders of the regional countries.

It was decision time.

The journalists were stirred. The messiah took the podium and looked around, giving the photographers a chance to direct their cameras at him. Camera lights began flashing.

“Today,” he started speaking, “I announce the establishment of a new sovereign state, the United Islamic Emirates. A total of fourteen countries have decided to integrate into the new state. Its capital will be Al-Madina, the erstwhile seat of governance at the time of Muhammad, the holy prophet, peace be upon him, and the subsequent caliphs.”

The announcement turned a neat press conference into a boisterous media scrum. Despite the presence of heavy security, the journalists shouted at the top of their lungs, pushing and shoving each other to reach the messiah.

“What countries have joined?” a reporter asked breathlessly.

The messiah beamed. “As of now, the former nations of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Turkey, and Pakistan, among others.”

The others, Zeng knew, would include Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Yemen and Afghanistan.

“Any chance the new country would expand further?”

“What we undertook today is a step toward a larger pan-Islamic union. At the same time, I invite non-Muslim nations to join our fold. Our goal is to work for peace in the world. The words of Jesus and Muhammad, peace be upon them, were the same.”

Another guy asked. “And who’s going to be the ruler? You, Mr. Messiah?”

He offered a genuine smile before replying. “No, I do not seek any worldly honor. In fact, a shura, or governing council, will decide the head of the state as well as the other functionaries in due time.”

With that, the messiah left the podium. The bedlam did not subside. Seconds later, the foreign ministers of China and Russia emerged on the stage. He locked his eyes onto his minister for only a few seconds, long enough to give him a reassuring glance, before looking away.

Both officials welcomed the formation of the new state in a short statement and termed it a major milestone for achieving stability in the region. On behalf of their respective governments, they announced the recognition of the nascent country and offered full support at all levels.

The ministers headed into the main hall, where they would sort out the details of the agreements prepared in advance.

The nascent UIE would undoubtedly stretch over a huge area, with abundant natural resources and a formidable military power. However, the internal politics would be a bitch to deal with. A conglomerate of several states with their own rulers and their peculiar agendas would require astute handling.

Another factor would be the reaction from the US and her allies. They would not easily accept a superstate in the Middle East taking over the global oil trade in a single sweep. Their perceived threats against the puppet state of Israel would also play a role in whatever course of action they ultimately chose. The nuclear weapons possessed by Pakistan would be another thorny issue.

If the West decided to act violently against the UIE in the immediate future, the nukes they held now would offer a limited deterrence. The Pakistani warheads had no means of reaching the continental US. He remained uncertain if his government would provide any nuclear umbrella. Even the Russians could not be relied upon for such guarantee.

If the push came to shove, the messiah and his backers were hardly ready for a military standoff against the combined forces of the US and NATO, but Gao speculated that in the coming years, the UIE could rise up and attain a formidable status as a regional power.

The relationship his government now forged with this new nation would be an ad hoc alliance of convenience. Any long-term partnership would depend on how its leaders conducted themselves.

China would make sure to steer itself clear of any involvement in the armed conflicts so typical of the region.

**Arabian Peninsula, United Islamic Emirates**

Missiles were standing ready on their transporter-erector-launchers. Three hours ago, the behemoth launch vehicles had been moved out of their tunnel hideouts across the sprawling base southwest of Riyadh and deployed to the pre-surveyed firing points.

The technical support teams had stationed their specialized rocket fuel carriers next to each Chinese-origin CSS-2 ballistic missile, and attached wide-bore hoses to the tail portion. Fueling technicians, dressed in clumsy protection suits, loaded the highly toxic rocket fuel into the missiles with remarkable skill, completing their delicate task in excellent time.

It pleased the commander, an artillery brigadier, who had been tense having his precious assets out in the open for such a long time. His missiles were now ready. He had switched sides following the revolution. His loyalty now lay with the messiah and the new UIE.

He headed to his underground command post. Sirens were already sounding, alerting the base troops to the upcoming firings. While the launch crews got into their vehicles, all support personnel cleared the area. The missile operators shut themselves inside their cabins and lowered the protective shields.

An hour ago, a Russian spy satellite had made a pass over the region, watching with its high-powered synthetic aperture radar the air bases in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, the two countries still opposed to the UIE. It specifically photographed the Al-Udeid air base in Doha, Qatar, where its sensors picked up a row of American aircraft parked in the open. It appeared that they were preparing for flight.

The recon shots had been promptly shared with the UIE military.

He announced it to his staff. "Release orders have been issued. Start firing the weapons." Seconds later, the first missile started its rocket engine with a boom.

A plume of dust and smoke materialized. Red hot flames raged under it. The missile lifted into the air. Men chanted their prayers.

Their first missile strike was on its way.

One by one, the birds launched, climbing high and disappearing from sight.

They burned their rocket motors within two minutes of their flight, having been lobbed with a low fuel load. They were now traveling at hypersonic speed. Soon, the weapons touched an apogee of three hundred kilometers in space.

As soon as the weapons lifted off and headed east, a number of American and allied radars detected the threat.

The US military and its hosts issued an alert for the whole region. They were already on a war footing. The estimated targets were the airfields hosting the American and Western military units, naval ports, and headquarters.

The American-supplied THAAD anti-missile systems in the service of Qatar and the UAE were launched to intercept the incoming rockets.

**Doha, Qatar**

If the civil defense had not been quick enough to announce the threat, those pillars of fire with their thunderous roars jolted everyone. People watched in awe. Some were terrified, others just struggling to keep their sleepy eyes open. No one knew what the scene was all about.

Chad got out of bed in panic.

Just as he was getting out of the room, the first weapon landed at the nearby Al-Udeid air base, filling the night sky with a blinding light. The next boom was much closer. It had been a successful interception, but the falling debris rained down over the Hamad International Airport and the adjoining residential area.

For the next ten minutes, it was a string of explosions. He clung to the door as the building seemed to toss and sway. With a pounding heart, he stared down into the street below, watching people run out of their houses. Some buildings collapsed in the neighboring block, and fires erupted.

The noise of the missile fire died down, and it was obvious that the raid was over. Sirens were now wailing. Smoke and flames from the burning buildings were plainly visible. He managed to stumble out of his apartment and found himself in the middle of a maelstrom.

A whole residential block had been hit. Firefighters were on the scene in no time. Other emergency services followed suit. He stood next to an ambulance van, his eyes taking in the macabre scene. A paramedic jumped out of the vehicle with a walkie-talkie set pressed to his ear; waiting for the all-clear signal from the fire people to move in and manage the casualties.

Firefighters in their protective suits moved about like ghosts, their awkward forms casting dreary shadows in the glare of vehicle headlamps and hastily placed searchlights.

The weapon must have been huge, likely weighing several thousand pounds. It had struck a small house in the area, but the force of the explosion had caused large-scale damage. Was it a deliberate hit, or had the weapon been deflected off-course after being struck by a surface-to-air missile? Nobody was sure. It was beside the point too.

The exploding missile had resulted in serious casualties, he noticed on moving around the area. He heard a constant wailing, mostly from the wounded but also from the unhurt relatives and friends who had gathered there. Standing helplessly, they appeared as if stunned into profound hysteria, their frightened eyes looking for signs of hope that no one could offer.

A paramedic adjusted his gloves and face mask. The firefighters motioned for him to run, and he ordered his men to follow. With a powerful handheld light, he began searching through the rubble. A massive crater was the only remnant of a home. Other homes were destroyed too. Some others looked intact, but barely. A few small trees stood burnt and twisted.

His mouth was suddenly turned dry. There were too many corpses. The bodies were ravaged beyond recognition. The people who had been alive half an hour ago were now heaps of splintered limbs, gouged-out torsos, and charred skulls. He fought a wave of nausea. The light caught a couple of little children, poor victims of some angry demon.

The mangled human remains stank of burnt flesh. Soon, the medics found some badly wounded people. With a clinical coldness that he inwardly abhorred, the medics began triaging the victims.

Chad stooped next to a seemingly lifeless man lying on the ground. He was not breathing. A paramedic quickly opened his mouth. Yes, he took a breath. Feeble and shallow. The man inserted an artificial airway into his mouth and ordered his assistant to hook him to a portable oxygen cylinder.

Moving further on, the medics prioritized the critically injured patients. In addition to marking the deceased. Many people with extensive burns, massive fractures, and ugly wounds needed immediate assessment and even faster evacuation. Within minutes, the guys had completed the triage, while other medics were now managing the wounded, giving them initial care before sending them off to the hospitals.

Chad nearly lost it seeing into the dying eyes of a woman, her arms clutching an already dead kid. He had to avert his gaze from a man half-buried under a collapsed roof, his sobs audible from a distance. A screaming little girl with a missing limb soon fell silent as life slowly drained from her.

He walked like a zombie in the field of death and destruction, benumbed by the carnage he saw. Wandering like an automaton, he steeled himself against the horror of those sights and sounds.

**Chapter 42**

**Eastern Mediterranean Sea**

Chad was headed to the intelligence work center aboard the carrier USS *Harry S. Truman.* He had left Doha after the Qatari government refused to cooperate with the US against the UIE. The devastating missile attacks against Qatar and the UAE had forced both countries to reconsider their priorities. The US military was ordered to evacuate its men and material from Qatar and the UAE. Leaving the Navy and the Air Force to fight against the UIE with their hands tied behind their backs. It was a big setback. Nobody had ever imagined that the United States would be so badly handicapped in the region.

The CIA was still present in Qatar, but Chad had been pulled out to head a small task force. His marching orders were to hunt the messiah and recover Kate.

An enlisted sailor accompanied him, guiding him through the maize-like passages. The carrier and her escorts, facing hostile shores on three sides, were a bulwark against the UIE aggression.

The sailor handed him over to a liaison woman and left. “What now?” Chad inquired as he entered the restricted area.

“Let’s go inside,” the woman murmured, introducing herself as Deborah. Chad had taken a helicopter ride to the carrier after flying out of the Middle East.

He was enraged, feeling as if he had fled Qatar with his tail between his legs. Kate was kidnapped and out of play for the time being, and Hasser and Zaki were nowhere near getting to the messiah. He knew it had not been their fault. In fact, the three of them had gone above and beyond what anyone could have expected under such circumstances.

They made their way to a conference room. As he walked in, he noticed someone perched on the corner of a long table, one foot firmly planted on the floor and his hands tightly tucked into his jacket pockets. Bill Price, the paramilitary operations guy. He was looking at a large video monitor, where a frozen frame showed Hasser's face. They were probably in the middle of a teleconference. On another screen, a series of images were rolling.

“Hey,” Bill said hoarsely. “I feel really sorry for Kate,” he said with as much gravitas as he could muster.

“Yeah, that’s fan-fucking-tastic. Thank you,” Chad growled as he approached him, his steps heavy.

“Sit down,” Bill gestured with his hand.

Chad sighed as he took a seat opposite him at the table. He was pretty beaten down physically and mentally after having been through the stress of a long, fruitless mission so far.

Deborah nodded to them as they sat down. “Coffee?”

“Please,” Chad replied.

Bill tapped the display. “We’re going live again with our videocon session.”

As if on cue, Hasser and Zaki appeared, their faces filling up the screen. They were staying at a safe house in Amman. He also spotted Diab. The unrest gripping the country had suddenly rendered Amman an unsafe city. Instead of staying at a hotel without any meaningful security, they had chosen the safe house where they had the means to protect themselves.

Both men had returned from Europe after their violent encounter with the Chinese. The Agency had identified the hostile team leader as Zeng, a colonel in the MSS. He was not a spook, but a paramilitary operations guy.

The kidnappers had taken Kate to Syria. The opp team had slipped out of Slovenia by road through the border crossing at Rupa. Once in Croatia, they had traveled to Rijeka, where a charter jet presumably owned by an obscure criminal enterprise had flown them to Syria. The aircraft had made a brief stopover in the Bulgarian town of Plovdiv for refueling.

The kidnapping was a heavy blow to the CIA.

Reeling from it, the Agency had undertaken a massive effort to unearth all that information in the shortest time possible. Friendly nations had been requested to cooperate. While some provided assistance, others hesitated or offered excuses. The not-so-friendly ones had been easier to deal with. Their databases were simply hacked. The targets of penetration were hotel records, camera networks watching the highways and border crossings, and airport and air traffic control logs. By pure luck, a NATO-owned radar bird participating in an air exercise tracked the mystery plane all the way to the Syrian border.

Once on the ground in Syria, the kidnappers had vanished. As the CIA had learned over the years, the best way to go around in a place like Syria was to seek out the militias and mercenaries. They are usually spread across the land with roots dug deep into the society. Even Mossad was asked for help. The Israelis knew their neighborhood better than anyone else did. Lots of American technical assets on the ground, in the air, and in space were also involved. It was a huge undertaking, indeed.

“What’s happening?” Chad inquired in a strained voice. Their efforts so far had been in vain. More than anything, though, the frustrating task highlighted that the clock was ticking for Kate. If they could not get to her in time, she might die a horrendous death. The mere thought of failure was driving him insane.

Hasser replied. “Amman station has come up with a lead. A former Jordanian intelligence official was tipped off by his source inside a pro-regime militia in Syria about a mystery prisoner.”

Chad sat up straight. “Could it be her?”

“I don’t know,” Hasser said. “The prisoner in question is on the move, being transported from Damascus to an unknown location. The exact destination remains uncertain, with suggestions of a possible hideout in the mountainous region near the Lebanon border and another one deep within the eastern desert."

“We got something at least.”

Bill nodded. “It’s pretty much thin information, but we must act. I suggest we dispatch a joint CIA-military team to the mountains to the west while Hasser and Zaki should plan a desert safari.”

“Okay,” Chad agreed. “Do assign him some help.” Mike was his best operator—smart, thorough, and utterly ruthless. An asset as priceless as they came. A hunter with many talents. He never let go of a mission thrown at him, but even the best ones needed support.

Price acknowledged. “Got it.” The task force had at its disposal some elements of the US forces, including a special ops unit and armed drones. If the need arose, they could also tap into the wider military apparatus.

“What else?” Chad frowned, rolling a half-burnt cigarette between his fingers.

“The crisis has escalated,” Bill said grimly. “I don’t know for certain what's going to happen. The region is descending into another war. Back home, the president and his security team have decided to confront the messiah after reviewing the intelligence we shared with them. They deemed the evidence good enough to stop the messiah, but not convincing enough to confront China directly."

“What the hell?” Zaki groaned.

Chad smiled. “It’s big geopolitics, Zak. Don’t stress yourself.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Mutual consensus at Langley has been that there might not be any solid evidence of a secret Chinese genetics laboratory after so much time has elapsed. Any additional proof would only be possible if the CIA captured a key Chinese figure directly involved with the project, like a minister or a senior MSS official.”

“So?” Diab inquired, speaking for the first time.

Chad said. “The president has ordered the Agency to target the Chinese. The US government is responding to a new form of warfare against humanity."

“What exactly is your government doing?”

“We’ve refused to accept an unlawful state brought into existence through a high-tech fraud, with the sole objective of destroying the religion of God and setting on fire an already unstable region. We are aware that the powerful forces behind the messiah are using him as a pawn. He needs to be stopped.”

“How was it even possible? I mean, technically speaking, how could they do it?”

“A scientific breakthrough, I presume. But it’s a mystery. Someday, I’d ask the Chinese how they pulled it off. When we approached a couple of our top guys in the field, they completely rejected the possibility. No human DNA on a piece of cloth could have survived two thousand years of ravages.”

“And yet somehow, it did.”

“Yes, it did. Nobody foresaw it. A scientific miracle made it happen."

“Not exactly true,” Diab smirked. “The Church had been closely guarding its Holy Grail, just to prevent such kind of atrocity.”

Chad whistled softly. “Oh, sweet God.”

Hasser asked the Egyptian. “Can we say it was the resurrection? In a scientific way?”

“No. His genes could be the same, even his physical form, but he doesn’t share the same spirit or soul. He retains some gifts that once resided in that holy body, that’s all.”

“I see,” Hasser acknowledged.

Diab said. “At least someone has decided to stand up to him. This *fitna*, or affliction, must come to an end. You know, Jesus, the true Messiah, will first appear in Damascus. Not in Jerusalem, though the Christians disagree. The Mahdi would arrive before Jesus, and the oath of allegiance would be offered to him.”

“You saying, once they were successful with their creation, they convoluted the story to suit their narrative?”

“Yes, absolutely. It’s just an evil trick.”

Deborah handed him a small folder. As they watched, Chad went through the contents in silence. He was suddenly pale.

“What now?” Hasser asked with trepidation.

“It’s bad, really bad,” Chad slumped back in his chair.

“I can see the bad news on your face,” Zaki chuckled.

Chad ignored him and continued. “Colonel Otaibi reached out to us. You remember, he’s Saudi intelligence. Or used to be.”

“Yeah, I came across him in Jeddah. What’s he telling?” Hasser said.

“Well, he has informed us that the UIE is moving secret contraband from Syria to its missile bases in the Arabian Peninsula.”

“What contraband?” Hasser felt his throat tighten. He could already guess what the colonel had disclosed.

“Potent nerve agents,” Chad said.

The Assad regime had once possessed a hefty stockpile of the deadly nerve gases, like the sarin and VX. For some time, Syria was believed to own the world's third-largest stockpile of chemical weapons, after the United States and Russia. The Syrian civil war saw occasional use of the weapons in and around the cities of Aleppo, Homs, and possibly Damascus. It led to a global hue and cry. Eventually, under international pressure, the Syrians destroyed their weapons and the precursor chemicals.

The world welcomed the move. An independent watchdog and the United Nations verified that Syria no longer held any chemical weapons.

Yet the intelligence community remained skeptical. It was thought that a portion of the arsenal still remained intact. If the colonel was correct, the secret weapons were on their way to the rogue missile bases.

It was a scary scenario. The UIE was already lobbing missiles at its neighbors. If it upped the ante by targeting its opponents with weapons of mass destruction, the American reaction might be deadlier. Because the US lacked chemical or biological weapons, its choice of retaliation would be nuclear.

Zaki groaned. “Shit. Part of me wishes I could book myself a seat on the first flight and head back to sunny California. Somehow, my gut tells me you wouldn’t allow it.”

“You’re right, Zak,” Chad replied humorlessly.

Zaki snickered. “Such a charming man. No offense, but someday, I’m going to strangle you with my bare hands.”

“Be my guest,” Chad said, still straight-faced.

Both Bill and Deborah barely suppressed their giggles. Chad shook his head in mock disdain. He turned to Hasser. “Get a hold of this guy.”

Hasser gave a dry smile. “I may have to facilitate him in his noble cause.”

More laughter erupted. They discussed some further details before the video call mercifully ended.

“Let’s ready ourselves,” Hasser told his partner.

**Chapter 43**

**Qasr Burqu, Near the Syria-Jordan Border**

The sun had gone down hours ago, plunging the centuries-old ruins into near total darkness when Hasser and Zaki reached Qasr Burqu. The place had once been a small desert castle under the Umayyad Dynasty in the eighth century.

Their journey from Amman to the middle of nowhere had been made on a hardy SUV able to traverse the rock-strewn black desert straddling northeastern Jordan near its border with Syria and Iraq. A local Bedouin driver had brought them here.

They were going to rendezvous with a special operations squad in Qasr Burqu and head into the Syrian Desert.

Hasser figured they’d better make the best of their one shot. He knew the risks of operating with scant intelligence, but that was why men like him trained so hard for operations.

Zaki was humming something. He seemed unperturbed by the desolate surroundings. The guy was sometimes insanely cool. Hasser still did not fully understand what drove him, but he was thankful for his presence. Their driver sat on a mat near the small lake and drank his *qahwah*.

“When this is over, I wonder whether I’d ever believe in anything,” Hasser whispered.

Zaki took a moment before replying. “When this is over, we’d be lucky if we’re still breathing.”

A pair of strange-looking vehicles appeared out of the blackness, each mounting a heavy machine gun at the rear. Hasser watched them skid to a stop. The Chenowth Light Strike Vehicles, with their roll-cage frame, were absolutely loved by the special operations units across the world. Two men dressed in black BDUs and ballistic vests jumped down while the drivers stayed behind the wheels.

“Good to see you. I’m Ralph, Navy Special Forces," the first man said, offering his hand. His colleague did not introduce himself.

Hasser welcomed them. Both CIA men sent their driver back and mounted the dune buggies.

Hasser wrapped the checkered keffiyeh around his head to ward off the desert sand. The Delta Force and Navy SEALs had always fascinated him as a young officer. Once upon a time, after qualifying for the Ranger course, he had nurtured a desire to join their cadre, but that was a long time ago. As an operator for the Agency years later, he sometimes fondly cherished the simpler black-and-white world of military men.

The buggies were running in total darkness, their headlights doused. The drivers wore night vision devices to navigate the Martian landscape spread in front of them.

The US military had started its offensive operations against the newly formed United Islamic Emirates. It would not be an easy task to subdue the messiah and his supporters. The new super-state fielded a million-plus army that possessed a huge stockpile of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons. It also held the world's largest oil and gas reserves.

He wondered how much blood would be spilled this time as the world plunged into another massive conflict.

The SEALs dropped them near the town of Palmyra after a three-hour ride through the desert. He would have loved to keep them around, but his current task required different company.

Hasser made contact with his local contacts in a roadside shack. The four individuals were typical tough Kurdish folk. Tall, bearded, unsmiling. They had previously worked with the CIA during the long civil war in Syria.

Their leader was Ayub. His deputy introduced himself as Saberi. Finding their names too difficult to pronounce, they simply gave the remaining two men handles. One, with a couple of front teeth missing and carrying a knife bigger than the pistol in his hand, was “KBar.” His short, skinny pal earned himself the title of “Halfmast.”

Ayub took them to a small house. Two fully stocked-up Toyota Hilux trucks were parked there, ready for any rough ride they planned.

Hasser went through the items he had requested. Four hundred thousand greenbacks transferred by Chad into the Kurd’s bank account in Palmyra had helped the matter.

He saw an assortment of handguns and rifles. Ammo for their favorite M4s. Body armor, burner phones, and a compact satellite phone. Another crucial item was a set of identities and permits to help them travel through the war-torn countryside. He also appreciated the jamming gear meant for the Toyotas.

Satisfied, he went inside. Zaki was looking around for some coffee. Firing up the laptop, Hasser accessed a secure cloud Chad had used to store some imagery data and other things. The internet connection in the house was shitty, and soon they began to curse and complain like spoiled children. Hasser resisted turning on the satellite phone to connect to the internet. It could be tracked.

He walked over to the small kitchenette where Saberi was preparing a stew. He made himself a quick meal of omelets and bread and sat down to eat. Saberi fixed him the local coffee, spiced with cardamom and loaded with brown sugar. Just as he preferred for himself.

“Here,” Zaki beckoned him.

“What’s it? You got something?” Hasser asked as he walked over to him. Zaki snatched the coffee mug from his hands.

He nodded. The laptop screen displayed a satellite map of Palmyra and its surroundings. Chad had supplied pretty good resolution satellite imagery sourced through a civilian corporation based in Europe. Although Hasser would have preferred the more detailed NRO photos, sharing such highly classified material on insecure computers via third-world internet links was impossible. On the plus side, the imagery was only one day old and of adequate quality. Better than what Google Earth offered.

Zaki zoomed in on a set of buildings.

“It’s a tiny settlement north of the town,” he said. The village was perched next to the N-7 Highway, its dwellings haphazardly arranged upon a barren-looking plateau. Hills towered over it on the other side.

Zooming in further, Zaki added. “We’re looking at a madrasa, formerly government-run but now operated by an influential cleric. His name is Nabi Hussaini. That’s our place of interest. The guy in question has worked with crazy shitheads before. Rumors abound that he looked after the Iranian-backed militants who fought to sustain the regime."

They could see a big compound with a cluster of buildings inside. The main building was a two-story structure. Some vehicles were parked by the gate. Human figures were also visible. Most likely, armed guards. The place was protected well. Only a covert entry would do.

“So, this schmuck is a seasoned badass. Let’s go visit him,” Hasser said.

Zaki considered it. His frustration was evident as he posed the question. “Any chance we’d be able to find Kate?”

“It’s possible, but I can’t tell,” he answered.

Zaki said thoughtfully. “In any other situation, the old man would have camped together with a hundred kids and an American hostage. To ensure he did not get a Hellfire down his throat. However, he would prefer not to be around the captive within a compound we are already familiar with."

“Maybe we get lucky tonight for a change,” Hasser snorted.

Zaki placed a finger on the map. "What you're seeing here is a fortress. Home to a paramilitary battalion. Sitting on a high rock, it monitors a vast area in all directions. Something we must bear in mind.”

“Got it,” Hasser nodded. The fortification was close to their target, something he had to keep in his mind.

For the next few minutes, they discussed the outline of their mission. Hasser explained everyone’s role in it. They would be accompanied by Ayub and his friends. He marked the map, pointing out clear infiltration and exfiltration routes in detail.

**East of Palmyra**

Ali Aqa smirked as he threw the cell phone to the ground and stomped on it. His call to a former militia leader in the desert would likely achieve its purpose: to convince the Americans that he was there and in their sights. Such gullible men, he thought. He was unable to comprehend how ambition could blind anyone so much.

Earlier, Zeng had helped the ruse by switching on his phone and talking nonsense for a few minutes to him. The bastard sounded cocksure when he proposed the plan to him. The Americans would fall for it, hook, line, and sinker, he had predicted.

Aqa was awed for a moment. If he played his cards well and didn't allow any fuckups for another few days, the CIA team would walk into his trap. Maybe, a special mission squad too.

He was stopped at a roadside food stall near Al-Sukhnah on his way to the vast Syrian hinterland. Major Javad and his men were at his disposal. They had transferred Javad back to the Quds Force. He had already confronted the Americans in Iran. His previous failure still stung him, though. The man wanted to even the score.

They were eating their meal. The woman was dumped inside one of the vehicles. He could not risk her coming out. His men had provided her with food and drinks.

He wanted to get off the main highway as soon as possible, where the paramilitary checkpoints were frequent and their patrol vans appeared from time to time. Thankfully, a stiff breeze was picking up from the west, keeping the soldiers inside their warm van cabins. Even the ordinary folks who usually thronged the roadside hotels and stalls were nowhere in sight. Sure, he enjoyed a pretty strong clout in Syria, but keeping a low profile suited him.

Even as he proceeded with the plan, the pesky Americans were starting to look like trouble. They were working nonstop to retrieve their colleague, while their government was busy bombing the messiah and his followers.

His breath steamed in the frigid air as he sighed. Something about their crazed relentlessness bothered him. They had already demonstrated their evil intentions by going after the UIE leadership. As the senior leaders from Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and Pakistan had taken off from Damascus after establishing their new country, the American air force had shot down their aircraft one by one. All five of them.

An hour ago, he had spotted the trails of American cruise missiles going west. To hit the Iranian forces being sent to help Syria. Or to take out the oil fields inside Iraq. He had no idea.

Worse still, the American reaction was making China nervous. They clearly did not want a nasty entanglement with America.

Already, alarm rings were ringing loud in Beijing, his sources told. Every Politburo member was voicing his concern over the situation. They were unnerved by the American war against the UIE. Even the decision by the Chinese president to send a carrier battle group into the Mediterranean Sea was being second-guessed back home.

Aqa realized China actually sucked at brinksmanship. Even the Russians did it better, despite having a far smaller economy and an ongoing bleeding war with Ukraine. Heck, his own mullahs played the game like pros, standing eyeball to eyeball with the enemy. If the politicians in China could not keep their shit together now, the whole adventure would fall apart.

He tried not to think about it too much. Gazing at the worst-case scenario was not his style. To dwell on bleak outcomes could make a strong man lose his mind. As he had learned over the years, fretting over a threat served no purpose. Instead, he had to act against it.

*Stay in the game.*

*Find your enemy.*

*Trap him.*

He knew why Zeng and his men had opted to stick around after handing over the woman to him. They wanted to hunt down the Americans. Zeng had communicated to him the details of his latest engagement in Slovenia. Before, it had been Myanmar. The body count had been terrible. Now the same team was back on the field and eager to kick ass.

The Chinese had no clue where the prey was. They informed him that they were actively searching, though he could not help them much. The hostage was keeping him on the run. Otherwise, he would have joined the hunt and brought a quick end to the mission. Still, he would do his part.

“Javad,” he barked.

He came over, wiping his mouth with a shirt cuff. “Yes, Ali.”

“I want you to send a message to Zeng. He must immediately move to Al-Taibah and prepare for a possible confrontation with the enemy. As I continue, you join hands with Zeng and intercept our pursuers."

“What?” his eyes bulged. “Are the Americans coming here?”

“They will come, Javad. I know it.”

He looked uncertain. “But how? They cannot touch the mullah. He’s the only one who knows about us.”

“They will not be deterred by Hussaini or the lunatics in his madrasa. That’s the reason I had to depart in a hurry.”

Javad’s eyes were wide. “No one would dare raid his madrasa.”

Ali sneered. “Mullahs and their madrasas are easy targets if the attacker has the will.”

“Subduing too many people would not be easy. Executing them all would be even more difficult.”

“Let’s see what happens. But I want you to do what I ask.”

**Chapter 44**

**Palmyra, Syria**

Hasser could smell wood fires and animal dung. The ground under his feet was covered in thin snow. Not a soul was in sight. A cold spell lasting over the last few days was keeping the folks indoors.

He stepped out of the shadows.

Without sound, a black-clad, heavy-set man leaped around the corner of the madrasa wall. Hasser was crouching against the wall. He winced before making a desperate lunge at the man standing three yards away. He was armed, probably one of the sentries Hasser had most likely failed to account for.

His turbaned head jerked and eyes widened in alarm before Hasser smashed him into the wall. The short-barreled Kalashnikov fell out of his hands. Hasser was now over him. He needed to neutralize him without firing a shot. He launched his carbine, striking him squarely in the head. His turban took most of the blow. Shit. The mouth quivered to let out a scream.

Hasser struck again at the opening jaw. Bones and teeth cracked, and spittle mixed with blood came out of the broken mouth. Pressing him against the ground, he removed his turban and wrapped it around his busted face. For a minute, the big man under him struggled desperately as the turban tightened around his mouth, depriving him of oxygen. Slowly the life drained away from the body. Hasser stood up.

Damn, it was exhausting. Ten yards behind him and flat on the ground, Ayub let out an audible breath.

The team had gotten out of town in their Toyotas and taken the highway. When they left the road, they doused the lights and continued on, taking a dirt track to the madrassa. A mile short of their objective, they dismounted and parked next to a barn.

While Ayub and Saberi accompanied the Americans, their two associates had stayed with the vehicles.

On the ground, the madrasa looked a little different than what the digital images had depicted. A wall separated the main buildings from an adjacent structure. The much smaller auxiliary unit was most likely a residence of some sort. Much better built than the row of rooms likely occupied by the students. For someone important. Like the cleric, he guessed.

Stalking the madrasa, Hasser pinpointed the guards without much effort. Well, most of them, he thought wryly. Six in total, the dead guy excluding. A thermal scope had helped. For the sentries, the night had probably brought a sense of unease after the arrival of someone like Hussaini. One man was at the gate. Two individuals were posted within the expansive courtyard, while another pair was visible on the second floor. An unknown number in their sleeping quarters.

With one guy permanently down now, he was waiting for either Zaki or Saberi to neutralize his pal patrolling the street on the other end. Ayub was sticking to him.

Someone whistled. He glanced that way. Zaki was approaching, pushing a gagged man in front. As he neared the gate, he removed the gag and whispered to his captive, who nodded. Zaki knocked on the gate. That was the signal.

Hasser tensed. He moved closer to the gate and readied his M4. Trailing him, Ayub did the same.

Dogs barked in the distance, around the corner.

The guard had a brief conversation with the man inside, who hesitated, then opened the gate slightly. Peeking through the gap, he saw nothing but dark shadows. A knife blade flashed. Just a blur on the periphery of his vision. Before he felt the intense pain emanating from his throat, two strong hands gripped him, clasping his mouth.

Zaki deposited the dying man against the gate and sheathed his knife just as Hasser flew through the gate. Ayub was in tow. Both split and went for the stairs on both sides of the main building. The sentries in the courtyard first spotted the two running men before more armed figures poured through the gate.

Coming straight at them.

They leveled their AK-47s, but the attackers were incredibly quick with their guns. Behind them, Zaki loosed a couple bursts of subsonic rounds, hoping to keep the noise and flashes down with the integrated suppressors on his carbine. Each shot rang out no louder than did a jackhammer.

The two guards dropped dead. Hasser hoped their demise would go unnoticed by the pair on the second floor. However, the report of gunfire was hard to miss in the quiet of the night. Unable to see what had gone wrong, the sentries ran down the stairs to investigate.

Hasser sprinted to the stairwell on the west end of the building. He was working his way up to the second floor when a man came rushing at him. He tried to move away, but the guy tackled him to the floor. He landed directly on top of him, catching him by surprise and causing his weapon to drop. Hasser grabbed the man’s head and drove it hard into the wall, trying to knock him unconscious. The militant proved strong enough to take a few blows before he went limp.

Hasser got up and started bounding up the stairs. As he got on the second-floor landing, he heard a few muffled shots on the opposite side. Seconds later, Ayub emerged, grinning wildly.

Zaki and Saberi arrived next after clearing the ground floor. It turned out nobody had been present there, and the adjacent madrasa hostel was separated from the building by a low wall. Anyone coming from the madrasa would have to enter through a side door that Zaki had bolted. Hasser tasked Saberi to clear the second-floor rooms one by one.

He pointed a finger at the main room, switched on the light on his carbine, and fist-bumped Zaki. Ayub followed them.

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The door to his bedroom split from its hinges with a terrible crack and crashed to the floor. Three armed men barged in.

For a long moment, Hussaini was frozen with shock, his eyes blinded by the rifle-mounted flashlights pointing at him. The circular bed under him was moving noiselessly.

“Motherfucker!” he heard one of the gunmen shout out.

A trickle of cold slipped down his bare spine. The sixty-year-old cleric turned his head slowly, disoriented, taking in the muzzle, the man, and his red-rimmed eyes as the weapon twitched ever so slightly in his hands. The boy under him whimpered. The one riding his back let out a scream, and he felt him shrivel inside.

Hussaini had been riding a wave of passion only moments ago in a most perfect “sandwich” position with two of his favorite boys handpicked from the madrasa. Nobody dared touch them before, the caretaker had assured.

He had massaged imported scented oil onto their young bodies. Even painted clumsy graffiti with Chanel lipsticks on hairless butts wrapped in silk underwear. One boy was wearing kohl for him. He touched them right, and the sounds they made were quite arousing. The foreplay had gone long into the night before the delicate, warm flesh had him overpowered with a surge of carnal desire. With a good dose of top-quality crystal meth coursing through his veins, the bed motion felt so erotic in the dimly lit room.

Now he was caught naked, squeezed in between the two boy toys. Held at gunpoint by unknown intruders.

A light switch was thrown. Hussaini cringed. The doe-eyed youth riding him slid off, breathless, terrified beyond belief. One man came forward and kicked him forcefully. “Still getting rammed in the ass, eh, you fucking Hussaini? Business as usual, I see.”

He yelled in pain. “Who’re you?” His long gray beard was quivering.

“Perhaps I didn’t make myself clear,” the attacker scoffed. He delivered another powerful kick followed by a lot more verbal abuse in rapid-fire Arabic. The moving bed saved him a little as the next few kicks landed on the naked butts of his two partners, who tried to get under a quilt to save themselves.

“Mike, try to stop this goddamned Kama Sutra bed,” a man hollered to his companion, who obliged by ripping out the cord from the socket.

“Well, I’m the one who’d saved your sorry butt after you were arrested by the cops in Damascus. It’s like more than a decade now. Doing the same shit with a couple of gunsels then. Remember anything?”

“You must be wrong,” Hussaini shook his head. His ice-addled brain was confused. The man clearly recognized him. And he sounded like a local, unlike his friends. *A former Syrian intelligence operative? Or a militia thug?* he wondered. Hussaini could deal with such people.

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While Ayub brain-fucked the mullah with tidbits of information he had gleaned from his days in the rebel militia, Hasser looked around the room. One of the walls bore a crude painting of a rustic scene. Arabic-style majlis sofas on the floor in one corner. Stacks of religious books on a small wooden table. Some leftover coffee in cups, next to the clothes shed by the trio. The only thing luxurious here was the rotating bed.

“I’m here to ask you about something,” Zaki hissed, placing a boot on the bed.

“Go off, I don’t answer to people like you,” the mullah drew a shaky breath, trying to show defiance. It did not work.

“You may be a big scumbag, but I don’t care, you know,” Zaki snarled.

“If you so much as touch me again, my madrasa students will drag you through the streets and kill you.”

“Sorry, but I’m not intimidated,” he replied boringly.

“We’ll descend on the capital and other big cities and start another insurgency. The country will be brought to its knees in days,” Hussaini threatened. He had demonstrated his capability for chaos on many occasions, Hasser knew. Still, he was surprised that the fat old queer was issuing threats despite his predicament.

Zaki swung a punch. “Do I look like a Syrian minister you’re trying to bully, you faggot?” His blow made a cracking sound.

Hussaini bellowed, his head tilted sideways. “Pig, I’m not talking to you at all.”

“Fine. I’ll execute you for sodomy, a sin punishable by death,” Zaki said dryly, lowering his carbine.

The cleric paled. “Wait, I know why you are here. I can help you.” His watermelon belly was shaking badly. Zaki’s sudden cold demeanor had him unnerved. Hussaini appeared to be the type who preferred survival over pretty much anything else.

“Go on,” Hasser stepped in.

“The Americans have turned on the heat too much. The Iranians and their hostage have already left this location. Ali Aqa hasn’t told me, but I guess he’s going to disappear in the desert.”

“Did they stay here?” Zaki inquired.

“Yes. They had decided to sleep here before something spooked them. Departed in a hurry.”

Hasser was not impressed. “I know. Tell me something a bit more useful.” He lunged, grabbing the mullah by his throat.

Hussaini recoiled. “Wait, wait, for God’s sake. He left in the evening today.”

“Are you bullshitting us? He should have found refuge with you. You hold sway here," Zaki reminded him by poking him in the butt.

The man was deflated now. "I'm watched regularly. He did not want to be around me.”

For a moment, Zaki doubted him. Then he understood. The desert was an excellent choice for a covert team holding a high-profile hostage. They were always on the move, off the beaten track, and invisible to the world. If cornered, they could easily slip into Iraq.

The badlands astride the now absent border had always been rife with corruption in one form or another. Narcotics and weapons were the staples, though terrorism had brought in windfall profits for the tribesmen. Religious men like Hussaini had amassed a fortune, both monetary and political, and worked in cahoots with all sorts of shadowy elements.

Still, Hasser was perplexed. What were the Chinese doing here? Why were they roaming around in the desert?

“Let’s go, Zak. We’re finished with him,” Hasser stepped away.

Zaki shook his head. “Not yet. Give me a second, Mike.” He looked feral. Taking out his combat knife, he stabbed the mullah in the crotch.

“You’re a devil, Hussaini.”

The cleric squealed, his whole body convulsing uncontrollably, as sudden pain invaded his senses. The knife cut into the flesh, making a mess of his genitals. Zaki did not stop and slashed him several times. Blood gushed out of the wounds. The old lecher was retching and puking in between his terror-laced screams.

“You sick bastard! I beg you to end my life,” he sobbed, tears running down his red, puffy face. Hasser threw his turban at him, which he grabbed and pressed against his crotch to stench the bleeding.

Zaki stood over him, his eyes merciless. "I hope you survive, asshole. I sincerely do.” He turned on his heel.

Gunfire exploded outside the room.

Followed by running footsteps and men screaming in rage. A shape sliced through the air, landing on the bed.

“Down!” Zaki shouted, diving and pushing the mullah to the floor. Hasser was on the other side of the bed, almost prone, when the grenade went off. The room shook; debris rose up to the ceiling.

Someone wailed. Keeping himself steady, Hasser trained his carbine at the armed man who jumped into the room and began to spray with his AK-47.

His rounds flew high, but Hasser did not miss. He saw nice holes punch through the clothing and shifted aim. The man wobbled and fell on his back. Hasser ripple-fired more shots, saturating the narrow space with lead where the door had been.

Another guy, blindly trailing his leader into the room, caught a part of it. He stumbled. More rounds slammed into him from behind, fired by Saberi, who materialized holding a pistol. That enemy was dead without getting a shot off.

“What happened?” Zaki croaked, standing up. Ayub shook his head.

Saberi replied apologetically. “These two must have been holed up in a restroom or a closet. Once I was at the other end of the floor, they came out and attacked, probably thinking you had murdered the mullah.” He peered inside. “Is everything okay?”

It was not at all.

The twinks had taken the full brunt of the blast, and they were dead, shredded badly by the hail of grenade fragments. Hussaini had dropped to the floor, bleeding profusely from a number of shrapnel wounds across his torso. He looked moribund. A quiver went through him, and his last breath came out like a sigh.

They left the compound.

The madrasa was stirring, Hasser observed, as the team slipped into the street. In the buildings, lights were coming on, and anxious voices were talking. Somebody had noticed the shooting. Though their own gunfire had been suppressed, the guys inside had fired an unsuppressed rifle and blasted a grenade before dying.

Even if it took time for the students to understand what had happened and mount a search for the escaping team, a general ruckus in the village alleys could still send things south. They had to move really fast to avoid further confrontation.

Luckily, the madrasa folks remained confused long enough for the quartet to get out and join up with their vehicles.

**Chapter 45**

The two identical Hilux pickups were going at a satisfactory clip. Despite the narrow asphalt road and the unruly traffic of cargo haulers and passenger vans. Every boorish-looking Kurdish driver, seemingly high on hash, was honking and gesturing wildly as he charged in, cutting at the last possible moment.

Welcome to the Wild West.

Ayub drove carefully, keeping the lead Toyota in sight while Hasser leaned his forehead against the window, taking in the barren landscape dotted with desolate hills. Halfmast slouched in the rear seat.

Hasser was worried, not sure if he would be able to pull off the mission. With every passing day, things were getting messier. He did not mind getting his hands dirty, but the body count had piled up without any significant gains in return.

Chad had reminded him of that fact lately when Hasser called before leaving Palmyra. He recounted his encounter with the mullah and the information he divulged before kicking the bucket. Chad chastised him for the violence. Eventually, he approved his plan for the upcoming trip, also bringing to his notice something significant. The Agency had detected suspicious phone calls originating in his area of interest, the callers being known Iranian operatives.

Nearing Al-Sukhnah, they veered off the main road. A security checkpoint lay ahead, where an exchange of Islamic greetings and American dollars resolved the situation. It was the fourth checkpoint they had encountered so far.

“Fantastic. Isn’t it?” Ayub chuckled as the barrier rose and the vehicles accelerated. He threw a mock salute to the smiling paramilitary soldier.

“Yes. We’re fortunate to operate in an imperfect world,” Hasser laughed.

It was the same everywhere in one form or another. Here in a third-world country, the violation of law was naked, bribery took an ugly shape, and officials traded in their honesty for a few bucks in broad daylight.

Back home, it was a subtle art. Politicians and government folks formulated dubious policies. Regulations crafted with built-in vulnerabilities, ready for exploitation. Deals buried under layers upon layers of bullshit. No wonder the foreign wars never stopped. Domestically, various mafias operated with impunity all over; drugs and illegal immigrants kept coming. Business as usual, they say. He was bitter for a moment, thinking about it.

“That gay mullah, I’m happy you did him in,” Ayub said, rotating the wheel as he negotiated a bend. With each passing mile, the road was getting worse.

“It was the grenade but yes, I didn’t feel a thing when he cashed in his chips,” he answered.

Shortly, the lead vehicle braked to a halt. Ayub stopped behind it. “He’s not around yet,” Saberi radioed in. The team was wearing earpieces and throat microphones.

“Got it,” Hasser replied, getting out of the truck. Before leaving Palmyra, Saberi had called a friend living deep in the desert for help. That friend had arranged for an informant to meet them en route. Now they were at the meeting point. While the trucks idled on the road, Hasser and Zaki carefully reconnoitered the area on foot to avoid any nasty surprises.

The desert was not too unlike that of northern Arizona. It was alive; he could see a multitude of bugs on the desert floor, as well as several geckos and crested porcupines scurrying around the bushes.

His eyes were drawn to a movement in the distance. It was a dust trail. As he watched, a motorcycle appeared out of the swirling brown sand. Ayub had his weapon protruding from the truck window, its snout tracking the approaching bike.

A lone man rode the scrambler. He stopped twenty feet away, killed the engine, and swung off his mount. A rugged, stubby-wheeled dirt bike. With his hands held high, he made his way over. *Guy knows the protocol,* Hasser thought.

“I am Soran,” the stranger announced as he approached them. He was a gruff mountain man in his mid-fifties who smelled unwashed. His tanned face was partly hidden by a low-seated turban, known as the *jamadani*. Eyes as black and soulless as the distant hills he had emerged from. A hefty mustache adorned his top lip.

Hasser felt a tinge of unease. The man sized him up, and his lips curled into a smile. More like a wolfish grin. He cut his eyes at Zaki, who stood nearby, pretending to scan his surroundings, though his main focus was the new arrival.

“Welcome, brother,” Saberi said. Soran embraced him. Hasser simply offered a hand. The informant greeted the other men in the trucks.

He said. “The Iranian entourage stopped here yesterday. For a snack break, I assume. Then they left.”

“Is the hostage with them? Hasser asked.

“Yes.”

“Where are they going?”

“To Iraq. Or the Hijaz. Anywhere with a lot of fanatics. What other choice do they have?”

“I guess you’re right,” Hasser allowed.

Zaki inquired. “How many men?”

“Eight, or ten, maybe," he replied. Hasser saw his mouth twitch a little as he answered. If Hasser had been paying more attention, he would have also noticed a strain in his voice.

“Any local support?”

“They were helped by a local smuggler in the village, but he would not offer them any manpower. I understand he would just help them travel across the desert.”

“Any signs of outside support?”

“No.”

Hasser was relieved. He had been expecting the Chinese to follow them here and try to finish the job.

Zaki asked. “So, what do you suggest?”

“Is it not obvious, friends?” he said, adjusting his turban. "If you want to confront the kidnappers, you must do so now. Once they are across the border in Saudi or Iraq, you might lose them for good.”

“How do we proceed?”

“We’ll take the road,” he said as if talking to an imbecile.

Zaki bristled. “It’s pretty simple, but what about the security checkpoints? Not every police or militia picket can be bribed if that’s your plan.”

“We’ll do what we can.”

“Is this a plan?” Zaki hollered.

Soran blinked before replying. “The government is rebuilding a portion of the road, but the builder is not keen on doing it. For at least half of our journey, we won't encounter many security posts. I suggest we take it.”

“Will it be safe enough?”

Soran cackled slyly. “Nothing is safe here, believe me.” His mustache flickered. Hasser thought it was amusing.

“Thank you for being candid,” he said.

“Let’s move. We need to go a long way,” the informant announced, squeezing Hasser’s arm, who eyed Zaki.

He looked unconvinced, rather a bit wary of the newcomer. Anyone here could be working for the opposition. A more careful approach would have been to verify his information first before proceeding. Trusting someone whom they had never met before could cost them a lot. Their mission, even their lives.

*But what else to do?* Hasser questioned himself. They had asked for him, not the other way round. They had to go with what he suggested.

“Okay. Let’s do it,” he finally said. Soran went with Zaki.

It was well past midday when their double-cabin Toyotas forded a stream and entered the warren of hills. For any wilderness junkie, it was a campsite idyll, but one with an ominous shadow; it was here that the climb began onto the Northern Palmyrene mountains. The track, mere packed dirt and sand, meandered through a series of weather-beaten cliffs and was crossed by shallow rivulets pouring off the rocks. A smattering of snow was visible on the ground.

They had stepped into a primeval and punishing place, Hasser saw. The Toyotas were sliding through mud, up rock slopes, and around boulders. A macabre, sun-burnt artwork of brown and gray tinted everything, from the hills to the sands to the very earth.

“People say giants roam here, banished to these lands by Solomon himself,” Ayub murmured, looking at him in the rear mirror.

“Really? I thought he didn’t operate in this part of the world,” he chuckled. “Jerusalem, yes. Yemen, maybe, you know, if we believe the stories in the Bible.”

Ayub made a face. “He went everywhere aboard his flying throne. Carried by the djinns and giants.”

Hasser nodded. Regardless of the folklore, it was eerie journey into the heart of Kurdish country. After departing the highway, they had traveled more than fifteen miles north over rough desert and around bare rockfaces.

KBar was driving the lead vehicle, a tail of dust in his wake, following the switchbacks up the mountains. It carried their sole heavyweight signals jammer to counter any buried IEDs and other similar threats. The involvement of Iranians had necessitated such gear.

“Heads up, people,” Zaki called. They were passing an old gray Jeep with tinted windows idling by the roadside.

“Copy that, Zak,” Hasser replied into his mic. Two men in baggy trousers and overcoats sat inside the Jeep, scarves covering their faces, assault rifles hanging off their shoulders. Another pair was out, peeing by the roadside. Zaki waved at them. It earned him glares.

“Bastards ain’t got no manners,” Hasser remarked.

Zaki said dismissively. “These locals don’t like strangers much.”

“It was about the guys pissing in the open, Zak,” he teased.

“Ah, your sensitivity to all things trivial, Mike. It’s never less than marvelous.”

Hasser relaxed a little, though he saw Ayub nod to Halfmast, who straightened up in the back seat. His rifle was already in his hands.

Further on, they encountered a couple of dusty sedans going both ways. Another Jeep too. All loaded up with men and children, with a few women in between. They lumbered by without stopping or showing much curiosity.

Hasser watched KBar swerve around a slow-moving, half-bed truck ahead. A stern old man riding in the bed barked something at them. Hasser rolled down his window and locked eyes with him.

The man with the snow-white beard stood motionless, peering in Hasser’s direction. His hooded eyes were like two obsidian orbs. His stare was intense. First for a second, then another thirty seconds, then longer. He barked again, louder and with more malice, making a slit throat gesture with his hand.

While Hasser remained cool, Ayub was not amused. He moved the wheel and gave the rickety truck a forceful nudge, knocking the codger against the bed rail. Ayub honked like crazy as the other driver struggled to keep his vehicle under control. Halfmast giggled.

“Let it go, man,” Hasser said boringly. Everyone was a prick here, he thought. His eyes scanned the surroundings, looking for any telltale signs of danger. The bleak, unforgiving terrain was as perfect a place for an ambush as anyone could desire.

He stuck one of the Glocks in his belt, under his parka jacket, and the other in his pants pocket. Trying to exit with stealth was the preferred option, but Hasser was not willing to part with the trustworthy M4. So, he slung it. Ayub had his rifle up, and a pistol stuck in his waistband beneath his untucked shirt.

The patch of road here was little more than shale covered with loose dirt. Every windstorm shifted the dirt and disguised the edges, making the driver’s job treacherous.

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The Jeep hobbled down the mountainside at a nearly vertical angle. Kai was driving. Above, the contrails left by the warplanes drifted across the blue sky in hazy circles.

Zeng had reached Al-Taibah the night before, a poor hamlet with squalid-looking houses. Ali Aqa had correctly predicted that the enemy would pursue them. They decided to engage the Americans. Both men had taken a beating at their hands. Now, they wanted to return the favor.

The cleric had died a miserable death, killed by the enemy in his own madrasa. Ali Aqa now demanded that they be taken care of at all costs.

His boot bounced up and down on the floor of the Jeep.

The imminent encounter with the Americans made Zeng nervous. He knew they had been lucky too many times. It had to change now. A tip-off by an informant who was helping the Americans had confirmed their arrival, after one of Aqa’s contacts had greased his palms. His scouts on the road had reported their current position. Based on the distance involved, their reported speed and his own progress, the Americans would make contact within a few minutes.

He rode in silence, his body pressed into the seat, as the vehicle sped up. The ride was bumpy, but they made good time, arriving at a ridge near the main road. He found a good place to conceal the vehicle, a small but deep saddle windward of the ridge.

With clear access to the road.

“In position,” Zeng contacted the Iranian major on the radio.

“Ready and standing by,” the man replied. Like his Chinese friends, he also eagerly waited for the Americans.

Zeng was parked next to an intersection. On one side, there was a collection of dingy mud houses. More drab buildings encroached on the main track, taken up by a makeshift tire shop and a roadside gas station selling illicit diesel. Some lollygagging youth sat outside an abandoned security post. Every few seconds they threw stones at an ancient tractor taking fuel at the gas station.

He had chosen his ambush site well, away from any of the usual bends around cliff edges where the room for engagement was limited and the likelihood of getting away meager if things went sideways. They sometimes did anyway, he knew. Besides, he wanted to throw off a professional team. Such players would always suspect the obvious spots.

A bright sun was strung in the sky, throwing long shadows off the rocks, the mountain air sullied by eddies of sand and whirling dust devils. Still, he could see for miles around. Aqa’s men had arrived early, posing as road workers. It looked like they were in position and ready.

“Inbounds!” Kai announced, pointing at the road.

Zeng squinted. The enemy was still away, but they were identifiable. The pair of Toyotas was racing in, adequately spaced, and making a beeline for the intersection.

Into the kill zone.

Zeng picked up his radio. “Here we go.”

Kai pumped the gas, the engine revving in an instant.

**Chapter 46**

They were trundling down a deep gulch. At the bottom of the ravine was a muddy riverbed, rutted deep by daily traffic. Suddenly, for no reason, Hasser felt uneasy. Something wasn’t quite right. Before his mouth opened to scream a warning, it happened.

A flash on the road.

Next to come was the massive explosion as the buried IED went off, cratering the road. The lead Toyota lifted off the ground as if slapped by a giant hand.

The thump of the pressure wave hit his chest, and the truck under him rattled. *Maybe the djinns really roamed here;* his mind screamed.

He felt numb as the Hilux in front slammed back down and braked hard, pebbles flying off its rear wheels. The jammer had prematurely detonated the IED.

Ayub swore loudly. The truck swerved left and stopped.

Still alive, Hasser reassured himself, breathing easier now. The enemy's use of a remotely detonated device had likely saved them from a horrific fate. A pressure-plate type IED would have been simpler to use and impossible to jam.

His Glock came out.

He scanned around. No threat spotted. It meant nothing. They could be standing in the middle of a well-laid kill zone, with the enemy hiding. Waiting for a follow-on attack. It was imminent, and they were the sitting ducks.

“Keep going! Don’t stop,” he screamed in his headset, telling KBar in the lead Hilux to move.

The trucks kicked up stones again as they accelerated away from the site of the blast. Hasser held his breath as Ayub barreled up the narrow, unpaved road cut into the mountainside. He was barely an arm's length away behind the lead Toyota. When they topped the rise, he noticed an intersection on the other side of a low, flat bowl.

Just then, he heard the roar of a vehicle engine come to life. An instant later, there was the squeal of tires. And a rifle blast.

Hasser turned just in time to see a black Jeep roaring across the intersection and picking up speed. To his horror, he saw another one, a pickup truck with two gunmen crouching in the box. It sped towards Zaki’s Hilux, kicking up a cloud of dust as it fishtailed around a tire shop.

Hasser watched for the exits.

None.

The bastards had every escape route covered.

At the same moment, he noticed armed men on foot, really close and threatening. Four guys, emerging from their hiding position inside an abandoned police building.

He lowered the window and twisted in his seat.

His pistol hand was in motion—swinging, adjusting, tracking. The first rounds were loosed immediately.

A target fell, hit in the chest. Then, another man buckled and hollered in pain as the nine mils riddled his center mass.

AK-47s opened up with a deafening roar.

Ayub spun the wheel hard at the intersection, causing the truck to skid on its tires. The bumper scraped against a building's side. A tea stall went airborne. The momentum of the turn sent Hasser smashing against the door.

He righted himself, took aim through the rear window, and fired. The sound of the rear window shattering startled Halfmast.

The screeching and whirling Hilux had the remaining pair baffled for a moment. Before they could react, his slugs ripped into their bodies at such close range that he could see the bewilderment in their dying eyes.

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The hills were alive with the loud popping of automatic fire. It was chaotic, and Zeng could barely make out the distinct signature of each weapon. Mostly QCW-05s and AK-47s. Pitted against a mix of M4s and pistols, by the sound of it.

The crafty old man had managed to bring the Americans into the trap. Zeng had not hoped for his trickery to work. Yet it apparently did. The CIA team should have acted smart. It appeared that frustration had forced such professionals to take risks that their training did not allow for.

A little spiral of curling smoke rose from the road where the blast had occurred. The fucking IED had missed. It would have been a simple enough ambush if not for the enemy jammer. As the lead truck streaked into view, he noticed the jammer's antenna. The Hilux was taking fire and running like mad; its driver not slowing down as he tore through the intersection.

“Wait,” he raised his hand. Kai decelerated. No point in going headfirst into the battle now as the IED had failed. The men in the pickup would go after any moving vehicle other than their own. He would stay at the intersection and provide on-scene fire support.

He unloaded his gun, and so did another man. Their own ride as well as the target vehicles were bouncing so much that he could not shoot effectively.

Nonetheless, some of his rounds hit the raging bull of a truck. Kai kept the Jeep facing away from the intersection, slowing down so that his boss and the other shooter could engage the fast-moving vehicles.

With its tires shredded by bullets, the Toyota fishtailed and impacted a mud wall. It turned turtle. Three guys scooted out of the truck and crouch-walked along the wall.

“Look!” Kai shouted.

Zeng shifted his aim, but they quickly slipped through a gap in the damaged wall and disappeared. Shit. They had now taken cover.

Gunfire was pouring into the intersection from three sides, even as a second truck appeared. It slalomed its way out of the death zone, with a guy inside expertly dispatching four of Javad's men before anyone had a clue what was happening. It accelerated away. Another pickup carrying more Iranian gunmen was on its tail.

He glanced back at the wall.

They had caught the Americans out in the open with nowhere to run or hide. They had to fight their way out of the sudden onslaught. They were returning fire, maneuvering and probing, trying to identify a soft spot where they could hit more forcefully and break through.

His men were not targeting them. They were too well trained for that. Their barrage was intended to keep the enemy hunkered down, preventing them from firing back.

Soon, he would see them surrounded and taken captive.

Or killed.

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Zaki had felt the truck slow down and wobble. The tires were giving way. There was a sickening boom. The vehicle seemed to roll over. His head struck hard against the roof, and he found himself hanging upside down, with screams in his headset and one heck a of gunfire outside.

Blackness swept over him.

When he came around, he hung there for a couple of seconds, unable to comprehend what had happened. He waited for instructions from someone. Anyone. Saberi had been in the rear seat with him. He had already opened his door and gotten out. KBar and Soran too. As the gunfire outside got louder, he fumbled for the release button of his seat harness, then fell awkwardly as the harness let go.

His carbine was nowhere.

He groped on the upturned roof among the cans of food, water bottles, and clothing items. Looking out a side window, he was blinded by the sun streaming in. All he could see were streaks of bullets crisscrossing the air. For the first time, Zaki realized that although he had survived the blast, he could still be in real trouble.

The cabin was oddly quiet. Everyone had exited in panic, without noticing he was still inside. *Look for the damned gun,* he thought, gritting his teeth.

His hand finally grabbed the M4 stuck between the front seats.

Another peek through the window made his heart race. Armed men were converging on the wall, and he could see one of his team members take a knee and fire his weapon. They were alive, and in the fight! He saw the informant on the run, getting away from the maelstrom.

*Everyone assuming I’m dead,* he thought. Even the enemy had not bothered to check on the disabled truck. They were shooting at the wall.

Maybe it was luck. Still, some trigger-happy son of a bitch could always shoot up the truck as an afterthought. Or, for fun’s sake. Metal and glass would never stop the bullets.

He pushed the door open and stepped out just as an enemy pickup hurtled past, tires roaring over the gravel. Heavily armed men rode in the bed. It slid into place behind Ayub’s truck.

Before he could raise his gun to target it, the sucker had opened up the distance, disappearing in a cloud of dust. Ayub appeared to have noticed the monster in his wake, initiating violent maneuvering of his own.

“Holy shit! Zak, is that you?” his radio crackled, Hasser yelling. He must have spotted him getting out.

“Hell, yeah. I’m gonna own their asses now,” he hissed.

Taking cover behind the upturned Hilux, he searched for the targets in a fifty-yard arc centered on the wall ahead. A hostile Jeep was visible. It was mobile, on the prowl, drawing closer. He had to act fast.

The fighters engaged with Saberi and KBar were facing away from him.

“Going hot,” he called out on the radio, telling his buddies to hunker down. Their positions were in his direct line of fire.

“No shit,” Hasser swore.

Zaki raised the M4, aimed, and squeezed the trigger. A stream of rounds set the air ablaze in front of his eyes. Tossing aside precision—taught and practiced by Hasser—he went for shock and awe. Like always.

It was all about swinging the rifle a little, holding the trigger against the backstop, and not letting go.

He burnt through the first clip in no time.

A pair of enemy fighters was stitched in the back. Both fell screaming to the ground. The surviving trio dove low, and one guy began to turn in his direction.

He worked furiously to reload.

Saberi was up and charging through the hole in the wall. Zaki saw muzzle flashes from KBar's gun. Covering fire, he realized.

*Don’t die, Saberi, you motherfucker;* the words came out of his mouth like gasps.

Saberi charged the gunman, pistols in both hands, a carbine dangling across his chest. It was a desperate race with a deadly finish. Kill or be killed.

Saberi held the triggers as he dashed like a maniac, firing round after round before the man was able to swing his way. A few slugs hit home, and the gunman fell. The blood on his face, soaking his beard, made Zaki retch.

His gun was reloaded. Shaking his head, he toggled the selector switch back to semi-auto.

Saberi was now out in the open, fully exposed. The remaining hostiles were lining up on him. The display of insane courage moved Zaki for a moment. The man had saved him. He must have felt awful after leaving Zaki inside the truck.

His gun came up. Shots flew off.

Missed.

But Saberi was safe. The enemy had jumped away to avoid Zaki’s fire. They bolted, retreating into the police building.

“Come, hurry up!” Saberi shouted. KBar had started to retreat, firing short bursts at the police post to keep the guys pinned down.

Zaki sprinted after Saberi, who was on the run. They went through the gap in the wall and weaved left, jumping over the pile of tires behind the tire shop. Nobody was in sight. Even the tractor driver had fled in panic. His machine sat idling, belching smoke.

Further back, he could see an open area. A couple hundred yards away. It looked like a construction yard, piled up with building material and machinery. Giant heaps of excavated earth littered the site. They had to reach there. His pace quickened.

And then Hell walked in.

The Jeep had thundered close, rolling to a stop not more than thirty yards away. Its doors flew open, and four men burst out, assault rifles in hands, joining the fray at once. Suddenly, a renewed storm of full-automatic gunfire raged throughout the area. Muzzle flashes flickered and winked from two directions. The pair inside the police post were also active, emboldened by the shooters in the Jeep.

They were firing long, uncontrolled volleys at the turtled truck and drilling holes through its body, thinking it still harbored someone.

Saberi made them realize their error. He stopped running and wheeled around. Before Zaki could ask what the hell he was up to, Saberi was firing his carbine at the Jeep. Zaki cursed as a dozen rounds whizzed past, missing but scaring the shit out of him. A few smacked into the wheezing tractor.

The Jeep whirled around and sped toward the yard. It smashed through the damaged wall, tires kicking up dust. The engine almost tearing itself apart.

Headed straight at them.

“Take cover, you nutcase,” Zaki blared in his mic, ducking and weaving as he ran. Saberi was scrambling now, his motion too awkward. He looked like an aged Daffy Duck doing a tap dance. A moment later, Zaki realized that he was injured. He wasn't sure if the guy would make it to the yard.

KBar was almost there. He immediately took up position behind a mound and began seeking out targets.

“Get the fuckers, KBar,” Zaki hollered, running. He kept low, moving behind a stack of coal tar drums.

The Kurd obliged, laying down suppressive fire at the gaping hole in the wall where the fighters from the police post were now pouring through. They scattered quickly.

Saberi hit the ground, sliding down a ten-yard stretch of loose gravel before coming to rest against a stripped-down motor grader. Several rounds pierced the air. The enemy fire sought him as he lay flat on the ground. Barely moving.

“Saberi, you okay?” he radioed.

“Yeah, in the pink,” he replied offhandedly.

“Where is that bastard, Soran? He screwed us.”

“I took care of him.”

Zaki flipped his M4’s safety to auto again and unleashed a full magazine at the charging Jeep. His rounds peppered its body. No effect. It kept coming. He lowered the barrel, the rifle jerking in his hands.

Hits, evidenced by a sudden popping noise.

The rounds blew out its tires as the Jeep wavered, slowed down imperceptibly, and crashed into a rubble hill.

He took a deep breath and slowly let it out. The rear passenger door of the Jeep opened. A man stepped out into the sunlight.

“Holy shit!” he hissed. “What’s he doing here?”

“Who’s it?” Hasser asked in his ear.

“Zeng.”

“Damn.”

**Chapter 47**

Zaki had to drop low as another man exited the Jeep and sent a burst his way. His mind was on fire, wondering how Zeng had managed to reach here.

From his vantage point, in a crouch and peering around the drums, the Chinese looked evil to him. They were dressed in tactical suits adorned with battle gear, their bulks accentuated by the ballistic vests underneath. Eyes flitting around, scanning the area in their path; weapons pointed ahead.

Tires screeched on the road.

Then, more gunfire roared.

Peeking around the drums, he saw a second Jeep appear. It tore straight through the gas station, then pulled to a stop next to Zeng. Men jumped out, their faces wrapped in scarves. Shit. It was the same guys they had passed on the road earlier.

He scanned over his rifle, turning left and right as he slowly got up and maneuvered behind the drums. He found Saberi crouched on one knee, shooting at the advancing hostiles, his profile partially obscured by the rubble mound. KBar was beside him, firing his own gun.

Squinting into the sun, Zaki picked a target. The shooter was moving carefully through the rubble. His rifle spat fire, sending a dazzling, burning stream of rounds streaking across the yard and into the fighter’s body. He fell.

In his peripheral vision, Zaki saw Saberi appear to his right. “We’re running low on ammo,” he whispered. His own gun was trained at the advancing hostiles.

“Yeah. Am down to my last clip,” Zaki shook his head. The situation looked bleak.

He exchanged a spent magazine for a fresh one. Continued his slow, cautious trot, moving around the cover spots he had selected. In short order, he shot a man in the chest and put a three-round burst into another’s head.

Crows circled overhead, their shrill cries filling the sky with dread. He navigated through the yard, leapfrogging from the drums to a rusting mixer to a dirt hill. Hiding, shooting, and scooting. Engaged in a battle that seemed to be slipping out of his hands. As were his friends, cornered yet putting up a ferocious fight. He didn't want to think about how long they would last, though the end was near, one way or another.

He could sense it.

The Chinese kept on advancing behind their relentless fire. They moved with tactical precision. Their own fire was slackening. He felt so helpless.

“Retrograding,” he heard Saberi scream. The man definitely knew his military slang. He leaped out from behind a motor grader that was taking too much fire and sprinted away.

Zaki covered his retreat as he sought an alternate position. The incoming fire was hellish now. A grenade arced through the air, landing within a couple feet of KBar. Zaki heard an explosion and a scream. His rifle snapped its last round.

He threw it away, inhaling a sharp breath.

Saberi was still shooting, his occasional rounds now supplemented by a string of curses he was hurling at the Chinese. KBar was silent, either killed or injured.

Then, multiple flash-bang grenades fell around Zaki, assaulting his senses with a barrage of light and noise. He rolled on the ground, writhing in pain. Saberi loosed his remaining rounds in panic.

Zaki spat a curse.

For several seconds he lay disoriented, waiting for the Chinese team to come and finish him. But nothing happened. Rather, he sensed a sudden decrease in the amount of fire the enemy was sending his way. They were out of his view.

*Are they disengaging? But why?* he wondered.

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Ayub drove the van around a bend in the road. They had blundered into a situation without knowing what or who they were facing. *Surviving by chance so far,* Hasser thought.

The enemy pickup was behind them.

A gunman in the bed sprayed them with another unrelenting barrage. Ayub dodged wildly. Hasser ducked low. Halfmast was already flat on the seat. The enemy fighter intended to walk his fire in their direction, but his bullets missed them and instead struck an oncoming car. Its windshield imploded. The sedan spun out of control.

Ayub uttered a loud prayer.

The pursuing truck swerved off-road to avoid the wallowing car. Amid a hail of bullets and the panicked screeching of tires, the sedan driver nursed his vehicle back onto the dirt-and-gravel road.

Masterful, Hasser appreciated silently. Must have graduated through the same driving course in insanity as everyone else around here.

Ayub raced on. The bad guys were relentless, matching the blistering pace their target had set.

The truck slammed into their Hilux from behind, throwing Ayub forward against the steering wheel. He hollered in pain. He shifted the gear, and the engine roared. The enemy accelerated to keep up as he pointed the Hilux into a long, sweeping turn.

Hasser felt his heart skip when he saw an outcropping looming ahead. Ayub stamped on the brakes and swung the wheel, desperately struggling to keep the tires glued to the gravel. The Hilux fishtailed viciously, but he countered the skid, and the truck brushed past the jutting rock. A loud scratch told him that their right fender had given way.

Hasser had unbuckled his seatbelt for moving freely in the seat to engage the gunmen. Now he was tossed around inside the cabin. His head smacked the broken windshield.

Ayub kept the gas pedal mashed to the floor despite the sudden jolt. Recovering, Hasser unloaded at the truck. He paused as the enemy truck’s engine block took direct hits and black smoke billowed from under its hood.

His next volley ripped into the men inside. The truck slowed, disgorging an armed man. The wounded enemy driver, summoning his last dredges of strength, floored it before Hasser could shoot at him.

The charging truck rammed the Hilux again, forcing it off the edge of the road on the opposite side. A plume of dust rose as it bucked uncontrollably and did a half-roll, slamming into the uneven bedrock in slow motion. The door snapped open, hurling him out of the Hilux before he could react.

The enemy truck spun to a halt, nobody coming out of it.

More hostiles emerged from a small building nearby. Halfmast exited the Hilux limping. Ayub jumped out too.

Hasser landed on a steep slope, his ass buffering the impact. Getting up, he dug his feet into the gravel. He tried to balance himself by leaning against the loose rocks. But the momentum from the fall threw him off balance, and he stumbled. Flailing, he recovered by digging his heels deeper into the grit. One step, then two steps. Slowly, he inched away from what looked like a knife edge.

Somehow, the carbine had slipped out of his hand. One pistol from his pocket too. He was now down to a single Glock, with no backup clips. He slowed to a stop. The burns from the abrasions began to set in.

“He is escaping. Stop him!” someone shouted.

Hasser cursed and started to run. He had heard that voice before. Outside the church in Iran.

Behind him, the Iranian major was scampering down the slope in a zigzag run. He was joined by another fighter. They kept a blistering pace, already halfway down to the slope's base. The rabbit chase had Hasser worried now. If he did not outrun them and vanish into the hills, he was a dead man.

The bastards were fucking fast.

He was desperately trying to keep his lead. His body struck a rhythm, with arms waving faster and legs pushing harder. He was running for his life. Fine gravel covered the goat trail. If he slipped, he would fly into the dreadful chasm and hit the rocks hundreds of feet below.

Bullets snapped by his head and smacked on the trail in front of him. Someone was shooting. Beautiful, he thought. He bounded side to side to spoil the shooter’s aim. More rounds ricocheted off the rocks around him, kicking up dust and spraying him with stone fragments.

Swearing aloud, he dropped to the ground. Rolled away from the line of fire, but crashed into a boulder. A lone gunman was visible to him. Javad’s man. *Where’s his boss?* Hasser wondered. After seeing him fall, the Iranian chose to close in and finish him off. His footfalls were hurried.

Hasser crouched behind the boulder, waiting, steadying his breath. Several long, tense seconds passed. Then, with the pistol out in front of him, he pivoted around the boulder, just in time to catch the guy mere yards away. He was looking straight at him, mouth agape in surprise.

Hasser squeezed on the trigger.

A round ripped through the open mouth, two whizzing by without connecting. The dead body slid down the trail in slow motion.

He stayed tight against the rock. Scanned back and forth. More shooters were emptying out of the pickup on the road. He had to get out of their reach. Deciding to follow the trail, he took off running again.

He was tired; his legs hurt from running on the uneven surface. He was proud of his fitness, but this mountain was a killer.

He heard an AK47 shooting, the rounds chasing him. He drifted–

A figure lunged at him, flying off the rock to his left.

He tried to move away, altering his stride in mid-step, but failed. The sudden attack sent him crashing to the ground. Falling, his heel slipped on the gravel, and he tumbled backward, landing flat on his back. His head smacked the ground with an audible crash. Stars blossomed in his vision. He blinked hard and rolled off the ground. His bruised back screamed in pain. The pistol dropped free.

Javad descended over him.

Hasser twisted, struggling to find his footing, swinging his left arm around. He caught the man with a backhand hammer fist across the jaw. The strike bought him time to steady himself.

Javad pivoted and lashed out with his leg, aiming for Hasser’s knee. He sidestepped the kick and punched him in the chest with an open palm strike, trying to drive his hand through the guy’s solar plexus.

Javad bobbed, his hand rubbing his bruised sternum. It appeared as though he was barely suppressing a scream. Lunging forward, Hasser struck again, this time going for his face. Javad saw it coming, and he pirouetted, taking the brunt of the blow on his neck. Hasser pressed his attack, throwing jabs with his right hand that Javad countered with his left.

Hasser spun briskly. Lifting a leg, he struck his opponent's shin with the heel of his boot. In the same fluid motion, he drove both elbows back, ramming them into his rib cage.

Javad gasped, staggering back.

Whirling around at waist level, Hasser thrust an uppercut into his groin, followed by vicious palm strikes to his solar plexus. The man wailed, his screams echoing off the hills. He stumbled, tripping over a stone, and fell on his side.

As Hasser glanced away at the approaching gunmen, the injured Iranian desperately tried to get hold of something to throw at his nemesis. His fingers touched a black metal shape. It was his own pistol, dropped earlier in the fight.

The gun went off.

Hasser rolled away. A round buzzed past his face. He cut away further, pivoting on his left foot and staying low.

The pistol hand moved. Tracking him. Shit. He threw his right leg out.

His leg spun in an arc, connecting with Javad’s firing hand. Another shot rang out. Missed. Hasser struck again with his leg, aiming for the man’s knee. The guy swayed, visibly hurt. Hasser sprang upward. His left hand darted out; he grabbed Javad's wrist and twisted it savagely, forcing the pistol out of his grip.

As the gun clattered to the ground, Javad howled with rage. Hasser was now unstoppable. His right hand whipped out in a chopping backhand motion. It crashed into Javad's exposed neck, snapping his larynx. He collapsed, gasping for air.

Hasser used his peripheral vision to pay attention to the hostiles converging on him. They were coming at a dead run. He heard a sharp crack above the howling wind. He dove, scanning the trail. Another crack split the air mere inches from his head. A small burst hit the nearby rocks.

He picked up his pistol and roared. “Time to go, asshole!” He fired a single round into the Iranian’s forehead. The lifeless body slumped to the ground.

Hasser turned into the evolving threat. He had no meaningful cover other than a dead hostile lying at his feet. He dropped to the ground, shielding himself behind the dead body.

The enemy fighters were furious, unafraid of the man who had already felled too many of them. They knew they had the upper hand. Once they were about fifty feet away, they resorted to heavy fire.

Hasser remained cool, sheltered by the body. He calculated. His eyes and gun hand in perfect sync. Counted the seconds as the attackers came shrieking, closer and closer until—

Boom!

The shot was not perfect, but it had the desired effect, punching one guy through its chest and bursting out the other side. The projectile, its speed slowed and trajectory altered by the bones and flesh, mushed up the internal tissues. The guy dropped to his side, unable to breathe, as the two others leaped past him, running side by side into his arc of fire. Their dark silhouettes cut left, then right, just as they had seen their quarry do earlier.

He blinked and watched them kick up sand as they advanced another twenty feet. The men behind them intensified their cover fire.

His pistol spat its last round and clicked empty. He raised his hands in defeat.

More shots impacted nearby, followed by a flurry of running footsteps and pissed-up voices.

Weariness was eating into his bones.

Just then, Ralph materialized by his side. He patted his shoulder and took a knee. His M4 was spewing rounds at the Iranians. His men positioned themselves around him. Their concentrated fire pinned down the enemy.

Hasser was relieved. The SEALs had arrived.

# **Chapter 48**

**Syrian Desert**

“What you propose is dangerous for us,” the old man croaked, fixing Ali Aqa with unblinking, kohl-laden eyes. His baggy dress was stained, and he smelled awful, like a billy goat. They were sitting in a patchwork wool tent. Ali and his men had stumbled upon the Bedouins outside a rundown, impoverished village.

He did not try to argue with the devious nomad. He was right, of course. Talking business here would make more sense. “Ganem, I suggest you name the price for your cooperation and let my men deal with the danger.”

Ganem offered him mint tea. “Drink while we talk.” He puffed on a hookah and tightened a leather collar around the neck of his dog, a big Saluki, its short fawn coat glistening.

The nomads like Ganem and his tribe were a rare sight these days. Ali had often witnessed their convoys winding through the twisting mountain roads, heading for the towns where they were largely unwelcome. When not on the move, they mostly stayed in the dusty countryside or inhabited the desert caves.

Ali did not say a word as he sipped the tea. Then, a moment later, he nodded quickly. “I’m listening.”

“Five hundred thousand dollars in cash,” the Bedouin blurted out.

“You must be out of your mind,” he spat.

The man shrugged unapologetically. “It’s a modest sum and not at all negotiable, my friend. The price could be much higher. We’re dealing with an important man here. The Americans would be eager to talk to him. And the hostage, of course." The old bastard, despite his nomadic lifestyle, remained connected to the world around him. He was too well-informed.

“Are you going to inform the infidels if I don’t pay what you demand?” Ali growled. The messiah had fled Damascus after the horrendous aerial attacks against the UIE leaders. The ever-increasing American bombing had now forced him to leave Syria altogether and travel to the Hijaz, the spiritual home of Islam, where he would be adequately protected. Ali had planned to move him by road.

“No, but I wouldn’t offer you the help you need,” he replied smugly. Putting an arm around his waist, he took Ali outside, where the nomads were breaking camp. A dust squall had come and gone.

Ali looked around. “I don’t see many armed men. You hardly seem to be in a position to help me anyway."

“There’s always safety in numbers,” the man pointed at the crowd. His men were loading the camels with bales of grain and animal fodder. One group was busy with dismantling the tents, another rounding up the flock of sheep and goats. A feral guy beat the ponies with a stick. The poor animals were baying under the weight of goatskin sacks. Their women, dressed in dazzling red, purple, and green, scurried around getting hold of the kids.

Ali stared at the sky with unease. He had welcomed the adverse weather during his quick run across the flat desert. For hours, the wind had strung an impenetrable sheet of dust across the vast, bleak landscape, enabling him to dodge the American drones and satellites. If the muck had persisted for another couple of hours, he would have certainly moved out. *God willing,* he thought grimly. Losing Javad had been another terrible setback, but he had to adjust.

To move further onward under the ever-present threat of crusaders who could now watch him and mount an attack, he had decided to travel with the nomads. The convoy of over a hundred men, women, and kids, along with twice as many animals, had been wandering in the desert.

Any attacking force would have to cut through the large convoy before deciding to engage them, unless they did not care for the collateral damage and went ahead with the killing. In that unfortunate scenario, he would certainly die, along with the messiah and the hostage. Ali was willing to do anything to avert this fate, even if it included bribing the crafty Bedouin. Even if he wanted a king’s ransom.

“You get what you ask for, Ganem,” he smiled, pulling out thick wads of currency from his travel bag.

Ganem grabbed the money. “Allah be with us,” he uttered gleefully. "These days, we have to pay the villagers to graze our sheep. Nothing is free.”

His men were staring daggers at the old geezer, Ali saw. The deal looked like a daylight robbery. They were used to having their way around most people. But Ali had no other way. To survive the remaining trek to the Saudi border and beyond, they had to lose themselves among the caravan folks.

By spending more money, he had also arranged additional fighting men from a warlord sympathetic to the cause. His troops would be joining them soon once they got under way. The money did not bother him.

Zeng and his surviving operators were available for the mission. They were willing to support him. Another band of holy warriors was coming from a madrasa near Deir ez-Zur. Though not fully trained, they would be dependable in difficult situations, especially if he had to employ them as cannon fodder.

He told his men to keep watch. Some of them were riding a truck they'd brought along. Ali concealed the hostage amidst the bustling caravan, while he deployed three Iranians at a distance. They were acting as his scouts. He had ensured they kept their weapons under their long coats and their faces covered.

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Kate was made to come out of the tent. A nomad woman wrapped her in a colorful shawl from head to toe. As she stepped out into the glaring sun, her eyes dazzled. The air was abuzz with sheep's shrill bleating.

One of Ali’s men had brought a camel. Helped by a nomad, he made it kneel. “What’s happening here?” she groaned. Her voice was tired.

The man glared at her but did not reply.

The last few days had been pretty hard. After leaving Damascus, they kept her in a barn near Palmyra. She was beaten up, then transported on bare horseback across the desert to a shabby one-room cell in a village. Eventually, her captors arrived here. The tyranny of a long, tedious journey, compounded by dysentery and poor food, wore her out.

“Time for a camel ride, I guess,” she muttered to herself, her voice whisper-like.

A nomad prodded her to mount the camel. She hesitated, unsure how to move. Another camel uttered a deep, rumbling growl. Startled, she jumped away. A gang of nomad women cackled. One young girl laughed so hard that she dropped the bundle of grass from her head.

“I can’t ride the camel,” she announced.

An old herdsman screamed at someone. They prepared another camel outfitted with large panniers. The nomads made her climb into an odd-looking basket hanging on one side.

“Shit, it’s worse than riding on the camel’s back,” she moaned as the animal wobbled, standing on its long legs.

Looking around, she saw Ali and the headman conferring. Some nomads, helped by their sturdy dogs, were herding the livestock. A radio was playing some music. She believed she heard a sad poem, sung by Bedouin women for their secret lovers. It was nice to hear something about love and hometowns for a change.

Intrigued by the captive, the nomad women had drawn closer. They wore long, bright shirts with intricate embroidery. They were gawking at her. A shy-looking girl stood still, humming to a baby at her breast. One wild-eyed teenager came holding a waterskin. She was pretty, with blue-green tattoos on her forehead and cheeks, bangles adorning her arms, and her hands dyed with henna.

Kate drank a few gulps of the rancid water to keep herself hydrated. The girl offered her mint candies before moving away.

“Mint is good for motion sickness,” the guard laughed, speaking in broken English.

Kate hoped she would not need it, though the camel ride was beginning to feel like another ordeal. For a moment, her eyes lingered on the distant desert tracks, wondering whether she would be free again.

**Near Mayadin, Syria**

“You got anything on the hostage-takers?” Hasser inquired, eyeing the imagery on display. He held a ruggedized tablet in his hand. They were conducting a conference call. Zaki was hovering nearby. The CIA men and their helpers were inside an abandoned oil refinery that was once owned by Daesh. After rescuing them, the SEALs brought them here. Unfortunately, they had lost KBar in the ambush.

Chad nodded, his face filling the tablet's display. “We’re onto something.”

“Really?”

“You’d rather better believe it,” Chad said, pointing at a screen behind him. “A horde of our manned and unmanned intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets have been scouring the country. Our human assets are thin on the ground, particularly in the desert, but we’re trying. It’s been a tedious process, but we’ve dug them up. I suppose now is the time to launch again.”

Hasser raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

Chad selected an image on the screen. It was a high-resolution satellite map. “We’ve identified a gypsy caravan in the southern wilderness.” As they watched, he manipulated the mouse to zoom in. A vast desert landscape appeared, stretching from the dark green vegetation along the snaking Euphrates River in the east to the black volcanic fields of Harrat al-Sham westward.

“Bandit country,” Ralph commented sourly.

“Yeah, mostly them, but others too, like the Daesh remnants, though they prefer to stay away from each other,” Chad acknowledged before continuing. “This particular caravan of nomads, like many others, has left the frigid highlands in search of temporary settlements in the south. They have been on the move for many days, mainly along the right bank of the river. Mostly herders and small traders. They roam the country in search of grazing lands for their livestock.”

Hasser listened quietly as Chad zoomed out and selected another portion of the map. "A big sandstorm engulfed this area a few hours earlier. We couldn't see anything due to the muck, except that several pickup trucks had made a high-speed dash through the desert and rendezvoused with the nomads. Interestingly, we’re now seeing two smaller caravans in the vicinity, plus a collection of pickups in the village here.” He highlighted the place with a finger.

“Any communications intercepts?”

“We’re monitoring all mobile and radio traffic coming out of the area. No unusual stuff.”

“Smugglers, maybe,” Zaki guessed, scratching his beard.

“A possibility, yes. I’ve run it by my analysts at Langley who agree.”

“But you don’t think so?” Bill asked.

Chad nodded. “The vehicles came from the general direction of Damascus. It’s a known smuggling route. Mostly drugs and weapons. But the vehicular movement in the middle of a storm isn’t normal, especially if you consider that we’re searching the same area for Kate and her abductors.”

“Do you see where the nomads are headed?” Zaki inquired with a sudden alarm.

“What?” Chad was perplexed.

“The caravan has drifted south. Toward the Iraqi border!”

“Hot damn. The bastards trying to smuggle her into Iraq?” Hasser wondered aloud.

“No. They would have preferred an easterly route if they’d wanted to go to Iraq.”

“Saudi, then?”

“More likely.”

“Where are the pickups now?” Bill asked, his eyes roaming over the screen.

“Near the river,” Chad marked a point on the map. "Our drones are back on station now that the weather has improved. We’re tracking their movement. My guess is these trucks are shadowing the caravan.”

Ralph pressed his lips together and nodded. “All right. It looks like a reconnaissance screen. We’re dealing with pros here.”

“Any estimate of the opposition?” Zaki questioned Bill.

“No idea, but it wouldn’t be much. A dozen armed men, max,” Bill said, though he did not appear comfortable with his wild guess.

Ralph tapped his fingers on the table. “We need to hit them.”

Chad’s voice had an edge to it, as he said. “I need to talk it over with Langley for approval.”

“Do it then,” Hasser said. A strained silence ensued. He saw Chad fidget for a while, then light up another ciggy. He picked up a phone. Standing up, Hasser turned to Ralph. “How ready are you guys?”

He replied. “My team has been on standby since midday. We've taken care of the logistics, and the men are all fired up."

“Sounds good.”

Ralph asked hesitatingly. “Where do you guys fit in? I mean, we could easily pull it off.”

“Oh yeah, really?” Hasser snorted. "We've been after these baddies since the start. Zak and I know them better than anyone else. Even confronted them already.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“What’s your point then?”

“Ours is a dedicated military team, trained for a job like this. You spooks excel in other areas." Everybody understood that the primary job of Agency officers was to collect intelligence, not to indulge in military-style operations. Even their lethal drone missions involved a lot of oversight.

“Don’t you think the line between spy and soldier is blurred now? Well, we’ve been in an endless circle of violence for the last few days. We can take care of ourselves.”

For a moment there was no response from Ralph, then he said with a shrug. “Ok. Let’s do it.”

**Chapter 49**

**Over the Syrian Desert**

It was an eerie scene. Seated in the cargo compartment of the helicopter, Hasser peered through a port window. The landscape below appeared to stretch away into an unknown netherworld, stark and shadowy under the moonlight.

He had a pretty close-up view of the desert that made up the country’s vast, haunting emptiness. His eyes were able to see every detail of the parched, defeated land—rows upon rows of sand dunes interspersed with patches of low, withered bush.

The big CH-53 transport helicopter was flying over the desert at night, another Chinook on its right flank. The helicopters had come off a Navy ship in the Mediterranean Sea. They had landed near the refinery to pick up the CIA team and their helpers.

The behemoths sliced through the air at such low level that they were almost hugging the terrain. Only the night vision goggles made this daredevil task possible. His headset was plugged into the intercom, enabling him to listen to the crew’s chatter.

Zaki and the three Kurdish gunmen sat across from him. Bringing the trio aboard an American military aircraft had required Hasser to speak directly with the station chief. Seated in the rear were Ralph, his deputy, and another pair of SEALs. Four dune buggies were chained to the floor. The second helicopter carried other squad members.

Langley had grudgingly okayed the mission. They would have preferred thorough planning and preparation, but it was a fluid situation. The life of an Agency colleague was at stake.

“Landing Zone clear. Get ready,” the pilot announced.

“Roger,” Hasser acknowledged, raising his open palms and spreading his fingers. Everyone started a last-minute check of their personal gear. His assault kit was superb tonight, complete with a new SOFMOD M4 carbine plus its accessories, two Glocks, grenades, protective vests, and night optics.

Instead of going for a straight takedown with a fast, low insertion and landing in the middle of a surprised crowd, they were going ahead with a slightly twisted plan. A high-value target and a kidnapped Agency officer in a moving convoy necessitated something stealthy.

Hasser had consulted with the SEAL team leader. The first helicopter would drop its occupants and the dune buggies a few miles away from the caravan. They would silently move into the immediate vicinity of their target.

The raid team needed to be close enough to get an ID. Once they positively identified Kate, they would summon the second helicopter and launch an attack to liberate her and eliminate the opposition. It all depended on how well their initial surprise held up. Even an armed drone was overhead in case everything went tits up.

He felt the helo cut its speed and descend. Then, with a thump, it touched down. The ramp opened. The men got up. Two soldiers leaped from the helicopter, setting a defensive position outside. He saw Ralph supervise everything. The second Sea Stallion remained airborne, with its door gunner keeping an armed watch over the troops on the ground.

Hasser came out on the double, his night vision goggles lowered in place. He tried to steer clear of the dust cloud kicked up by the rotors. Strange green-tinted outlines of his teammates were visible as they climbed into the dune buggies. Each buggy was sporting a machine gun. Both Zaki and Hasser jumped in with a lone soldier who was carrying a sniper rifle. Ayub and his pals were aboard another vehicle.

“Move! Move!” Ralph shouted. He was riding in the lead buggy.

As the helo lifted back into the air, the quartet of dune buggies headed into the deep, black night.

The nomad convoy was a little more than five miles away.

They sped through the desert toward their objective. Ralph did a quick radio check with everyone. The soldiers readied their weapons. Hasser checked his watch. It was eleven o’clock.

The rough track they were following weaved back and forth around a low knoll. He gripped the handlebars as the four-wheeler bumped along. The buggies topped a rise before cutting through a shallow wadi.

They passed by a settlement. A dozen mud and stone buildings, an open-air barn, and yelping dogs. As they slowed down to ford a shallow stream, he sensed movement. His gun moved. Shit. A young man and his goat frolicked in the water. Not a threat.

The trail now snaked through a rocky plateau under the dark sky, navigable only by Ralph’s GPS. To avoid spooking the enemy, the Reaper kept its distance from their outer picket of trucks lingering near the convoy.

Hasser was scanning the area with his night vision goggles. “Here’s a good spot,” he pointed. “Let’s go there.” He could hear the SEAL sigh as he slowed and turned off the trail. The ground was just packed sand, rising abruptly to a cluster of bleak dunes. Hasser had him drive another fifty yards off the track, until the surface was too rough even for a dune buggy.

“Here’s your perch,” he patted the soldier. “Go.”

The man took his M2010 sniper rifle and dismounted. Zaki slipped into the driving seat.

The SEAL positioned himself. The sand dunes around him, sculpted oddly by the wind, provided him with some concealment.

“Let’s start the show,” Hasser announced on the radio.

The four dune buggies began to speed up.

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The nomads were keeping a good pace. Zeng watched their point men, half-hidden in the cloud of sand kicked up by their animals. They were following the almost invisible trail with ease, though loose rock and sand made it difficult to find footing in the dark.

He squatted on the ground, staying close to the camel carrying the hostage. The fighters escorting the woman were wide awake, ready for any trouble. The track seemed deserted, yet he could not shake off his unease. He looked over his shoulder, back up at the rocks. If anyone was standing there, they were lost in the inky darkness. He squinted, looking for lines and shapes that seemed out of place. Nothing. And no movement.

The low dunes on one side blocked any view of the convoy’s position from anywhere on the ground. Nothing could be done about the satellites or the drones, though. Still, the old headman had banned any fires in the caravan, and the nomads had grumbled but obeyed.

He had sent out scouts ahead. The desert route was desolate. No sizable village existed anywhere along its entire length. It was well south of the main road. Only a handful of locals dared leave the road and face the dangerous and unpredictable obstacle course of roving bandits and violent sandstorms. Here in the extreme south, even the nomads did not stray away from their route. It was the boonies, even for the Syrian Desert.

He took a nightscope and studied his environment. There was nothing visible, but the scene could still be deceptive. The desert presented its own set of challenges, and he lacked the necessary equipment to effectively operate here. His scope was based on image intensifying tubes, an antique technology compared to the latest generation thermal imagers his adversaries employed. Despite his efforts, he had not been able to arrange that stuff in time.

Kai had taken up a watch position in one of the trucks a short distance away. The reinforcements, ten battle-hardened former Daesh soldiers, had also arrived. Another posse was due shortly. Ali had grown tight with the headman. Some armed nomads were working closely with his fighters, prepared to ward off any attack against the caravan.

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Hasser initiated a moving ambush against the nomad caravan. His pre-contact observation had placed Kate somewhere in the center of the convoy. Now he eyeballed his objective.

A camel, flanked by armed men on horses.

Ali had unwittingly given him a clue. It must be Kate on the camel. He relayed the sighting, emphasizing fire discipline to avoid hurting her. Next, he ordered a dune buggy to peel off. It drifted toward the outlying truck-based picket. They closed on the nomads as soon as the diversion began.

Hasser lofted smoke canisters in the air. While his team was doing fine with the night vision on, the smoke would hinder the enemy. It was hard to fight what you could not see properly.

He scanned ahead.

The sharp report of gunfire announced the first contact with the enemy. Ralph’s guys were on the go.

A group of armed men turned in their direction. They had been lurking among the ponies laden with tent poles. Some guys proceeded to confront the other two buggies. It unnerved him.

The militants had reacted too well. They were professionally maneuvering against a military assault force. The expected chaos was not there. The enemy did not seem surprised at all. They knew the soldiers were coming.

Hasser gripped the side-mounted machine gun with both hands and sighted down the long barrel as the first group of hostiles charged at his advancing buggy. As he fired, the buggy easily absorbed the mounted gun's recoil. Spent brass casings fell to the ground.

He hosed a couple of men down with his repeated bursts, the bullets ripping through them. The others were running, seeking cover. In the dark, the long snout of his M 240 glowed hot.

His ammunition belt was already running low but he did not have time for attaching a backup belt. Running out of ammo was less of a problem than pumping rounds. Zaki weaved frantically. Hasser swept the machine gun in a narrow arc. The attackers kept coming. His finger jerked the trigger. At the same time, the enemy opened up, their AK-47s belching fire.

A series of loud thunderclaps echoed off the desert floor. An enemy took a long burst in his gut. His entrails exploded, and the gore flew off in a shower.

The buggy shimmied, bounced, and bucked across the desert. Hasser had to remind himself that he was riding with a madman behind the wheel. Scrubland flashed by as the machine gun pounded out a precise staccato.

The second militant dodged his initial rounds by rolling away. Hasser adjusted. His subsequent shots hit home, punching a line of wet holes across his target’s chest.

At the edge of his vision, the convoy appeared to be in a sudden pandemonium.

The hostiles jumped away to avoid the charging buggy. As they scattered, Hasser heard them screaming at each other.

Next to him in the driver's seat, Zaki was also shouting and gesturing. He hurled nonstop abuse at the enemy in Arabic. Despite his irritation, Hasser could not hide a smile. “You crazy bastard!”

Zaki howled, waving a fist in his face. “Screw them all, Mike. Their virgins are waiting.” He floored the buggy.

Surging into a wall of hostiles, Hasser kept the trigger mashed, moving the machine gun in a push broom pattern. Another target fell. His suppressive fire sent the enemy fighters scrambling for cover.

Still, incoming fire pinged against the buggy. Another volley struck the ground, sending stone pieces into the air. A shard hit his face.

He popped more smoke.

He was now sure that the opposition either did not have any night-vision gear or whatever they used was crap, otherwise they’d already be shooting to kill the attacking Americans. He wondered how long it took before a stray bullet found its mark.

Ralph and his team were charging ahead. In moments, they had overwhelmed the outer layer of Ali’s people. Now they were driving over the fallen hostiles, moving closer to the caravan. The air was thick with smoke from the gunfire and flares. He shook his head, desperately fighting the urge to rub his nose.

The nomads were in a bind. More motivated by a desire to make a fast buck than by a willingness to die, they had taken up arms as a show of solidarity to their chieftain. None of them had the vaguest idea what the mysterious Iranian was up to.

The first sign of the terror they unexpectedly encountered was the dead bodies of their clansmen falling around them like ninepins. It hadn't really sunk in until that moment that despite being capable fighters in tribal feuds, they stood no chance against a dedicated assault team appearing out of thin air. But as the desert had taught them, anyone could run.

And run they did.

It did not discourage the opposition much. As Hasser watched, a new line of fighters appeared. They were squatting on the ground. Further back, another guy lifted his head. He was barely visible, crouched behind a boulder. They fired intermittently into the smoke cloud. Around him, Hasser could hear the short, well-aimed gunfire from his team. Each American popped off single bursts at his chosen target, then announced his kill and paused to look for more hostiles.

In his sector, a hitherto invisible enemy fired a long burst. His muzzle flash was blindingly intense, but the shots went wild into the air. His friends also joined in. As Zaki did a zigzag evasion, more bullets impacted the buggy.

A blow smacked Hasser in the chest. He stumbled, his hands coming off the machine gun. It felt like he had been hit with a battering ram. Swearing, he steadied his grip and fired again. The vest had saved him. Despite the protection, a high-power rifle round was still a bitch. Their smoke screen was becoming less effective due to their proximity to the enemy.

“You okay?” Zaki asked.

“Yeah.”

Zaki saw angry pinpricks of light flying across their front sector. Then he heard a sound like hail impacting on the right side of his buggy. He yelled, “Contact right!” and floored the accelerator.

But even as the buggy sped up, gunfire erupted from a sand dune engulfed in darkness. He snapped the wheel to the left and reduced pedal pressure to balance the vehicle in its violent maneuver. Hasser felt the buggy skid out of control on the gritty streambed. Someone had sneaked up on them from another nearby gully.

Hasser got a call from Ralph, who announced. “Reaper is on station. Coming in hot against the enemy trucks.”

“Tell him not to engage the convoy,” he replied. An armed drone and its gum-chewing operators would not hesitate to blast anyone to kingdom come if they spotted gunfire directed against the friendlies on the ground.

The buggy sent out earlier as bait was serving its purpose. As expected, the hostiles did not ignore it. Two trucks accelerated to chase it. He heard the whine of an aircraft engine. It was the Reaper, diving from a dark sky. A pair of fiery trails erupted.

“Incoming! Reaper launching,” Ralph called on the radio.

The Hellfire missiles swished overhead, seeking an invisible laser spot lingering over the first truck. The weapons exploded in succession. The truck blew up. Before the drone could line up on the second truck, it broke contact and headed for the caravan. The drone crew, fearful of collateral damage, held back another missile strike.

**Chapter 50**

Zeng and two of his best operators moved swiftly along the edge of their defensive zone, heading toward the sound of gunfire. Their rifles were carried in low-ready. The attackers seemed to have an upper hand. The nomads were in disarray, and he was unable to see past the milling bodies. As they progressed through the ruckus and neared the firefight, his stomach churned.

His eyes lingered over the dead bodies. The Syrians sprawled awkwardly on the ground, their empty eyes staring skyward. He had met them for the first time just hours ago, when they joined the fight against their common enemy. *Why is fate so cruel?*

The gunfire grew to a crescendo. A blur of motion appeared in the corner of his eye, followed by a distinct shape.

A sand buggy was barging in.

His eyes widened. He had never faced such things before, but he knew the American commandos used them for quick hit-and-run style operations. Such puny sandrails with little protection were impractical in his opinion.

He pointed at the target with his hand. Let’s hunt them. His men needed no further instructions. The trio moved to confront the vehicle with the controlled quickness of a well-trained shooting team. With one guy trailing, Zeng and his other operative went back-to-back, scanning the dunes, searching for the threats.

The soldier in the buggy fired his way. He ducked. The vehicle was swaying as it drove at high speed. In fact, it bounced so much that the man behind the gun struggled to aim properly.

Zeng cut loose a triplet of rounds. His men also fired, taking care to pump out aimed bursts at the target.

The vehicle disappeared in a sudden haze of dirt and sparks.

He continued firing as the vehicle seemed to slow down. There were some hits. They worked their way through the dust swirl, trampling over thorny bushes. Firing on the move, crouching and weaving.

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A double line of ugly red rounds appeared in his view. Hasser screamed. “Contact! Taking fire."

Zaki executed another evasive turn, throwing the buggy around in a classic last-ditch maneuver. Hasser was slammed forward, then sideways. The buggy spun, as if caught up in a whirlpool.

The enemy fire arced left, missing them. Zaki abruptly cut the wheel to the left, causing the buggy to fishtail. Too late, he tried to right it. It struck a rock, then bounced, tires rumbling and kicking up sand, engine groaning helplessly.

He heard himself cursing Zaki. As the tires lost traction over the sand, the buggy slammed into a bush and rolled over. The horizon spun before his eyes, then vanished.

God damn it, he swore. He was lying on the sand, thrown out of the buggy. It hurt like hell. Zaki, half buried under the buggy, appeared unharmed.

Getting up, he tried to move away from a pair of hostiles who were close. Too close. Zaki opened his mouth to shout a warning. Hasser twisted his body, the M4 flinging across his chest. His hand moved, twitching slightly, and his shots flew wayward. Although the bullets missed, they rattled the enemy.

Hasser pulled the trigger again. More rounds flew out of the barrel and tore into one of the men.

He moved against the other shooter, coming around the upturned buggy. The gun barked twice in his hand as he placed the rounds squarely in the opponent's center mass. He sidestepped to the corner of the vehicle, searching for more targets. At first, nothing. All he saw was a gray-green void, staring at him in bewilderment.

A figure abruptly rose, and multiple shots pierced the darkness. Rounds peppering the metal where he hid. Splinters scratched the side of his face. He felt a terrible sting. As he fired back, the enemy vanished. He heard only the thwack of bullets on sand.

He crawled back, then circled the buggy and reached its other side. His skin felt prickly despite the cold, and he was breathing hard.

A second barrage of bullets arrived, smacking into the upturned buggy. The tiny assault vehicle really pissed someone. He saw chunks of metal fly off as round after round landed. The buggy jerked under the onslaught of rifle fire.

“Tallyho! Wait for my shot,” the sniper announced in his ear. He had been sweeping the area with his scope, looking for targets.

“Take him out,” Hasser radioed back.

The SEAL grunted in acknowledgment. His rifle’s collapsible tripod was resting on the sand. He looked through the optic, and placed the aiming reticle on a single human figure, three hundred yards away. With a final correction, he pulled the trigger. A high velocity .300 round punched through the air and hit the man below his left ear. The flash of mist, as the blood droplets flew off into the air, filled his view. Then the body fell.

It was a clean shot.

His long-range hit was picked up by the opposition. A shower of bullets came his way. Then, something else. Realizing the immediate threat a sniper posed, a nomad horseman decided to handle it.

The SEAL watched the horse charge at his position. The rider had a rifle in his hand, waving it like a spear. The sniper was in no mood to kill the poor animal, and the attacker was difficult to track. It was too imprecise. A shot meant for the rider could just as easily kill the horse. Smart bullets were not in existence yet.

He eased the pressure on the trigger. The enemy had already started shooting. His rounds were raining down on his position. He waited for a few more seconds, letting the enemy close the distance and betting his life on his unsteady aim. Eventually, he decided to fire, though a headshot was still not possible.

The gun kicked into his shoulder. The noise was deafening. His round's hot brass bounced off the sand.

A miss. The guy survived; he was now no more than fifty yards away. Another shot fired. The SEAL saw his target jerk back before falling off his mount. The horse was still moving fast, coming straight at him. At the last moment, it galloped away when a round hit the sand not more than a foot from its forelegs.

Hasser breathed in a mouthful of cold air. His head swiveled like it was on rollers. His night vision goggles were missing after the earlier ruckus.

The radio was going apeshit; everyone was talking about their shots, more enemy fighters were pouring into the battle than expected, and some teammates reported their injuries.

More rifle fire came from deeper within the caravan. A soldier riding in one of the buggies took a round and slumped over his machine gun. Another guy twisted out of the vehicle, rifle in hand. A sledgehammer-like force knocked him backward, and he fell to the ground.

The remaining two SEALs jumped out on opposite sides of the buggy. Crouching, they opened up with their weapons. A man screamed. Nobody knew if he was hit or just panicked. Huddled next to a dead pony, some women sought refuge from the shooting.

Hasser lifted himself up. He checked on Zaki who had somehow survived the gunfire. He unbuckled his seat belt and dragged him out. The buggy was too damaged to be of any further use.

He heard Ralph calling for the other Chinook. The lieutenant wanted his remaining squad to deploy immediately. His men were facing much tougher resistance than they had anticipated.

Hasser helped Zaki up a small rise where they lay flat and scanned the area with their rifle scopes.

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From his vantage point on a sloping dune, Ali Aqa watched the attack progress. Soon, the Americans would come from another direction. It would most likely be airborne reinforcement, though another attempt with those stupid-looking dune buggies was also possible.

His men were now readying their heavier stuff after recovering from the initial chaos of combat. He was also grateful to Zeng, whose experience had helped Aqa and his men not buckle under the assault.

He groaned, realizing that the enemy attack had not slackened despite a heroic resistance put up by his side. The cowardly nomads had disappointed him, running away like frightened sheep early in the battle. Their embarrassing lack of fighting skills notwithstanding, at least some of them had proved useful.

With a little help from the headman, he had kept them sticking around. They provided a valuable human shield. The American drone hadn't dropped bombs on his men. No other airborne threat had materialized either after the drone had neutralized one of his trucks. It was still up there, keeping a watchful eye on the battle, but it had not launched another weapon. The nomads and their animals shielded his remaining trucks from any air attack. Luckily, the messiah had remained untouched by the gunfire.

His fight was not going well at all, though. It bothered him. Nothing seemed to work against the assaulters. If they managed to reach the camel carrying the hostage, he would fail miserably.

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The helo came fast and low, its huge rotors kicking up a brown dust storm. Zeng tensed, his ears pricking in anticipation of another helicopter, but it was just one. The whine of its mammoth turboshaft engines grew louder. He estimated the bird to be a couple hundred yards away.

Nearing the landing zone, it dipped even lower. Gunfire echoed off into the howling wind under the helicopter, and Zeng noticed tracer streams angling up toward its massive frame. The ever-vigilant door gunner returned fire, his rounds pummeling the ground like fire and brimstone unleashed by an angry god.

He helplessly watched the flashing projectiles slam against the desert floor, a squall of tracers mixed with invisible, deadly metal. He didn't want to imagine what it was like to be on the receiving end of such massive firepower.

As if on cue, footfalls echoed hollowly in the distance. Zeng craned his neck. One of his lieutenants appeared.

“American helicopter is here. Kai wants to shoot at it.”

Zeng was furious. Kai was an idiot. *What is he waiting for?* "Tell him to engage right now. Hurry up!” His voice boomed, commanding him to leave. The helicopter made him feel vulnerable because it was impossible to figure out how many of them were inbound. If the Americans brought in a battalion of soldiers and dropped them in the middle of the caravan, he would be screwed.

Kai, a man who considered himself one of Zeng’s finest operators, a man smarter and wiser than anyone else, drove his guys into the thick of battle. It was a night of sacrifice.

Kai was ready. As were his two associates.

Each man held a rocket-propelled-grenade launcher. They had deliberately kept the RPGs hidden under the tarps to avoid detection by the snooping drone. The young man delivered the message from the leader. He nodded and handed him the pouch of spare rounds.

He trained his weapon, taking care to aim at the big fuselage. A hit against the rotors would be deadlier, but it demanded a better close-up range. If the pilots spotted him, they would be spooked. Moreover, he did not want to offer himself up to the gunner. With his one hand resting on the trigger grip, he steadied the launcher with his other hand.

The helicopter was dropping slowly. He did a last moment correction and pulled the RPG’s trigger.

The round blazed through the air, accelerating as its motor kicked in. It covered the distance in a flash and struck the helo broadside. The explosion ripped a big hole in its skin.

He watched the door gunner lurch as the chopper was buffeted by the sudden hit. The crew struggled to control their machine. A fire raged along its side. It corkscrewed and hit the ground.

*“Wasai!”* he shouted, his eyes twinkling. Wow. His men rushed to the wreckage to finish off any survivors.

Inside the downed chopper, the copilot unbuckled himself from his seat. Wincing, he checked on the pilot. He was lifeless. The man turned to his flight engineer, whose moans were barely audible. Before he could offer him any help, the shattered window glass came under automatic fire. He froze.

Running footsteps appeared outside. Through a hole in the crumpled forward fuselage, he saw an armed fighter. Two more guys darted out of the shadows, rifles drawn.

His hand went to his holstered pistol. As he brought up the weapon, the enemy saw him. His shot rang out first, hitting one of the men in the leg. A grim-faced Chinese man whirled around and opened up with his rifle. His companion lobbed something inside. The wounded flier squeezed off another round before the grenade flashed white and blasted apart the damaged cockpit. Along with the men trapped inside. They threw more grenades into the cargo hold to eliminate the troopers.

With a satisfying grin, Zeng looked away from Kai’s handy work as the chopper began to burn like a giant blazing torch. He saw not a single soldier come out of the inferno alive.

Sprinting to an alternate firing position nestled among a cluster of boulders, he trained his gun at the Americans he had spotted earlier, waiting for them to get up and turn his way.

Kai and his men continued with their RPG fire. He watched a round fizz toward a dune buggy. It blew up. Another pair of rockets was launched against the sniper to dislodge him.

**Chapter 51**

When he saw the helicopter go up in flames, Hasser sprang to his feet. He was through the gaps in the boulders and sprinting down the slope, reloading his weapon. Zaki followed.

A foot crunched somewhere to his right. He spun around. That's when he saw a frenzied man coming at him, holding a rifle at chest level. Hasser was faster—a lot faster. He pulled the trigger, but the guy dove behind a boulder. The burst flew wild into the air. He fired again and managed to scratch a few rocks.

The brief encounter had sent adrenaline spiking through his body. He crouched, calming himself, and eyed his surroundings. With practiced ease, he swapped the magazine and began moving again.

They had not moved another twenty yards when gunfire erupted, stitching a line in the sand. Hasser shoved Zaki to the ground before landing himself on all fours. He brought his carbine to bear on the muzzle flashes twinkling in his vision. Zaki was also looking, and he was the one who spotted them first.

A couple of guys huddled together on the ground. Shooting at them.

Zaki brought the M4 up, tucking the buttstock into his shoulder. With a grunt he got off the first rounds. Hasser fell back. They were trying to get clean shots by supporting each other and conserving ammunition. One man fired while the other observed.

The hostiles shot a few rounds at them before retreating into the caravan. The two Americans were close on their heels. The crashed helicopter had sent another ripple of panic through the nomads. Seeing the Americans approach, the throng of running men and women parted, revealing a guy with an AK-47 who was scanning the area for possible attackers.

Hasser wasted no time in tagging him as a hostile and dropped him with a precise shot to the head. Screams filled his ears. He flew off, bursting into the crowd. It was dangerous. There could be more enemy fighters coming his way, but he had no choice. The only thing he could do was to press the attack. Moving through the commotion, he glanced around.

Nothing at first. Then he saw two more men running toward him, their guns raised and fingers on the triggers. The closest guy was momentarily stunned. He was not expecting anyone to emerge from the stampede, and his eyes bulged in surprise.

“Evening, pals,” he hissed.

His rifle spurted a round. It caught his first target in his pelvis. He whirled, losing his balance. Realizing he had rushed the shot, Hasser gripped the gun for a more accurate aim and fired again. The guy went limp. His M4 shifted slightly. A couple of rounds tore into the other man.

The camel was in sight. A group of militants surrounded the camel, shooting at Ralph's troops.

Before Hasser could think of how to deal with that layer of hardcore warriors, the enemy threw more monkeys at them. The headman sent a few of his loyal armed men to aid his Iranian benefactor in a last-stand battle.

Peering into the darkness Hasser sensed the terrifying rush of air above his head as multiple rounds whizzed by. Shit. He went to the ground.

Playing hardball here would be better, he decided. He pulled the pin on a fragmentation grenade. With a jerk of his finger, he let the spoon fly and tossed the metal ball at the enemy. As the grenade exploded in their midst, Hasser trained his M4 and raked the kill zone.

They could not hear the footfalls on the sand amidst the fading echoes of their gunfire. Two men emerged from the shadows as if they just got off a magic carpet. Zaki whirled around.

“It’s us,” a voice boomed. Ayub was standing behind them, his teeth flashing. Saberi lurked by his side.

Zaki was not amused. Lowering his rifle, he growled. “You must have wanted a new asshole by sneaking up on me like this.”

“Before that happened, my shot would have blown your dick off,” Saberi laughed.

Hasser whispered. “Were you guys lost?”

“We got separated from the team after our buggy was hit. Two soldiers died. We killed a militant each,” Ayub explained.

“Where’s Halfmast?”

“He’s with Ralph and his guys.”

“How many soldiers did we lose?”

“Too many.”

It meant that the squad was gone. They started moving again. Hasser’s mouth was dry. Beads of cold sweat glistened on his face and rolled down his neck. Everything was going south. Zeng and Ali apparently had turned the tide. The unexpected loss of the Chinook with all the remaining squad members had pretty much ruined the night for the assaulters.

The radio chatter was now anything but professional. Ralph was bitter. His surviving soldiers were asking him for a drone strike on the nomads to avenge the murder of their fellow soldiers aboard the downed helicopter. He had a call to make: stay in the fight and take his chances with an emboldened enemy, or bomb the hell out of everyone in the caravan.

Hasser was halfway across the narrow track through the windswept dunes when his earpiece burst into life. It was Ralph. “Got eyes on you guys. Clear the immediate area around the hostiles. Exit to the north and proceed to pick-up point.”

“Negative,” he hollered back.

“Reaper inbound for the attack. Get away while you can,” the man was hysterical.

“Stop it! That’s a fucking order.”

“No way, Mike. I launched with sixteen guys. Twelve are KIA, one wounded,” his voice cracked. “We can’t survive here on our own. Exfil to the north now.”

“Do what I tell you, Ralph. Stop that drone. You’re not here to kill her.”

No reply, just static noise hissed in his ear.

“Clear! Clear!” Hasser nearly screamed at them. He started running at once, in a direction away from the caravan.

“What?” Zaki asked perplexedly. Ayub and Saberi looked at each other.

Hasser waved at the desert and spoke again, his voice low but his tone strident. “Just haul ass now. Get away from this circus. Air attack any moment!”

Zaki scrambled into a panicked run. The other two guys needed no further encouragement. They simply nodded their heads, every bit as shocked as Zaki, and took off.

“What the hell is going on?” Zaki called after him, huffing badly.

He snatched Zaki’s wrist and bolted down the slope. They made it to two hundred yards from the caravan on a dead run when he heard the Reaper. The muffled engine noise did not sound like it was a low-level run; it would have been louder. The operators had preferred a high deck. It meant bad news. The drone would be raining down something far more potent than the Hellfires.

A chill shot through him.

Seconds later, a tea kettle-like screech sounded as the bombs sliced through the air. Followed by the massive ear-splitting explosions. The Reaper had released a pair of five-hundred pound, GBU-38 bombs. The weapons were enormous and used GPS-aided navigation, allowing the drone to avoid flying a low-altitude, close-range pass usually needed for laser-guided weapons, like a Hellfire.

The roars felt like two volcanoes erupting in unison, the concussive force of explosions spreading outward in all directions. A bursting hail of shrapnel mixed with fine sand chased them as Hasser and the others sprinted, racing down the sand dunes for cover.

His whole body was gripped by fear as Hasser felt the buildup of adrenaline rush, the slowing of time, the heightened senses. A pressing desire to live urged him on. He dove over a rock. His ankle twisted, and he hit the ground. A sharp, prickly bush dug into his thigh when he landed, but he barely felt it.

The pressure wave from the detonation was strong enough to knock him to the ground, slamming his head into the sand. He felt a heat sensation on his exposed skin. It immediately grew to searing pain. His eyes jammed shut against the intensifying glare. The ground itself rippled under the blow.

He struggled to get up but failed, clawing at the air to steady himself. His hands involuntarily clamped over the pain in his ears. A strong jolt wrenched his stomach and chest, and he retched. Sniffling, he rolled painfully over onto his back.

Someone loomed over him. “You alright? Saberi asked, his voice whisper-like. He touched his body, probing for any injuries. Hasser nodded and stared blankly at him. Taking a deep breath of air filled with the smell of burnt explosive brought another wave of nausea. He willed himself to ignore it.

He saw Ayub helping Zaki to his feet. He looked rattled, but was fine otherwise. “I realize I’m getting too old for this shit,” Zaki quipped. Saberi passed around a canteen for everyone to drink some water.

Hasser tried to raise Ralph on the radio but received no answer. He got hold of his rifle. “Our desert trip isn’t over yet. Let’s go back to the nomads where our hostage is.”

“If she isn’t torn to bloody ribbons already,” Zaki sighed.

“Air Force guys weren’t fools. Most likely they carried out a disruption strike, not a lethal one.” Hasser extended an arm and pointed at the clouds of dust. “Look, where the bombs landed. Never in my life have I seen such a piss poor hit by the drone boys. It was a deliberate miss. To stun the enemy and give us a chance.” Hasser had pleaded with Ralph to refrain from taking any action that might endanger Kate. The drone pilots had obliged.

“You could be right. Let’s hurry up then,” Zaki said.

In a situation like this, Hasser would have called Chad on his satellite phone to ask for immediate help while he chased the enemy. But he had no means to contact anyone. His sat phone was gone with the dune buggy, and he was unable to raise Ralph on the radio.

They made a beeline for the caravan. Hasser could only imagine what was waiting for them out there in the dark. It no longer mattered. He was committed to fight it to the end.

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Ali came to, dazed and glassy-eyed. A side of his face was sore and swollen. He winced, recalling how the blasts had flung him mercilessly against the lunar-like surface of the desert before total blankness overtook him.

He blinked his eyes. *Am I still alive?*

The messiah shook him violently. “Crusaders are not gone. They could still kill us all. Get up.”

Ali nodded and cleared his ringing ears. He wasted no time in getting into action. The exploding bombs had sent the nomads scrambling in every direction. Some evacuated with whatever horses and ponies they could find, splintering into smaller convoys—not more than ten families in any group. Each small caravan was now fleeing its own way. The leftover animals were going berserk—thrashing around and kicking, and biting and crashing into each other. Goat bells jingled. A shepherd dog was caterwauling rabidly in the background.

It seemed some of his men had panicked. After dragging the hostage off the camel, they took hold of her and raced off into the wilderness. He was not sure if it had been a diversion to confuse the enemy and save the messiah. In that case, they should have consulted him first. His remaining men, just four now standing on their feet, readied their trucks.

The headman was nowhere in sight. He most likely had escaped with his three wives. A drone hit would have served him right. The greedy bastard had charged Aqa a large sum, but his nomads had bolted with their tails between their legs when the attack came. Ali wished he could snap his neck as a final payment for his service.

He could not determine where the Chinese were. Zeng and his men had fought extremely well, he reminded himself again. In fact, it was their tactics that had saved him. The messiah was also unharmed. It could have been a lot worse.

They hurriedly got into the pickups. His driver gunned the engine and roared out of the mayhem. Lights were doused. He ensured they stuck with a small group of nomads. He ordered the other truck to drive away in a different direction. Once clear of the area, they would rejoin.

As they escaped, he heard another American helicopter in the air. If he had to guess, their help had arrived. If it was an armed helicopter, he would be in serious trouble. On the other hand, a troop transporter would not bother him much. He was on his way out of the battle area. The enemy would be more interested in dealing with their casualties.

The drone circling overhead was another matter. It could watch his entourage at will for hours but would not shoot to kill as long as he had the hostage in his captivity or if he managed to stay within spitting distance of a nomad family. Ali had already noticed its reluctance, as their operators had just dealt a glancing blow to the caravan.

A moving shadow appearing around a dune made him jump out of his seat. On a second glance, it turned out to be a dark-painted motorcycle with lights off.

“Halt!” he barked, watching the bike. It made its way slowly, like a desert fox on the prowl. He saw two black-turbaned riders, Ak-47s hanging by their sides.

His men hailed them. The bike came to a halt, and a bearded man appeared in his windshield. A brief talk followed. Ali felt a sense of relief when he realized the man was one of the student warriors from a nearby seminary. His reinforcements had arrived. They informed him that a band of them was nearby, eagerly waiting to ambush the Americans.

He directed the motorcycle troops to proceed to the attack site and fight the infidels. With any luck, they would keep his enemies engaged while he got away.

**Chapter 52**

Hasser jumped onto a horse. He had watched a pair of trucks leave early on. The trucks continued to blaze along the trail. Zaki and the others mounted their own rides.

The stallion under him was as wild as they came, and it galloped faster than the wind. As soon as he lashed it and loosened the reins, the buckskin tossed its head, storming into the night. The very air blowing over the desert quavered with the sound of its pounding hooves.

The trucks jumped over a rise, giving him a glimpse of their receding tail lights.

Hasser and his small party were lucky as the pickups slowed to a crawl, then stopped. They covered another hundred yards before the enemy began moving again.

The night had turned colder by now. He saw smoke curl up near the boulders; the hot vapor leaving a motorcycle exhaust pipe. The bike itself was out of view behind the rock. Hasser reined the horse in.

A waiting ambush, he guessed.

He raised his rifle. Before the enemy could come out of his cover, Hasser took his shot, aiming for the motorcycle’s tailpipe. The noise startled the man, who had been waiting for his own kill. With his gun barrel poking out, he stepped forward.

Hasser drilled a gaping hole in the face behind the gun with a single round. The corpse fell back, dropping to the ground with a thud. To his left, another figure emerged. A crazy howl escaped the man's mouth. His shots were sudden and unexpected, hitting Saberi’s horse.

Both Zaki and Ayub loosed long bursts with their rifles. The enemy fighter jerked wildly, pinned against a boulder.

The wounded horse neighed in pain and bucked, dumping Saberi to the ground. It died groaning. Saberi now had to share a ride with Ayub.

They galloped again. The tail lights were faint in the distance. "He's drifting east," Zaki shouted over his horse's whinnying just yards away.

“What do you mean?” Hasser screamed back.

“The enemy’s original destination was Saudi. Now, Ali has either changed his mind or he’s just trying to shake us off. He knows we wouldn’t expect him making a run for Iraq.”

“Never mind. We’ll get him.”

Hasser left the trail and cut across the desert. For another few minutes, the enemy drove on, never leaving the side of their nomads. Hasser was unable to see a drone in the sky. Their slow progress helped the horses stay on their tails. If he wanted to guess, their current route would take them across the vast desert that stretched all the way to the Euphrates River. At least Hasser and his party were no longer facing RPGs. The enemy had apparently shot up all their bangers.

When they reached a dry stream bed near a small dust-caked village, the nomads were already clearly visible. Hasser and his pals had gained on them.

Then he noticed a buggy in his wake. Ralph and his men.

For some reason, the hostiles were suddenly spooked. They had probably sensed their presence. The trucks sped up, leaving the nomads behind; stealth was replaced by speed.

*Bastards are slipping away,* he cursed under his breath. Taking one look at the pickups, Hasser raced his mount. Their horses were tired, but he had no choice. The three charging steeds never strayed off course, as if following their enemy's scent. They flew over clumps of bush, weaved through a rock field, and cut around tricky bends in the dunes.

The trucks loomed ahead. Riding into the clouds of dust with his rifle in hand, Hasser noticed the gunfire.

The air around him crackled with high-velocity rounds.

He manipulated the reins. The horse lurched left, then right. It was fidgety now, sensing the danger. Sweeping up the rifle, he returned fire as best he could, kneeling and sawing the reins to hold onto the terrified animal.

He barely kept his balance and fired at the truck. His shots clipped the tailgate, the rear windshield splintering. A man yelped inside. Hasser pumped out more rounds. His men joined too.

To his surprise, the truck cut sharply to the right over a salt flat before vanishing between two wind-eroded ridges. The driver had either lost control or made a deliberate move to split the opposition. The tiny gulch offered some overhead cover. He followed the pickup, not knowing whether his party had made the turn. The other truck, perhaps unaware of the situation, did not slow down.

“Coming right behind you,” Zaki radioed in.

Hasser pulled out a grenade. He lunged forward to throw it, trying to keep his ass in the saddle and hang on as the horse swerved around the ridge. He heard the rounds crashing around him once again. The horse bucked hard. The bullet-ridden animal sagged to the desert floor, throwing Hasser out of the saddle. His hand let go of the grenade.

He slammed into the ground.

A hellish gunfire boomed in the gully ahead, rattling off the ridge walls. Seeing him fall, the truck braked. Two guys emerged, their weapons emitting fire.

“Stay down!” he heard. As Zaki began laying down suppressive fire, Hasser rolled away to find cover behind a rock outcropping. He was flat on his chest. Taking his time, he inserted a fresh magazine. The pickup was not moving. He emptied his full clip at the truck, reloaded and set the selector switch back to semi-auto.

Someone opened up. Bullets smacked into the sand, and angry bits of stone and dust flew off in all directions.

Peering at the scene once more, Hasser spotted one of the dismounted fighters. He was crouching, careful to move without making any noise. A sneaky asshole. He watched as the enemy brought his rifle up to his shoulder. Without missing a beat, Hasser snapped off two quick rounds. The guy uttered a feeble scream and dropped dead.

His buddy fired, eliciting a response from Zaki, who discharged multiple rounds in return. It looked like a stalemate. Hasser crawled behind another rock. The enemy moved closer. Hasser saw his dark form silhouetted against the truck's blurred tail lights. His steps were slow, deliberate. Looking for a quarry he thought he had surely cornered.

Hasser whistled softly.

The man spun around, his eyes wide and fierce. As he stepped back, he found a gun pointed at his chest. Hasser pulled the trigger, blasting him onto his back.

These men had been Iranian. He had no idea where Zeng and his gang were.

As Zaki discharged repeated bursts of covering fire across the gully, Hasser swung around the edge of the rocks. He crept along, staying low to present a smaller target to the enemy, then made a run for the truck.

He fired short bursts at the driver’s window, shattering its windows. It was impossible to tell how many enemy targets were there or how many they had hit, but the hostiles would not be able to fire back while his team kept them pinned down.

The driver poked his gun through the broken glass and fired blindly. A round stung Hasser’s forearm. He clinched his teeth.

Ralph came running after him. Holding back a grimace of pain, Hasser continued, pumping more rounds into the side door and reloading again. He was able to see the driver's profile. His head lolled against the broken window.

Then he saw a woman. Slumped over in the back seat. Gagged and trussed up. She tried to roll away, pushed herself onto an elbow, and levered herself up.

It was Kate. Her hand was over her mouth, fear etched on her face. She appeared sullen, utterly defeated.

He bent down and jerked the door open.

In his desperation to rescue Kate, he had not been very careful. His mind almost ruled out other threats.

The attack came without warning. Later, Hasser would blame himself for his lack of situational awareness. He should have picked up the faint rustling as the head poked out of the bush for a final target view, as well as a tiny noise made by the rifle bolt a second before the Chinese man squirted off his rounds.

With all of his training and his recent experience, he should have seen the attack coming. But he had been too fatigued, and his body was not performing at its best. Others were in even worse condition.

The enemy fire hit Saberi first, knocking him to the ground. More guns opened up around them, mercilessly killing the two remaining horses.

They were all lying flat on the desert floor. Hasser did not dare move. Without turning his head, he scanned around, trying to see a moving shadow. Nothing. Just pinpricks of fire.

The enemy was behind cover and positioned well. Their own fire was blind. Whenever they shot, it only highlighted their position, making it easier for the opposition to engage them. However, they could not escape if they kept quiet and did not shoot.

The situation looked bleak.

He dragged Kate toward the buggy. Halfmast stood there, shooting at the bad guys. Upon spotting them, the driver helped Hasser load her into the vehicle while Halfmast provided covering fire. But he did not last long. A moment later, he took a round and went limp.

Hasser swore. “Shit.” Another good friend was gone.

“Come on. Let’s move,” Ralph whispered.

“No. You and Kate are getting out. She’s in a terrible condition. Let’s make our stand here.”

“Mike, no. Don’t do this to me. We’ll all go.”

“Leave now.”

“Oh…please, don’t. We—" Ralph wanted to protest.

But Hasser shook his head. He focused on the threat, while others stared at him in the dark, their faces taut with emotion. Then Ralph mounted the buggy and left.

The ensuing firefight was short-lived.

The four surviving men took up whatever positions they could manage and began to exchange fire with the enemy. Saberi was wounded but he was able to use his gun. Before their current confrontation, they had already run low on ammunition. The enemy's firepower soon overwhelmed them. Hasser hoped Ralph and Kate were safely away.

“Don’t attempt to run,” someone hollered. He shut his eyes and tried to think of nothing.

Seconds later, he heard the crunch of a step. And then a shadow appeared. Hasser held his breath, a sense of unease gripping him. The shadow was so close that he could tell it was an Asian man. Looking sideways, he glimpsed at the silhouettes of more men, as if a dark cloud was hovering nearby.

He watched as the enemy fighters spread out carefully and encircled them. They were too many. The way they moved told him all he needed to know: the attackers were armed well, and they looked ready for trouble.

Big hitters. They were a solid kill team and clearly knew all the moves. Hasser was in no position to do anything.

“Stay on the ground and do not move,” another warning came as. He seethed helplessly as the fighters approached, their guns pointing outward.

They maintained their stoic vigil around him, hands clutching rifles, automatic pistols holstered on their waists. A mix of Chinese and Iranians. They were well-built, rough-looking, and ready to unleash lethal force. Their eyes were fixed on him with thinly veiled contempt. He heard a grunt behind him and turned his neck, expecting to see the man who would pull the trigger.

A vicious slap across his cheekbone rattled him, triggering a wave of pain in his head. He felt a tooth dislodge from its socket. A form floated before his eyes; men laughed at him, rifles poking into his body.

A hand clamped against his mouth, forcing his head to the ground as he felt the cold, curved edge of a blade pressed under his jaw. The pulse in his neck throbbed against the blade, which was tight enough to slash his skin at any second.

“So we meet again,” someone hissed in his face, a rancid breath invading his nostrils. It was Zeng.

Hasser stared up at the sky, the wan moonlight drawing a sinister halo around Zeng’s face as he leaned over him. The Chinese bent down lower, his broad face and snubbed nose coming into focus. Distant, empty eyes crinkling in wry amusement. His gun was pointed upside down, like a bludgeon.

Hasser blinked, bracing for another blow, but the pistol only hovered in his face.

“You’re finished,” Zeng said, a thin sneer on his lips.

Hasser shrugged painfully. “It ain’t over till it’s over.”

The Chinese smirked. “Ha-ha, quoting old Kravitz, eh. I like it.”

“You’re wrong, Zeng,” he said with a grunt. "In fact, it was Yogi Berra. A big basketball big daddy who uttered these words. A true legend, believe me.”

“I didn’t know that,” Zeng said with a burp.

His gaze faltered on the Chinese man. He could clearly see the feral glint in his eyes before he shifted his gaze to the side, where the remaining hostiles were congregating. An alpha and his pack hounding their prey.

Hasser replied. “It’s a small world.” They faced each other like cowboys about to duel, though he was in no position to even lift a finger.

“Make yourself comfortable. You’re among friends,” Zeng jeered. His men bent over the American and whooped. They all wanted to teach this American bastard a lesson in humiliation.

Hasser blinked repeatedly. The smell of unwashed bodies choked him as he squinted into the wild faces. Looking away was not an option. They were all over him. Their yelling crescendoed to a fit of rage as a boot crashed into his gut. A scream escaped his mouth. Something poked him in the back. He shifted slightly and felt it with his fingers. It was a five-inch-long piece of metal. He snaffled it in his welt pocket.

Without warning, Zeng came up to him again and kicked him hard in the ass. The thick boot packed a wallop. Hasser screamed, rolling onto his side. Zeng punched his face. The pain now overwhelmed him. A rivulet of blood erupted, dripping onto his neck and chest. Then, Zeng lifted his pistol and shot Saberi in the face.

“Bastard,” Hasser croaked, spitting blood onto the sand.

Someone laughed.

The two Chinese men exchanged stares. The jackass to Zeng’s right moved his arm. His backhand hit Hasser square in the face.

He smiled despite going through a spell of agony. “You’re a pussy! I can take anything you throw at me.”

The man fumed, his eyes bulging in anger. His boss called him Kai—a grotesque and violent gorilla of a man. Hasser endured a merciless beating for the next few minutes. He shouted so much that his throat was raw and burning.

His incessant screaming had little effect, though. Another brute hit someone next to him, and he heard the yelling. It was Zaki, he realized. Then came Ayub’s voice. They were both going through the torture cycle. Zeng spat on their writhing bodies.

Then, three guys straddled Hasser at once. He struggled under them, but the Chinese kept him pinned down. Kai slipped a pair of zip ties over his wrists and tied him up expertly, looking as if he had spent years working with ropes and knots. He finished by giving him a punch. Zaki and Ayub were also fastened.

**Chapter 53**

**Mediterranean Sea**

Chad stepped out of the secure facility for a smoke break. He massaged his temple, as if it would make the throbbing headache go away. He had done it so often in the past few hours that he was certain he had developed a tic. Ralph followed him into an adjacent room.

The assault against the nomad caravan had been a disaster. Ralph had returned with Kate after recovering whatever remained of his team. The second helicopter had picked him up, along with the wounded and the dead. After tending to his wounded men in the sick bay, he arrived in the secure facility to provide Chad with a detailed account of the fiasco.

Chad had been awake the whole night, monitoring the mission. Kate was now undergoing medical treatment for her dysentery and the bullet wound she had sustained early in Slovenia. The ineffective treatment she received from her captors had made her wound septic.

Kate had brought some important pieces of information: the messiah was traveling in the Syrian desert, the Iranians and the Chinese were protecting him, and Hasser and his guys were untraceable.

“Where’re they?” he asked aloud.

Ralph had no answer. “Can’t say. Last spoke to him when he ordered us to boogie on outta there.”

“Who asked for the bombing?”

“I did.”

“For hell’s sake, why? Wasn’t all that shit going on there enough for you?”

“My troops were massacred in front of my eyes,” Ralph said vehemently, his face darkened with grief. “I was outraged. I wanted to wipe every nomad in that fucking convoy.”

“Well, you almost did it. Were it not for the drone operators, we would have been labeled war criminals by now.”

“It was a shitty op, right from the start,” the sailor bristled.

Chad turned to face him. “I agree. Was the messiah ever spotted during the operation?”

“No. We just kinda tagged a heavily guarded camel. Hasser thought Kate could be there, but we had no idea about the messiah.”

“So?”

“We executed, and then everything went downhill. It was a mess,” he said, shaking his head.

“It’s snowballed, actually,” Chad corrected him. “The Syrians are rattled. Their forces have reached the area. Journalists questioned some of the surviving nomads. Everyone says that the Americans attacked. They identified the downed helicopter and those damn awful-looking sand buggies. Pictures are circulating on the social media and internet.”

“Ho-ly shit,” Ralph said.

“Director called. He hauled me over the coals nonstop.”

“Are we looking for our guys?”

“Of course we are,” he snarled. “What do you think? Do I look like a jihadist boss sending men on suicide missions?”

Ralph replied. “I didn’t mean it that way.” Anger made his voice raspy, and his eyes glistened with moisture.

“Our assets are scouring the whole southern region,” Chad said mildly. “Once the bombs fell, several smaller groups of nomads scattered off in many directions. The drone observed the nomads, unsure of what to hit next. Then, a small madrasa force appeared on motorcycles. It was a total clusterfuck.”

“Did we track anyone?”

“Yes. Many groups ventured deep into the desert, and we sent additional drones after them. Some were intercepted. Nothing materialized. Then, hours later, we saw something. Several trucks, way south from here, peeling off from the nomads.”

Ralph was open-mouthed, Chad saw. Then, his lips tightened and his jaw clenched. “Where’re our guys now? Their current status?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did we send another team?” He forced himself to exhale slowly as he spoke.

“Yes, we did. It was a brief incursion. I sent Bill and his boys on a helo but their mission was a bust. They didn’t see anything. The trucks had vanished.”

Ralph could not comprehend anything. “What does this all mean?”

“They either killed our guys or took them captive. And the messiah is in the wind,” Chad analyzed grimly.

“Any good news?”

“Our drone guys hit a vehicle convoy in the desert. Took out a couple of high-speed trucks. One or two vehicles got away clean.”

“Got it,” Chad nodded. “We’ll meet again shortly.”

With that their discussion ended. Ralph left.

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Sick, tired, and damn angry, Kate Armigo finally finished signing up the sheaf of papers at the nurse’s station. She was getting herself discharged against medical advice. Her treating doctor had almost wanted to restrain her to the bed before letting her go.

Still wearing her hospital gown, she walked out of the sick bay and into the bright lights adorning a hallway. The glare forced her to step back a little. Time to hail someone, she thought. An ensign stopped when he saw her. The guy was kind enough to walk her to the secluded area. She thanked him, grateful to be out of the sick bay.

“Damn. Kate! Why in Allah’s name are you here?” Chad dropped his cigarette when he saw her in her hospital garb.

“Because I’m alive,” she answered, twisting her lips at him as she took a seat.

Chad sat back. Crossing his arms, he hissed. “Not at all amusing, Kate. Now do I need myself to go deposit your ass back at the infirmary?”

“Come on, it's a sick bay."

"Whatever it is, you need to be back there."

"No, I feel okay, and I’m not here asking for a field assignment. Just let me hang around so that I stay in touch with my team.”

“What makes you think it’s a good idea? You almost got yourself killed. Get some proper treatment, for God’s sake.”

She just stared at him.

He growled. “All right.”

“What’s going on?” she asked, relaxing.

With a sigh, Chad filled her in on the details. He concluded. “Mike has failed to make further contact. It worries me.”

She mulled over it for a moment, then asked. “We doing anything about it?”

“Our efforts are ongoing.”

A sailor offered them coffee. Chad waved him off, but Kate took the Styrofoam cup. She inhaled and took a conscious sip.

Chad’s eyes brightened with amusement for a moment. “You must be in love with the Navy.”

She sipped again and put the cup aside. “I tried to drink it, honest to God, I did!”

“Phooey!” one of the sailors said with mock indignation before pointing to a tray. “Will you take some cinnamon rolls? There’s plenty left over.”

“Thank you." She ignored him and turned to Chad again. “How’s our military action progressing?”

“Not good. It appears the UIE is still pretty strong despite its initial losses. Many times, they struck our flotilla in the Mediterranean Sea. The Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden also witnessed similar clashes. Lots of ships sank. Hundreds of sailors died. Their damn missiles are targeting airfields and ports in the Mediterranean, as far as Gibraltar. In the Gulf, UAE, Qatar, and Oman have refused to offer any help. Our Navy no longer has the support it needs. We’re on our own.”

“Damn.”

“But we must go on fighting.”

“Do we have a choice?”

Chad shook his head. “No, I don’t think so.”

The air was cool in the cramped room. They hovered over a pair of sailors manning the communications station, much to the Navy people's annoyance. However, they had orders to bear with their uninvited guests.

A single MQ-9 Reaper drone was airborne over the Eastern Desert.

An impossibly young-looking uniformed officer and his assistant were managing the video and voice links with the Air Force team flying the drone out of Akrotiri in Cyprus. It turned out Lieutenant Max Grayson was on his first overseas assignment while Petty Officer Ed Drake had come through many tours in the Middle East and Africa. The Reaper and its operators belonged to the 29th Attack Squadron, a unit home-based at Holloman but now actively deployed.

They had their eyes glued to the crystal-clear flat panel display. Aided by a secure satellite link, the drone fed its images directly onto the console.

Kate stood behind them, watching the same imagery. Chad had taken a seat. He looked bored.

“Heads up! A plane just landed at an abandoned airstrip in the desert,” Drake announced. He was pointing at the display monitor.

“Any ID?” Kate asked immediately.

“Not possible. We’re too high.” The drone was at twenty thousand feet above ground, its onboard automated sensors keeping it in a programmed track, meaning its sophisticated multi-spectral imaging system was only giving them a God’s eye view of the area under its wings. But it was a mission requirement. If the drone ventured into a low orbit, its noise could alert the opposition.

“I see.”

The sailor smiled at his Agency guest, enjoying her unease. "If you're okay, we can fly into the weeds and sneak a peek. Cameras will give you anything you ask for.” The stateside crew could manually direct their multimillion-dollar flying machine with a joystick.

“Please do it.”

“How did the plane get there?” Chad asked. “Are we not enforcing a blockade over Syria?”

“No, we aren’t. It’s still an ongoing contest. The air forces of Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia are putting up a ruthless fight. We’d prevail eventually.”

“Unless nukes from the Pakistani arsenal force us to our knees,” she muttered. Her words silenced the man.

Chad said. “I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I,” she replied.

He snapped. “Damn. Why’re you here if you can’t help me get out of this jam?”

“What happened?”

Chad paused for a moment, his fist clasped around an unlit cigarette, hesitant to speak. He rolled the cigarette between his fingers several times before words came out of his mouth. “The presidential kill order! I just received it.”

She gasped. “What?”

“You heard it,” he tapped a folder. It was labeled Top Secret.

“No way you’re waving a wishy-washy political script in my face?”

“It’s legit. The messiah has been handed down a death sentence.”

“Come on. Let’s finish this crisis now.” She looked excited all of a sudden.

He froze. “What’re you implying?”

Kate said in a matter-of-fact tone. “Messiah must be terminated. And we need to do it ASAP.”

He shuffled uneasily. “I see. The mission would likely fall to a tier-one unit. Let’s manage the intel for them.”

She shook her head. “Sorry, no time for that. We must act now.”

“Hey, hey,” he looked rattled.

“Listen up, Chad. I feel they’re desperately trying to move the messiah out of Syria. They initially wanted to do it by road, but it didn’t work out. This plane thing is a gamble. If they manage to scoop him away, we will lose the war. But if we get him in time, we’re still in the game.”

“You’re right,” he conceded half-heartedly.

“Yet you look uneasy.”

“Yes, because I am,” he snarled.

“Can’t blame you for feeling that way.”

Chad took a deep breath. “Okay. What do you suggest?”

She told him her plan. He bickered and protested, but she managed to convince him in the end.

An hour later, they were on the carrier’s deck. Ralph was with them. He had put together another assault team in a hurry.

“Tell me you really want to do it?” Chad asked in a screaming voice for the umpteenth time as Kate adjusted the vest she wore over her combat fatigues. Her rifle dangled across her chest. A deck crewman had given them ear muffs, but the noise from the aircraft engines was overwhelming.

Kate replied irritably. “Yes. Now, please stop being my mom.”

They were standing near the open rear ramp of a CMV-22B aircraft, a modified tilt-rotor Osprey with enhanced range and better communications. Ralph and his men were stowing their gear inside the bird. Kate was amazed by the devotion displayed by these SEALs. Only a day before, they had endured a great deal of hardship. Some of the dead bodies remained unaccounted for in the desert. But the men were ready again. In fact, they had volunteered for the mission.

*How could I stay back and send such fine soldiers on another trip to hell?*

They were going against the messiah. But everyone knew rescuing the Americans was their top priority. It was her job to stay with them all the way. To fly and fight alongside them. She could not back out. Never.

She had proposed the plan after all.

The Reaper had to bug out of the hostile airspace after spotting the mystery plane on the ground. The arriving UIE interceptors had made sure of it. Chad requested the satellite coverage over the airstrip. It showed an aircraft and many human figures milling around on the tiny airfield. The sensors also monitored the UIE forces, who had become extremely agitated following the previous battle in the desert.

Taking both the military and Langley aboard, she had suggested an airborne insertion without wasting further time.

The satellites were tasked with watching the airstrip and its surroundings. Since the objective was located too deep in the wilderness, it did not show significant security at the moment. The UIE troops, however, would soon be arriving to provide additional support. Before it happened, the team had to get there. The newer model Ospreys, with a maximum speed of three hundred knots per hour, could deposit them at the airstrip within an hour.

The engine noise picked up. Chad and Kate did not speak now because the conversation was next to impossible. Finally, Chad looked into her eyes for a moment and smiled.

She walked into the gaping tail of the Osprey.

**Chapter 54**

**Mediterranean Sea**

A strident alarm resonated across the carrier’s interior.

The sound jarred Chad. He looked up. The usual clamor of voices suddenly vanished, leaving everyone stunned. Chad hurriedly walked to the carrier’s combat direction center. Nobody seemed to object, he noticed.

An officer screamed. “Warning, warning! Large-scale missile attack in progress.”

Chad’s eyes shot to the screen. The display was alive with a lot of flashing icons. Fingers began hitting the keyboards furiously. People were shouting to each other.

The door to the center banged open, and in walked a flustered-looking woman wearing her flight coveralls. She was Rear Admiral Stella Reese, the carrier group commander.

Stella demanded. “What’s going on?”

The officer replied. “Ballistic tracks in flight, origin Yemen.”

“What missiles? What type?” she asked the supervisor.

“Possibly Burkan TBMs,” the man answered, reading from the screen. “Count is twenty and rising.”

The satellites operated by the US Space Force had detected the heat signatures of tactical ballistic missiles launched by the Houthis as they ignited their rocket motors and started the flight. The critical information was instantly shared with all military units in the area.

“Destination?” the admiral inquired again.

“Working on it, ma’am. Initial estimates say Western Israel.”

Stella huffed. “Need to confirm it. Hurry up.”

Chad studied the big board display on the wall. It was showing a large map of the region. Moving symbols marched across the display. Inside Yemeni territory, launch points flashed red.

“I’m updating. New raid,” the man announced. “More missile launch detections.”

Stella groaned. “What? Where now?”

“Hawkeyes are reporting air-breathing vehicles over Egypt and Turkey. Likely heading for Israel.”

The carrier’s radar planes in the sky had detected several new airborne threats. Based on their flight characteristics, the sensors designated the tracks as cruise missiles. Unlike ballistic weapons, they flew a sneakier, low-altitude course. It was all preliminary information. The missiles were airborne yet still too far from whatever targets they had been programmed to hit.

“More threats!” the officer shouted once again, almost bolting out of his seat as his screen flashed bright.

“Shit,” Stella muttered.

Chad held his breath as the operator refined his information. “Ballistic missiles being launched. Over Saudi. Al-Watah and Shamli garrisons.”

“Where’re they headed, for God’s sake?” Stella slammed her fist on the console.

“Tel Aviv.”

A tingle ran down Chad’s spine.

The missiles being reported now represented the deadliest threat. They could be carrying weapons of mass destruction. Stella picked up a headset and communicated hastily with someone.

Soon, the missiles arrived over Israel. The US forces had already warned the Israelis. Their anti-missile systems began engaging the threat. US ships carrying their own interceptor missiles were also involved in handling the missile targets.

In Tel Aviv, the locals witnessed flashes and streaks of light on the horizon. Most people had taken refuge inside the shelters. Some were still in the open. A family watched in awe as smoke erupted from a launcher and a Patriot missile fired, cutting through the plume and trailing a flickering lick of orange flame. It illuminated the billowing smoke that engulfed the long, pointed round in flight.

The cheering from the family started with the first flash of light before the roar of rocket motor thrust reached their ears. It terrified them into stunned silence. In the distance, more dirty orange glows stabbed the sky. A new cascade of missile trails raced to meet the arriving salvo; the Israeli Arrow interceptors.

A horrid glare invaded the darkness. The SAM fire intensified, with each missile marked by its brilliant exhaust plume. The sudden, bright, erupting glows signified successful interceptions. Finally, the anti-aircraft guns intensified the drama of light and noise. Their muzzles erupted with fiery breaths, and their bangs pounded the desert.

Aboard the carrier, Chad watched the display in consternation. The missiles fired from Saudi Arabia and Yemen were impacting. The defending systems killed most of the incoming missiles, but some survived.

“This shit’s going to land with a stinking splash, no doubt,” someone commented. Chad stood behind the staffers. Stella was staring at the wall display.

Half an hour later, the news reached him.

Fifteen missiles carrying the VX warheads had detonated in Tel Aviv. Over forty thousand people were dead as of now. The number of casualties was rising at an alarming rate.

“Motherfuckers really did it. Damn. We all thought it was just bluster,” Stella swore.

Chad was suppressing his rage. The UIE had crossed a very serious red line. Now, there was no turning back.

**Syrian Desert**

Zeng and his party reached the airstrip without further incident. Another drone attack on the way had left him with just two Chinese operators. The Iranians had also suffered some casualties. An edgy guy from Ali’s band met them at the entrance and guided them to the parking ramp. He could see a plane's tail fin looming ahead. Sun glinted off of the metal. As his truck pulled up to the tarmac, remnants of old battles began to show.

A helicopter, probably a Mil-24, lay on its side near the runway, bullet holes and fire damage evident on its skin. Two SUVs, wrecked and burned beyond recognition. Patched-up sections of runway dotted with abundant wild growth. Rusted mobile anti-aircraft guns and service trucks. A rundown building next to the tarmac. What he saw was not comforting.

Zeng was finally relieved to see a functional aircraft on the runway. It was a Y-9 transport plane, operated by the Chinese air force.

He jumped out of the vehicle the moment it stopped near the plane. It was guarded by a small contingent of Iranians and their local Syrian supporters. He glanced around the area with a practiced eye. No immediate threat.

Director Gao was visible at the door. The man had been in Damascus. Now, he had come to save his ass.

Half running to the aircraft, he hollered at Ali. “We need to hurry. The Americans are after us. You don’t have much time.”

Ali needed no further encouragement at all. He replied. “Let’s go then.”

The crew had already refueled the bird. They began readying themselves for the flight. Zeng would have preferred a top cover of fighter jets, but no such luck here.

He had now three hostages in his captivity. His men dumped them into the aircraft. Gao would likely want to fly south and escape into the deeper UIE territory, where they would be safe from the Americans, before embarking on a journey to China.

Success at last.

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Hasser was on the floor in the aft section of the plane. Zaki and Ayub sat together, their backs against the fuselage's side. Both men had their mouths gagged. Zaki looked drained. His face was bruised and bristled with gray stubble.

Zeng came aboard with another Chinese man. Ali and the messiah accompanied them.

He stopped. “You’re going to love this trip, American.” A self-satisfying smile adorned his face. It was his moment. The other man just observed them.

“Go to hell,” he hissed.

“You know what fate awaits you?” Zeng asked, eyes glinting mischievously.

Hasser shook his head. “I don’t want to know.” He was least interested in whatever sadistic party the man was about to kick-start once they landed.

He ignored the smug bastard and addressed the messiah. “Don’t you realize it?”

“What?” the man asked. His eyes were empty.

“Your very life is a lie. You were artificially created by monsters like him,” he pointed at Zeng. “Now, they’re using you to breed chaos.”

Zeng fixed him with an icy glare. For a moment, Hasser feared he would just shoot him. Kai was more aggressive as he came forward and kicked him. His eyes pulsed with fire.

“Did I have any choice?” The messiah wailed through clenched teeth. His scream echoed back in Hasser's face, as if mocking him. He took a sharp breath.

Everyone was stunned.

The messiah was hysterical. He cried. “I’m helpless. My whole existence is a curse. The fact that I never feel at rest is a harsh punishment."

He spun and tried to snatch the gun from Ali. “Just kill me. Do it. I don’t want to live anymore.”

Strong hands gripped him. His frenzy was uncontrollable. Zeng slapped him hard. Kai and another man overpowered him and took him away. One guy gave him a shot, Hasser saw. Probably a tranquilizer. He had wanted to ask him about the dreams, but it was not possible now.

Soon, everything was calm.

Hasser turned to face Zeng and asked. “How did you do it? I mean, the cloning?”

Zeng’s new buddy gave him the once-over from head to toe, then he shrugged his shoulders. "As you already know, the Vatican man came to us with his shocking proposal. Him and his gay buddy, the scientist. He was really good, I must say. At first, nobody took them seriously. But they were possessed by their idea. They finally convinced our minister at the time, who then spoke to the president. We were given a go-ahead.”

“Who’re you?”

“He’s Xiaofei Gao. My director,” Zeng introduced wryly.

Hasser asked him. “Were you involved right from the start?”

“Yes, in some way. That's why I know the details," Gao said, nodding. "I was just a young officer at that time, assigned to the project security."

“Where were you set up?”

“Lijiang. The higher-ups wanted a totally isolated place away from Beijing and other major towns. Anyway, we got underway. We shopped for the equipment from all across Europe. The queer had so many vital contacts in the industry.”

“Didn’t it feel unethical?”

“Ethics, my friend, is a subjective matter.”

“I disagree.”

Gao sneered. “Let me tell you something. As we speak, a dozen labs around the world are involved in human cloning experiments. One of them is in Scandinavia. Another in Israel. Maybe, Korea as well. All are underground, which means not officially sanctioned, but the governments could not be possibly blind to their existence.”

“I see.”

“To tell you the truth, we initially took it as a scientific experiment. Despite Costello pushing for it, the decision to weaponize came much later. He had beef with his church. The promise of advanced biotechnology fascinated our leadership of the time. Eventually, the endeavor paid off in many ways. Our biotechnology industry is currently world-leading, thanks to the hard work we undertook for the project at that time.”

“How did it go? Must have been a difficult undertaking.”

“Yes, kinda. We hit some initial roadblocks, but the progress was good. In the end, our scientists were surprised.”

“What?”

“The genetic material we scraped off the cloth was unlike any other. Over the millennia, it had remained viable. In fact, Norice discovered two separate blood samples on the robe. We were unable to tinker with one blood sample, but our team was successful with the other. They were able to prepare a zygote. It was implanted inside a Middle Eastern surrogate woman. The pregnancy went smoothly. No other cloning experiment so far has been such a success. In fact, not a single baby was artificially born other than him.”

“Do you know what that means?” Hasser asked.

Gao was irritated. “No. What’s your point?”

“Whether you believe in God or deny him, He certainly works in his own ways. The blood stains you had been unable to gain access to must have belonged to Jesus Christ.”

“What?”

“That blood was of Jesus Christ. It got mixed up with his betrayer’s.”

"Why didn't Norice take it apart in the lab? Why our whole team failed to do anything about it?”

“God’s will, you idiot!” Hasser croaked. “He really didn’t want assholes like you to recreate the true Messiah. He preserved the bloodline of a prophet. All you bastards did was to create a monster.”

Gao looked stunned. “So?”

“You most certainly hatched the antichrist by manipulating the genetic material left by the other man on that robe.”

“Who was that other man?”

“Judas Iscariot. He was the one who betrayed Jesus. Sold him out to the Sanhedrin.”

“I don’t believe your religious traditions,” Gao chuckled.

“It hardly matters what your beliefs are. You started a global disaster by messing with something you didn't understand."

Gao was taken aback. “But how is he healing the sick and raising the dead if he doesn’t carry your Christ’s blood?”

“Mind you, Judas had been one of Christ’s closest disciples before he went rogue. Jesus or his Lord might have bestowed upon him certain powers. Or it could simply be another test by the Creator.”

Gao tried to speak, his lips quivering, but no words came.

Hasser gestured toward the messiah. “Where was he raised?”

“Mostly in China and Syria. Under the protection of our people. Finally, we sent him to Myanmar before the execution phase started."

Hasser did not let go. “Wait, wait, tell me what happened to the priest and his lover.”

“Why are you interested in them?” Gao eyed him. His face no longer betrayed any emotion. Cold bastard.

“Just curious, you know.”

Gao nodded. "As the boy grew up, the MSS practically cut Norice and Dave out of the entire program, yet they continued to receive lavish care. The couple carried on with their hedonistic lives before Norice contracted HIV during one of his trysts in Thailand. The apparent ‘unfaithful behavior’ proved more devastating for his lover. The two guys drifted apart. Costello fell into depression and drank himself into oblivion. Norice lost his battle with AIDS a few years later and died inside an obscure Chinese asylum under the watchful eyes of MSS. Costello one night overdosed on his sleeping pills and never woke up.”

"I thought you might have executed them after the birth."

Gao smiled thinly. “We’re not barbarians, Mr. Hasser.”

“Your humanity is reassuring,” he snarled.

Gao shrugged. “Thank you.”

“You guys are horrible,” Hasser spat his words.

“Whatever. Enough talking now," Gao winked, moving away. The messiah’s true origin rattled him, but he had recovered himself remarkably well from the shock after listening to Hasser.

**Chapter 55**

Hasser sat in silence. The hostiles were occupying the seats. Total nine of them, including Zeng, Gao, and Ali Aqa. And the messiah. One guy, Kai, was in the cockpit with the flight crew.

The pilot switched on the engines. Hasser listened to the whine. Too much racket, he judged. The interior was basic, not adequately shielded against the noise. It was a small blessing, because what he planned to do would be easier done inside a noisy cabin. In the desert, he had pocketed a sharp metal piece to cut his ropes if the opportunity arose. His legs were free. He only needed to work on the rope around his hands.

He sensed it was time now to use it before the plane took off and flew to an obscure airfield deep inside the UIE.

Into the belly of the beast, where all of them would disappear for good.

Once everything was squeezed out of them in a torture cell, they would become a liability. Zeng and his pals would never acknowledge their presence. He did not relish the idea of coming face-to-face with an obscure MSS assassin in a dark Chinese prison outside Beijing.

Trying to escape would be impossible aboard a plane flying over the wastelands of Arabia. Doing nothing was suicidal. So, he had to fight now. It was as simple as that.

The American operator went over the moves he would undertake to engage his adversaries. He was beat up and weak; his hands were bound, and he was pitted against several armed men in a jarring aluminum tub. Outnumbered and outgunned. Like most of his recent encounters, it would not be a fair fight. But who cared now? He had almost gotten used to it.

He had no plan. No one knew where they were. The plane was flying to an unidentified location. Not his own military could help. Not even Chad or the Agency. A desperate situation, he judged.

Whatever the odds, he had to get an upper hand. To defeat the enemy at all costs. His life, as well as the lives of his friends, depended on his actions in the next few minutes.

A cold shiver went through him, and his entire body tensed.

It was time to act.

He brought his elbows together. The slack created by the movement allowed him to slip his right thumb out. With some effort, it came free at last. The joints and tendons in his hands strained. He turned his wrists as much as he could, bending his thumb to prod the metal strip in his trouser pocket. It fell out of his grasp. He eyed the rusty metal piece and shook his head.

With some difficulty, he got hold of it. Placing its sharp end against the rope, he began to cut it. A small grating sound appeared. Thankfully, the engine noise muffled it.

The hostiles were all facing forward. They chinwagged and laughed nonstop. One guy occasionally looked over his shoulders to check on them.

Nothing happened first. It took Hasser at least five minutes to adequately cut the rope. With a final forceful jerk, he broke free of his restraints. He flexed his fingers to restore blood circulation and waited for the numbness to go away.

Seeing his work, Zaki inched closer. Hasser also severed his ties. Ayub was next. Both men removed their gags.

Zeng’s deputy opened the cockpit door and stepped out. He appeared perturbed. Hasser watched him closely as he leaned over his boss to whisper something. Zeng rose from his seat. Both men went into the cockpit.

A man got up to grab something from overhead stowage.

Now.

Hasser sprang to his feet. His arm swung. The Iranian sensed a flash of movement to his right. Before he could react, Hasser stabbed his neck with the strip of metal. He wobbled. A scream escaped his mouth as arterial blood spewed out of his lacerated neck. Hasser crashed into another man with his full might, slashing his forehead.

The force of the blow sent the Chinese guy staggering across his seat. He slammed into another Iranian on the next seat, and they both collapsed to the hard metal floor. Blood gushed from the cut in his forehead. The other guy buried under him was moaning. It sounded like he'd broken something. Hasser pounced on him repeatedly. He was out cold.

Ali Aqa dropped himself flat. His eyes were wide. He had also dragged the messiah to the floor. Gao joined them.

An exchange of shouts happened between the hostiles. The wounded guy screamed particularly loud. As another Quds operative stood up in alarm to help his pal, Zaki flew at him. Under a flurry of punches, the man struggled to hold off the attack.

Zeng and his sidekick came rushing out of the cockpit in panic. Kai carried a handgun, but his boss was unarmed. The gun was useless in the melee anyway. If he fired, he might inadvertently harm his own men.

It started like a saloon fight out of an old western. For a minute or two limbs flowing in every direction. They unleashed kicks, exchanged blows, and threw punches. Despite being trapped inside a flying tub, both sides sparred with wild abandon.

The presence of too many guns made the situation a bit complicated. Hasser and Zaki took care to keep their adversaries from using their firearms. Their first jabs were directed at the gun hands. As the fists collided, the guns broke free from bruised fingers and cracked bones. Bodies hit the floor. Dust rose up.

As Hasser closed in to finish one guy, the Chinese operator counterattacked. Either the gash in his neck was minor, or he was born with rhino skin. Surprised, Hasser tried to dodge but the man lunged at him. He was a trained killer, able to stand on his feet and fight rough. His head dove into Hasser’s midsection. They smashed into the opposite wall.

Hasser absorbed the headbutt and swung a hand at his attacker. The man slapped it away. He threw an elbow, catching the Chinese man in the back of his neck. The guy wailed. Next, Hasser balled his fingers into a fist and hit him on the side of his face.

He slapped again. Harder this time. The man’s head wrenched around to his right. Hasser followed up with a backhand in the opposite direction. It connected nicely, with the face contorting into a grimace of pain.

Suddenly the man drove his knee deep into Hasser’s groin. It was his turn to yelp now. He was on his back, the attacker atop him. Hasser found himself pinned to the floor, stunned. The man punched and slapped furiously, trying to subdue him. Hasser tried to block the blows with his forearms. It wouldn’t last long, he knew. If he did not quickly throw the bastard off, he would be reduced to a pulp. Pushing himself hard, he rolled to his side.

The rhino hovered beside him for a second. Hasser grabbed him by the hair and pushed his skull into the floor. His face hit with a thud. The sound was like a watermelon crashing open. Hasser lifted him up and smashed him again.

As he jerked him around, his victim let out a final cry before his eyes went blank. His body shook and rolled onto the aircraft’s floor.

Ali Aqa grabbed the messiah by his hand and sprinted into the cockpit. Gao followed them.

Zaki was wrestling with the other man. The Iranian bit his arm. Zaki stumbled back. The man charged and swung his meaty fist at him. Dazed, Zaki tried to stop another blow by bringing his hands up. The attack did not come. Instead, as if by magic, a gun appeared in his opponent’s hand. Before he could bring it around and aim properly, Zaki lunged at him and knocked the gun away. It clattered to the floor.

Zaki struck with a left hook and hit him in the nose. A satisfying crunch of bones sounded. “Not really your day,” Zaki chuckled.

Wincing, his foe took a step back and touched his nose. As if trying to ascertain whether it was still attached to his face. Zaki heard a grunt as blood dribbled out of his nostrils. However, the man was still on his feet. He was young and fit.

With a feral shriek, the enemy fighter barreled into Zaki and slammed him hard against the back of a seat.

A stab of pain almost paralyzed Zaki. Sweat popped out all over his skin. He took a deep breath, closing his eyes.

Ayub rammed into an Iranian who was trying to make his presence felt in the fight.

Kai bore down on Hasser, his teeth bared. “I’ll finish you here,” he cried out.

“Take your best shot,” Hasser replied, with as much candor as he could muster.

He feinted with a lunge. As Kai sprang backward to avoid him, Hasser struck. The swaying motion of the aircraft did not help his opponent. His legs wobbled.

Kai’s nostrils flared with anger, and his chest heaved. The American had surprised him with his opening move. The man knew how to fight. While he did not relish the blows, at a more professional level, such adversaries always excited him. It would be so much fun taking down a man who was able to put up a decent fight.

Recovering, he counterattacked. His hands worked in unison, delivering multiple jabs. Despite being more agile than the Chinese, Hasser had no room to maneuver.

He stumbled.

A powerful punch struck his shoulder with a sickening thud. Bellowing in pain, he grabbed a fistful of hair and yanked the Chinese around. His elbow connected with the back of Kai’s skull. It was his opponent who staggered now. Hasser shoved him forcefully at the man standing over Zaki.

Both guys collided and dropped to the floor. The other man barely squirmed.

Four opponents were left in the fight now. Amidst a cloud of dust thrown by the wrestling bodies, a few limbs wriggled on the floor.

The aircraft began its takeoff run with a lurch.

The unsteady platform under him now worked against Kai as he tried to stand up. Zaki lashed out with a foot. Unable to keep his balance, Kai fell again, his legs hitting the metal floor with a crack. A muffled cry escaped his lips.

Hearing him yell in pain, Zaki descended on him. His right fist landed like a hammer, catching the man in the face. His head twisted away. With his back pressed to the floor, Kai took another blow before pushing Zaki away and scrambling to his feet.

*“Wangba dan,”* he spat, slipping into Chinese. Son of a bitch.

Zaki blew him a kiss. *He surely knows how to get under someone’s skin,* Hasser thought in amusement.

Kai felt humiliated. His opponent was older and in much worse shape after his recent ordeal. Still, he had managed to get a few good licks in. Killing him would be a pleasure. The hulking Chinese man glanced up. He gathered himself to make a move. Flecks of spittle flew out of his mouth. He crawled across the cold floor like a frenzied man-bear, trying to close the distance between them.

He crashed into Zaki’s midsection, keeping him pressed against a seat. Zaki was trapped. He tried to move but failed. The guy was built like a brick shithouse. His breathing quickened as panic lapped over him like a black wave. A feeling of impotence tugged at his mind.

Hasser sidestepped from a sudden lunge as Zeng began his own attack. His eyes were alert, glancing sideways and scanning without his head turning a bit. The man was moving too fast. He missed his target, though the momentum allowed him to escape the swinging punch Hasser threw at him.

Before Zeng could have recovered, Hasser closed the gap in a heartbeat. He lowered himself, planted his feet as close as possible to his opponent, and hit him with his shoulder. Zeng was startled by the tackle. Hasser’s arms shot ahead, wrapping around the man. Finally, he drove him to the floor and finished on top of him.

Hasser struck his face with every ounce of strength he could generate. He first delivered a chop to the side of his face, then aimed a straight palm heel at his mouth. The blows were massive. After a moment of stunned silence, Zeng let out a yelp through his broken teeth.

While Hasser tussled with the senior Chinese operative and Zaki was fending off his deputy, the last man decided to rush in. His kick dislodged Hasser off Zeng. Off balance now, Hasser absorbed another boot in his flank. He grimaced as pain rippled through him.

Struggling to keep his foot planted on the floor, he rotated to avoid another brutal kick heading his way. The man was closer now. His next strike was a powerful hook that stung. Hasser raised an elbow to fend off another strike.

With some effort, he pummeled the Iranian in his testicles. Screaming, he rolled sideways. Hasser kicked him hard. For a moment both men did not move, then Hasser leaped at a pistol lying on the opposite side of the aisle. It belonged to the man who was slumped on the floor, certainly unable to use it. His opponent rushed to stop him, but he slammed into him from behind.

Hasser hit the floor. The pistol lay under him, flat against his thigh. He struggled to pick it up. The Iranian clawed at him like a maniac. With much difficulty, he finally grasped it and pulled the trigger.

A bullet tore into the guy’s shoulder, dropping him to the floor. The handgun blast was deafening inside the confined space. Smoke wafted in the air. He lay on his stomach, thrashing and sobbing. Blood pumped from the wound.

Zeng dove to the floor as Hasser pivoted into Kai who was wrestling with Zaki, and opened fire. He missed. The man lay flat on the floor. Zeng burst out of the other side of the aisle, picking up a handgun on the run, and flew into the cockpit as a hail of bullets erupted all around him.

Hasser kept firing single shots as he moved around the seats. He was in a low crouch as he worked his way toward the plane’s front section. Kai had no meaningful cover. His only refuge was the cockpit. If only he could make a run for it.

Hasser made sure he did not succeed.

When the man rose to dash away, he took a slug in the back, whipping him around. From behind the cockpit door, Zeng saw his man in trouble.

Hasser sent another round through his throat. Blood shot out in a thick spray as Kai groaned. Hasser watched him collapse and held back on his next shot. It was no longer necessary. His target was down, drenched in a pool of his own blood.

Zeng gasped as his deputy went down. His whole body shuddered, and he fell at Hasser’s feet, as if bowing before him.

To Zeng’s visible shock, Hasser bent down and grabbed an unconscious operator. With some effort, he shoved the man onto a seat. It would deter the Chinese colonel from shooting at them. Or provide some protection if he did.

Crawling over to where the wounded man lay, Hasser pressed the muzzle of his still-smoking pistol to his temple. He needed to ensure his target remained motionless.

“Try to find some goddamned weapon for yourself, Zaki,” Hasser whispered. His focus was on the cockpit door. Zeng was hidden there. He was armed. The fight was not over yet.

Zaki sighed heavily as he eyed the scene. He snatched a pistol from another fallen enemy fighter. Ayub snatched one for himself.

“Mags too. Hurry up,” Hasser emphasized. Zaki fished for some spare clips. He discovered them on one of the corpses. They divided the clips among themselves.

Rounds pinged off the seats and the fuselage. The thin aluminum wall began to shriek under the impact of multiple rounds.

It was Zeng.

Hasser dropped to a knee, raised his weapon in a flash as he sheltered himself behind a seat, and loosed a stream of bullets.

Zeng ducked behind the cockpit door again. Shit. The American had turned everything around. The scene was beyond shocking.

The pilot gulped in air. His copilot screamed.

“Shut up!” Zeng bellowed, irritated by the wailing. The copilot did not listen. He hit him across the cheek. It worked. The guy flinched visibly.

Turning, he found the pilot staring at him. His mouth was open. Zeng lowered the gun. “No need to worry. Keep her going.”

“We’re taking fire from within, mister.”

“Let me worry about it.”

“Hey, my bird is not bullet-proof,” the pilot shouted. “You need to understand me.” They were now doing seventy knots. Gao fumed. Ali and the messiah were quiet.

Gao looked at the navigation data being presented on a GPS screen in the cockpit. Given the fuel situation, he had only one option.

“I want you to fly to Arar airport,” he tapped his finger at a dot on the screen. It was in northern Saudi Arabia. Another option was Tabuk, but he was reluctant to travel there. Too close to Israel. Arar would do. He hoped he could count on the UIE officials once he arrived. With some serious manpower at his disposal there, he could subdue the Americans.

“What? We won't be allowed to land there.”

“Why?”

“No foreign aircraft are permitted. It’s a small regional airport.”

Gao smirked. “We’re supporting them, moron.”

“I know, but we could be in trouble.”

“I authorize you today.”

“Just like that? the man asked skeptically.

“Yes.”

“Who are you?”

“Trust me, you wouldn’t want to know.”

**Chapter 56**

**Aboard a US Navy CMV-22B Aircraft**

“Target aircraft in sight. It’s taking off,” the pilot announced on the intercom. Kate sat upright. The tight vest pressed on her bandaged wounds, making her wince from time to time.

Ralph signaled everyone to be ready. She raised her thumb in acknowledgment. She carried an MP-5 carbine and a compact handgun.

To her surprise, the Osprey had arrived just in time before the lumbering Y-9 could leave the airfield and disappear into the sky. They had flown low. Luckily, there were no UIE fighter patrols overhead.

Kate had considered intercepting the target aircraft on its way.

Ralph had suggested a forced landing at an airport in Israel. Armed F-35s from Truman could attempt such a thing, but Kate opposed the idea. It could spook Zeng and his Iranian pals aboard the aircraft. Nobody wanted that to happen. The enemy could go to any lengths if they felt cornered. She could not risk the lives of her team members. Besides, the Israeli government could not be trusted to hand over the plane and its occupants to America.

Someone had come up with a strange compromise in the end.

Now, the Osprey would execute a fast tactical landing at the airstrip. No armed escorts would fly along. The Osprey would keep its engines running. The soldiers were under orders to free the Americans and capture the messiah, should he be found. Use of deadly force was the last resort, the bureaucratic-sounding directive had communicated.

*Cripes,* the young soldiers thought. They resented the twisted rules of engagement, realizing fully well that the orders put their mission and lives at stake.

A quick assault supported by combat aircraft to overpower the enemy before anyone could mount an effective response would have been a much better choice.

But they were not the ones making big decisions.

**Aboard the Y-9**

“Where’re we headed? Ayub asked.

“Somewhere in Saudi Arabia,” Hasser replied, hefting an AK-74 mini-rifle. The man was eyeing him nervously.

The plane was accelerating. Hasser guessed they were going to take off any moment. He peered out the window. No runway markers, of course, but everything whizzed by in a blur. Beyond that, an undulating desert could be seen all around.

He cradled the rifle in his hands and opened fire at the window. Glass shattered. He aimed the rounds at his side's engines and wing, hoping to damage the control surfaces. He emptied a full magazine, reloaded, and fired at full auto again.

The runway ran parallel with what looked like the airstrip's boundary fence. In the distance, he could see some village buildings. To the right, bleak mountains dotted the landscape, their crests glowing golden red in the fading sunlight.

Gao ignored the spectacle. He was too tense in the cockpit. He had taken the spare seat behind the pilot and copilot. The crew had wanted to inspect the runway for a visual check before getting airborne, but he had ordered them to take off without wasting more time. They could not understand what was at stake.

Gunfire erupted in the cabin, and the plane underwent a series of violent spasms before rolling sideways.

“Shit,” the pilot blurted. Something had suddenly ruined his perfect takeoff run. One of his engines was bleeding off power too fast, and his controls were unresponsive.

“What?” Gao asked.

The pilot yelled. “Brace for the impact,”

Gao breathed hard, cinching the seat belt tighter around his abdomen and lowering his head. Zeng was on the floor with the messiah. Ali was insanely quiet.

Judging that the plane was losing control, the pilot rolled it hard to the left. At the same time, he applied the rudder in the opposite direction, and his hand eased back on the power to avoid a violent yaw.

It worked, but It wasn’t enough. They were still too fast. Uttering a curse, he manipulated his controls. With its right wing raised, the plane skidded. Gao panicked. A sudden rush of vertigo came over him.

The pilot tried some more corrections, and the aircraft slowed down. Zeng felt his stomach lurch as the bird decelerated, wobbling as it finally skidded off the runway.

The Y-9 limped back to the runway and turned around. Gao watched intently. His gun was ready. At least he'd have some support on the ground. The pilot taxied to the tarmac.

One of its engines was still running when a pair of trucks roared down the runway. The vehicles screeched to a halt in front of the aircraft, and several armed men dashed out, weapons in full view. The pilot shut down the engine.

Zeng yanked open the cockpit door. He found himself staring at the ugly snout of a rifle.

“Welcome back,” the Syrian behind the AK-47 snickered. Around him, other fighters clustered.

“No fun here. Americans have killed my team. They’re armed and ready to screw you if you don’t act sensibly.”

His pale brown eyes darted back and forth as the Syrian militant tried to understand what he had heard. His companions appeared equally confused. It did not mean they were less attentive. Their guns never wavered from the aircraft's rear section.

Zeng walked out to the tarmac. Gao, Ali and the messiah followed him. While Ali and Gao could be counted on in a gunfight, the messiah was useless. He had to come up with a new plan.

A fighter looked up, then around, then screamed and pointed at something. Zeng turned. What he saw was unbelievable. Just a short distance away, a single transport aircraft was landing in a cloud of dust. The Americans had arrived.

*American commandos,* one Syrian gasped.

A chill ran up and down his spine as Zeng barked at their leader. “I want them repelled immediately.”

The man bristled. “With what?”

Zeng jumped into action. He saw no point in arguing with the fool, who was paralyzed with indecision.

He yelled at the men standing outside the aircraft. “Kill everyone aboard the plane. We should not allow them to escape.

A total of four fighters stormed the aircraft. One of them was senior, too sure of himself, and unable to see what type of men he was going face-to-face with. He thought he was just executing some prisoners.

Hasser read their body language in one quick glance out the window, wondering how quickly they would react if presented with an unexpected situation. Another glance revealed the manner of carrying the weapons.

He was positioned behind the passenger door. His eyes burned, and his jaw was set. It was a signal for Zaki and Ayub, who nodded.

A man stroked the door with his rifle.

As Hasser slid it open, a militant charged in. He was armed with a standard AK-47, not an ideal weapon for the close-quarters job at hand.

Hasser covered the distance in one quick stride. He feinted with a quick right jab, and his left hand snapped out with lightning speed. It connected with the man’s face. Surprisingly, his victim twisted, spinning on his knees and throwing Hasser off balance.

Hasser went for his rifle with his free hand, but the man was too fast. He drove an elbow into his chest.

Suppressing the pain, Hasser punched him in the throat and wrenched the rifle away. Zaki grabbed it. He leveled it at the next two guys, whose own guns were coming up, and opened fire. Their bodies jerked under the impact of multiple rounds. They toppled over and hit the ground with wet thuds amid the clinking of spent brass on hard asphalt.

With the butt of his rifle, Zaki took on the last man and broke his chin. A dull crack of bones and teeth splintering under the impact. His scream erupted as the echoes of the shots receded.

The guy grappling with Hasser was a leech. He did not relent easily despite taking many jabs. Zaki tried to hit him but failed. He couldn't risk shooting at him as he was tangled up with Hasser.

Hasser inhaled sharply.

With a good breath of cool air inside his lungs, he felt energized as his next punch targeted the guy’s temple, dazing him instantly. As he blinked, Hasser drove his knuckles into his armpit, aiming for the brachial plexus. The strike stunned him.

Hasser dropped him to the tarmac with a final forceful shove. Ayub finished him by placing a round in his head.

Zeng and Gao were startled by the noise of gunfire emanating from inside the plane. Zeng’s eyes were wide like saucers when the bodies started to fall.

Damn. He stopped running. Going alone into the plane would be like asking for a round in the head. Before he could call out for additional fighters, he saw another threat materialize before him.

American assaulters were jumping out of the Osprey.

They did not waste time. Once clear of their aircraft and on their feet, they began to approach the objective. Soon, they were crouched on the sand, and their weapons pointed his way. One trooper launched a man-portable rocket across the runway.

“Down!” Zeng shouted. His companions hit the ground. Gao was smart enough to defer to him in a battle.

His trained mind identified the incoming projectile as a LAW anti-tank rocket. It slammed into a truck. The vehicle flipped and burst into flames.

Another group of men appeared. They set up a big machine gun and began shooting. A volley of rounds chipped the asphalt in front of him. A man shot a handheld mini-drone into the air. It ascended rapidly, deploying its switchblade wings. With eyes over the whole place, they would hunt to kill. Every living thing they encountered would be fair game.

The machine gun fire was pretty sustained, Zeng judged. Before he could call on the Syrians to retaliate, a vehicle ignited its engine and drove off. Away from the American guns. They were all hardened fighters, but as the local folklore went, the sudden appearance of flying machines out of the sky did not bode well. They always brought death to those who chose to stick around.

About half of his local support had fled the scene, too terrified to fight the Americans. He spat in disgust.

The vast expanse of packed sand around him offered no meaningful cover. His only refuge was the airstrip building. The militants accompanying him dispersed and sheltered themselves under its many roofs. Armed with an AK-47, he now deployed the remaining fighters at his disposal. Feeling that something awful was in store, he prepared to make his last stand.

The tactical situation was grim, but he also hoped the Americans would not linger too long. Once additional UIE troops showed up, they would have to flee. He had to hold out only so long. If he was lucky, he could eventually slip out amid the chaos. If not, he was doomed already.

A few American soldiers veered off from the main attacking column and ran to the parked vehicles. They clearly wanted to prevent anyone from bolting the scene. They fired as they ran, riddling the trucks with bullets.

Zeng struggled to gather his wits. The brazen display of violence by the Americans was not surprising. They were in no mood to show mercy.

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At first Hasser could not hear anything. Zaki’s shooting had played havoc with his hearing. The roar of his bullets had felt like a knife rotating in his ears. His hearing slowly returned, and then he picked up aircraft noise and the distinct note of a high-powered weapon in full auto mode. It was a machine gun, he realized, and it sounded like a jackhammer.

“Come on. Let’s see who else has joined the party,” he said to Zaki. He burst out of the plane, lifting an AK-47 and spare ammo off a dead fighter.

Zaki and Ayub followed him. In addition to the AK-47s, they now possessed three grenades.

Emerging on the tarmac, Hasser found himself transported to a battlefield. An Osprey transport bird in US Navy livery caught his eye; its ramp was open. Two armed sailors guarded it. The sight lifted his spirits, and he realized his ordeal would be over soon.

The stutter of gunfire was unmistakable amid the relentless screaming of aircraft engines. Besides a barrage of noise, the Osprey was throwing up a shitload of sand all around. Soldiers were leapfrogging to the airport building, their rifles spitting out short bursts of fire. A rocket whistled some distance away. Someone hurled a grenade at a parked truck. It exploded.

The Americans were pushing forward, but the building still held considerable enemy manpower, judging by the gunfire. It sounded like a deafening, freaking whirlpool of chaos.

He pivoted into the blinding dust storm and began running. Behind him came Zaki’s maniacal laugh. “Is this what you call a party?”

“Of course.”

Hasser fired the AK-47 in short bursts as he approached a single-story building. Stopping at a side door, he crouched low and paused to listen for sounds. Voices and gunfire from the inside. There was no way they were going to enter through that door. He moved back. Searching for another entry point, he spotted a ladder at the rear, next to a pile of cardboard boxes. They worked their way up the ladder and landed on the roof.

A rooftop enclosure loomed ahead.

Hasser approached it crouch-walking, his step light, staying as low as possible. He gripped the handle and threw it wide. It was empty, though he could hear shouts below. Charging down the stairs would be suicidal.

Zaki sent a banger first. It bounced down the stairs and went off with a boom. Hasser rolled his eyes. Despite his many flaws, you could never accuse Zaki of being subtle.

They descended the stairs.

Through the door to the ground floor and into a hallway. They saw a wounded man on the floor, moaning. Zaki ended his misery with a head shot. Ayub moved in another direction.

A door was kicked open. Two militants emerged. Hasser pointed his weapon and pulled the trigger. The rifle barked, multiple rounds stitching his victims across their chests. They staggered before hitting the ground. In the throes of death, one guy let loose some rounds as his finger inadvertently tightened around the trigger.

Hasser winced sharply. A burning coal lodged itself in his thigh. He ducked sideways, out of the line of fire. It was a pure instinctive move that saved his life. The subsequent rounds chipped the concrete all around him. One round cracked over his head. The initial burning sensation of the bullet wound was now giving way to pain.

He hobbled down the hallway, his feet echoing off the concrete. With his eyes scanning ahead in an arc, he looked for telltale signs of danger and kicked a door open. Zaki entered the room, shooting as he swung left. Hasser was behind him, covering his right side.

The room was empty.

Behind them, Hasser heard an uproar in another room, followed by footfalls and finally by bursts of gunfire.

Startled, he went back out of the room.

He moved quietly down the hallway. The door at the end of the hallway was wide open. He peeked in. He could not see a single man. *Where are all the fighters that I heard?*

The gunman’s steps scraped the floor behind him.

Shit. He whipped around. A door had opened. He saw someone leap out, his gun turning his way.

It was Ali Aqa. Behind him was another armed man.

“Down!” someone screamed. Hasser dove to the floor. Three rounds zinged overhead.

Zaki dropped the Iranian with his shots.

“It’s for Sanya,” Zaki spat at the dying man.

His next slugs hit the second man's center mass, pulping his insides. The body thumped to the ground.

Hasser waited, holding his breath. He wasn’t sure, but there could be more fighters around. He did not want to rush and eat a bullet for no reason.

A figure sprinted for cover, but Zaki could not put him down. His bullets flew harmlessly past him.

Zeng.

He turned away to escape but was too late. Hasser lunged at him desperately and slammed a shoulder into his back, knocking him forward. Both fell to the floor.

Zeng reached for his gun lying before him; the same moment Zaki opened fire, hitting him in the legs, and he screamed.

Hasser rose. His thigh was now hurting like hell. With some effort, he kneeled beside the Chinese colonel.

“Pig,” Zeng blurted.

Hasser raised his gun, aimed it at the man’s left shoulder, and fired. The man hollered.

Hasser did not stop. He fired another round into his left knee. Zeng jerked, his screams nonstop now. Fragments of bone and flesh danced in the air.

More bullets to his right shoulder and right knee. Then, both ankles. His ravaged body was convulsing, and blood was gushing out of too many wounds. He was on the verge of losing consciousness. So far, his wounds were not critical, though the pain was immense. It burned every fiber of his body.

But Hasser didn’t stop. By the time he exhausted his magazine, the man was a mess.

**Chapter 57**

Hasser closed his eyes. For a second, he felt almost overcome by exhaustion.

Ayub appeared. He was holding Gao and the messiah at gunpoint.

Before Hasser could say a word to him, the front door was smashed into pieces as the SEALs made a forceful entry. Kate accompanied them. She swiftly aimed her pistol at the messiah and began firing. Ralph swatted her gun away, but it was already too late.

“Damn,” Hasser swore as a round caught the messiah in his gut. He collapsed to the floor. Another bullet hit Gao and took away half of his skull.

“Medic!” Ralph shouted as he ran to the wounded man. Hasser kneeled beside the messiah who was suddenly pale. Internal bleeding. A combat medic rushed inside. He immediately went to work. Gao was beyond any aid. Kate stared blankly at the wall.

It was then that Ralph and his SEALs surveyed the scene in the room. The bullet-ridden corpse was hard to miss anyway. Stunned-looking soldiers uttered mute curses.

Kate asked. “Ali?”

Zaki cleared his throat. “Got him.”

“Thanks.”

A man tended to Hasser’s wound. They managed to get airborne before a convoy of trucks showed up at the airstrip.

The messiah was in critical condition. The medic had given him Fentanyl to ease the pain and hooked him up on plasma expander. It was all he could do.

Ralph updated Hasser on the nerve gas attack in Tel Aviv.

His chin dropped to his chest, and his eyes welled up. It was a bombshell. His mind failed to comprehend what he had heard.

For the next few minutes, Hasser remained numb, unable to think properly. The Osprey sped on westward.

Slowly, the shock wore off. He began to think. Pandora’s box had been kicked open. Forty thousand deaths in a single strike. It was a huge blow. By all means, the Israelis were going to counterattack.

It had to be stopped. Otherwise, the world would face an Armageddon.

He came up with a desperate plan. “Hey, guys. Listen,” he sat up straight.

“What?” Zaki asked. “What is it, Mike?”

As he told Zaki and Ralph what he wanted to do, they looked at him as if he were a lunatic. Then they eyed each other, heads shaking.

“It’s doable,” he insisted, ignoring their expressions.

Their heads came close, and they talked. And they shouted, argued, and argued more.

Zaki objected. “They’re going to shoot this flying crate out of the sky the moment we approach their airspace.”

“He’s right,” Ralph said. “The Israelis would be on hair-trigger alert. Now is definitely not the time to test their capabilities.”

Hasser studied their faces. Days’ worth of stubble, layers of dust, dry lips. The weariness he saw made him shudder. They had been through a lot already. Yet, if he asked, they would go with him anywhere.

“Let me talk to Chad,” he said. He grabbed himself a headset and asked the crew to get him on the horn with the carrier.

The radio call was connected. “Yes, Mike. You alright?” he heard the tinny voice through his headset.

“Chad? Are you listening?” he shouted.  His own voice sounded distant.

“Yes, yes.”

“I want ourselves to divert.”

“Divert? Where?” The man was suddenly guarded.

“Tel Aviv,” he answered, and rattled off a synopsis of what he wanted to do. It wasn’t much convincing, but he had to try.

“Whoa. Hold on,” Chad snarled in his ear.

He said. “I’m serious.”

“Jesus. What the hell’s happening?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you… are you sure it’s going to work?” Chad asked in a quivering voice.

“Well, as I said,” Hasser rubbed his eyes, “we need to try. But we must hurry.”

Chad sighed. “I’ll be right back.” He clicked off, and the radio went silent. He would surely consult with his superiors. It would take some time to get the Israelis on board.

Hasser took a deep breath and slumped back in the seat. Ralph nodded at him. The medic was tending to the messiah. His face had turned ashen. The monitor attached to his body was beeping nonstop. His heart was in overdrive, his breathing fast and shallow. Despite the intravenous drip and inotropes, his blood pressure was abnormally low. The guy was going downhill.

There was a long silence, and then Zaki whispered. “Man, he needs to be in a hospital. ASAP.”

Hasser said nothing. He sat motionless. Ralph spoke. "We could get him into an Israeli hospital. I’m sure they wouldn’t refuse.”

The Osprey was flying south of Damascus, its crew trying to keep it low on the deck and outside the fifty-mile air defense bubble set up around the city. The recent reinforcements by Russia and China had the town bristling with advanced missile systems. Gone were the days when the Israeli bombs fell there with impunity. Now it was different. If they strayed into the lethal zone, they would be dead in seconds.

Chad radioed him.

The Israelis had allowed them to land in Tel Aviv. Hasser went into the cockpit and relayed the information to the pilots. Soon, they were in contact with the Israeli military controllers, who guided them onwards. He opted to stay in the cockpit as long as the flight lasted.

The Osprey executed a bank to the left. They would avoid the disputed Golan Heights where a fierce exchange of rocket and artillery fire was going on between the Israelis and Hezbollah. Their course was now due south over the Israel-Jordan border. The shimmering waters of Lake Tiberias were behind them.

Hasser looked outside. He could see all the way to Capernaum. Across the lake were the cliffs of Gadara and Kersa, lit up by the fading sunlight. Once, a blessed man walked there, healing everyone who came to him.

The Osprey changed course again, now heading southwest toward Tel Aviv. They swept over Nein, a little-known village, where Jesus had once raised a young man from death.

Hasser sighed. He did not know if another miracle would happen today.

The sound of the propellers changed, and the aircraft slowed down. It was preparing to land.

Hasser watched. The tiltrotor descended over a secluded area of Ben Gurion Airport and settled down on the tarmac. A group of soldiers approached. They all wore full chemical protection gear—rubber suits, boots, and gas masks. They informed Hasser that the entire town was under lockdown.

While all other occupants of the aircraft were ordered to remain inside, Hasser and Zaki were given the protective suits to don. An Israeli doctor conferred with their medic about the status of the wounded man. He nodded.

The messiah was wheeled out of the plane and loaded onto a waiting ambulance. A soldier escorted Hasser and Zaki to another vehicle.

They walked under a pale, desolate curtain thrown by the afternoon sun. Israeli fighter jets crisscrossed the sky above him. Hasser could feel an air of tragic loss and misery engulf the place.

“I feel like I need a cigarette,” He said morosely. Without a word Zaki handed him half a pack and his lighter. Hasser pocketed the items but didn’t light up.

A short ride later, they arrived at a mass triage area. The Israelis had set up a makeshift treatment facility in a park in the town's center. The military had erected massive shower stalls where all people exposed to the chemical attack were being washed to remove the residual agents from their bodies and clothing.

A team of doctors then assessed each person for the symptoms. They administered the limited antidotes available to anyone requiring immediate treatment. Depending on the severity, the medics either transported the victims to hospitals or detained them at the site for further observation. Many people declared fit enough were told to go back to their homes.

A portion of the facility was being used as a temporary morgue to pile up the bodies for further disposal. The enormous death toll had already exhausted the morgues in the city’s hospitals. The ambulance halted near the morgue. There were rows upon rows of corpses under sheets of cloth. According to reports, the Israelis had also run out of body bags.

A military officer lurked nearby. He was a colonel in the Israeli Defense Force. Hasser couldn't see his face clearly behind the mask.

“How bad?” he reluctantly asked.

The man stared at him for a moment before replying. “Terrible. We just touched the fifty-thousand mark.” He swallowed hard, trying to hold back a sob.

“God.” Hasser sighed, staring off into space.

“We’re devastated. Too many lives snuffed out. Our people are calling it another Holocaust." The look in his eyes was that of a shattered man.

“Any further threats?”

“We haven’t seen anything that may indicate a follow-on attack. But it’s meaningless.”

“What do you mean?”

“Israel has to retaliate. We can’t just suck it and move on. The prime minister lost his wife and two children in the raid but he has no time to mourn. He’s in a meeting right now with his cabinet to decide our reaction.”

“Why are you here?”

“I came to detain him,” the Israeli pointed a finger at the ambulance.

Hasser was jolted. “For heaven’s sake, why?”

“He would undergo a trial and face punishment for his crimes.”

“That wasn’t the deal,” he fumed.

The colonel smirked. “It’s now.” He waved a document in his face. "Before coming here, I received an official order. Signed by the prime minister himself.”

Hasser stomped off. There was no point in arguing with the colonel. He was a mere functionary doing his job.

The messiah beckoned him. “Please, help me. I want to see the sky,” he said feebly.

Hasser and Zaki were helped by an Israeli paramedic as they pulled the stretcher out of the vehicle.

“What’s this place?”

Hasser replied. “Israel.”

A smile crossed the man’s lips. “Somehow, I knew. What was the Israeli saying?”

“They want to arrest you. A trial would be held.”

The messiah rolled his eyes. “Ah, another trial. Surely, the Jews will lose. The way they did a long time ago.”

He tried to sit up but failed. Zaki sat next to him and held him. “Your daughter? She’s Autistic?” the messiah whispered to Hasser.

He was taken aback. “Yes.”

“Cut up a piece of my robe and take it with you.”

He hesitated. But the man insisted. “Do it, Michael. And send her my greeting when you see her.”

Hasser obliged him. He cut his blood-soaked robe with a pair of surgical scissors and pocketed a piece. The messiah lifted up his hands in prayer.

His eyes were unfocused, yet his lips moved.

The monitor beeped louder.

“He’s in arrest!” the Israeli medic shouted in alarm. As he jabbed a syringe into the I/V line and pushed in a drug, his partner attached a bag valve mask to the messiah’s face. The first man placed his hands on the messiah’s chest and began pumping.

*Oh, God,* he prayed. *I’ve seen violence and savagery enough, misery and death enough, to turn my soul forever into a dungeon of despair.*

Hasser stood back quietly as the medics worked like maniacs to revive the messiah. Their efforts went on for thirty minutes before the fatigued young men shook their heads hopelessly and stepped away.

The messiah was dead.

Hasser looked over at Zaki. A bystander like himself. Neither man could have done anything to affect the outcome. Zaki’s eyes were still closed, and his hands were raised to the sky in supplication. For a moment, Hasser wondered why anyone would pray. The heavens were distant and empty, not at all bothered by what happened to the miserable earthlings. He had carried a little hope, a trifling belief that something would happen to undo all the suffering he had witnessed. But all in vain.

His mind agonized over the short, troubled life the messiah had lived. No one deserved an existence like that.

A light breeze was blowing. He saw a sheet lift off a corpse. He might have dismissed it if another sheet had not slid away. He squinted.

Another sheet rose, as if the dead body underneath was stirring.

He ran up to the morgue.

Now, the whole rows of corpses were moving. The squirming under the sheets picked up considerably.

The first one who was raised from the dead was a young girl. She sat up with a jerk and looked around in bewilderment.

Hasser felt his heart race.

More corpses were throwing away their sheets. Zaki sprinted his way. The Israeli colonel and the medics were in tow. Their mouths hung open as they watched the dead rise.

By now, every dead man, woman, and child in the morgue were alive again.

Breathing hard, Hasser headed back to the ambulance. The messiah was still lifeless, his dead body untouched by his last miracle on earth.

Within minutes, the reports began coming in. Every dead victim of the chemical attack had been raised from the dead. All fifty thousand of them. Israel was jubilant.

A major catastrophe had been turned around.

The next day, Hasser was in the US. Becky came to receive him at the Joint Base Andrews.

A dark gray cloud layer was lifting after sending a short but intense shower of rain for a few minutes. It was midday. The sun peeked from its high perch in the sky, as if beaming with zest. Despite a fading light, the poplar, oak, and pine trees appeared greener, adding their aroma to the rain-soaked air.

Hasser took a deep breath.

Becky held him in a tight embrace. He kissed her vehemently. Pam was in the car, throwing up her usual ruckus. Junior was with his grandma back home. As they got underway, he took out Zaki’s lighter and the piece of cloth from his pocket.

"Hey, what's that?" Becky inquired, glancing sideways at him as she drove.

With a sigh he flicked the Zippo and touched up the flame to the rag. As it started burning, he tossed it out the window. They drove in silence for a while.

Pam seemed suddenly calm. Then she hugged him from behind. “I love you, dad.” It was the first coherent sentence she had ever spoken in her life.

Becky almost lost control of the car. She barely managed to avoid sideswiping another vehicle and parked on the roadside. Hasser saw her wife squeal in joy.

His eyes misted. He took Pam in his arms. "Someone asked me to say hi.”

She giggled. "Send him my love, dad."

Sitting there, he prayed for the messiah, wondering whether it was a good idea at all. The man had carried neither the spirit of Jesus nor his blood. But Hasser did not care. His last gift to humanity had been huge.

The man might as well have been the antichrist. Holding on to his own faith, Hasser had turned down his personal favor. And yet God had healed his daughter.

**About the Author**

Trevor Isaacs is a retired military officer. He participated in multiple operations in the Global War on Terror and other conflicts. An aviation enthusiast and a trekker, his extensive firsthand experience was instrumental in creating this book.

He can be reached at trevorisaacsbooks.myportfolio.com.

Email: trevorisaacs111@gmail.com.