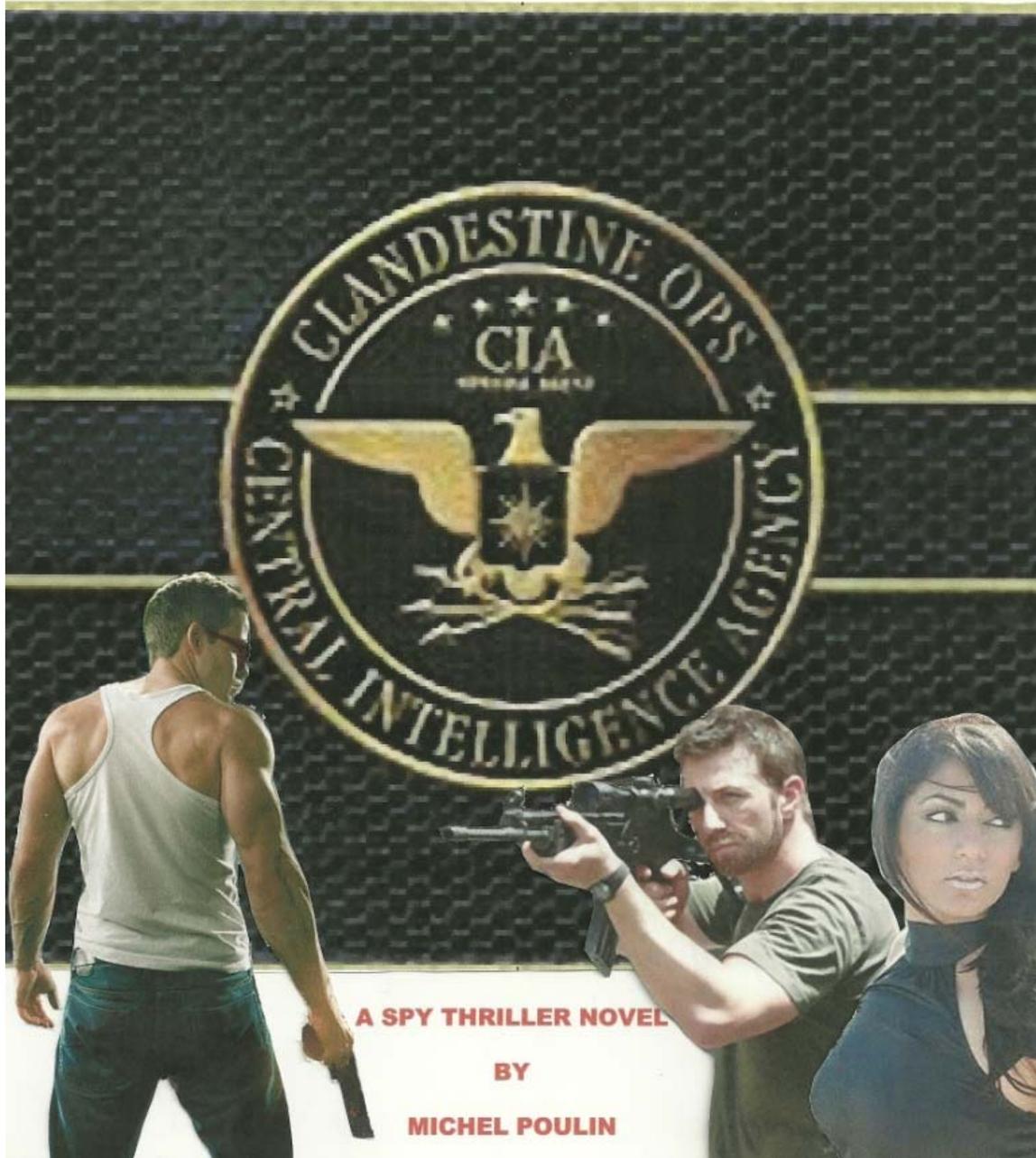


# FRIENDS AND FOES



A SPY THRILLER NOVEL

BY

MICHEL POULIN

# **FRIENDS AND FOES**

**A Spy thriller novel**

**By Michel Poulin**

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## **WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS**

**THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF VIOLENCE AND SEX, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION AND WORDS OR DEEDS ATTRIBUTED IN IT TO PERSONS WHO EXIST ARE STRICTLY FICTICIOUS.**

### **Acknowledgements**

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## **CHAPTER 1 – ASSETS**

**17:28 (Washington Time)**

**Sunday, May 24, 2015**

**Apartment 336, residential building**

**North Utah Street, Ballston**

**Virginia, U.S.A.**

Cynthia Wilson smiled widely to the handsome man who opened the apartment door on which she had just knocked: Dean Price was a fit, muscular man standing six foot tall, with brown hair cut very short, brown eyes and a square, resolute jaw. In short, what a woman could call a real man. Cynthia knew that he was 31 years old and that he was some sort of federal employee but, having met him only on brief occasions as they crossed path while going in or out of their apartment building, she actually knew little about him. The one thing she knew was that Dean Price was to her taste and she was hoping to learn more about him this evening. Dean smiled in return to the young and pretty university graduate and political secretary.

“Come in, Cynthia! Make yourself at home.”

Cynthia obliged him at once, walking inside a lounge furnished with comfortable but relatively inexpensive furniture. Dean, like her, was probably part of what would be called the middle class in the Washington, D.C. area. Cynthia’s nose caught at once an appetizing smell coming from the kitchen of the apartment.

“Hmm, this smells good! What are you preparing for supper, Dean?”

“A Cajun seafood three course meal. I however kept the spicing to a moderate level: I wouldn’t want to put a nice girl like you on fire, right?”

The 24 year-old blonde grinned at his choice of words.

“And what tells you that I am not already on fire, Dean?”

Dean’s smile widened and he stepped closer to her, but still didn’t touch her.

“Well, we could discuss about that later, Cynthia. Would you like to drink something? I have a bottle of nice chilled rosé wine.”

“The rosé wine will do just fine, Dean.”

“Then, make yourself comfortable on the sofa while I prepare our drinks.”

Sitting in the black leather sofa of the lounge, Cynthia looked around at the decoration of the room as Dean disappeared in his kitchen. There were actually few decorations in the lounge, with an old flintlock pistol hooked on a wall being the most prominent object in sight. There were also a few small framed pictures, one showing a graying couple and another showing a smiling Dean Price crouching besides an obviously dead bear and holding a big revolver. Cynthia pointed the last picture to Dean when he returned with two cups of wine in his hands.

“You are a hunter, Dean?”

“Yup!” Said proudly her host while handing her a cup before sitting down besides her on the sofa. “I bagged that big sucker in Alaska last Fall. One shot right through the heart as it stood on its rear legs to try to scare me away.”

“It must take quite a powerful gun to kill a beast like that, no?”

“Effectively! I used my new Smith & Wesson Model 500 revolver, chambered for the .500 Smith & Wesson Magnum caliber. When you have a big Grizzly this close to you, you better make sure to kill it quickly if you don’t want to be shredded to pieces.”

Cynthia shivered at the thought of finding herself facing such a beast.

“I must say that I would probably run away in panic if faced with a big bear like that.”

“Then, you would end up dead.” Said Dean in a more sober tone. “Running away from an attacking bear is about the worst thing you could do and bears can run faster than most men...or women. You either stand your ground while hiding your fear, or you climb up a tree solid enough that the bear can’t break it down.”

Cynthia then looked into Dean’s eyes, herself sobering down.

“Were you scared then, Dean?”

“Yes, a bit. A man who pretends to never be scared is either a liar or an idiot. That bear actually took me by surprise and came out from behind a big rock as I was pitching my tent for the night.”

His answer made Cynthia smile, while she patted his chest with her left hand.

“Many men I know would have pretended not to be scared. I like men who give honest answers.”

Dean smiled in turn and raised his cup of wine.

“Then, let’s drink to honest people.”

They knocked their glasses together and took a sip before Cynthia snuggled closer to Dean.

“Tell me more about you, Dean. I don’t even know yet what kind of work you do.”

“Oh, there isn’t much to it, really.” Lied Dean. “I am a security consultant for the State Department. I travel around the World and inspect and review the security plans of our various consulates and embassies.”

“So, that is why I see you so infrequently around this building. It sounds like an interesting job. Is it dangerous?”

“Sometimes, but my visits to our most threatened facilities are normally made in periods when things are relatively quiet. I do however see my share of crummy hotels and kamikaze taxis: the State Department can be quite stingy with its lower level employees.”

That made Cynthia giggle.

“I work as a junior political secretary for a senator, so I know what you mean about low level employees’ pay and benefits. Were you a soldier or a police officer before becoming a security consultant?”

“I spent eight years in the Army and served in Iraq and Afghanistan.” Answered Dean, neglecting to say that he actually had been part of the Green Berets, the special forces branch of the U.S. Army. Dean took a sip of his wine, then looked at his watch.

“I believe that supper should be about ready to serve. If you will please move to the dining room.”

Dean got up from the sofa with Cynthia and accompanied her to the adjacent dining room, gallantly pulling a chair for her and helping her sit before going to his pots and pans. He soon put a bowl of steaming soup on the table in front of Cynthia.

“Here you are, Miss Wilson: Cajun soup. Bon appétit!”

Much later, Cynthia sat back in her chair, both full and happy.

“My god! This must be the best supper I had in a long time. You should become a professional chef: you are easily good enough to become one.”

Dean smiled proudly at the compliment.

“Cooking is one of my favorite hobbies. I must also confess that I used some of my mother’s recipes from the bayous of Louisiana. She is a first class cook.”

"I'd say, judging by your own cooking. Decidedly, you are becoming more and more interesting, Dean: a handsome man who is also a top cook and who has seen the World. What else do you have lined up for me this evening?"

Dean's eyes lit up as he grinned in anticipation.

"Well, I was going to propose to you a little massage session, starting with a foot massage."

"Hmm, sounds nice. Let's see how well you do with that foot massage."

"Then, let's move to the master bedroom: you will be more comfortable lying on the bed while I massage your feet."

"Alright: show me the way."

Fourteen minutes later, Cynthia let out a sigh of contentment as Dean finished massaging her feet.

"God! This was so relaxing! You are an expert at this."

"Would you like a complete body massage, then?" Asked Dean softly, making Cynthia smile and nod her head.

"If the rest is as nice as the foot massage, then how could I pass on such an offer?"

"Then, I suggest that you go inside the bathroom to undress and put a towel around you before I start."

That got him a malicious look from the voluptuous blonde.

"Why go inside the bathroom for that?"

She then got up from the bed and started undressing, watched by an appreciative Dean. She was soon fully naked and laid belly down on the large beach towel Dean had spread on top of the bed. Grabbing a bottle of massaging oil and pouring some oil on his hands, Dean rubbed his hands together while smiling down at Cynthia.

"Well, time to take care properly of this splendid body of yours, Cynthia."

**06:00 (Washington Time)**

**Monday, May 25, 2015**

**Apartment 336**

The buzz from the alarm clock woke both Dean and Cynthia, with Dean taking his right hand off Cynthia's right breast in order to rub his eyes. Cynthia turned around

on the bed and kissed him on the lips, while her left hand went wandering under the bed sheet.

"A handsome man who is a first class cook, knows how to give good massages and is also good in bed... I should visit you more often, Dean."

"You are welcome to see me any time, Cynthia...when I am in town. I could phone you later tonight, once I know if I have to travel again overseas or not."

"Good idea! I will give you my phone number before leaving. Sorry if I must rush a bit: the morning traffic in downtown Washington can be a real killer."

"Don't I know that! Let me offer you a quick breakfast before you go, though."

"I won't say no to that."

About 25 minutes later, Cynthia was leaving the apartment after giving a last kiss to Dean, heading for her own apartment down the hallway in order to change and prepare for work. On his part, Dean showered and shaved and put on one of his customary dark suits, complete with sunglasses. His favorite every-day sidearm, a Desert Eagle semi-automatic, eight-shot capacity pistol in .44 Magnum caliber, took place in a left side shoulder holster hidden under his custom cut vest, while a compact snub-nosed Smith & Wesson ME .44 Magnum caliber backup revolver went in a discreet belt holster on his right side. A razor-sharp commando knife in an ankle scabbard completed his usual armament. He was about to walk out when an idea came to his mind, making him smile. Going to his bedroom for a couple of minutes, he came back out with a small, hard polymer briefcase in his right hand. Dean then left his apartment, taking the stairs instead of the elevators to go down to the underground garage of his building, where his latest pride, a red 2015 Chevrolet Corvette Z06, was parked. It had mostly emptied his savings account but it had proved well worth it, demonstrating top road performance while having a more luxurious interior than one would expect from an American muscle car, and that for only about 80,000 dollars. For an expert driver and car enthusiast like Dean, it had been love at first sight. It didn't hurt either that his new car attracted many pretty girls to him, since women were another important item of interest in his life.

Driving out of his underground garage, Dean turned on North Utah Street, then on Washington Boulevard, intent on taking Highway 120 North. As usual, traffic was quite heavy on the 120 for a Monday morning, but most of it was thankfully heading

south. After rolling for less than seven miles, Dean turned west on Highway 123, heading towards Langley. Another four miles and he was turning his red Corvette on the access road leading to the complex of the Central Intelligence Agency's headquarters. He soon joined the lineup of employees' cars waiting to pass the preliminary security checkpoint along the access road, showing his CIA identity card and badge to the armed guard there before rolling to one of the huge parking lots nearly surrounding the complex. Being a senior field agent, Dean had a reserved, numbered spot near the main building and pulled into it at twenty to eight. Shutting down his engine and stepping out of his car, he was locking it and was about to walk to the main entrance when his longtime partner, Erik Johnson, rolled into the adjacent parking spot to his right. Erik, a fit man standing five feet ten inches with medium length brown hair and a short, carefully trimmed beard, stepped out of his well used 2010 Ford Explorer SUV and went to Dean to shake his hand.

"How were your two weeks of leave, Dean?"

"Just fine, Erik. I finally was able to participate for the first time this year in a pistol shooting competition, which I won by the way. And you?"

Erik, a man with hard, penetrating brown eyes and a nearly inscrutable face, nodded once at the question.

"I did some fishing in Vermont and caught a few nice trout. Well, time to get back to work, I guess."

"Right! I am sure that plenty of stuff happened around the World while we took some time off. We will probably end up spending the whole morning going through the backlog of classified traffic."

"You can bet on that, Dean." Said Erik before looking at the hard briefcase in Dean's hand. "I suppose that this is not your lunch, right?"

"Hardly!" Replied his partner with a smirk. "I want to do some pistol practice today, after all these days off."

Erik shrugged at that, knowing what kind of handgun enthusiast Dean was, and didn't ask more questions about the briefcase.

The duo then walked together to the main entrance of the old CIA headquarters building and entered its main lobby, which was alive with the morning crowd of employees arriving for work and lining up to pass through the security turnstiles. Dean and Erik patiently waited in line for their turn to pass, showing their CIA badges to one of

the armed security guards checking on the newcomers. Once through, they walked towards the section lodging the Operations Division of the agency, passing through no less than four security checkpoints and coded access doors before entering the large, open office space where they and other field agents and analysts worked. That room had no windows and was rated as a Secure Contained Information Facility, or SCIF in short, a place where one could discuss highly classified subjects without the risk of eavesdropping or electronic retransmission to unauthorized persons. Those entering the room had in fact to hold a minimum security clearance of Top Secret in order to be given access to it. Since a recent reorganization of the CIA, the room no longer housed only field operations agents, but rather a mix of field agents, analysts and subject matter experts assigned to work as a team, sharing their various talents and skills. Erik had approved that reorganization with enthusiasm, seeing in it a long needed step to improve operational efficiency at the agency. Their particular joint section was also a special one that took care of especially difficult or sensitive tasks and missions overseas, a section which answered directly to the Assistant Director for Operations, Julian Moore.

Exchanging greetings with the other CIA employees they passed by, Dean and Erik arrived at their work desks, with a thin, unimpressive-looking young man smiling on seeing them and waving a hand in the air from his own desk, set nearby.

“Hey! You are back from leave! How was it, guys?”

“Just nice!” Answered Dean first, shaking hands with Ian Dorset. “I went hunting in Alaska and bagged among other things one of the biggest grizzly bears you could think of.”

“Good for you! And you, Erik?”

Erik smiled at the young analyst, whom he valued a lot as a team member. While the complete opposite of what an action agent would look like, Ian Dorset was a true genius as both an intelligence analyst and as a computer and electronics expert. His expertise, knowledge, quick thinking and problem resolution capacity had often meant success for the missions on which he was employed. Because of that, it was easy for Erik to excuse the somewhat nerdish personality traits of Ian.

“It was a good one indeed: I went fishing in Upper Vermont State and caught some nice ones.”

“And could we hope to help you eat these soon, Erik?”

"It will depend on our caseload, Ian. I froze my catches for the time being. When we have some free time, I will get Dean to show off his culinary skills by cooking those fish for the group."

"Sounds like a plan." Said Ian approvingly, who knew how good a cook Dean was.

"So, how much shit happened around the World while we were trying to forget about it, Ian?"

"Oh, the usual. The Middle East is its customary shit pit, with civil wars continuing in Syria, Iraq and Yemen and with Islamic fundamentalists destabilizing most of Northern and Central Africa, while the Taliban is quite active still around Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Europe, indications are that Putin is not finished yet with the Ukraine, despite all his claims of wanting peace there. There are also indications that he may soon sow trouble as well around the Baltic States. Of particular interest to us is the situation concerning ISIS<sup>1</sup>, or Daesh if you prefer, in Syria and Iraq. It is deepening more and more the rift between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the area and many Arab states in the region are becoming increasingly irritated by the not so covert role Iran is playing in Iraq in raising militias there to fight ISIS. With Saudi Arabia and other Arab states combining forces to counter the Shia rebellion in Yemen, the whole Middle East could soon become a Sunni versus Shia battlefield. You can imagine how bad this could turn out."

Dean made a grimace at those words.

"With so-called devout Muslims ready to blow up even mosques and kill other fellow Muslims during prayer time while screaming 'GOD IS GREAT!', that could be quite a bloodbath indeed. Couldn't we find a way to divert those damn arctic jet streams that have been freezing our northern states last Winter and send them to the Middle East? That would cool down their fighting spirits over there."

"Well, my parents living in Boston certainly wouldn't mind that one bit, I suspect, but no luck on that, big guy. Anyway, I will let you read through your traffic backlog, since you probably have enough lecture there to easily fill your day."

Dean sighed at that but sat nonetheless at his desk and started his computer. To be an effective clandestine agent, one needed to acquire and keep a nearly encyclopedic

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<sup>1</sup> ISIS : Islamic State in Syria and the Levant. Is trying to form a modern day Islamic caliphate in Syria and Iraq.

knowledge of history, events and actors concerning the various areas of interest, on top of knowing at least the basic local customs and mores. If you could also learn the local language, it was even better. The lack of such basic knowledge and skills on the part of CIA executives and operatives during the first decades of the agency after the Second World War had resulted in many badly bungled or misguided operations, particularly around the Middle East and South and Central America. That lack of professionalism and the stubborn refusal to understand the fact that American values and ways were far from universal in their appeal to far-flung, non-Christian populations, had caused long-term damage to American interests in many countries, contrary to what may have been intended at first. Iran was a perfect case in point, where a coup organized by both Great Britain and the United States in 1953 had toppled the local, democratically-elected government and replaced it with a monarchy that soon ruled through arbitrary arrests and torture of political opponents. That had eventually resulted in the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which had brought to power the mullahs, who were still in control in Iran today.

Dean had been reading on his computer for over one hour when Erik spoke up from his adjacent desk.

"Hey, Dean, have you read yet the classified weekly personnel report?"

"Uh, not yet. What about it?"

"Go to the second item of that report. Two of our agents were murdered in Cadiz, Spain, two days ago. Unfortunately, the relevant information has been compartmentalized and is not available in the report."

Curious and worried at once, Dean opened the said report and started reading the second item on the menu. While far from unprecedented, the death on duty of CIA clandestine agents was not a daily occurrence and, when it happened, was often an indicator that something bad was brewing. The terseness of the report made Dean frown nearly at once.

"Hell, this says nearly next to nothing, apart from the fact that our two agents were on a mission in the Cadiz area and were found dead on Saturday. Their mission must have been a sensitive one indeed for the facts to be covered up like this."

"Agreed!" Replied Erik before looking at Ian Dorset, who was typing on his computer two desks away.

"Hey, Ian! Do you know anything about the reported death of two of our agents in Cadiz on Saturday?"

"I do! I took the liberty of looking at the relevant file when I first read about those deaths. Basically, those two agents, who were from our Madrid section, were investigating a possible case of weapons trafficking involving a so-called retired Russian tycoon living in Cadiz. Our agents were severely tortured before being executed with bullets to the head. Their bodies were found by the local police in a ditch outside Cadiz. The report didn't say more at the time."

Dean and Erik exchanged glances then: arms trafficking was a ruthless business and also an ever expanding one, as the number of wars, both declared and undeclared, around the World seemed to grow constantly.

"Do you have the name of that 'retired' Russian tycoon by chance, Ian?" Asked Erik. Before Ian could answer, a female voice made them all look towards the desk of Julie Prost, an analyst, linguist and subject matter expert that worked in the same special joint section as Dean, Erik and Ian. Julie was widely acknowledged to be a near genius, with encyclopedic knowledge of the Middle East in general and of weapons trafficking and Islamic extremists groups in particular. However, one thing Julie was not was a beauty: while not truly ugly, no man would call her even pretty in the least. She was physically fit, being built like the proverbial matron, but her square face, prominent chin and large nose gave her a nearly masculine profile. One could in fact be excused to think at first sight that she was a transvestite or a transgender person. More than one CIA employee had compared her, in her back of course, to the ex-prime minister of Israel, Golda Meir. Thanks to her physical attributes, Julie was probably the only CIA female employee less than forty years old and working in Langley that Dean Price had not tried to date.

"Viktor Grashev is an ex-SVR officer who retired from Russian government service about seven years ago and went to live in Cadiz, where he officially runs an import-export business. In reality, he is suspected of heading a very active weapons trafficking network based in Cadiz. Most of his clients are from around the Middle East, which is why I took a special interest on him. I don't know if Grashev is the culprit in the death of our two agents, but I can assure you that he is one very mean bastard."

"What else do you know about that Grashev, Julie?" Asked Dean just before Erik could. In response, Julie took a file out of one of the piles of documents on her desk and got up, walking to Dean's desk and putting down the file on it.

"This is what we know about him. He is said to be an old friend of President Putin and is supposedly still very chummy with him. He is thus able to call in quite a few

favors in Moscow from time to time. In return, he is a believer in the old Soviet regime, like Putin, and is rumored to help Moscow's agenda around the World with his arms trafficking network. While the details of the mission given to our dead agents have not been released yet, I suspect that Grashev's links with Moscow attracted our attention on him."

"And why would the details of that mission be kept confidential still, even at our level, Julie?" Asked Erik, frowning. "Is somebody trying to cover something up?"

"I can't say for sure, Erik, but my feeling is that someone goofed and that some higher up is trying to hide possible mistakes or shortcomings in the mission. I unfortunately can't speculate further at this time: the facts that were released were slim indeed."

Erik had to contain his anger and irritation then: this would not be the first time by far that some CIA senior officer would try to hide his mistakes, typically by blaming the field agents who had paid the price for those mistakes. He already had a bad feeling about this Cadiz affair but, as long as he would not be directly assigned to follow up on it, he would not be able to dig into it on his own authority. He thus reluctantly nodded his head, acknowledging the information from Julie.

"Very well. Please tell me if you see anything new about this case, Julie."

"I will be happy to do that, Erik."

As Dean was reading the file on Viktor Grashev, Erik switched his computer to the personnel files of the CIA and quickly reviewed the files of the two agents killed in Cadiz. One was an experienced old hand that Erik had met a few times in the past and who had an exemplary service record. He was not the kind of man to fall easily into some trap or to commit serious mistakes during clandestine missions. His partner was a much more junior agent but was still highly rated and was no idiot, according to his previous field assessments. Somehow, Erik suspected that someone else goofed. Either that or they had faced a truly dangerous adversary. Dean was soon finished with Grashev's file and passed it to Erik, who eagerly started reading it. The file was actually rather thin when it concerned the post-retirement life of Grashev in Spain, but his service history with the SVR was in comparison well documented. The man had been the head of the Middle East division of the SVR, with the rank of Colonel General when he had retired and was said to have directed many crucial operations in the region during the 1990s and early 2000s. He was credited with speaking a fluent Arabic, on top

of English and French, and was said to be by now reasonably fluent in Spanish as well. What attracted the attention of Erik was the part describing him as a cold, calculating psychopath who had not hesitated in the past in doing some of the dirty work himself. Concentrating back on Grachev's years in Spain, Erik was troubled by a couple of things and looked up at Julie, who had returned to her desk.

"Julie, if that guy is such an active arms dealer and has such connections in Moscow, how come we took an interest in him only now? According to this file, this was the first time that we have investigated him directly, or tried to."

Julie sat back in her chair, thoughtful, before answering him.

"Erik, please understand that arms dealers with customers around the Middle East are nearly a dime a dozen right now. Also, due to budgetary restrictions, our clandestine operations have been somewhat curtailed in the past few years, with a big chunk of what was left disappearing in the black hole called 'The War on Terror'. It seems that, as a consequence, there were not enough resources available left to properly check on this Grachev before. I however agree with you that something big must have pushed someone in finally looking at him. Unfortunately, I don't have any information on what may have prompted that new attention on Grachev."

"Yet, we now have lost two good field agents, killed in a most brutal way." Said Erik, frustrated. There was however little he could do about it, while Spain was a very quiet place compared to many other spots in the World. He thus did his best to forget about that case and concentrated on reading the rest of the backlog of classified information on his computer.

At about eleven in the morning, Dean stretched his body in his chair before getting up with a grunt.

"Damn, my eyes are straining with all that reading on a computer screen. How about a little pistol shooting session before lunch to stretch our muscles a bit, Erik?"

"Not a bad idea, actually. In fact, I need the training after that two-week fishing vacation. Let's go!"

Grabbing from a drawer of his desk a small bag containing some 9mm pistol ammunition, a cleaning kit and a pair of ear defenders, Erik was about to walk out when he noticed that Dean had grabbed the hard briefcase he had brought with him in the morning, on top of his own pistol gear bag.

"What's in the briefcase, Dean?"

His question attracted a malicious grin on his partner's face.

"My latest acquisition. It did marvels at putting back in their places my opponents at the Fairbanks metallic silhouette target shooting competition."

Erik didn't ask further about it then, but strongly suspected that it would be another hand cannon of the type Dean loved to shoot. For the big Louisiana native, anything under the caliber of .44 Magnum was considered a 'sissy's gun', while a .357 Magnum handgun would pass as a barely acceptable minimum. As for the 9mm Sig Sauer P226 pistol favored by Erik, it had attracted countless snide remarks and jokes from Dean.

Walking out of the Operations Division sector, the duo followed a series of long hallways, eventually arriving at the underground shooting range of the headquarters complex. There was actually more than one distinct shooting range, as agents had to train with submachine gun and assault rifles on top of practicing pistol shooting. The pistol range, with its long gallery of individual shooting positions and its remotely-controlled target frames suspended from overhead rails, was only partially occupied at this hour, to Erik's satisfaction: they were not going to have to wait before being able to start their practice. As for Dean, he smiled on eyeing the dozen or so men and women busy shooting up targets.

"Hey, look at that, Erik: the sissies from the Administrative Division are here, practicing with their peashooters."

More than a few of the so-called 'sissies' gave black looks at Dean then, as the latter had been quite loud when making his remark. Dean then chose a shooting position three places away from the nearest Administrative Division agent and put down his hard briefcase on the table of his shooting stand while smiling to Erik.

"We might as well keep some distance from these guys, in case of lost bullets that could hit our own targets."

Erik couldn't help smile on seeing the looks that these words attracted on Dean.

"Maybe their bullets won't even make it to our own targets: some of these guys are firing .38 Special snub nose revolvers, while a lady near the end is firing a .22 caliber pistol, I believe."

"Tsk tsk! Such amateurs..." Said Dean while adjusting his ear defenders. He then opened his briefcase, revealing a pair of huge revolvers that made even Erik's eyes open wide. Both were obviously of the same make and model, but one had a long ten inch barrel, while the other had a four inch barrel supplemented by a muzzle climb

compensator. Dean grabbed with nearly loving tenderness the revolver with the ten inch barrel and, after opening its cylinder to show that it was empty, handed it to Erik, whose hand dropped a bit under the 76 ounces of the gun.

"You are now holding the most powerful commercially-produced handgun in the World: the Smith & Wesson Model 500 five-shot, .500 Magnum caliber revolver. It has three times the muzzle energy of a .44 Magnum revolver and seven times that of a 9mm pistol. I could drop a man at 200 yards with it and I was able to kill in one shot a Grizzly bear charging me. I however am going to practice with the four inch barrel model today, as I already fired the longer one a lot while in Alaska."

Taking back the big revolver from Erik, Dean then took out the shorter barreled one and opened a box of ammunition, extracting five rounds from it. Erik held his breath on seeing them: those five rounds nearly filled Dean's hand, which was far from being small. As Dean loaded his revolver while grinning like an idiot, Erik quickly made sure that his ear defenders were correctly in place, then waited for Dean to start firing first. The nearest Administrative Division agent was aiming his 9mm pistol and was about to fire when a monstrous blast and concussion shook the whole shooting range.

## **BOOM**

The Administrative Division agent jerked and fired prematurely his own shot, while a female agent four positions down shrieked, terrorized by the deafening detonation. Shocked and stunned, she turned her head to look at Dean as the latter was about to fire a second time.

## **BOOM**

The female agent saw a nearly three foot-long tongue of flame come out of Dean's revolver muzzle when the shot was fired, with more flames coming out upwards from the end of the barrel. The armored windows of the pistol range rattled under the concussion, prompting the range master into nearly running to Dean.

"Hey, what the hell are you shooting with, mister?"

"A Smith & Wesson Model 500 revolver in .500 Magnum caliber. This range is advertized as being authorized for use with all handgun calibers, no?"

"Uh, correct." Admitted the flustered range master while eyeing the huge revolver. Himself a gun enthusiast, he then watched as Dean fired another three rounds, then eyed with glee the gun as it was unloaded. Erik started firing his own pistol

at that time, using the respite to concentrate on his shooting while the range master was with Dean.

"That is a magnificent piece you got there, mister."

"Please, call me Dean." Said Dean, beaming with pride and satisfaction. "Here, you can handle it while I retrieve my target and patch it up."

The range master took a few seconds to examine the gun, then looked at Dean's target, which had travelled back to the firing position on its overhead rail under the power of its electric motor. Despite having been positioned at a distance of thirty yards, the maximum distance the range size permitted, the five shots had printed a tight grouping right in the center of the target.

"A two inch grouping at thirty yards with a revolver? Wow! That's some incredible shooting, Dean!"

"You should see what its big brother here in the case could do at 200 yards. Would you like to try it?"

"Hell yes! Uh, you don't mind that, do you?"

"Of course not! Here, take my spot."

As the happy range master loaded five rounds in the revolver, Dean smiled to Erik, speaking in a low voice.

"Another convert made on the altar of magnum power."

Erik smiled as well in amusement and nearly laughed when the agents from the Administrative Division quit in disgust as the range master started firing the giant revolver, packing away their guns and gear and walking out of the range with black looks towards Dean. They thus ended up having the whole pistol range to themselves for the rest of their practice, with Erik firing during the intervals taken by Dean to patch his target. After a forty minute shooting practice and after cleaning their guns, the duo left for lunch, going to the big central cafeteria of the complex.

Dean and Erik were back at their desks, finishing to read their backlog of reports, when Erik's desk telephone rang. For reasons of electronic security, all portable phones and electronic devices had to be switched off while in the secure area, leaving only desk telephones, fixed computers and intercom loudspeakers as general communications means. Erik grabbed the handset and spoke up in his usual calm voice.

"Johnson speaking!"

He then heard the voice of Assistant Director Julian Moore, the boss of the Joint Special Section and one of the top executives at the CIA.

“Erik, have Dean, Ian and Julie Prost come with you to my office at once: I have a field mission for you.”

“We are on our way, sir.” Replied Erik before hanging up and speaking out loud while looking around him. “Dean, Ian, Julie: come with me to Mister Moore’s office!” Still taking the time to lock the access to their respective computers and to put away their paper files before leaving their desks, the three men and one woman hurried out of the secure section, going up three levels and walking down a long hallway before arriving at the executives section of the headquarters. Julie smirked as she eyed the apparently brand-new carpeting evident around the executives section.

“I see that the budget cuts didn’t affect the refurbishing projects in this section.”

“What did you expect, Julie?” Replied Ian Dorset, looking very nerd-like with his glasses and pocket pen protector. “That they would lower themselves to the level of us common mortals?”

“Come on, guys!” Chided Erik. “You know that Julian Moore is an ex-field agent and that he truly respects us all.”

“He is an okay guy, that’s for sure.” Recognized Julie. They then walked into the office of Moore’s secretary, a mature but still pretty woman in her forties who greeted them with a wide smile.

“Please go in right away, lady and gentlemen: Mister Moore is waiting for you.”

The group walked into a relatively large office that included a low coffee table and sofas in one corner. Julian Moore, a tall, jovial man with a bit of a pot belly and receding hairline, got up from behind his desk at once and walked around it to come shake the hands of his four employees.

“Thank you for coming this fast. Please, let’s sit around the coffee table: we will be more comfortable to discuss business.”

“Thank you, sir.” Replied Erik, who was the unofficial leader of his group, apart from being one of the most experienced field action agents at the CIA. It also had partly to do with the fact that he once had been a junior officer in the U.S. Navy S.E.A.L.<sup>2</sup>s

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Navy S.E.A.L.s : For Sea, Air, Land. The special forces component of the American Navy and considered to be one of the top elite military units in the World, if not the top.

before joining the CIA. The group sat on the sofas around the table before Moore spoke again, looking at them with gravity.

“By now, I suppose that you all read about the deaths of Jack Sleeman and Tom Partridge in Cadiz, correct?”

“We have, Mister Moore.” Answered Erik. “We also couldn’t help note the lack of details in the report concerning their deaths. Are we going to investigate that case, sir?”

“Yes! The lack of detail in the report you saw was due to the fact that little information had filtered out from Spain...until now. Let’s say that the Madrid Chief of Station<sup>3</sup> was rather slow in responding to our requests for additional info once the deaths of our two agents became known. In fact, I suspect that Mister Ronald Atkins is trying to hide something about this case, maybe even incompetence on his part that may have caused the compromising of our agents. I however don’t have enough yet to justify his recall to Washington. I have thus decided to send in an independent team that will stay unknown to our Madrid station and that will answer only to me. If Atkins somehow learns about you and tries to pull rank on you or interferes with your mission, then tell him to go screw himself, with my compliments. Now, for the case itself...”

Moore then distributed around the table four copies of a file, keeping a copy for himself.

“This is what prompted the initiation of Sleeman’s and Partridge’s mission. Very sensitive sources in the Middle East have alerted us that Viktor Grashev, a retired SVR officer presently living in Spain, where he is said to direct an important arms trafficking network, may have been asked to provide advanced portable surface-to-air missiles to ISIS, the Islamic fundamentalists presently trying to grab Syria and Iraq and turn them into a modern-day Islamic caliphate. Now, with the intensive bombing campaign we and a number of allied nations are presently conducting against ISIS, you can imagine the impact that deliveries of such modern portable SAMs could have if provided to ISIS in any significant numbers. At the least, it would render any helicopter support mission or low level bombing mission very dangerous for our pilots. You all know what our pilots could expect if shot down and captured by ISIS.”

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<sup>3</sup> Chief of Station : Title given by the CIA to its senior agent in command of a clandestine network in a given country or location.

All four nodded grimly their heads, still remembering how an unlucky Jordanian pilot had been captured, then burned alive by ISIS while held in a steel cage. Moore then continued.

“There were also unverified information saying that, on top of portable SAMs, ISIS is looking for other various advanced weapons systems. One unconfirmed report has designated Grashev as having been approached by an ISIS representative, to which Grashev would supposedly have promised that he could deliver the advanced weapons systems in question. While I will agree with you that this makes for a lot of unsubstantiated information, just the possibility that Grashev could eventually find such systems and sell them to the ISIS is a very troubling one, a possibility that is in fact making the President very concerned. As you know, the whole region is like a tinderbox right now, with Saudi-led Arab forces now fighting Shi’ite rebels in Yemen, rebels that are supported by Iran, and with Iraq in real danger of blowing up into its various ethnic parts, while Syria is in the fifth year of its civil war. There is a very real possibility that this whole mess could turn into a regional war between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Apart from the horrific human costs of such a regional war, you can also imagine the effect that it would have on the oil industry in the Middle East...and the worldwide economy. If ISIS somehow manages to return on the offensive because of newer and better weapons, then such a regional war will become even more possible. It is thus imperative that any deliveries of such weapons to ISIS be stopped or prevented, and this as soon as possible. This is where you will be coming into play. The four of you will leave for Spain as soon as you are ready to go and will fly to our naval station in Rota, just a few miles from Cadiz, in an Air Force transport plane. That way, you will be able to enter Spain with all your weapons and equipment without having to pass through Spanish customs. Rota is actually a joint American-Spanish base, but the Spaniards do not scrutinize what we bring to Rota from the United States. I am presently in the process of coming to an understanding with Naval Intelligence, so that it will provide you with a secure, protected location inside our naval station there that you will be able to use as a safe house for your operations in and around Cadiz. That location will also benefit from coming already equipped with protected lines to secure, encrypted long distance communications means. Your team will thus be able to keep constant, secure contact with Langley. By contrast, no contact at all will be made with our Madrid section for the time being: as long as I am not sure that it was not compromised, I prefer to leave it in the dark about this operation.”

Erik nodded his head then, satisfied up to now by what he had heard. There were however a couple of points that bothered him a bit.

“Sir, your entry plan and basing scheme in Spain sounds excellent, but I have a couple of questions for you at this point.”

Moore nodded his head in turn.

“Go ahead, Erik. Don’t be afraid to be frank with me, as always.”

“Thank you, sir. First, while I don’t mean any disrespect to Ian or Julie here, the point is that they are analysts and technicians, not field-trained action agents. They could be at risk in Spain, especially in view of the kind of ruthless opponent we may be facing. On the other hand, me and Dean are accustomed to operate alone, by ourselves.”

“I understand perfectly your objections about this, Erik, and would normally agree with you. However, the prospect of a well defended, secure base location inside the Rota Naval Station will negate the risks that Ian and Julie would normally face. In turn, that will leave them free to provide you instant analytical, linguistic and computer support to you as you operate in and around Cadiz with Dean. Your team will in fact be equipped with some of our most advanced spyware available here in Langley. Anything else?”

“Yes, sir. Who will provide close protection and access control to that safe house of ours in Rota?”

“The package I am negotiating right now with Naval Intelligence includes a close protection detail of Marines, plus a Navy SEAL team on standby in case you need some truly heavy duty support. Know that this mission, while kept secret from our own section in Spain, has the full support of the President himself, who has strongly enjoined the Chief of Naval Operations and his Director of Naval Intelligence to fully cooperate with us...while asking the minimum of questions.”

Erik, like Dean and the two others, smiled at the mention of the Navy SEAL team on standby: you truly couldn’t get better field support than that.

“In that case, sir, we will start preparing right away, sir.”

## **CHAPTER 2 – ESPAÑA**

**16:26 (Madrid Time)**

**Tuesday, May 26, 2015**

**Naval Station Rota Air Terminal**

**Southern coast of Spain**

Carrying their personal bags, the four members of the team walked down the ramp of the big C-17A cargo aircraft, finally stepping on the tarmac of the military airfield servicing the Rota Naval Station. The day was a typical one you would expect in Southern Spain in May: sunny and hot. A young and very pretty female navy lieutenant that had been waiting with two Marines at the foot of the ramp greeted them with a smile and a handshake.

“Welcome to Rota, lady and gentlemen. I am Lieutenant Jennifer Wells, Assistant Intelligence Officer at COMNAVACTSPAIN<sup>4</sup> Headquarters, and I was tasked with greeting you and guiding you to your accommodations. I am also tasked to help you as much as I can during your mission in Spain and to serve as your liaison officer as needed with the Spanish Navy, which is technically in control of this station. With me are Staff Sergeant Chris Rohmer and Corporal Dave Hatfield, who are part of the Marine squad attached to your team as a close protection force.”

Erik smiled back in turn at the small brunette in tan summer uniform while shaking her hand.

“And my name is Erik. My partners are Dean, Julie and Ian.”

The brunette didn't miss the fact that Erik had not given family names, nor did she miss the appreciative glint in Dean's eyes as he was examining her. The two other newcomers were however not like what she would have expected from CIA agents on a field mission. One was a rather dumpy and nearly ugly mature woman, while the other screamed 'Nerd' from ten feet away. The two first ones however were much more typical of CIA paramilitary agents.

“We have our vehicles nearby. If you are ready, I will guide you to your assigned facilities.”

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<sup>4</sup> COMNAVACTSPAIN : Commander, U.S. Naval Activities Spain.

“Thank you, Lieutenant, but let us first bring out our equipment: it won’t be long.”

“We can help you with that, sir.” Volunteered the Marine staff sergeant, making Erik nod with appreciation.

“Thank you, Sergeant. We have a total of two crates to take out of the plane.”

If Jennifer Wells was hoping to see what the team’s equipment consisted of, she was soon disappointed, as the two big polymer crates brought out had no markings on them. The Marine corporal then ran to his vehicle, an extended cab pickup truck, to roll it closer to the aircraft’s rear cargo ramp. Loading the backpacks, kit bags, briefcases and equipment crates of the team in the truck took only a couple of minutes, time that Jennifer Wells took to go get her navy staff car. Erik and Julie took place in her car, while Dean, Ian and the two Marines went in the pickup truck. Erik smiled to Jennifer, who was driving, as she started rolling away from the cargo plane that had brought his team to Spain.

“So, where will we be located on this base? I understand that it is a joint facility with the Spaniards. I hope that the Spanish Navy will not come to pay us a visit while my team is at work, Lieutenant?”

“Don’t worry about that, mister: the Spaniards may in theory control this base with us, but we actually pay all the bills, so the Spaniards tend to let us do our things pretty much without interference in the parts of the station that we occupy. To answer your first question, your team will have a number of rooms to itself inside the old decommissioned VLF antenna complex of the Naval Security Group Activity, situated just besides this airfield. While the VLF array itself has been dismantled years ago, the building complex in the center of the array’s grounds that housed the signal analysis and cryptanalyst crews is still standing and functional. At its peak, it housed over 1,500 specialists. Now, only a handful of communications specialists still work there but the main building still has hard, protected communications lines and satellite antennas. The lodging facilities in it for your team will be somewhat Spartan, but the place has the benefit of being completely secure and is well isolated from the other installations on the station. For one thing, the Spaniards never set foot in there, unless formally invited by us for an official visit.”

“That sounds perfect to me, Lieutenant.” Replied Erik, truly satisfied by this. Jennifer Wells then glanced quickly at him.

"I was told next to nothing about the mission given to your team in Spain, mister, except that it was vital for our national security and that the Navy would give your team full cooperation and support."

"Unfortunately, I can't tell you more at this time, Lieutenant. Men already died because of suspected leaks here in Spain and our mission is strictly compartmented. I do want to tell you however that the Navy's help is highly appreciated by me and my team."

"Thank you, mister."

"Please, just call me Erik. We may be staying anonymous with you but there is no need to stay so formal. Can I call you Jennifer when in private?"

"I don't have a problem with that...Erik. Your big partner, Dean I believe, gave me the impression that he found me pleasant. Should I expect advances from him soon?"

That made Erik grin with amusement.

"Normally, yes, as he loves female company. However, he is a consummate professional: while on duty, he can stay as cold as an ice cube, even in front of a naked young woman."

"Oh! Too bad: he is quite handsome, actually."

Erik didn't reply to that, his attention attracted to a still distant group of buildings standing by themselves in the center of a large, paved round area. That area was huge, with a diameter of nearly a half mile. Only one road crossed that area to link the group of buildings with the road circling the Rota Naval Station. From afar, it looked to him like a perfect base location for his team.

Erik was soon able to better detail the buildings as the two vehicles transporting him and his team turned on the single road crossing the round, paved area around the buildings. The main building, made of white concrete blocks, had three levels and sported a number of small satellite communication antennas on its roof, while the few annexes closely surrounding it had one or two levels. A tall water tower stood just behind the main building, while an empty parking lot was located just outside the paved circle. Erik noticed a few dozen cars parked in front of the main building, besides the main entrance to it.

"How many people exactly still work in this building, Jennifer? Are their offices close to ours?"

“Don’t worry about them becoming indiscreet, Erik.” Replied the young naval officer. “Less than 150 specialists and staff members from Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron Two still work inside this building and their offices are on the opposite side from the wing you will occupy. They were also told not to venture near your wing and to keep their mouths shut about your team’s presence here. The Marines that will provide close protection to your facilities have orders not to let anyone, save me and my superiors, approach your team. That Marine squad is already in place and our security specialists made sure that no bugs have been hidden by anyone.”

“Excellent!” Simply said Erik. However, despite Jennifer’s assurances, he was already planning to fully sweep for electronic eavesdropping devices the rooms assigned to his team: one was never cautious enough in the line of work he was in. He didn’t speak further until they had stopped their vehicles near the main entrance and were stepping out on the concrete pavement.

“Would it be possible to get a couple of cargo plates for our kit, Jennifer?”  
As a response, Jennifer looked at Staff Sergeant Rohmer and gave him a curt order.

“Sergeant, have two of your men bring cargo plates to the main entrance.”

“Right away, maam!” Responded the Marine NCO before switching on the microphone of his portable VHF radio and speaking in it. Erik and his teammates used that time to start taking out of the Marine pickup truck their personal kits and two equipment crates. Jennifer Wells would probably have been shocked by the sophistication of the electronic equipment contained in one of the crates, while the arsenal inside the second crate would have attracted a few envious remarks from Sergeant Rohmer. Julian Moore had not lied when he had promised to provide to the team the best equipment available in Langley, some of which was still unknown to other U.S. government agencies. Two Marines, in combat uniform and fully armed, soon showed up, each one pushing a large cargo plate mounted on castor wheels. The team’s luggage was quickly loaded on the plates, which then followed the group inside the main building. After a short trip down a large but deserted hallway, the group entered a cargo elevator and went up to the top floor, where they exited and followed another deserted hallway. Erik nodded in appreciation when they passed a Marine standing behind an improvised sentry post located at a right angle turn at the end of the hallway, his M16A2 at the ready. Another Marine sentry was visible at the other end of the new corridor, while two Marines stood beside a door on one side of the hallway. Like in the case of the two corner sentry posts, their posts were provided with improvised

protective parapets made of concrete blocks piled up three-deep. Any attempted assault by some enemy commandos against the team's facilities was bound to prove costly to attackers, something that made Erik feel much reassured now. Nodding to the two Marines guarding the door, Jennifer entered a large, mostly empty room that had four windows to one side and five doors connecting with adjacent rooms. The only furniture in the room consisted of six work desks with swivel chairs on wheels and one large table surrounded by six chairs, plus two steel filing cabinets.

"This room was chosen to become your main working area. The five doors along the side walls give on four offices, now empty except for beds and lockers, and on one bathroom. The windows are covered with a fine metallic mesh that prevents any electronic signal from within the room to be detected and intercepted from the outside. All the wiring, like in the rest of the building, is contained inside protective pipes, while each wired network is widely separated from each other. This was built like this because of its original goal of serving as an office for cryptanalysts and code breakers and the room is still certified as safe for the handling of classified materiel of up to and including 'Top Secret Codeword'. You will find a number of wall connection boxes near the work desks that are linked to roof-mounted satellite communications antennas or to secure telephone land lines. There are as well two steel filing cabinets on which you will be able to put padlocks of your own in order to store your papers. I hope that this will satisfy your needs, lady and gentlemen."

"Uh, would it be possible to install a small table with a coffee machine, a microwave oven, a hot plate and a small refrigerator in here, Lieutenant?" Asked Dean Price, attracting a smile on Jennifer's face.

"All that and more is already available in the room opposite this one, which is used as a guard room by the Marine squad assigned to your team. Since they have no classified equipment in their room, the Marines also enjoy the benefit of a large color television connected to a cable service. You will thus be able to relax and watch American news and programs during your breaks."

"That is if we manage to have time for breaks during this mission." Said Julie Prost while eyeing the setup in the team's room. That prompted Jennifer into looking cautiously at Erik.

"And may I ask how long this mission of yours could go on, Erik?"

"Hopefully, two weeks at the most. If it goes much further than that, then that will mean that we probably failed and that our target has slipped away. I'm sorry if I can't tell

you more but this whole thing is very sensitive, with very dramatic possible consequences in case of failure.”

Jennifer eyed him for a moment before nodding her head.

“Very well! Do you need anything else at this time?”

“I have two questions, actually. First, how can we contact you quickly?”

In response, Jennifer took out a calling card and quickly scribbled a number on its back before giving it to Erik.

“Here is my calling card. I wrote on its back my confidential number at work. You will find a secure telephone in the Marines guard room, along with a base directory. In case of a real emergency, Sergeant Rohmer can call instantly for reinforcements via his own encrypted portable radio. What is your second question?”

“We will need to rent cars during our stay. Where could we go for that?”

“The station’s Navy Exchange has a car rental office, with a couple dozen cars to choose from. One of Sergeant Rohmer’s Marines could drive one of you there when you will need it.”

“Excellent! Be sure that I will commend the Navy’s assistance to our superiors once we are back in the States.”

“Glad to be of help. Well, I will now let you alone, so that you can set up your things. Don’t hesitate to call me or to ask Sergeant Rohmer if you need anything else.”

“Will do! Thanks again, Jennifer.”

The young intelligence officer was about to leave when she hesitated and stopped, turning to face Erik again.

“Uh, by what name do I designate you and your team to my superiors? I’m afraid that just ‘Erik’ won’t do with them.”

Erik smiled, understanding her problem.

“My codename in the CIA is ‘Sparrow’, while Dean’s codename is ‘Stryker’. The codename for our team on this mission is the Nemesis Team.”

“Nemesis... Right!”

Jennifer then walked out with her Marines, leaving the team alone in their new setting.

Erik’s first action once Jennifer and the Marines were gone was to make a silent gesture to his teammates, who understood at once what he wanted done. As they opened the crate containing their electronic equipment and took out of it detectors meant to find eavesdropping devices, Erik visited quickly the five adjacent rooms attached to

the main working office. The four offices turned into bedrooms were small but adequate, while the plumbing in the bathroom was functional but also typical of the 1960s, when the complex had been built. Returning in the main room, he went to Dean and put one hand on his left forearm, making him stop.

"I will take care of this here, Dean. Go get a Marine to drive you right now to the Navy Exchange, so that you could rent a car before the rental office closes for the day. And please rent a four-seat sedan instead of some convertible muscle car: we may need to fit all of us in it in case of an emergency. You may however choose a model with an opening sunroof if you find one."

If Dean was disappointed by that directive, he didn't show it and gave his bug detector to Erik before walking out. The latter then assisted Ian and Julie in thoroughly checking their rooms for electronic spyware. After twenty minutes of checking, Erik was convinced that the rooms were safe for their use and switched to the task of unpacking and storing their personal kits and equipment. Once he was finished with his own kit, Erik went to see Ian, who was unpacking and hooking up to secure feeds their computers and communications gear with the help of Julie.

"Ian, I will be across the hallway for a moment, talking with Sergeant Rohmer."

"No problem, Erik. We should have at least one computer station in place here and linked to Langley within ten minutes."

"Excellent! I won't be long."

Going out in the hallway and closing the door behind him, Erik briefly nodded to the two Marines guarding his suite before going to the door on the opposite wall of the hallway and knocking on it. A muffled welcome answered him nearly immediately and he pushed open the door, walking inside a large room similar to that given to his team but furnished differently, with sofas, a table with chairs, a large flat screen television set and a kitchen with a small refrigerator and a microwave oven. Two Marines were present in the room, one of whom was Staff Sergeant Rohmer. Erik walked to the table, where Rohmer was writing some notes on a pad, and sat facing the lean Marine in his early thirties.

"Could we talk in private for a minute, Sergeant?"

"Of course, sir!" Replied at once the Marine NCO before looking at his soldier present in the room. "Neil, could you leave us alone for a moment?"

"Sure, Sarge!"

As soon as the Marine had disappeared in one of the side rooms and had closed the door behind him, Erik spoke to Rohmer in a low voice, his face reflecting seriousness.

“Sergeant, what were you told about my team and how to interact with it?”

“Uh, basically that me and my men were to provide close protection to your team and its facilities here and also to filter the visitors that would show up on our floor.”

“And who were you told to let pass?”

“Lieutenant Wells or any of her superiors from COMNAVACTSPAIN Headquarters, plus my own superiors. Is that okay with you, sir?”

The frown that appeared on Erik’s face told him at once that it was not.

“Sergeant, that makes for way too many people to my taste. Please understand that our mission has been deemed critical to our national security and that secrecy and discretion is paramount. Just knowing about the presence of my team here is already too much, except in the case of a very few senior officers here, plus Lieutenant Wells. In particular, I won’t appreciate visits by senior officers whose sole intent would be to claim their authority to watch over my operations around Cadiz. Thus, I would like you to brief your Marines and tell them to stick to the following rules: first, except for Lieutenant Wells and for her immediate superior, the Intelligence Officer at COMNAVACTSPAIN, any military visitor will have to get the approval of me or one of my team members before he or she can enter our work area. I don’t care if it is an admiral: he or she will still have to wait for our approval before being given access to our main room. Anybody who ignores that rule and tries to barge in will have to be stopped by your Marines, by force if need be.”

“But, you can’t expect my Marines to turn away an admiral, sir?”

“I actually do expect exactly that if that admiral becomes too pushy or nosy, Sergeant. Know that both the Chief of Naval Operations and the Undersecretary for the Navy signed a letter in support of my team’s mission. That letter specifies clearly that only the officers with a strict need to know verified by me will be allowed contact with my team. That same letter also says that any Navy personnel is to assist my team to the maximum extent possible if asked to, and that without any questions asked in return. Here is a certified copy of that letter.”

Rohmer took the folded letter that Erik had just taken out of one pocket of his jacket and read it quickly. What he saw made him give a bewildered look at Erik.

“Damn, your mission must be really important to elicit such heavyweight support from the Navy. Do you have any other rules about access control, sir?”

“Yes, I do! My second rule is simple: no civilian visitors! Even if they claim to be CIA employees, diplomatic couriers or technicians sent to repair some of our equipment, turn them away. In fact, no civilian government employee in Spain is supposed to know about our presence here, thus such claimants may very well be hostile agents and should be treated with utter suspicion. If you have any doubt, ask one of my team members. Lastly, and most importantly, no Spaniard is to be given access to our work area, for any reason. I don’t care if that Spaniard is the rear admiral commanding this base. If visitors ask questions about our presence, your men are to say simply that they can’t answer. They are then to verify the identity of those visitors and to note down their names and claimed positions, along with the time of the visit and any detail about them that could be pertinent security wise.”

“Hell, this sounds even tighter than access control at the White House.”

That attracted a disillusioned smile on Erik’s face.

“Well, I wouldn’t use that place as an example of tight security right now if I were you, Sergeant. Swiss cheese has less holes in it than the White House security these days.”

“Right!” Said Rohmer, smirking, while giving back the letter to Erik. “I will brief my men at once on your access rules and will emphasize to them that there are to be no exceptions to them. I actually suspect that some of my men will secretly enjoy being able to tell, politely of course, some senior officers to fuck off.”

That in turn made Erik smile in amusement.

“Yeah, I can imagine that, Sergeant. One last thing: tell your men to forget what they see and hear on this floor. Blabbing about my team while in some local bar may get them in big trouble, if you see what I mean.”

“Oh, I hear you on that, sir.”

Rohmer then watched Erik get up and leave the guard room. Turning in his chair, he looked outside through one of the windows while his mind reviewed the rules just laid out by the CIA man. He didn’t even dare to try guessing at this time what kind of mission that secretive team was here for.

Dean Price was back in the team’s office at a bit past six in the evening, two pizza boxes and a large brown paper bag in his hands.

“Hi guys! I brought supper, for those of you whose stomach is not too upset by jet lag.”

“Goodie!” Exclaimed Ian Dorset, eyeing hungrily the pizza boxes. “My stomach doesn’t feel like its supper time, but it sure feels like lunch time.”

On her part, Julie Prost didn’t waste time either in joining the others at the table, on which Dean had put the pizza boxes and the paper bag, from which he was extracting a collection of soda cans, plastic utensils and paper napkins. Dean showed a set of car keys to Erik as he was sitting down at the table.

“I rented a Nissan Murano SV with electric sunroof. It has a decent V-6 engine in it and has plenty of space for four persons.”

“It will do.” Replied Erik. “Under what name did you rent it?”

“I identified myself at the rental office as Don Wilder, a Department of Defense civilian contractor.”

Erik nodded, satisfied. Himself and the other members of his team all had come to Spain with multiple sets of fake identities, backed up with top quality false passports and complete sets of driver’s licenses, social identity cards and bank and credit cards. They also had plenty of cash money with them, in order to leave as little of a paper or electronic trail behind them if they had to move around Europe...or the Middle East. One of Erik’s false identities for the mission was also as a DoD civilian contractor, this one named Eric Manning. The four of them started eating the pizzas with gusto, with Dean speaking again after three minutes.

“So, Erik, how do we proceed from now on?”

“I believe that a discrete preliminary reconnaissance from afar of Graschev’s residence is in order. We will also go examine the warehouse belonging to him in the Santa Maria commercial port area. If given the chance, we will install a few of our remotely-controlled surveillance cameras near both the residence and the warehouse. We will then play it as it goes from there. We will use our DoD contractors identities for the time being and will carry only compact, concealable weapons: no big holster rigs, big guy, sorry!”

Dean sighed at those last words.

“But I feel naked without my Desert Eagle. Could we at the least hide heavier weapons in the car trunk, in case of trouble?”

“That we can do, although I fervently wish that we don’t attract attention right away. We may have to watch that Graschev for a while before getting clues about his weapons trafficking business. However, I am confident that surveillance of his residence and of his warehouse should lead us to something solid: this guy is not in the business

of peddling only a few pistols or rifles at a time and he needs a large, secure facility to receive, repack and ship large shipments. Julie, I will need you to dig into the business history of his import-export company. See if he regularly uses specific cargo ships to transport his official goods. Also, check for the recent arrival in Cadiz or near future planned departure of cargo ships from Cadiz towards Middle Eastern or Turkish ports. If you could gain access to the port's traffic schedule, even better. Keep your computer link hidden, though."

"Of course, Erik!" Replied Julie, faking indignation. "I am not in the habit of searching for dirty linen on the Internet with an IP address that screams 'CIA'. Your little weasel here showed me quite a few tricks about this in the past couple of years."

Ian grinned on hearing that, his mouth full of pizza.

"She ain't bad now...for an amateur."

"An amateur?! I was punching computer keys when you were still in diapers."

"Maybe, but you're still an amateur compared to me."

"Uh oh!" Said Dean, grinning himself. "It's 'Nerd vs Geek' again!"

"Enough about that, children." Gently chided Erik. "Ian, for your penitence, you will dig into Grashev's recent telephone and computer communications, on top of his banking transactions. Watch in particular for contacts with the Middle East or with Islamic groups. Once we will have that background data and will have his residence and warehouse under remote visual surveillance, we will then institute a round-the-clock watch of Grashev, so start thinking about some staggered sleep time soon, people."

They took about twenty minutes to eat, then went at their respective tasks. While Julie and Ian worked on their computers, Erik and Dean took out of their electronic equipment crate a few select items, then put those items in a large sports bag. Another sports bag was filled with backup weapons and spare ammunition. A digital still camera with zoom lens and concealed body radio sets with earphones and special sunglasses completed their equipment for their planned evening outing. Dean smiled to Erik after putting on his own sunglasses, which had polarizing lenses.

"Don't I look like the typical American tourist?"

Erik glanced at him but simply smiled. The sunglasses he and Dean were wearing were far from normal ones. In reality, their stylish frames hid a micro CCD camera connected to a radio transmitter also embedded in the frame. With those sunglasses, what he or Dean saw could be sent by radio to the team's work place inside the naval station, via a

separate amplifier and transmitter unit that would be hidden in their rental car or transported on their persons. Erik and Dean could also use them to discreetly take still pictures of persons they encountered, to run them later through a sophisticated face recognition program. Those sunglasses were a recent addition to the CIA bag of tricks and had been developed and designed, like other items, following suggestions by Erik and Dean, based on their past field experience. Their present mission was in fact going to be a first for many pieces of equipment they had brought from the United States today.

At about seven in the evening, with still two and a half hours of daylight left, Erik and Dean walked out of their top floor office and went down to their rental car, parked near the main entrance. With Dean taking place behind the driver's wheel, they were soon leaving the base by the western main gate, taking the A-491 highway that went around the base and heading east. Dean turned south on Highway A-4 after a few miles, now heading directly to Cadiz. From what they knew, Viktor Grashev had chosen to build for himself a residence in the area of Puerto Real, east of the Cadiz Peninsula, where housing was much less crowded and constricted than in the old Cadiz itself. That coastal area was also nearer to the port of Santa Maria, across the bay from Cadiz, where Grashev had a warehouse in the name of his company, 'Meridian Import-Export'. With Erik carefully navigating for Dean with the help of a detailed local road map bought at the Navy Exchange, the duo soon took the CA-32 Highway that paralleled the Rio San Pedro, west of Puerto Real. They then went off the highway and on a secondary road that ran through a mostly denuded, semi-arid alluvial plain area. Another turn and Dean was driving down a dirt and gravel road leading to the San Pedro River. Once he entered a patch of trees, he slowed down, then turned off the road and parked behind a clump of trees before looking at Erik.

"Time to change our registration plates."

Erik nodded and got out with Dean to help him: such a procedure was standard for them when doing discreet surveillance or scouting. It took them only a few minutes to do that job, exchanging the American plates for fake Spanish civilian ones. Once that was done, the duo sat back in the car and drove back on the dirt road.

Finding and identifying Grashev's villa was not hard, since they had studied detailed, high resolution overhead satellite pictures of it in Langley before leaving for

Spain. Grachev had his new retirement residence purpose-built for him in a deserted patch of land along the eastern bank of the Rio San Pedro, about a mile north of the campus of the Puerto Real University. The location was not as nice as other locations further south along the Rio San Pedro, having a muddy shore rather than a sandy beach, but it was well away from any preying eyes and was easy to secure. The villa itself, built only a few years ago along Grachev's own specifications, was a near fortress, despite its stylish Mediterranean architecture. Dean and Erik did not drive down the gravel road that led directly to the Russian's house, using instead another dirt road about 300 yards to the South. Once near the banks of the Rio San Pedro, Dean again turned off the road and parked his car inside a clump of trees, with the two agents stepping out at once. While Dean kept watch around them, Erik took out the bag full of special electronic equipment, then looked at his partner.

"I'm going to approach Grachev's villa in order to find good spots to install our surveillance gear. Keep an eye on the car in the meantime."

"Got it!"

Walking quickly at first through the trees as he went north, Erik slowed down and crouched once he started to be able to see the villa through the trees. Now using to the maximum the vegetation cover, he stopped a few yards short of the tree line and examined carefully the residence. It was surrounded by a ten foot-high brick security wall on three sides, with a strong steel main entrance gate on the western side. Between the perimeter wall and the tree line stood a good fifty yards of open terrain. Erik didn't see the equivalent of guard towers, but the top floor of the villa was high enough to allow watchers on its roof to have an excellent view all around the residence. A peep through the zoom lens of his digital camera showed two such watchers actually positioned on the roof of the villa and using binoculars to look around. Thinking that there may well be more, Erik shifted his attention to the perimeter wall itself and the tree line. He had a mean smile when he spotted the two surveillance cameras fixed to the external face of the wall, one each at the corners of it: with those two cameras, anyone approaching the wall and hoping to use it to be out of sight of the rooftop watchers would be in for a rude shock. This was not a surprise however, considering that Grachev had been a top Russian security service agent and officer before retiring: the man had to know about every trick in the book and apparently had the money to offer himself a top quality level of personal security. Now concentrating on the house itself, Erik noted the

four-car garage attached to the main building, the large swimming pool in the back, near the riverbank, and what had to be a small gardener's shed near the pool. Having now seen enough to be able to choose spots for his equipment, Erik cautiously moved closer to the river, staying inside the tree line, until he found a large, solid tree that would offer a good view of the back of the villa. With his equipment back slung in his back, he deftly climbed the tree until he stood on one of the main branches, with a gap in the foliage giving him a view of the residence and of its grounds. Erik then went to work, taking out first a directional radio scanner set on the frequencies of cellular telephone and pointing it at the villa before fixing it solidly in place with dark green duct tape. Next was a swivel-mounted miniature video camera with dual day/night lenses and remote control pointing, which he also taped in place after carefully choosing its anchoring spot in order to give it the best possible field of view. Both the directional radio scanner and the remotely-controlled camera were then connected to a specially designed relay/transmitter/power pack unit that was placed well out of sight, among the branches and leaves. Erik connected in turn that unit to a solar array panel made of dull gray mesh that would be hard to spot, fixing that panel against the southern side of the tree trunk, at a height of maybe ten feet. His final task was to carefully point upward the small, dark green satellite dish antenna atop the relay unit, so that it would be in line with one of the American Department of Defense geostationary communications satellites in orbit over Europe. He then switched on the whole system and used his own cell phone to call Ian Dorset in Rota.

"Hello, Hacker Boy? This is Sparrow. Please check if you are receiving correctly the signals from Zombie Station One."

"One moment, please." Replied Ian, who was then silent for half a minute before speaking again. "I confirm that I am receiving good quality signals from Zombie One. I am going to test the remote control function of the video unit now."

Erik smiled with satisfaction when he saw the swivel-mounted surveillance miniature camera rotate from left to right, then up and down.

"I confirm that you have control of Zombie One, Hacker Boy. I am now going to find a spot to install Zombie Station Two. Will call you back then."

Cautiously climbing down from his tree in order not to attract the attention of the rooftop watchers, Erik then walked eastward at a crouch, in order to find another tree that would give him a good observation spot to watch the front of the residence. He

found such a tree about 120 yards away from the first one and climbed in it. Repeating the work done at the first station, activating the system and confirming a good receipt of the signal by Ian took him about half an hour, by which time the Sun was low on the horizon. It was time for him to go back to the car and go to their next spot of interest. With his remotely-controlled sensors in place here, his team was going to have the same surveillance capability as a much larger group of field agents, while putting less of his people at risk. That suited Erik just fine, as he never risked the lives of other agents without some very good reasons, contrary to some CIA executives and chiefs of stations he knew.

Returning to the car and sitting back in it, he had Dean drive back to the CA-32 Highway, going north towards the nearby port city of Santa Maria. As they were rolling, Erik thought about their next target, the warehouse of the Meridian Import-Export Company. Dean seemed to guess what he was thinking about and glanced at him while driving.

“How do you plan to proceed with Grashev’s warehouse, Erik?”

“Well, we definitely need to install some remotely-controlled cameras to watch the warehouse and adjoining quays, but that place is harder to approach discreetly in daylight than Grashev’s villa. The place is in the middle of a vast paved surface with no cover but that of the occasional piles of crates and containers around it. As for the warehouse itself, if Grashev is truly into weapons trafficking, it is liable to be watched by some armed guards. I think that we will need to wait until darkness before sneaking in.”

“We could place our cameras atop the roof of the nearest adjacent warehouse, which is probably not guarded by armed men.”

“Hum, not a bad idea at all, Dean: it would give us a good observation point from a low risk building. I buy that! We will just drive by the port area once in Santa Maria and take pictures from a distance of the warehouse and of any ship docked in proximity to it. Then, we will spend a couple of hours in the town of Santa Maria itself, playing tourists while waiting for the proper hour to get inside the port.”

Dean smiled at the last sentence and gave another glance at Erik.

“How about going to shop for some really good bottles of sherry wine while in Santa Maria? The town is reputed to be the center of production for the best sherry wine in the World.”

“Why not? We might as well turn our visit there into something pleasant.”

The duo was soon driving into the small town of about 50,000 inhabitants, following the N-IV Highway until hitting the exit for the Avenida Catalina Santos La Guachi, on which they turned south. Now going through a residential area, Erik readied his camera with zoom lens as Dean drove parallel to a road connected to the port area. A right turn led them to that port access road, on which they turned left, rolling through a semi-arid area with a few sparse trees along the sides. It then made a ninety degree curve towards the port after a few hundred yards. Now rolling at a moderate speed, Dean examined the port area carefully as he was approaching it. There was a large fuel depot area ahead and on the right side of the road, where six big oil reservoirs sat, along with a pumping station and a couple of other buildings. To the front left, behind a large swath of arid, bare ground, sat the quays and warehouses of the port inlet area. The Meridian Import-Export warehouse was actually the first in a row of five identical buildings, with a wide paved surface on its side facing the Northeast, where a few piles of containers and rows of parked small boats and yachts on trailers were located. There were only three cargo ships tied to the quays adjacent to the warehouses, with one ship situated right in front of the Meridian Company warehouse.

“You see that ship docked close to the Meridian warehouse, Erik? It is actually in the process of unloading containers on the quay.”

“I see it! I will try to get a few good pictures of it once we are closer.” Replied his partner. “Did you notice how little activity there is in the port?”

“Yeah! Spain’s economy is in the doldrums, has been so for years now. It is normal that it would be reflected in its maritime traffic. You want to roll by it?”

“Yes! Go to the T-junction at the end of this road and turn left.”

“Got it!”

Dean was passing by a patch of woods on his left and approaching the T-junction when his eyes caught on a gray sedan car’s bumper that stuck out from behind one of the trees.

“Heads up! Gray car visible among the trees to our front left.”

“Keep driving and don’t change your speed.” Urged at once Erik, before reclining his seat to a near prone position. He then raised his camera, aiming it from behind Dean’s seat and clicking a series of pictures of the parked sedan as they passed by it from a distance of at most fifteen yards.

"I saw one man waiting behind the wheel. My bet is that he is waiting for someone, a someone that could very well be presently observing the same warehouse that is of interest to us."

"Competition on this case? Hell, did that Atkins idiot in Madrid send a second team here without telling Langley?"

"If he did that, then he will be able to kiss his job goodbye. That car had a Spanish rental plate and I was able to take a fair picture of it."

"What do I do now?"

"Turn left at the T-junction and roll towards the Meridian Company warehouse but keep your speed low and constant. I really need to take a good picture of that ship near the warehouse."

Turning left as directed after doing a stop, Dean drove down the road that paralleled the row of warehouses and the quays, rolling for 200 yards before passing in front of a small hut of some sort that stood on one side of the entrance to the warehouse's lot. Erik used that opportunity to take a few pictures of the ship and of the warehouse, playing with his zoom lens to read the name of the ship on its stern.

"The 'Nikolai Vorontsov!'" He announced to his partner. "It is flying the Russian flag and is designated as home-ported in Saint-Petersburg."

"Did you notice that security camera installed on the roof of that hut by the side of the entrance road to the warehouse?"

"I did! We've seen enough for now. Turn left on the dirt track leading back to town and let's go into the town proper, where we will have supper at a restaurant and shop a bit before returning to this area."

"That's fine with me." Replied Dean. "I am really curious to see who was in that gray sedan hidden among the trees."

"We will know soon enough." Replied Erik, his mind in high gear.

In the gray Fiat sedan parked among the trees in sight of the Meridian Company warehouse, the driver, a beefy man with a square jaw and wearing a cheap suit, had noticed the passing Nissan Murano and had followed it visually with the help of his rear view mirror until the Murano rolled out of his sight. Thankfully, the occupants of that car didn't seem to take notice of his Fiat. He debated mentally for a moment before deciding not to call his partner about this: Farah would not be happy to be disturbed in her observation work for such a minor thing. Bored by the long wait, the driver rolled down

his window and lit up a cigarette. Thankfully he had a still half-full thermos bottle of strong coffee to help him stay awake and alert during this dull but important work.

Dean stopped and parked the Nissan Murano in the parking lot of a restaurant on Avenida de la Paz, close to one of the two wide sandy beaches that attracted tourists to Santa Maria. Before stepping out to go inside the restaurant, Erik took out his cell phone and called Ian Dorset in Rota. The analyst and technician answered within two rings.

"Hacker Boy here!"

"This is Sparrow: go green!"

"Going green now!"

Erik then selected the hidden encryption mode embedded in his CIA cell phone and switched it on. His conversation with Ian would now be scrambled electronically according to a powerful algorithm, making it unintelligible to anyone eavesdropping on it.

"I am green now. How do you hear me, Hacker Boy?"

"Loud and clear, Sparrow. Where are you now?"

"Me and Stryker are in Santa Maria and about to go eat supper in a local restaurant. We just passed by the Meridian warehouse and took pictures of it, along with pictures of a ship docked near it. The ship is the 'Nikolai Vorontsov', a cargo ship apparently home-ported in Saint-Petersburg and flying the Russian flag. It is presently unloading a number of sea containers on the quay. Could you do some checks on that ship? Also, we saw what appeared to be a suspicious car hidden among trees near the target warehouse, with one man inside. It may be a competing surveillance team also interested in Grashev's business."

"Do you have its make and plate registration number?"

"I do! One moment, please."

Taking his digital camera, Erik reviewed on its display screen the photos he had taken, stopping on the one showing the gray Fiat's behind.

"The car is a gray Fiat sedan, Spanish plate number 455 BGW. Call me if you find something about it or about the Nikolai Vorontsov."

"Will do! Have a good supper!"

"Thank you! I will call you if I get more info for you."

Closing his cell phone, Erik then smiled to his partner, who had been waiting patiently for him before stepping out.

"Sorry for the delay, Dean. We can now go sample the local food."

Dean grinned and rubbed his hands together then.

“Excellent! Let’s see if they make a good paella here.”

“You probably already cook a better paella than about anyone in Spain, Dean.”

“So? I like to try the recipes from local chefs: I sometimes learn a few culinary secrets from them that way. Anyway, let’s go eat: I’m starving!”

Still wearing their special sunglasses, the two agents got out of their car and walked to the main entrance of the restaurant, which advertized fine Spanish cuisine. Going inside, they saw at once that the dining room was nearly full, with most of the patrons looking like tourists from all over the globe. A maître d’ led them to the corner table that Erik asked for, which was both away from the bay windows and near an emergency exit. That table also had the benefit of being at least one table away from the nearest patrons, in this case a German family of five with small children. Dean lost no time and ordered a royal paella for two after a quick look at the menu, along with two glasses of Sangria, practicing his Spanish in the process. As the waiter that had taken their order walked away, Dean bent forward and spoke in a low voice to Erik.

“If not our people from the Madrid office, who do you think could be the persons we saw near the warehouse?”

“Hell, the choice is rather vast, Dean. It could be the Spanish ONS<sup>5</sup>, which could be trying to find out why two Americans were found tortured and executed near here. It could be INTERPOL<sup>6</sup>, which probably suspects that Grachev is dealing in weapons trafficking. It could also be one from a number of Middle Eastern countries, including Israel and Syria, that would want to foil any major weapons delivery to the ISIS. If too many people get to learn about this possible arms deal, this case could become a real crab’s nest.”

“Hum, sounds fun!” Quipped Dean as a joke. In reality, he realized too well how complicated or bloody this affair could turn out to be. Two CIA agents were already dead because of it and whoever had killed them had demonstrated that they were playing for keeps. He then stayed silent, waiting for their food but also staying alert and

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<sup>5</sup> ONS : Oficina Nacional de Seguridad. The Spanish government’s security apparatus.

<sup>6</sup> INTERPOL : International Police. An international organization linking the polices of numerous countries around the World and that prosecutes cases across international borders at the request of its member countries. Based in France.

scanning discreetly with his eyes the other people in the restaurant and the movements in the adjacent parking lot. Their drinks then arrived after a few minutes, followed fifteen minutes later by their paella. Dean sniffed with delight the smell coming up from his plate before taking a bite. Closing his eyes, he let his taste buds register for a moment the mix of spices in the recipe while masticating his food before giving a thumbs up sign to Erik.

“A very good paella. This chef knows his business.”

Erik, who had waited for his verdict, smiled and picked up his fork. They had been eating for maybe ten minutes when Erik’s cell phone vibrated, making him put down his fork and wipe his mouth while taking out his phone. He spoke in a low voice to Dean after one look at the display screen of his phone.

“It’s Ian! He probably has some info for us.”

Raising his cell phone to his ear after pressing the ‘talk’ button, he turned his head towards the nearest wall, away from the other customers in the restaurant.

“Sparrow, here! What do you have for us, Hacker Boy?”

“A few things. First, though, we need to go green on this.”

“Going green now!”

Erik activated his cell phone encryption mode, then spoke in it.

“I am green now. Speak!”

“First, about that car you spotted near the warehouse. It was rented at the Madrid Airport yesterday by a Rafik Shamoun, supposedly a Lebanese citizen from Beirut, who paid cash for the rental. I hacked the Madrid Airport recent arrivals lists and found no mentions of that Rafik Shamoun. It thus is probably a fake identity. I also took the liberty of checking our roster of agents in Spain and none of them could pass convincingly as a Middle East native. Whoever you saw was thus most probably not one of ours.”

“That already simplifies things significantly for us, Ian, as I was getting afraid of ending in a friendly fire incident. Since that Shamoun seemingly arrived only yesterday, then chances that he and his possible partners were implicated in the deaths of our two agents are slim. We thus have confirmation of a third, unknown party being interested in this affair. Advise Langley of that after our conversation ends.”

“Will do! Now, about that Nikolai Vorontsov. According to the manifest submitted by that ship’s captain to the Puerto Bahia Cadiz authorities, it transported a cargo of powdered titanium metal, drums of lubricants, heavy duty industrial pumps,

canned fish, crates of vodka bottles and large spools of steel wires and copper wires, all due to be offloaded here in Cadiz. It is due to then depart Cadiz in three days to return to Russia with a cargo of olive oil, sherry wine and fresh fruits, all purchased by the Meridian Import-Export Company for the benefit of a Saint-Petersburg company. One thing of interest about the Nikolai Vorontsov is that it has been suspected for some time already of occasionally being used covertly by the Russian government to deliver sensitive or illicit cargo to hot destinations. The last such occasion was one year ago, when it delivered combat aircraft spare parts to the Syrian government via the port of Tartus.”

“That certainly makes it a good candidate as a carrier for the weapons requested by the ISIS.”

“Agreed! However, while the Nikolai Vorontsov possibly brought in Cadiz the weapons wanted by Grachev and the ISIS, I believe that another ship will take care of delivering these weapons to the Middle East. To sail for another destination opposite to its stated one would attract too much attention on the Nikolai Vorontsov. I thus hacked the list of scheduled cargo ship arrivals in Cadiz for the next few days. Two ships are due in Santa Maria during the next ten days, one of which is due to tie up at the quay next to the Meridian Company warehouse. That ship, the MV Heraklion, is a Greek-flagged ship and is due to arrive in four days, next Saturday. It is returning to the Mediterranean after delivering a cargo of fresh fruits to Norway. There is however still no list available of what the Heraklion is due to load in Santa Maria, or to where it is heading after Cadiz.”

“It certainly sounds like a possible carrier for the weapons that interest us, Ian. What else do you know about that ship?”

“That it is a 5,800 ton cargo ship, was built sixteen years ago and belongs to the Stavropoulos Shipping Company based in Athens. That shipping company has by the way a rather spotty history and has been implicated in the past in a number of questionable deals. Basically, it is said to be ready to transport anything without questions, as long as you pay the right price.”

“I see! We will certainly keep an eye for that MV Heraklion. Continue to check periodically the cargo manifests from Santa Maria during the next few days, to see if we can learn what it is supposed to carry and to where.”

“I will keep my fingers playing on my keyboard, Sparrow.”

“Good! Anything else of interest that we should know about?”

"Not for the moment. When are you planning to return to Rota?"

"Later tonight: we still have to go install a surveillance camera near the Meridian Company warehouse. Once that is done, we will come back for some sleep time. I am going red now."

Erik then closed the link and looked at Dean, who was waiting expectantly.

"Ilan had some new information for us."

He then resumed in a low voice what he had just heard, making Dean nod his head at the end.

"I agree that this MV Heraklion is a good candidate as the possible future carrier of those weapons, if there are indeed weapons on the way to ISIS. However, if the Nikolai Vorontsov brought the weapons here from Russia, we may want to find out in advance what exactly it brought for ISIS before it is reloaded on the Heraklion. For all that we know now, which is basically a bunch of suppositions and rumors, this could be something as insignificant as a few crates of rifles and small arms ammunition, in which case we are wasting our time here."

"I somehow doubt that, Dean: you don't torture and execute two CIA agents for a few AK-47s. Also, Grachev doesn't strike me as the small potatoes kind of dealer. He was able after all to have a villa worth over a million dollars built here to his specifications. No, if a weapons shipment arrived on the Nikolai Vorontsov, then I expect it to be a large, valuable one. If we have a chance to sneak in that warehouse tonight after placing our surveillance camera, we will take it to examine what came from the ship."

"Got it!"

They took their time in finishing their supper, as darkness wouldn't arrive before around ten in the evening. As they were leaving the restaurant after paying their bill, Dean eyed a nearby wine store with a big sign in its front window claiming to be selling the top brands of sherry wine in Spain. Stopping for a moment and looking at Erik, he pointed the store to him.

"Do you mind if I take a few minutes to go buy a couple of sherry bottles in there?"

Erik smiled, amused: Dean, apart from being an extremely efficient field agent, was definitely a certified gourmet.

"Why not? We still have plenty of time before it is dark. I will go wait in the car and will take that time to call Ian again."

Letting his partner walk to the wine store, Erik went back to their Nissan Murano and sat in the front passenger seat, then took out his cell phone and called Ian Dorset, going in encrypted mode once he had the analyst on the line.

"Anything of interest yet from our surveillance stations near Grashev's villa, Hacker Boy?"

"Not yet, but I have something new for you. Grashev checked by computer this afternoon on a secret Swiss bank account that he evidently owns. Since I was directly monitoring and recording his computer exchange with the said bank, I was then able to run that exchange through a decoding program. That program just finished breaking open the bank code. Hold on to your pants: someone transferred five hours ago a sum of 200 million Euros into Grashev's account."

Despite all his previous field experience, Erik couldn't help be stunned on hearing the amount involved.

"Two hundred million Euros? But, that's huge, even for an arms deal."

"It certainly is, Sparrow. Oracle says that, since ISIS hasn't got its requested weapons yet and since buyers of illegal weapons never pay the whole sum in advance, this must be only an advance payment for the weapons. Oracle believes that the full value of the present deal must be at least 400 million Euros...or more."

That left Erik speechless for a moment. Some nasty thoughts then sprouted in his mind as he reflected on the implications of such a huge clandestine weapons shipment.

"Hacker Boy, were you able to trace from where that money came from, and from whom?"

"From where: yes! It was wired from another secret account in another Swiss bank. While I have the number of that other secret account, I don't have the access code for it, nor the identity of the account owner."

"Alert Langley at once about those two accounts and about the transaction. Have it assign a computer team to keep those accounts on a permanent watch. I want to know in particular who owns that second Swiss bank account as soon as possible: we need to know who is financing such a huge weapons deal. There is no way that ISIS could come up by itself with such a sum. Somebody has to be backing that deal financially. Advise personally our boss and ask him to raise the priority of this case to

the highest level: so much money could help equip a whole army with the latest weapons on the market today.”

“I will do that right away, Sparrow. I... Wait! There is now more activity around Grashev’s Swiss bank account. From what our cell phone signal intercept unit is getting, it seems that Grashev is presently effecting a money transfer from that account. Hold the line for a moment!”

Erik complied with the request from Ian, realizing that something important was happening right now. That gave him more time to think about this whole affair and its possible implications. If what he was thinking was correct, then the geopolitical ramifications from this arms deal could create severe diplomatic and military shockwaves around the World. He thus waited patiently until Ian spoke again on the line, excitement detectable in his voice.

“Sparrow, Grashev just took 150 million Euros from his Swiss bank account and sent it to a bank account in Moscow. That bank account is known to us and belongs to the Russian SVR<sup>7</sup>!”

That made Erik sit back in his car seat.

“The SVR? Then, this is no private illicit arms deal: it is in reality a covert Russian government operation meant to provide advanced weapons to ISIS. Does that mean that Russia is also financing this whole deal?”

“I don’t think so. In the state the Russian economy is right now, with low oil prices and Western economic sanctions, a half billion Euros arms donation simply to support ISIS is too steep a price for the Russian government. While Moscow may have helped by providing access to advanced weapons and by shipping them to Cadiz, someone else has to be financing the deal. The money just transferred by Grashev to Moscow may simply be part of the payment to be made to the various Russian weapons manufacturers involved. If and when we will be able to identify the owner of the second Swiss bank account, we will then know who is financing this deal.”

“I think that you are right about this. Contact at once Langley and speak directly to our boss to brief him on all this. Tell him that it is imperative that our Madrid office not be put in the loop on this: if this leaks out prematurely, there is no way to predict the consequences of this affair.”

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<sup>7</sup> SVR : Sluzhba vneshney razvedki, the foreign intelligence service of the Russian Federation. The successor with the FSB (Russian Federal Security Service) to the defunct Soviet KGB.

"I'm on it right away! Going red now."

As Ian closed the line, Erik blew out some air to calm his mind a bit. An apparently happy Dean then came back to the car and put a cardboard box in the back before sitting behind the driver's wheel. His smile faded as soon as he saw the expression on his partner's face.

"Something's wrong, Erik?"

"You could say that. Ian was able to intercept a couple of bank transactions made via computer. The implications are truly mind boggling."

Erik then took a couple of minutes to expose to Dean what Ian had told him, plus the directives he had given in return to Ian. That left Dean to shake his head in bewilderment.

"The Russian government, helping ISIS in getting advanced weapons? Why would it do that? The Russians are presently supporting President Assad, who is an enemy of the ISIS."

"I'm not sure, Dean. Somebody may not be thinking straight in Moscow. That or Putin is even more bloody-minded than we thought already. Either way, our mission is now more important than ever. Apart from preventing ISIS from getting those weapons from Russia, we need to find who is the double-crossing bastard financing this deal. Be ready to get little sleep for the next few days, Dean."

"And I was so happy to have found those special vintage bottles of sherry. So, what do we do now? We still have a good hour of daylight left."

"We return to the port area, find a discreet place to park and hide the car within sight of the Meridian company warehouse, then wait there for the right time to go in."

"What if those guys in the gray Fiat are still around and observing the warehouse?"

"We will give them a wide berth for the time being and stay out of their sight. We will use the same dirt trail we used to exit the port area after passing by the warehouse, but this time to get in."

"Sounds like a plan." Simply said Dean before starting the engine and putting the transmission into gear. They then rolled out of the parking lot and headed back towards the port.

**21:45 (Madrid Time)**

**Port area, Santa Maria**

The Sun had set about ten minutes ago, with twilight due in another fifteen minutes, forcing Erik to switch from his regular binoculars to a large portable night vision telescope in order to continue watching from a distance the Meridian Company warehouse. Up to now, little had happened, except for the fact that a number of large crates and sea containers had been moved from the quay beside the Nikolai Vorontsov to inside Grashev's warehouse with the help of big forklift vehicles. Erik was about to wake up Dean, who was sleeping in the reclined front passenger seat, so that they could prepare for their foot infiltration, when his cell phone buzzed. Picking it up, Erik saw that it was Ian calling.

"Sparrow here!"

"This is Hacker Boy: go green!"

"Going green now!... Yes, what is happening now, Hacker Boy?"

"Two visitors just arrived by car at Grashev's villa. Oracle is presently running the car plate and visitors' faces through our programs to identify him. Those visitors were obviously expected, as the guards at the villa behaved politely towards them. We may have the weapons buyer's representatives paying a visit to Grashev."

"Which means that they are close to sending those weapons on their way to the Middle East. I bet that these representatives will want to personally inspect the weapons before they leave Spain."

"That would be logical, Sparrow. For 400 million Euros or more worth of weapons, I would too want assurances that I am not being fleeced by the Russians. Wait: Oracle wants to talk to you."

"Put her on the line, Hacker Boy." Said patiently Erik, who then saw Julie Prost's squarish face appear on the display screen of his cell phone. "What do you have for me, Oracle?"

"Grashev's visitors' identities, and you may not like it one bit."

"Try me!"

"Alright, here goes nothing! The car belongs to Prince Muhammad Bin al Rashid, a nephew of the present King of Saudi Arabia. Muhammad, who is also the Deputy Minister for Religious Affairs of Saudi Arabia, happens to have a large secondary residence in Madrid. His face also matches that of one of Grashev's visitors. As for the second visitor, he is apparently from the Middle East area but I still haven't got a match for his face. I will advise you as soon as I get a result about him."

"Do that, Oracle. You too, Hacker Boy. Be advise that me and Stryker are about to go out of the car and infiltrate on foot the area of the Meridian warehouse. We will call you once we are safely back in the car...or if the shit hits the fan. In the meantime, pass that info at once to our boss in Langley. Going red now."

Closing the link and looking at Dean, who had been awakened by the cell's buzz, Erik made a bitter smirk.

"We may just have found who is financing the weapons deal for ISIS: the Saudis."

"The Saudis?! Decidedly, this affair is becoming more and more nuts!"

"Sadly, it does start to make sense to me, Dean. While the present Saudi monarch is a relative moderate and is trying to slowly introduce reforms in his country, there is no lack of very powerful Saudi figures with hard-line or even extreme religious views ready to play in his back, especially after the recent shuffle in the succession line made by King Salman. ISIS is actually claiming to follow the teachings of Wahabism, the official, state-sanctioned hard-line variant of Islam that dominates in Saudi Arabia. ISIS is also a violent enemy of Shia Muslims, who are also considered blasphemers and stooges of Iran in Saudi Arabia. You also must know that many people in Saudi Arabia are less than fond of being allied with the United States. Remember who were the terrorists who slammed those airliners into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in 2001, or where Osama Bin Laden was born."

"Yeah!" Said Dean in a disgusted tone of voice. "They were all from the same country which is still flogging women for driving cars and stoning them to death for adultery. We certainly have had a talent in the past few decades for making some unsavory allies around the World."

"Our country has not been alone in this, Dean. Now, it is our job to help right some of this wrong. Maybe exposing the Saudis' role in this deal will push them into cleaning their house and mending their ways."

"Well, don't hold your breath on that, Erik."

"I'm not! I am simply trying not to be a complete pessimist. Enough about the political talk: let's get ready for our infiltration job. We will go in light reconnaissance mode. Pack the directional microphone on top of the remotely-controlled camera and cell phone signal intercept unit."

With each of them carrying a sports bag slung on their back, the two CIA paramilitary agents left their car, hidden in the middle of a dense group of bushes situated maybe eighty yards from the line of warehouses, and cautiously approached the road passing by the warehouses, using the vegetation cover to the maximum. The illumination from the floodlights mounted at interval between the warehouses, while mostly directed towards the quays, provided enough light to dispense with the use of night vision goggles. Crouching behind a bush just short of the road, Erik looked at the security camera mounted on top of the hut next to the warehouse: it was presently pointed away from them, while there were no guards or dock workers visible on this side of the warehouses.

“Time to run across the road, Dean.”

Both men crossed the road at a running crouch and went to hide in a large bush beside two small, derelict wooden fishing boats. They were now near the back of the warehouse adjacent to that which was of interest to them. Erik then pointed at the floodlight tower situated between the second and third warehouses.

“The base of that tower is out of sight from any guard standing on the quay side of the Meridian warehouse, while the tower itself is high enough to provide an excellent location for our snooping camera and antenna. I will climb in it to install our gear while you provide security near its base. Use only a silenced weapon if you need to use one.”

“My fateful .44 Magnum backup revolver has a good silencer. Don’t worry about that.”

Knowing that Dean could be fully counted on in tough or delicate situations, Erik then jogged silently to the floodlight tower that interested him, then started climbing the lattice structure of the mast as soon as he got to it, while Dean went to hide behind a large garbage bin nearby. There were no dock workers around at this late hour, something that made things a lot easier, while Erik would be out of the normal field of view of a sentry posted in front of Grachev’s warehouse. He was thus able to get to the level of the platform supporting the banks of floodlights without being seen. Stepping on the narrow platform and crouching behind a transformer box, Erik felt satisfaction as he eyed the view he had from his present position: it was a perfect spot to install his remotely-control surveillance camera and a cell phone intercept antenna unit. From up high, he could see two armed guards dressed in black coveralls standing near the large sliding doors on the side of the warehouse facing the quay. Contrasting with the lack of other security guards or watchmen around the other warehouses in the port, that constituted

one indicator by itself that the Meridian warehouse contained some very valuable goods. Opening his sports bag and taking out his electronic equipment and tools, Erik then worked quietly and quickly, installing and fixing in place his three sensors, their powerpack, the solar energy panel and the satellite retransmission dish antenna in 25 minutes. His last task before climbing back down was to orient and fix the dish antenna skyward, then to check that it was getting the proper satellite signal, with a short call made to Ian to verify that he was receiving the satellite feed correctly. Now satisfied with his work, Erik joined back Dean behind his garbage bin and spoke to him in a whisper.

"It's all done. Unfortunately, there are armed guards, professional-looking ones, guarding the accesses to Grachev's warehouse. Since it is too early to forcibly crash the place, I believe that we should call it a night and return to the car."

"I concur! There are no doors on the two sides nearer to us and the road, while the windows of the warehouse are a good twelve feet above ground level. We may have to quietly cut through a back wall whenever we will want to go in but that should be done as a last resort only, unless we want to alert Grachev that someone is again after him."

"True! Let's go back to the car."

Quiet as ghosts, the two agents returned to their car and put their equipment bags on the back seat, then sat inside. Dean didn't have to worry about his headlights automatically coming on when he started his engine, a standard feature installed at the factory on all modern commercial vehicles which could be very annoying to people like him when doing things like tailing another car or approaching a suspect's location. He had connected a small, CIA-made special electronic device to the lights' circuit right after renting the car. That device allowed him, via a small remote control box, to switch on or off at will the normal headlights circuit. When set to 'off', Dean could then drive without any lights showing outside his car. When he had to do that, like in this case, he simply put on a set of the latest and best night vision goggles available and drove on as if it was daylight. Erik, always the cautious and forward-thinking man, also put on a set of night vision goggles, so that he could help Dean in detecting any sign of trouble approaching. Backing out from the middle of the bushes, Dean then slowly rolled back to the dirt road they had used to come in, accelerating once he was on the road but keeping his speed moderate, in order not to create a cloud of dust that would show in the night. They were approaching the junction of the trail with the paved road connecting the port and the town when Erik quickly patted Dean's right arm.

“Quick, get off the trail and hide the car behind that bush on the right side, ahead of us.”

Knowing from experience that Erik was not the type to overreact or panic, Dean obeyed him without question, then looked at him after he had stopped the car behind the bush.

“What’s wrong, Erik?”

“That gray Fiat we saw before supper: it is still there, hidden behind the same trees as before.”

Looking in that direction, Dean effectively saw the Fiat in question through his night vision goggles. The man sitting in the driver’s seat of the Fiat stepped out of his car a few minutes later, apparently trying to stretch his legs. Dean took a moment to examine the man in detail.

“Medium height, about five foot nine but solidly built, hair cut short, with short beard. I would say that he has a Middle Easterner look to him. He also wears a cheap suit, with no tie and an open collar shirt. I make him as a simple minion, not as a person in charge.”

“I believe so as well. Someone else is probably observing the warehouse at this time, hiding in the trees further up the road. I am really curious to learn who these people are.”

“We could wait for them to leave or to be replaced, then follow them.” Suggested Dean, making Erik nod.

“We will do that. Keep an eye on the Fiat and wake me up if anything happens, or in three hours, whichever comes first. I will take a nap in the meantime. Advise Ian, so that he doesn’t panic at not seeing us come back.”

“Understood!”

Dean was soon left alone to watch the unknown car and his occupant, sitting in the dark while wearing his night vision goggles. As the time went by, he couldn’t help having his mind review all that they had found and learned up to now. Logically, a number of things in this affair did not make sense. However, hard experience in the field had taught him that not everyone in the World acted logically all the time, far from it. If anything, the case of North Korea was a perfect proof of that. Also, supposedly intelligent men could make the most stupid mistakes when under the influence of a few basic emotions, like hatred, rage, jealousy or greed for power or money. Sometimes, a simple misunderstanding was enough to start a real mess, all the way to causing a war. Human nature could be most feeble and unpredictable indeed.

At around ten past midnight, Dean saw some movement among the trees near the car. Straightening in his seat, he soon saw a human silhouette approach the car and open its front passenger door. That silhouette had unmistakable curves to it.

"A woman?" Let out Dean, surprised. His exclamation, even if told in a low voice, was enough to wake up Erik, who was a light sleeper.

"Uh, what?"

"A woman just came to the car and got inside it: she must have been the observer we were speculating about. She was dressed in a pair of jeans, sneakers and a T-shirt. She had long dark hair and stood about five foot six."

Looking at the Fiat with his own night vision goggles, Erik saw that it was now backing out of its hiding place.

"They're leaving! Let's see if we can manage to follow them to their safe house."

"Consider it done." Replied Dean with a mean smile while starting his engine but also staying in dark mode. Apart from being an outstanding cook, Dean was also an expert car driver, with extensive CIA training to add to his natural talent. For him, a car chase was the definition of fun. As he started to follow the Fiat from a respectable distance, he asked a question to Erik while keeping his eyes on the suspects' car.

"That this team uses a woman should limit somewhat the possible choice of nationalities for that team, since they are from the Middle East, no?"

"You are right...if they are indeed from the Middle East area. The Syrians, Iraqis, Iranians and Jordanians do use female agents, although quite rarely. The Gulf states and Saudi Arabia don't use any, while Israel has a shovel full of them. I am not sure about Turkey, though."

"That still leaves quite a wide choice, Erik."

"I know! That's why we will refrain from truly hostile actions against these people until we can identify them properly. Then, even if they are proved to be from a nation hostile to the United States, that won't mean that we should attack them just for that: they may have as good a reason as us to want to prevent advanced weapons from getting to ISIS. Beheading and executing people left and right has made a lot of enemies for ISIS."

That attracted a smirk on Dean's face as he was turning on the paved road heading into the town of Santa Maria.

“The good old ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’ bit. We are certainly in familiar territory here.”

Erik nodded his head at that, thoughtful. Dean was right about the CIA having worked in concert with some unlikely or even unsavory allies in the past when the circumstances demanded it, and that more than once. Those past cases had however taught him not to demonize or hate automatically foreign agents that would normally be described as hostile to the United States. For one, that could cause him to underestimate them, a mistake that often had bad consequences. Second, enemy agents or not, they were still human beings, with feelings, families, hopes and beliefs, with professional soldiers in particular often sharing a common set of values. Persons that could be described as being evil through and through were actually in the distinct minority. He himself had done things in the past that he was not proud of, but that he had done out of operational necessity. One thing he certainly was not was a sadist. The whole sorry episode about the use by the CIA of so-called ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’, an hypocritical euphemism for torture, during the ‘War on Terror’, had made him uneasy, while he had verbally clashed a few times with some CIA agents whom he found a bit too enthusiastic about using those ‘techniques’. If those unknown agents he and Dean were following were truly working to prevent the delivery of weapons to ISIS, then he was ready to give them a ‘pass’, irrespective of their deeper motives and allegiances. Hell, he had once met in the field a Russian agent that he would have easily described as ‘cultured’ and ‘charming’. That souvenir made him chuckle briefly, attracting a glance from Dean.

“What’s funny, Erik?”

“I was thinking back about some of our past experiences working alongside foreign agents of supposedly hostile nations. Prime Minister Winston Churchill once said ‘when you are killing a man, it costs nothing to be polite with him’.”

Dean smiled on hearing that.

“Isn’t that right! Spying is so much more agreeable when done between gentlemen. Too bad that there are so many cruds and thugs around these days.”

Their tailing work was actually a short one, as the gray Fiat turned after only a few minutes inside the parking lot of the Puertobahia Hotel, near the wide sandy beach immediately east of the port area and actually quite close from the restaurant Dean and Erik had used earlier on. Having switched back on his headlights once in town, in order not to attract police attention, Dean also entered the parking lot but took the vacant spot

that was the furthest from that taken by the Fiat. Erik spoke to him urgently as he was about to step out of the car.

“Dean, you go place a GPS locator unit on that Fiat. I will go inside the hotel and try to find in which rooms these bozos stay. Don’t worry if you can’t contact me by radio during a few minutes: I will have to take off and hide my radio ear piece for a moment.”

Dean simply nodded and then stepped out to go search in his equipment bag on the back seat. On his part, Erik pulled out the ear piece of his miniature radio and stuffed it inside the collar of his polo shirt before opening his car door and going on foot: even though the ear piece was made of transparent plastic and was hard to see, it could still be noticed at short range by professionals. Until proof of the contrary, he intended to treat the two unknown agents as able and competent ones and to not underestimate them, especially since he still didn’t know from where they came from. With the two occupants of the Fiat now inside the hotel, Erik hurried to it and went through the revolving glass doors, adopting a more nonchalant pace once inside the lobby of the hotel. There was still a surprising number of people inside the large hall at this late hour, most of them looking like tourists having returned from a late dip at the nearby beach or from a quiet stroll. That actually suited Erik just fine, as he now wanted to pass as one of those tourists. A quick glance showed him that the man and woman from the Fiat were going towards the bank of elevators visible at one end of the lobby. He walked in that same direction while registering every pertinent detail about the two foreign agents. The fact that the woman had taken a slight lead over her partner actually helped Erik narrow down a bit from which countries they could be: in the more conservative Middle Eastern societies, women and girls were raised to be subservient to men and to always follow behind them. That still left quite a few possibilities, though. Erik was still about twenty feet away when the pair of agents entered an elevator cabin they had called. Hurrying to a near run, he raised one hand and spoke loudly in German, which he was nearly fluent in.

“HOLD THE ELEVATOR, PLEASE!”

The male foreign agent hesitated for a short moment but did put his hand up to keep the cabin doors from closing. Erik entered after cutting his pace to a fast walk and smiled to the man and woman while taking a position in an opposite corner.

“Danke<sup>8</sup>!”

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<sup>8</sup> Danke : Thank you in German.

As if as an afterthought, he then extended an arm and pushed the button for the top level of the hotel, then politely retreated back in his corner as the woman, who was truly beautiful and was in her late twenties, eyed him discreetly, obviously on her guards. From his corner, Erik nonchalantly slid his left hand inside the side pocket of his jeans, grabbing the small command box of his special sunglasses. He gave a polite smile to the woman as she was eyeing him, snapping a picture of her face at the same time via the micro camera hidden in the frames of his sunglasses. He had time to take a few pictures of the two agents from varying angles before they stepped out once the cabin stopped on the fourth level. Registering which way they turned along the hallway of the fourth floor before the cabin's doors slid closed, Erik then pushed the button for the fifth floor and hurried out of the cabin as soon as it stopped on that level and the doors opened. A quick glance showed him that the entrance to the emergency exit stairs were to his left, near the end of the hallway. Sprinting to the exit door and pushing it open, he ran down to the fourth floor level. He however did not make the mistake of entering the fourth floor hallway right away, though: it would have marked him at once as a follower if seen then by the pair of agents. Instead, he pulled out of his polo shirt pocket a small telescopic periscope and extended it before cracking open the emergency door by a couple of inches and inserting the periscope head in the interval. While it would look like a simple toy to many, Erik had found such an instrument to be extremely useful on missions, especially when being in an urban environment. For one, it helped you avoid sticking one's head past a corner to watch someone, something that could put a target on alert if noticed. The head of his periscope was actually only a fraction of an inch in size, making it very hard to notice from any distance over a few feet. He was in time to see the male agent stop in front of a room's door and open it with his hotel electronic access card, while the female agent went down to the next door and entered that room. Waiting about a minute, Erik then entered the hallway and calmly walked down along it, registering mentally the room numbers where the agents were as he passed in front of them. Now having the info he wanted, Erik continued on, turning the next corner and going to the next staircase exit door to return to the lobby level. Walking out of the hotel and into the parking lot, he returned to the Nissan Murano, where Dean was waiting for him in the driver's seat.

“The GPS marker is in place.” Said simply his partner as Erik sat back in the car.

“Good! The male agent occupies Room 405, while the female agent is in Room 406. By the way, the woman is very pretty.”

“Really?” Said Dean, smiling. “Then let’s hope that she is a friend of the United States: I hate to have to kill beautiful women.”

“I can understand that, but some of them truly deserve a bullet. Remember that North Korean agent we caught in Tokyo two years ago.”

“Yeah! That was one certified steel-plated bitch if I ever saw one. I suppose that we are now going back to Rota.”

“Correct! We need some sleep time, plus I want to run the pictures I took of those agents through a facial recognition program and look for them in the various databanks available to us via Langley.”

Dean nodded and started the engine, then backed out of his parking spot and rolled through the parking lot, turning on the adjacent avenue and heading towards the nearby highway.

## **CHAPTER 3 – THREAT CONFIRMATION**

**07:49 (Madrid Time)**

**Wednesday, May 27, 2015**

**CIA team's operation center, decommissioned NSGA complex**

**United States Naval Station Rota, Spain**

Erik woke up by himself and sat up on the edge of his bed for a moment in order to fully wake his brain. The Sun was well up by now, with some of its light filtering through the curtains of his room. It also looked like another bright, sunny day, like the kind of day tourists would be hoping for. However, he was very conscious that he and his team were not here for some fun time and he mentally reviewed what he already knew about the situation. One fact that stuck out right away was that they still didn't know for sure what Grashev was due to receive and then ship to ISIS in terms of weapons. They also still didn't know by what port of entry the Russian arms dealer was planning to deliver his weapons shipment to ISIS. After all, while ISIS presently controlled large swaths of Syria and of Iraq, all the ports in Syria were still under government control and President Bashar al Assad certainly would not let a significant cargo of weapons slip through to get to what was presently his most dangerous enemy. Neither could Grashev send his weapons to a Lebanese port: the pro-Iranian Shia Muslim Hezbollah militia, a mortal enemy of ISIS, either controlled or tightly watched all the ports on the Lebanese coast that could receive a cargo ship the size of the MV Heraklion. Further south was Israel, an even more improbable destination for an arms shipment destined to ISIS. That left Turkey, just north of Syria, but the Turks were part of NATO<sup>9</sup> and were an official ally of the United States. Erik however backtracked a bit then: while Turkey was indeed a NATO member country, its ruling AKP party and President Erdogan were proving lately to be way too sympathetic to Islamic hardliners in the region, something that was riling many in Washington and had triggered a few alarms at the CIA. From being friendly with Israel at the start of his mandate, then Prime

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<sup>9</sup> NATO : North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Founded after World War 2 to oppose the Soviet threat against Western Europe. Led by the United States and comprised of most countries in Western Europe, plus the United States and Canada.

Minister Erdogan and his government had gradually become more and more critical of Israel, while it had definitely dragged its feet in the fight against ISIS. Erdogan was also a vocal critic of Syrian President Assad, although he could easily be excused for that in Erik's mind. Turkey thus looked to him at the moment to be the most probable future destination for the MV Heraklion. However, passing a sizeable shipment of weapons through Turkish customs without detection would normally be a difficult feat...unless Grashev had Turkish contacts that could facilitate the clearance and transportation of his shipment through Turkey and into Northern Syria, where ISIS held a firm hold. Those hypothetical Turkish contacts, if they existed, would certainly need to be uncovered and then ideally eliminated in order for his mission to be fully successful. Then, there was this unidentified surveillance team he and Dean had seen near the Meridian Company warehouse. Overall, he would need a lot more information before any direct action would become worthwhile, or even necessary.

Getting up from his bed and putting on his jeans and socks, Erik then grabbed his shaving kit and left his room, walking into the central room of the suite used by his team. He found Julie Prost sitting at her computer station and monitoring the feeds from the cameras and cell phone signal receivers he and Dean had installed yesterday. Julie, who was drinking a cup of coffee, turned her head on hearing him and gave him a welcoming smile.

"Good morning, Erik! Dean and Ian are presently sleeping."

"And good morning to you too, Julie. Anything new?"

"Not yet! Grashev was quiet last night and the unloading of the Nikolai Vorontsov has resumed this morning. As for the faces of the two unknown agents you took in picture last night, I still have no positive match. I ran the pictures through the CIA, DIA and FBI databanks, with no match found. I am now running them through the State Department files and, if that doesn't work, will then pass them through the INTERPOL database."

"Maybe they are new in the field, at least from our perspective. Keep up the good work, Julie: in the meantime I will go shave and then will eat breakfast. Alert me the moment you get something new."

"Will do!"

Then going into the bathroom attached to the main work room, Erik took a few minutes to shave and use the toilet. After that, he returned briefly to his room to get dressed,

putting on a loose, long T-shirt and a pair of sneakers. Next, he went across the hallway and into the guard room used by the Marines guarding his section, picking up and heating a field ration of ham and eggs. Staff Sergeant Chris Rohmer nodded and smiled to him when he sat down at the Marines' table with his warm pouch of food and a cup of coffee.

"So, did you have a fruitful night yesterday, sir?"

"Yes, but we still have many things to find or clear out. We are now in the watch phase and may not be doing much for the next day or two. How are your men taking their present job, Sergeant?"

"They are understandably curious about your mission but they understand the need for secrecy and are vigilant. Nobody tried to come sneaking on your team up to now."

"Good! That's the way I like it."

The conversation then turned to more mundane subjects, like national and regional pieces of news from the United States and things concerning the Marine Corps. Once he had finished his ration, Erik threw the empty bag and plastic utensil away and poured himself a second cup of coffee before returning in the team's operations center. There, he crossed path with Dean, who still look sleepy and had his shaving kit in hand while walking towards the bathroom.

"Good morning, Dean! Finished with your beauty sleep?"

"I could have used another hour of sleep, to be frank, but I don't want to play the slacker."

"Then go back to bed! I will take care of relieving Julie at the monitoring station. I will wake you up if anything new shows up."

"Fine by me!" Replied Dean before turning around and returning into his room. Erik then went to Julie and glanced at the views of Graschev's villa and warehouse on the computer screens. Viktor Graschev was now visible, swimming lengths in the large pool at the back of his residence while two armed guards stood watch. As for the warehouse, what appeared to be the last crates and containers aboard the Nikolai Vorontsov were being hoisted down to the quay besides it, where a pair of giant forklifts then transported them to either inside the warehouse or to a pile forming up in the open space in front of the warehouse. He was about to tell Julie to leave her place to him and to go take a break when she stiffened and raised a hand to make him keep quiet.

"I am intercepting an incoming call for Graschev... He is now picking it up."

"Put it on speaker!"

Julie did so and Erik heard a female voice speaking in English to Grashev while using what appeared to be some crude prearranged code.

"Viktor, this is Maria. I have some news for you."

"Go ahead, Maria." Replied Grashev in a neutral tone.

"My boss was told not to send a second gift package to Cadiz. He is not happy about it but that came from his big boss back home."

"Hum, interesting. Any idea what his boss will send instead?"

"None! No parcels were received from the United States in the last four days."

"Very well. Continue to cuddle your boss: it could earn you a promotion. Thank you for calling, Maria."

"My pleasure, Viktor." Replied the woman before hanging up. Having the nasty feeling of what that conversation had really meant, Erik looked down at Julie.

"Where you able to identify the woman calling Grashev?"

"I have her number, which is from the Madrid area, and am presently running it through the Madrid directory. It should give us an answer in a mom..."

A block of text then popped up on Julie's computer screen, much faster than she had expected. The words in the text made her swear in anger, while Erik stiffened.

"Hell! That cell phone number is used by a Maria Franco, who is a local employee of our embassy in Madrid, where she works as a secretary in charge of travel arrangements for the American staff of the embassy. I am pulling up her personal file on the screen right now."

Erik eyed with hatred the picture of a pretty woman in her late thirties that soon appeared on the screen.

"A mole working for Grashev right inside our embassy. From the words used by Grashev, I bet that our Chief of Station, Ronald Atkins, is in bed with her. If that's the case, then it is no surprise if our two agents were found out by Grashev."

"And, from her conversation, I would say that she was telling Grashev that Langley told Atkins not to send more agents, and that she was not aware of more agents arriving in Spain from the United States. The possible promotion mentioned by Grashev is probably an extra bonus for her if she finds more useful info for him."

"I think that you are right about the whole thing, Julie. That Atkins idiot! He is probably talking too much while in bed with that Maria Franco. That woman will definitely have to go before she causes more damage to us."

Julie gave him a cautious look then.

“You are going to kill that woman, Erik?”

“Yes, but not right away: I don’t want to raise Graschev’s suspicions too early. I may even use her to pass some disinformation to Graschev if that could be useful. Gather all the info you can get on that woman and try to access her list of recent calls within one month. On my part, I will start composing a priority message for Mister Moore.”

Still fuming from what they had just learned, Erik went to his own work station and started typing a message to Assistant Director Moore, to be encrypted before sending. Two minutes later, Julie transferred Maria Franco’s file to his screen, helping him in fleshing out his report to Moore. Another three minutes and Julie was also sending him a list of calls made or received on Franco’s cell phone. A number of the calls had been highlighted by Julie, who explained verbally from her station.

“I highlighted the calls this Maria Franco either sent by or received from Ronald Atkins, our Madrid Chief of Station. Those calls were mostly made after normal work hours. The number used by Atkins is that of his confidential cell phone, which he is supposed to use only for CIA business and is not supposed to be given to non-CIA employees. By the way, Atkins is married and his wife is presently residing with him in Madrid.”

“The fucking idiot! Not content of committing adultery and exposing himself to possible blackmail attempts, that Atkins is also violating about every security rule in the CIA book. Mister Moore is going to go bonkers on learning about this.”

“And so he should.” Replied Julie, herself angry. “The stupid things some people could do just for sex...”

The two of them were then silent for a while as they worked at their respective stations. After sending a rather damning report for Moore’s eyes only to Langley, Erik went to stand behind Julie, looking at the side screen showing the location of the GPS tracer fixed to the mysterious gray Fiat. Not surprisingly, it was shown to be parked again at nearly the same spot in the port area, near the Meridian Company warehouse.

“So, our unknown competitors are back at their surveillance business. Obviously, they do not have the kind of equipment that we have.”

“That would jive with their pattern of activity up to now, Erik.” Said Julie while keeping her eyes on her computer screens. “They are probably nothing more than a

simple reconnaissance team and may be here only to confirm how serious or true the information they have on Grachev and an arms deal with ISIS is. If they truly wanted to commit a direct action to stop that arms deal, they would have brought a bigger team with more equipment and weapons.”

“I concur with you. However, like us, that third party team will soon need to go check by themselves what that arms shipment looks like, which means that they will have to attempt to gain access inside the warehouse. The problem is that the Meridian Company warehouse is well guarded and has only a few access points that are on well-lit sides of the building. As for the windows, they are a good twelve feet above the ground and are also rather small.”

“Then, how will you and Dean gain access inside without alerting Grachev?”

“We actually have two options available to us: we could either quietly cut an entry hole in one of the outer walls, using a portable plasma torch, or we could use our nifty mini spy quad copter to do the job for us.”

Before he could say more, one of Julie’s screens emitted a beeping signal, while a second image appeared beside that of the unknown woman photographed by Erik at the Puertobahia Hotel.

“We have a match from the State Department’s databank for that woman!” Exclaimed Julie, suddenly excited. She read quickly the info under the new image, only to have her jaw drop from surprise.

“An Iranian female agent, here?”

“And not anybody.” Said Erik, whose face was hardening as he read the text under the picture. “The daughter of the mayor of Tehran, no less! That Farah Qalibaf is actually listed simply as a child of Mohammad Qalibaf, with present occupation unknown, but her father is an ex-general in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and was even a presidential candidate twice, losing last time to present President Hassan Rouhani but still ending second in the polls. Hell, talk about good political connections! That woman must evidently be a part of the Revolutionary Guards Corps Intelligence Bureau, in view of her family connection.”

“Well, she is certainly a pretty woman. She must also be at least reasonably competent and efficient, to be selected for such a sensitive mission.”

“Agreed! Another fatal beauty to deal with.”

Julie then gave a dubious look up to Erik.

"Maybe we won't need to clash with those Iranians, Erik. After all, they hate and fear the ISIS at least as much as we do, on top of being much closer to the threat that ISIS represents. Remember that the Iranians kept quite mum and didn't protest when we started our airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq. We should simply keep our distances from her and her partner, in my humble opinion. Heck, if push comes to shove, we could even work together with those Iranians if we really have to."

Erik thought that over before nodding his head once.

"Again, you are right, Julie. Those Iranians may even end up unknowingly making things easier for us, by being a distraction to Grashev,. I definitely need to send this to Mister Moore right away: this is a big piece of the geopolitical aspect of this mission."

"Funny that you said that, Erik: her father, apart from being the mayor of Tehran, also teaches geopolitics at the Tehran University."

"Hmm, point noted." Said Erik before returning to his work station to send a second message to Julian Moore.

Once his message was sent to Langley, Erik told Julie to go rest a bit and took her place at the surveillance work station. Dean woke up about one hour later and went to shave and have a late breakfast before joining Erik and getting updated by him on the latest developments. The news about the renegade local secretary at the American embassy angered him, while that about the female Iranian agent made him shake his head.

"What a snake pit! Do we have identifications for the male Iranian agent or for the man that accompanied Prince al Rashid during his visit to Grashev yesterday?"

"Not yet! They were next in the search queue set up by Julie. Well, now that you are up and ready to work, I will let you watch the warehouse, while I concentrate on Grashev's residence."

"Fine with me! Let me just get another cup of coffee first."

"Aaah, coffee: the universal drug of overworked people and night shift workers."

"You can say that again, partner!"

To their disappointment, the facial recognition program failed to find a match for both the man that had accompanied Muhammad Bin Al Rashid and for the male Iranian agent seen with Farah Qalibaf. What they however found in the afternoon, when Ian

woke up and started working on his computer, were the names used by the pair of Iranian agents, hacked from the Puertobahia Hotel electronic registry: Fatmeh Kadoumi and Rafik Shamoun. At about three in the afternoon, a top priority, top secret message came from Langley, signed by Julian Moore. After decoding it, Erik read it out to his assembled team members, who were as anxious as him to find out what the reaction in Washington had been.

“To Team Nemesis, from Julian Moore. The following orders have been vetted and approved by Director Brennan after he briefed the President on the results of your mission so far: first, you are to find out the exact nature and composition of the presumed weapons shipment received in Cadiz by Viktor Grashev, without alerting the said Grashev about your presence; second, you are also to find out the exact route planned for the weapons and the identities of the intermediaries involved, so that actions could be taken against them after the weapons shipment has been either stopped or intercepted; third, contact must be avoided as much as possible with the Iranian surveillance team. That said team may be allowed in turn to find out by itself the nature and route of the shipment and to then send the info it collected to Tehran. The geopolitical impact of this weapons deal is presently being assessed at the highest levels in Washington. The information about your team and your exact mission is however being kept tightly controlled and the Madrid Chief of Station is not to be made aware of your presence in the Cadiz area. The said Chief of Station will be relieved of his post as soon as it is possible to do so without compromising your mission. A second team from Langley will be sent to Madrid to deal discreetly with the embassy mole you unmasked, so that you will be able to concentrate your attention solely on the weapons shipment. Please advise as soon as possible once you have firm information about the exact nature of the shipment. Good luck!”

Erik raised his nose from the text message on his computer screen and looked soberly at his three team members.

“Well, you have it from the horse’s mouth, guys. Our job now is to find out what is in that weapons shipment, how it is supposed to get to ISIS and find who else is involved in helping that shipment through, all in a discreet way and without alerting Grashev or the Iranians about us.”

“So, lots of finesse and no boom-boom.” Said in turn Dean, making Erik nod his head once.

"That's right! As for how we will find out about the exact nature of the shipment, I believe that our spying mini quad copter will prove to be just the tool we need for the job. We will thus go back to the port area tonight and will fly our quad copter into the Meridian warehouse, so that we can have a view of what's inside."

"But, how will we find out about the intermediaries involved at the end portion of the weapons shipment, in Turkey?" Asked Julie. Erik thought for a moment before answering her.

"I see only two ways to do that: either we find that from Grashev or we physically follow the weapons all the way to Turkey and see who shows up to greet the shipment."

His statement made Ian raise an eyebrow then.

"Capturing Grashev and making him tell us about the route and intermediaries is bound to alert nearly at once those intermediaries, Erik. As for stealing that information from him, I strongly suspect that Grashev is too experienced as a clandestine operator to keep that on paper. He likely committed the details about that to his memory."

"Correct. That's why I think that the only sure way to find those intermediaries is to bodily accompany those weapons all the way short of the Syrian border with Turkey."

"That means having to travel clandestinely aboard the MV Heraklion." Said in turn Dean. "We will have to think our moves carefully and board the ship with the right equipment and supplies. Ian, do you think that you could obtain the layout of that MV Heraklion without raising the alarm?"

"That should actually be easy, Dean." Answered the nerdish analyst. "Being a simple commercial vessel and not a warship, its blueprints will be kept in unprotected files, both at the shipbuilder that made it and at the Stavropoulos Shipping Company. Besides, for reasons of international maritime security and insurance coverage, those blueprints may also be available at the maritime insurance company that is covering the ship and at the offices of the Greek Coast Guard. I will get on it right after this meeting."

"Do that!" Said Erik. "You have a question, Julie?"

"Yes! Once we have the information about the route and intermediaries, those weapons will have to be either destroyed or confiscated. Who will do that? Also, who will take care of Grashev after this?"

"Two pertinent questions, Julie. With the level of Washington attention now on this shipment, I believe that we will most probably be able to call on one of our Navy task

groups in the Mediterranean to either capture or sink the MV Heraklion if it comes to that. If we have to let the weapons be unloaded in a Turkish port, it will then be the job of me and Dean to destroy them after unmasking the intermediaries at that end. As for Grashev, I agree with you that he will have to be taken out of the picture at the end of our mission. We will however wait for further instructions about that from Mister Moore once we know more about the shipment. Well, I believe that we now have plenty of things to do to occupy ourselves until me and Dean go back to the port tonight. Dean, me and you will take a good nap once our equipment for tonight's operation is ready: it may be a long night up for us."

### **22:53 (Madrid Time)**

#### **Grashev's residence, Puerto Real**

Viktor Grashev kept a façade of politeness and respect as he escorted his Saudi visitor to his own car, an armored Mercedes-Benz 350, so that they could go visit together his warehouse. In reality, the Russian was fuming at the stupidity and arrogance of his customer: because of his intransigence, Viktor was being forced to commit a couple of cardinal sins in terms of clandestine deal security. For one, Prince al Rashid was a recognizable figure with no obvious reasons to show himself at some commercial warehouse in a minor Spanish port. If he was seen in Viktor's company in the port, that could be enough to raise suspicions in the minds of either the port authorities or of Spanish customs officials, thus endangering the precious and very costly weapons shipment he had just received. Secondly, because of the insistence of al Rashid to see by himself the weapons and check its inventory, Viktor's men had to get all the weapons crates out of the sea containers in which they had been hidden up to now and then lay them out in the open inside the warehouse. If by bad luck the Spanish customs decided to pay a visit to his warehouse tonight, he would be caught literally red-handed, with no other recourse than to offer enough bribe money to the customs officials to convince them to keep their mouths shut. That last recourse was however far from being sure to work and he would then be vulnerable to future blackmail from those officials. Of course, if it came to that, he always could make those officials suffer some unfortunate accident in order to get rid of them. Still, this was not a way to do things properly.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid!* Thought Grashev as he opened the rear left door of his armored Mercedes-Benz for Prince al Rashid and his assistant. At least the clown had not showed up at his residence dressed in his Saudi outfit of Arabic robe and headdress. Instead, he had sensibly chosen to wear a top quality western style blue-gray suit. His assistant, some flunky who actually knew something about modern weapons and did the real work for al Rashid, also wore a western suit, albeit of lower quality. As he took place in the car beside the Saudi prince, Viktor consoled himself by thinking that the seventy million euros he was going to get as a commission for this deal would go a long way to allow him to retire for good...that is if his old friend Vladimir Putin would let him do so: Viktor had been very useful to him in the last few years and Putin may just tell him that his services were too valuable to let him retire effectively.

With a second car filled with four of his bodyguards following his Mercedes-Benz, Viktor, a heavy-set man with hard features and piercing eyes, gave a polite smile to his customer as they rolled towards the port of Santa Maria.

"I believe that you will be most satisfied with the merchandise I just received on your behalf, Your Highness."

The Saudi, a thin man in his fifties with a small, carefully-trimmed beard colored with some gray hair, made a dismissive gesture.

"Well, you will agree that, for a price tag of 800 million euros, a customer has the right to be demanding about the goods, Mister Grashev. Me and the other sponsors of this deal in turn expect significant strategic returns as a result of sending these weapons to the ISIS. The Americans have been dictating for far too long what to do to our own leaders, while a return to the offensive by ISIS will keep in check those damn Shiites in Iraq and will keep Iran's attention and resources occupied there. That will in turn give us time to put some order in our own house and change things as they should be. Tell me, Mister Grashev: has there been any fallout from your killing of those two American agents that came snooping on you?"

"No! My sources say that the Americans have not yet reacted in any detectable way to the death of their agents. By the time they react, if they do, the weapons will be on their way to ISIS and out of reach of the Americans."

"And when are the weapons due to leave Spain?"

"The ship scheduled to carry them will arrive at quayside tomorrow and will immediately start to load the weapons aboard, Your Highness. If no delay is encountered, the ship and the weapons will leave Cadiz on Saturday morning."

"Excellent! Have you been able to get a precise list of what was sent from Russia?"

"Such a list was brought by the leader of the security team that has escorted the weapons from Russia. You will be able to collect a copy of that list once at the warehouse. I will however urge you to exercise extreme caution about that list and the information it contains: if it comes to the attention of the wrong persons, it could spark a very violent storm indeed."

"Do not worry: I understand perfectly how sensitive that list is. On the other hand, I do need something to convince my co-sponsors back home and in Turkey that they are getting their money's worth. After all, 800 million euros is no mere peanuts, even for a group of Saudi princes. Besides, I have no wish to have my head chopped off on the order of my king, may Allah curse that old fool."

They were then mostly silent during the rest of the short trip, until they arrived at Grashev's warehouse. There, one of the armed guards on duty opened briefly one of the large sliding door sections facing the quays, time to let in the limousine and its escort car, before closing back the door. Al Rashid's attention was attracted at once to long rows of crates and munitions containers, piled head high in one corner of the warehouse. Even without knowing yet for sure what was in the crates and containers, the quantity in evidence was still impressive.

"I see that your leaders in Russia took our requests seriously, Mister Grashev. In fact, I am still surprised at the willingness of your government to participate in this deal. After all, Russia is supposed to be supporting President Assad of Syria."

"Let's just say that greater strategic goals of more immediate importance have influenced Moscow into choosing to support ISIS in a covert way. It has however found a way to deflect the blame if those weapons ever fall into the wrong hands."

"What do you mean?" Asked at once al Rashid, surprised. Viktor smiled maliciously then.

"You will soon see by yourself, Your Highness. You may now step out." Viktor got out first, with his driver going to open the rear passenger door for his customers. He then walked with the two Saudi men towards the nearest pile of crates

and containers, which were guarded by two intimidating men in black coveralls and combat boots. Each guard wore tactical vests and were armed with compact assault rifles, pistols and knives. A third man in black walked quickly to meet Grashev's group as they arrived at the guards, stopping at attention and saluting Grashev.

"No security threat detected, sir, and all the items are ready for inspection."

"Thank you, Major." Replied Viktor before looking at al Rashid. "May I present you Major Koslov, who is in charge of the team that will escort the weapons all the way to Turkey and the Syrian border."

The Saudi prince painted a perfunctory smile on his face and bowed slightly to Koslov.

"Pleased to meet you, Major. May Allah be with you during your mission."

*'Fuck your Allah!'* Thought Gennadi Koslov, who had fought Islamist extremists in the Caucasus for many years. While he had accepted this mission, he still was at a loss to understand why Moscow was ready to help barbarians like those butchers from ISIS. He however kept a polite expression and presented a document file to al Rashid.

"Here is a copy of the manifest of the items of interest for you, as you requested, Your Highness."

"Thank you, Major." Said al Rashid, taking the file and then passing it to his assistant. "Amin, you are in charge of accounting for the items on that manifest."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

Al Rashid then looked at Viktor.

"I would like to start with the promised portable ground-to-air missiles first, Mister Grashev."

"Of course, Your Highness. This way, please."

Moving to another pile of containers made of dark green hard polymer, Viktor opened the most accessible container and presented its content to al Rashid while smiling.

"As promised: 1,200 IGLA-S portable ground-to-air missiles, also known by their NATO designation of SA-24 Grinch. They are the latest model in the Russian inventory and have a highly advanced infrared seeker that is resistant to flares and other countermeasures, yet are simple to operate and require very little maintenance. They have a maximum range of 6,000 meters and a ceiling of 3,500 meters. If an American or Allied Coalition attack aircraft ever gets within range of one of these missiles, then its chances of surviving are slim indeed."

"What if the American aircraft drop their so-called 'smart' bombs from outside that range, as they often do right now?"

That brought a mean smile to Grachev's face and he then moved to a nearby pile of wooden crates.

"Our air defense specialists in Russia have worked up a system to prevent attacking aircraft from launching laser or GPS-guided bombs and missiles from outside the range of our own SAMs. These crates contain 400 copies of our best, most powerful portable GPS jammer system. Those jammers can be fixed to a building or placed near a position that is considered important to protect. Once activated they will hopelessly jam out to a radius of a couple of kilometers the signals emitted by orbiting GPS satellites, signals that are used by the American JDAM smart bombs to guide themselves to fixed targets. The said GPS-guided bomb will then break lock and will hit at random around its originally intended target. On top of saving the protected building that way, this gives the added advantage that the errant GPS bomb may hit a purely civilian building, thus opening the possibility that the Americans could be accused of war crimes for indiscriminately bombing civilian populations."

"I like that!" Said at once al Rashid, beaming. His assistant was however less quick to rejoice, making an objection as soon as Viktor was silent.

"Such GPS jammers were used in the past by the Iraqis in 2003, with little success, Mister Grachev. What tells us that they will perform better now? Also, what about laser-guided bombs, which the Allied Coalition is using in abundance?"

Viktor had to give to the small Saudi man that he knew his stuff, but had responses ready for his objections.

"Mister al Jabal, these systems are way more sophisticated and powerful than the crude models used in Iraq in 2003. In fact, you have here what is the latest in GPS jamming technology in the World and it was tested in real conditions against military-grade GPS guidance and positioning systems. As for countering laser-guided bombs, we have added another useful piece of gear to the shipment for that purpose."

Viktor then led the two Saudis to the next pile of wooden crates, opening one of them and showing to al Rashid what looked like four fist-sized boxes connected by long wires to a central box with a simple-looking control panel. Four fixed tubes multiple grenade launchers were also linked to the central box by wires.

"This is one of the 1,000 portable laser warning receiver and decoy systems that are part of the shipment, Your Highness. A complete system, which consists of four laser detector boxes, four grenade launcher units and one central control box, is fixed to either a building or a vehicle that can be as small as a pickup truck. Once activated, it

will give an audio and visual warning signal if a targeting laser is pointed at the protected building or vehicle, while also indicating the rough direction the laser beam comes from. As soon as a threat laser beam is detected, the grenade launcher mounted in the direction of the threat will automatically fire away a salvo of special, multispectral smoke grenades able to obscure the targeted building or vehicle to the laser aiming device, thus breaking the lock of the laser-guided bombs that were dropped and sending them astray. When used in conjunction with one of our GPS jammers, this will render ineffective the American smart bombs used in Iraq and Syria and will thus force the American and Allied planes to drop to a low altitude in order to launch unguided bombs from close range. That is when our IGLA-S missiles will catch and destroy them. After a few weeks of that treatment, I can guarantee you that the American and Coalition planes will not be willing anymore to attack ISIS targets. A lot of 200,000 multispectral smoke grenades is part of the shipment.”

The said al Jabal nodded his head, obviously impressed.

“A smart combination indeed, Mister Grashev. That could very well be enough to neutralize the air superiority factor of the coalition air forces over Syria and Iraq and thus allow ISIS to return to the offensive. What about ground combat?”

“As requested, this shipment comprises anti-tank missile systems, portable anti-tank rocket launchers and sophisticated night vision equipment that will let ISIS fighters outgun and outfight their opponents, especially at night. We have in this warehouse 200 portable tripod launchers for 9M133 Kornet anti-tank missiles with an maximum effective range of 5,500 meters. The tripod launchers have a thermal night vision aiming sight, thus can kill tanks even in the dark. The Kornet, also known by NATO as the AT-14, was used with success by the Lebanese Hezbollah militia against Israeli tanks in 2003, destroying a number of their heavy Merkava tanks in the process. We sent 4,000 missiles with those 200 launchers. As a cheaper to use complement to our Kornet missile, you will find 1,000 RPG-32 Nashshab shoulder rocket launchers, along with 100,000 unguided heavy anti-tank and thermobaric warhead rockets. The RPG-32 has the added benefit of being officially produced in Jordan, after being developed by a Russian company. Those RPG-32s here bear Jordanian manufacturing tags, even though they were produced secretly in Russia. Thus, the Jordanians may well be blamed for sending these weapons once ISIS can start using them. Finally, we have sent 10,000 copies of the Lomo Recon-2 monocular individual night vision goggles, to equip ISIS infantrymen for night combat. You may now feel free to check at random any

crate or container of your choosing, so that you are satisfied that I am not cheating you, Your Highness.”

Al Rashid and al Jabal did not have to be told twice and started at once to choose at random crates and containers in the piles, oblivious to the tiny, nearly-impossible to spot object sitting on top of a sea container inside the warehouse.

In the CIA team’s operation center, Julie Prost sat back as she reread the notes taken while Grachev was describing the weapons shipment to his Saudi customers. Those Saudis were still visible and audible on the video feed transmitted by the mini spy quad copter that had previously flown inside the warehouse via an opened window.

“Jesus Christ! With all this, ISIS will be able to put the whole of Syria and Iraq on fire! And our planes will be powerless to stop those barbarians. This is even worse than what I could imagine! Sparrow, you got all of that at your end?”

“I did! Many people in Washington and Langley will have a sleepless night over this. Edit and prepare for transmission at once the video data you have, to be sent in top priority to Langley. If we could manage to fly our quad copter close enough to those crates and containers to be able to read and record the labels and serial numbers it would be even better, but that would expose our quad copter to visual detection by one of the guards present inside the warehouse.”

“I concur on that last part.” Said Ian, who had been watching the video feed beside Julie. “We however need only to wait for those visitors to leave with Grachev. Then, we may have a more easy time of it to go look at those labels. Let’s be patient and wait another hour or two, I say.”

“You are correct about that, Hacker Boy. We have all our time here anyway. We... Wait! I just saw some movement on the southern side of the warehouse, were it is close to the next warehouse.”

Things then happened fast, with little time for the CIA team to do anything but watch. A number of pistol shots rang out just as some sort of commotion was happening inside the warehouse. Erik and Dean, hiding about 150 yards away in bushes across the road passing by the row of warehouses, also heard the faint ‘plop’ of shots fired by a silenced weapon. On the video screen showing the feed from the quad copter inside the warehouse, both Julia, Ian and Erik saw the guards present inside suddenly bolt towards the southwest side doors, evidently alerted by some radio warning from the guards outside. The head of the guards then pushed Grachev and his two guests towards the

safety of their armored limousine, obviously trying to protect them from whatever was happening. Erik did not hesitate then: as the mayhem spread around the warehouse, with shouted orders and a few more shots ringing out, he activated the four rotors of his spy quad copter and sent it flying down towards the piles of crates to film them from up close.

“Dean, keep an eye out for the action around the warehouse while I am busy flying our quad copter.”

Dean did not reply verbally, simply taking out his silenced revolver while scanning the surroundings of the warehouse with his night vision goggles. He saw in a flash a silhouette running at a crouch across the road parallel to the warehouse and then disappearing among the bushes there. A few seconds later, three armed guards appeared on this side of the warehouse, obviously looking for the intruder, but without luck. As the three guards gave up after a minute or so of searching, Dean tried to reacquire visually the one who had crossed the road. The faint noise of branches being disturbed then made him turn his head towards his back. About forty yards away, he saw for a second a person doing its best to move silently yet quickly, heading in the direction where he knew the rental car of the Iranian team was parked among the trees.

“Well well, ain’t it Miss Qalibaf, getting the hell out of Dodge. Should I intercept her?”

“No! Let her be! She actually provided us with a very useful distraction tonight. I am now video-recording nice close-ups of the labels and markings on these crates and weapons containers.”

Dean went along with that, following with his night goggles the Iranian woman as she went back to her car.

“I wonder if she was able to enter the warehouse and film those crates. That would certainly explain the exchange of gunshots.”

“Maybe! That is not important for now.”

They were then silent for long minutes, Erik piloting his mini quad copter and Dean keeping watch in case one of Graschev’s guards came in their direction. After about ten minutes, and with Erik having finished doing his close flybys and having returned the quad copter to its original overwatch position, things seemed to quiet down in and around the warehouse. Graschev, who had simply stayed with the two Saudis inside his armored limousine, ready to drive out in a hurry if things became real bad, finally came out of his car as three of his guards brought in the blood-soaked body of a man. Major

Koslov showed to Viktor a silencer-equipped pistol, a pocket radio transceiver and a small, handheld cutting torch.

"We found this on that man. He was posted outside the warehouse, along the southern wall and near a hole freshly cut with that torch into the siding of the warehouse. The cut was made behind a garbage bin, which is why we didn't see it at first. One of my men that was patrolling around the building saw some movement and drew pistol fire, to which he replied before taking cover. That man then charged him and another guard while shooting like a mad man before being gunned down."

Viktor gave a hateful look at the dead man, whose features were definitely from around the Middle East.

"Did he have a camera or a recording device on him?"

"No, sir! He had no identity papers of any sort or keys on him either."

"Then, he was probably covering someone else, someone that may have gained access to the inside of this warehouse and may have escaped by now."

"That would be typical of those fanatical Shiites, to sacrifice themselves for their cause." Spat Prince al Rashid, who had finally come out of the armored limousine and now stood beside Viktor. "This man certainly looks like one: I can smell them from kilometers away."

Viktor and Gennadi exchanged a quick glance, but didn't comment on that. Viktor then looked at the piles of crates and containers full of military equipment and weapons.

"Let's replace these weapons in their intended hiding places before the Spanish customs or police show up. Major, take pictures and fingerprints from that corpse, then make it disappear. I want this warehouse to look normal by sunrise tomorrow."

"Understood, sir!"

**00:38 (Madrid Time)**

**Thursday, May 28, 2015**

**Room 406, Puertobahia Hotel**

**Santa Maria**

Farah sat down slowly on the edge of her bed, both sad and despondent. While she had technically been his superior, Ali had been like a mentor to her as one of her NCO instructors from the Intelligence Bureau. He also had been a decent man and had been more like a friend than like a simple partner to her as she gained experience and

rank as an officer of the Revolutionary Guards Corps Intelligence Bureau. Farah now couldn't help feel guilt for having fled while Ali was covering her retreat. She however quickly changed her mind about that: Ali had sacrificed himself so that she could escape with precious information vital to the security of Iran. To have stayed and fought besides him, apart from probably resulting in her death as well, would have made his own sacrifice meaningless. She now had the information she had been tasked to find and she was thus going to send it to Tehran via the Internet, using the encryption program hidden inside her laptop. That would however have to wait for a few minutes: she had a prayer to do first in honor of Ali Gorani, a faithful servant of Iran who had martyred himself for the cause.

**10:11 (Washington Time) / 16:11 (Madrid Time)**

**The Situation Room, the White House**

**Washington, D.C., U.S.A.**

President Barak Obama blew air out in disbelief as he finished viewing with the members of his National Security Council the video taken inside the warehouse in Santa Maria and brought in by CIA Director John Brennan, along with the pertinent case file.

"Has Putin gone nuts? To give all these advanced weapons to those barbarians from ISIS?"

"Actually, he sold them, Mister President." Corrected at once Brennan. "Such an expensive weapons deal, at nearly a billion dollars, actually constitutes quite a substantial boost to the various Russian military equipment manufacturers involved in this. That is also not the only benefit he could get out of this affair."

"Oh? Like what other benefits?"

"What I am going to expose now is a theory put forward by one of the CIA analysts presently in Rota, Spain. In view of who has by now been clearly implicated up to now, I believe that her analysis makes a lot of sense, if you push your political cynicism factor to the maximum. First, we have solid proofs that the Russians are knowingly selling to ISIS about one billion dollars worth of the latest Russian military portable equipment, including shoulder-launched SAMs, enough to allow ISIS to go back on the offensive while repelling our air attacks. Second, we now know that a number of rich and powerful people in Saudi Arabia and maybe elsewhere are financing that weapons buy in support of ISIS and are hoping to make our air campaign over there fail.

Now, if ISIS effectively returns on the offensive while fending off our airstrikes, it will accomplish a number of things for a number of people. For Russia, it will mean a severe loss of prestige for us and our allies engaged in our fight against ISIS. That loss of prestige may in turn force us to up the ante in Iraq and Syria, possibly to the point of sending ground troops in a combat role, something that would suck up much of the available military resources we have overseas and cost us a fortune to sustain. More American military resources in the Middle East would also mean less American military resources available around Europe, something that would directly benefit Putin and give him a freer hand in Eastern Europe, particularly around the Ukraine and the Baltic States. From the point of view of the Wahabi hardliners in Saudi Arabia, an ISIS on the offensive means that the Shiites in Iraq will be in real danger of being slaughtered eventually, something that Iran could and would never allow. Thus, that would result in Iran spending more time, resources and men to defend the Shiites of Iraq and the Alawites of Syrian President Assad, meaning less Iranian capacity to threaten Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. Also, a severe loss of face for us in Iraq and Syria due to a failed air campaign may just embolden the extreme conservative Wahabi factions in Saudi Arabia into openly questioning or criticizing their King's alliance with us. They may even revolt and lead a coup to depose King Salman and get rid of his intended successor. Now, Mister President, just imagine what a Saudi Arabia controlled by Islamic extremists hostile to the United States and sympathetic to both ISIS and Al Qaida could mean for us."

Obama winced on hearing that last sentence, like many around the table.

"It would be a nightmare come true, no less."

"And it would be a nightmare that would further benefit Putin, as we could then lose access to many of our present bases in the Middle East. It would then probably take all of our military power just to put back some order in the Middle East and repair all the broken china. Even better for Russia, a Saudi Arabia hostile to the United States and NATO would mean that we could well lose access to Gulf oil. Now, where would Europe then look for the oil it could no longer get from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States? The only viable choice would then be to buy Russian oil and gas, so Putin wins again!" Struck hard by Brennan's exposé, the President stayed silent for a moment before looking around the table.

"I believe that the CIA analysis we just heard makes sense, even if it is hard to stomach. We need to counter that scenario, and quickly! Any suggestions?"

The Director of National Intelligence, who capped all the various national intelligence agencies in the United States, replied nearly at once.

“The solution is obvious and simple, Mister President: let’s destroy that weapons shipment before it can get to ISIS.”

“I agree, Director Clapper,” said John Brennan, “but we still are trying to identify all the hidden players in this mess. In particular, we still don’t know who is going to greet those weapons in Turkey and how they will be transported into Northern Syria without risking to be stopped and then confiscated by the Turkish authorities. This brings me to another hypothesis advanced by my analyst in Spain: that factions inside the Turkish government could well be aiding and abetting this weapons deal for their own benefit.”

“And what kind of benefit could the Turks possibly gain by helping to arm ISIS?” Asked the Vice-President, getting somewhat agitated. Brennan gave him a cold, no-nonsense look.

“What benefit, Mister Vice-President? Who would be swept away and destroyed first if ISIS goes back on the march in Iraq and Syria? The answer is simple: the Kurds, the only truly effective ground force facing ISIS right now in Northern Iraq. The same Kurds that the Turks have been considering like enemies for generations. Remember when all those Turkish Army tanks were shown sitting idle within sight of a Kurdish-held border town while ISIS was assaulting the place? Only our airstrikes stopped that ISIS assault, while those Turkish tanks never fired once on ISIS. Worse, Turkish warplanes attacked Kurdish positions inside Iraq at about the same time, pretending that it was in retaliation to a Kurdish terrorist attack. Without our air support, the Kurdish forces may well falter under the blows of a better armed ISIS. That’s one benefit of participating in this scheme in the eyes of many in the Turkish government, with ISIS then basically getting rid of the Kurds for them. Another benefit would be the possible downfall of President Assad of Syria, if ISIS manages to defeat his army. Well, Turkish President Erdogan happens to hate President Assad’s guts with a passion. He also happens to be sympathetic to a return to a hard and pure version of Islam in Turkey, complete with Sharia Law. I know this may all sound like realpolitik pushed to the extreme, but there is really no other explanation to the otherwise crazy weapons deal scheme we uncovered in Spain, Mister Vice-President.”

There was a heavy silence around the table as the participants pondered those words. President Obama finally spoke in a subdued tone to nobody in particular.

“As crazy as the scenario presented by Director Brennan may sound at first, I think that it actually makes sense, when all the facts of the affair are considered. I agree that those weapons will have to be either seized or destroyed one way or the other before they could get to ISIS. I however also agree that we must find and uncover all the players involved in this monstrous scheme, so that we could thoroughly clean this mess afterwards. Director Brennan, tell your agents to do everything possible to unmask the remaining players in this deal. In return, I can promise them the full and immediate support of the United States forces in the region.”

## **CHAPTER 4 – A NICE MEDITERRANEAN CRUISE**

**23:50 (Madrid Time)**

**Friday, May 29, 2015**

**Greek cargo ship MV Heraklion**

**Inlet, port of Santa Maria, Spain**

Erik cautiously stuck his head above the level of the weather deck of the cargo ship, where steel railings ran along the upper sides of the MV Heraklion, looking quickly around for any sentry or crewmember through his night vision goggles. Seeing none except for one man in black coveralls standing on the starboard open wing of the bridge, way at the back of the ship, he quickly climbed over the railing and crouched in a shadow area created by covered piles of crates tied to the deck. After another look around to make sure that nobody was looking in the direction of the bow, near which he was hiding, he activated his combat diver's radio transceiver's microphone.

"The way is clear for the moment. Climb aboard quickly!"

"Coming up!" Replied at once Dean before starting to climb the light but robust boarding telescopic aluminum ladder that had been pushed up from their submerged Swimmer Delivery Vehicle, or SDV in short, and then hooked to a side railing of the MV Heraklion. Two U.S. Navy S.E.A.L. commandos, who were staying with the SDV in order to pilot it away after they would be aboard, held the bottom of the ladder to steady it and also stood ready to help pass to the two CIA agents their waterproof packs full of equipment and weapons. Dean, who had tied to his belt the end of the nylon ropes attached to their packs, soon climbed aboard the cargo ship and joined Erik in his hiding spot. The two men, communicating in brief sentences by radio with the S.E.A.L. commandos below the waterline, then pulled on the ropes of their packs, lifting them out of the water and up to deck level, where they quickly but quietly swung them aboard. Apart from those equipment packs, Erik and Dean had climbed aboard with much smaller packs attached to them that contained their primary weapons, ammunition and a few tools. Their FN 90 compact bullpup automatic carbines were already slung across their chests and ready to fire as they quietly carried their equipment packs to their hiding spot. As Erik told by radio to the Navy commandos that they could leave with their small

submersible, Dean used the shoulder straps of his big pack to load it on his back. Erik then did the same, following which they cautiously went to the forward access deck hatch they had selected in advance when studying the blueprints of the MV Heraklion in Rota. They were helped by the fact that dozens of big wooden crates mounted on pallets had been fixed to the open weather deck with ropes and chains, then covered by huge canvas tarps to protect them from the weather and from waves, thus creating nice obstacles to visual observation for any sentry. That had proved necessary for the crew of the cargo ship to do since the cargo holds were now filled with stacks of steel sea containers, which Erik and Dean knew to be containing the weapons and ammunition destined to ISIS, themselves hidden behind a few rows of boxes of more legitimate merchandise. The crates on the deck contained in contrast legal cargo, like canned foodstuff, kegs of beer or wine and paper products.

Getting to the hatch, which actually was a vertical panel set in the steel bulkhead formed where the higher bow section rose from the main weather deck, the two CIA agents entered the bow section and proceeded to a small, rarely used storage compartment one deck down. Putting down his big pack in a corner of the compartment, behind a few old steel drums, Dean looked around at what would be their sea accommodations for the eight-day sea trip to Turkey.

“Well, it ain’t the Ritz, but it will have to do.”

“More importantly, it should be a fairly safe hide for us.” Added Erik as he himself put down his pack. “With the toilet compartment on the deck above us and its adjacent janitor’s compartment, we will be able to go wash and relieve ourselves with minimal risks during our trip, as the crew nearly exclusively uses the facilities situated in the stern, in and under the bridge superstructure. Well, let’s take off our diving equipment and unpack our things, so that we could make ourselves comfortable here. However, we will keep our kit behind those barrels and boxes, so that a casual look inside from the entrance hatch won’t reveal them.”

The two men then stripped out of their dry suits, masks and closed circuit breathing systems, all courtesy of the U.S. Navy, revealing their black tactical commando outfits underneath. Next, they unrolled and spread out on the steel deck, behind the cover of the old barrels, the foam mattresses on which they would sleep. As discussed earlier in Rota, Erik and Dean then fitted long, fat sound suppressors on their FN 90 carbines before cautiously leaving the compartment to go do a visual reconnaissance of their

section of the ship. As they arrived at the nearest ladder leading up to the next deck, Erik eyed the steep set of stairs and the short passageway it was in and took out of his small equipment bag a miniature, remotely-controlled camera mounted inside a small, dark plastic dome. Going in the constricted space between the foot of the ladder and the watertight bulkhead behind it, he fixed the camera dome in an upper corner that was in a zone of shadow. He didn't need to deploy as well a solar energy panel for it, as a ship standard electrical outlet was conveniently situated a few feet away, fixed to a wall of the hallway. He ran the thin power chord up from the outlet to the ceiling, alongside the steel pipe containing the ship's power wire, then running it among the bundles of wires and pipes running overhead, finally connecting it to the power supply pack of the camera.

"There! This camera will be able to show us anyone approaching our hiding place. Let me add a motion detector alarm sensor and run command wires to our compartment and we will then be much safer. We will also put a similar set of camera and motion sensor above, near the washroom compartment that we will be using. Go find a good spot to place and hide a remotely-activated Claymore mine that will cover the passageway where the door of our compartment opens, while I finish the job here."

"How about putting another Claymore mine right here, at the foot of this ladder? This way, we could catch anyone in the back after they came down from the upper deck."

"Do it!" Approved at once Erik.

The work on the deck level of their hiding compartment took them mere minutes, following which they climbed the ladder to go on the upper bow deck, which was level with the open weather deck just aft of their location. There, they did a visual reconnaissance of that part of the ship, noting what could be of eventual use or interest to them. Most of the compartment there were used for the storage of materiel typically used once in port, like supplies of paint and thinner for the hull and reserves of thick ropes, cables, chains and canvas tarps. To their satisfaction, the small washroom compartment they were interested in proved to include as well a shower stall, on top of a toilet and sink. The adjacent janitor's compartment had a huge sink, nearly the size of a bath tub really, plus drying racks for mops and shelves full of cleaning supplies. Erik nodded his head as he eyed the washroom facilities.

"Perfect! This will make our sea trip a lot more bearable. Let's wire this area for remote surveillance, then we will be all set."

“While we were going around those crates on the open deck, I noticed a few pallets of canned foodstuff. I know that we have brought with us some field rations for our trip, but we had to limit their quantity in order to leave enough space in our packs for our equipment, weapons and explosives. I could go discreetly grab a few boxes of food tins after we are finished here.”

Erik gave an amused look at his partner, but mentally conceded that he was right: if some unexpected stop or delay in a port or at sea lengthened in any way their trip, they would then be in danger of running out of rations. That could be truly problematic if it happened while stopped in some port short of Turkey, when sailors and stevedores would be running around the ship to load and unload cargo, thus rendering any move by them risky.

“Such food reserves could come handy, effectively. Just don’t turn our hiding compartment into some eatery counter, though.”

It took them about fifteen minutes to install a camera and motion sensor to cover the approach to the washroom, plus another set inside the washroom proper, and place a Claymore mine covering the passageway, running their control wires down a small vertical ventilation shaft that conveniently passed as well through their hiding compartment on the level below. That same ventilation shaft also gave a chance to Erik to run two wires connected to tiny whip antennas, once Dean had installed them on the open bow deck as part of his excursion for canned food. Those whip antennas were going to allow them to receive and send messages via satellite telephone and to receive signals for their GPS locator, even while hiding inside the ship. For that part of their work, Erik accompanied Dean outside on the weather deck to provide him close protection while he fixed the antennas and foraged for foodstuff. There was still an armed guard visible standing on the open bridge, watching the waters around the cargo ship. A more detailed look revealed to Erik a second armed guard, also dressed in black coveralls, watching the access gangway and the quay next to the ship.

Dean had finished his job of fixing the two satellite whip antennas and running down their wires through the ventilation duct and shaft and was now cautiously crawling outside on the weather deck, around the tarp-covered crates and pallets loaded with wooden boxes, checking the markings on them in order to find something of interest in term of foodstuff. There were a few feet of separation between the piles, something that

gave him some good concealment while he was crawling around. In some cases, the crewmembers had played it easy and had used a single large canvas tarp to cover two adjacent piles or crates, thus creating covered spaces protected from the elements, something that added yet more concealment for his movements. The first thing of interest he found was a pile of wooden boxes of canned food stacked on wooden pallets covered by a single tarp. Using his flashlight fitted with a red filter, Dean read quickly the markings on the sides of the boxes, smiling to himself when he found something to his liking.

“Tins of pre-cooked Spanish paella: that could be a nice variation from our field rations.”

Cautiously sliding out one of the top boxes from the pile and putting it down on the deck, he used his combat knife to pry open its top and examine its content. He found it full of large, family portion sized tins of paella, each enough to feed at least four persons.

“Excellent!”

Using the equipment bag that had contained his Claymore mines, wires and antennas, Dean stuffed four of the big cans in it, then closed back the box and replaced it in its original place. Moving to the next pallet, he found it loaded with boxes of tinned sardines. Taking out a top box and opening it, he saw dozens of small, hand-sized sardine cans inside and took a dozen of them before putting the box back in place. His last stop was at a pallet loaded with canned tuna, where he picked up twenty of the small round cans. His equipment bag now quite heavy, Dean turned around and walked on all fours to return near the bow access hatch, staying between the covered piles and with all his senses on alert. A slight movement that he glimpsed between two piles he was passing by made him stop and back a bit in a hurry. Grabbing his silenced FN 90 carbine, he listened carefully for a few seconds while hidden behind a pile. After a moment, he heard a faint metallic noise that he knew too well: someone had just taken the safety off a weapon, no more than a few feet away. Dean thought furiously, trying to figure out who that could be. It certainly wasn't one of the guards used by Grachev to protect his shipment, as he would have no need to hide like this. It couldn't be a crewmember either: even if one had been stealing tins of food from the cargo, he would not be armed. That left a stowaway like him and Erik, someone interested in tracking the cargo of weapons destined to ISIS. Dean smiled at the irony of things when the truth dawned on him. Staying behind his cover, he spoke out in a soft, low voice, using English.

"Miss Qalibaf, is that you?"

There was a moment of silence before a female voice replied to him, clearly hesitant and suspicious.

"Who are you?"

"The Great Satan sent me to prevent those weapons from reaching ISIS." Answered Dean in jest, using the pejorative term by which the United States was often called by Iranian leaders. There was more heavy silence before the female voice spoke again.

"How do you know my name?"

"We used our crystal ball. The mayor of Tehran can be proud, as he has a truly brave daughter. Look, I believe that we are working towards the same goal here, so why not forget about our political differences for this mission and coordinate our efforts." Yet more silence. Dean stayed patient, realizing how unsettling this encounter could be for the female Iranian agent. He then heard the noise of a weapon safety being put back on. That encouraged him in speaking further to the Iranian woman.

"Miss Qalibaf, me and my partner have found for ourselves a storage compartment in the bow where we hid after getting aboard. It is located near a washroom, so is ideal to hide during the sea trip to Turkey. You are welcome to hide with us for the duration of this voyage."

"And what tells me that you won't kill me quietly in my sleep during the trip?"

"The fact that we won't need to do that, unless of course you try yourself to kill us, which would only help Grachev's henchmen. I doubt very much that you could take out by yourself a whole squad of Russian Spetsnaz soldiers. However, me and my partner can and we do have the weapons needed for that. We have a mutual interest in preventing ISIS from getting these weapons. Let's forget our political and ideological differences during this trip and cooperate to thwart those barbarian bastards."

There was more silence before Dean heard the shuffling noise of someone crawling towards him while dragging some kind of bag on the deck. A young woman with neck-length dark hair then cautiously stuck out her head and looked at Dean.

"Alright: let's go to your hiding place. We will be able to discuss further once there."

"A good decision, Miss Qalibaf. Follow me as quietly as you can."

With the Iranian woman, who seemed to be wearing a black diving suit, trailing behind him, Dean continued on all fours until he arrived at the last pile of crates nearest to the

bow access hatch. He could see with his night vision goggles Erik, crouched in the opening of the hatch and waiting for him, his FN 90 carbine at the ready. Erik had also shut the internal lights of the passageway, so that no light showed up outside. Dean then activated his throat microphone.

"Sparrow, this is Stryker: I found a friend hiding among the crates on the deck while foraging for food. She agreed to call a truce and to come hide with us for this trip."

"She? Don't tell me that it's Qalibaf!"

"It's her alright. We are now going to rush past you to enter the bow."

Dean then twisted his head around to look at the Iranian agent.

"We are going to cross that open deck space at a crouch and enter the bow section through an opened hatch facing us. My partner is guarding the hatch, so don't be nervous on the trigger."

"Don't worry: I put my pistol on 'safe'."

"Good! Wait two seconds after I go, then follow me."

Dean next made a short dash across the open space and crouched behind Erik once inside, waiting for Qalibaf to follow him. She did so after a short moment and also crouched inside the passageway as Erik closed quietly the access hatch. Only then did he put the lights back on, allowing the two men and one woman to look at each other. With his FN 90 still at the ready but not pointing directly at the Iranian, Erik spoke in a neutral tone after examining visually the female agent. She had an oval face with soft features, large brown eyes and a slightly brownish skin that gave her a certain exotic air. She wore a diver's wet suit, with a mask, tuba and a pair of fins hooked to her belt and with a watertight small pack now at her feet, while she held a compact, silencer-equipped pistol in her right hand. The pistol was presently pointed down at the deck, something that reassured him a bit about her.

"If you will follow us, Miss Qalibaf, we will guide you to our hiding place, where you will be able to change and then eat and drink if you wish so. You can't have that many rations and water bottles in that small pack of yours."

"Effectively, mister. I had little time to equip myself for this trip and had to improvise. I was counting on stealing food and water during this trip."

Erik nodded in appreciation at that: she was proving to be both gutsy and dedicated, although she was obviously enjoying little field support from her organization, contrary to the extensive means presently at the disposal of him and Dean.

"Then follow me, miss."

The trip to their hiding compartment was short, being only about fifty feet away and one deck down. On entering it, Farah looked quickly around the compartment, noting the old barrels placed in line off the walls, so that they could hide the occupants from the door. Slowly and ostensibly, she then put her handgun back in the waterproof pouch containing her meager kit and supplies while eyeing the two Americans facing her. Both men visibly relaxed a bit on seeing that and let their weapons hang by their slings but kept looking at her, while she detailed them in turn. The one who had found her on the deck was tall, a good six foot in height, and was wide-shouldered, with a muscular body. His face was handsome, with brown hair cut very short, but his eyes said that he meant business. His partner was a bit shorter and less muscular, but his body was lean and nervous, while his brown eyes were presently as cold as ice. He wore medium-length brown hair and a short beard. Farah's eyes narrowed when she studied his face.

"Didn't I see you before, in the Puertobahia Hotel, mister?"

"Yes, you did, miss: I played the German tourist on you then, so that I could follow you."

"I remember now. But, if you were able to follow me to my hotel and inside it, how come you didn't do anything against me later? Our nations are all but sworn enemies."

While the shorter man's mouth formed a smile then, his eyes stayed cold as he answered her.

"We didn't attack you because you were not our target for our mission. Our mission is to prevent ISIS from getting those weapons, while finding out as much as possible who precisely is involved in this crazy plot."

"And that also happens to be my mission. Since you followed me to my hotel, you must know that I had a partner. Unfortunately, he was killed by Graschev's men at the port warehouse, while we were trying to find out what was in the weapons shipment."

"We know! We had a small camera hidden inside the warehouse and we saw Graschev's men when they carried the body of your partner inside after killing him. We also saw you run away from the warehouse just before that."

Farah tensed up at those words: those two American agents were decidedly a bit too efficient and well informed to her taste.

"If you had the inside of the warehouse under surveillance, then you must know by now that your good ally in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, has its hands all over this deal, along with the Russians."

"I must qualify your statement about that, miss. While some powerful players in Saudi Arabia are involved in this plot, it does not mean that they have the sanction of the Saudi government or of King Salman."

"And that's supposed to change things a lot?" Replied Farah in a sarcastic tone. The smaller American shook his head slowly.

"Not a lot, as a matter of fact. Either the Saudi government is behind it, or it is being undermined by an extremist faction sympathetic to ISIS and Al Qaeda. Either way, it is something we definitely don't like. However, that particular problem will have to be dealt with at a much higher level than ours. Our concern right now is to prevent those weapons from getting to ISIS and to unmask those involved in the transit of these weapons. Are you ready to work with us towards those goals, while forgetting for the time being the ideological differences between us?"

"If that is the price to pay in order to complete my mission, I am sure that my superiors in Tehran will understand."

The taller American then spoke up, sounding somber.

"It is a good thing for you in this case that your father is so influential in Tehran. He is supposed to be a pragmatic man, from what I know of him."

Farah smiled very slightly then, warming up a bit to those two enemy agents.

"He is! He also happens to be a qualified commercial pilot and has the good of the citizens of Tehran at heart. He will be able to understand the need for this truce between us."

"And we will abide by that truce, miss, as long as you don't initiate hostile acts against us or against the interests of the United States."

"That is quite a large qualifier, mister: the interests of the United States keep changing and expanding as it finds new reasons to push itself around in the World. By the way, my name is Farah. Since we are stuck together for the duration of this trip, we might as well be on a first name basis, right?"

"You may call me 'Stryker'. My partner is 'Sparrow'. Now that we have introduced ourselves, how about that you change out of that diving suit? I can guide you to the washroom above us, where you will be able to wash away the salt on your skin and then change."

"I will gladly take your offer...Dean. I hope that you are not counting on playing the peeping tom upstairs?"

"Don't worry, Farah: when on a mission, I can be all business and no play." Somehow, the way he said that convinced Farah that he was not lying. She thus grabbed her equipment pouch and followed the big American out of the compartment and up to the deck above, where he showed her a small and austere washroom with a shower stall in one corner.

"I will stay outside the door and keep a watch for any armed goon or sailor while you wash and change. I will just ask you to make it quick and not waste time: no perm job on your hair, please."

Farah, who was starting to find the bigger American to be decidedly more likeable than his partner, at least in appearance and demeanor, frankly smiled at his attempted joke.

"Don't worry, Stryker: I didn't bring my hair blower with me on this mission."

"Excellent! I will be outside the door. If you hear some kind of fracas, don't panic and simply dress back quickly, then wait for me to open the door. Just don't shoot immediately without looking first who is coming, though."

He then closed the door, leaving Farah alone in the small washroom. The first thing she did then was to take out her pistol and put it on the side of the sink, near the shower stall, so that she could grab it quickly if something happened. Only then did she peel off the neoprene wet suit that clung closely to her body, revealing a bikini under it. Showering and drying herself, she slipped a panty on and clipped a bra in place, then put on a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, a pair of socks and running shoes. The whole process took her a bit over twenty minutes. Rolling in a bundle her diving suit, with her wet bikini inside, took her another two minutes. Dean was patiently waiting in the passageway, partly hiding behind a big pipe that ran vertically between decks, when she came out of the washroom. He gave her a quick glance up and down before pointing the nearby ladder.

"Good! Let's go back to our luxury cabin. Are you hungry?"

"A bit."

"Then I will open a can for you once there."

"A can of pork or a can of worms?"

Her joke then brought for the first time a genuine smile on his face.

"Well well, an Iranian agent with a sense of humor: that's refreshing!"

"Did you think that us Iranians are all crazy religious fanatics screaming 'God is great!' all the time?" Farah replied while following him towards the ladder. He twisted his head to look at her as he was about to climb down the steps.

"No! And neither are we Americans all depraved capitalist exploiters screaming 'God bless America' all the time. Well, maybe the part about 'God bless America' is true."

Farah had to restrain herself then from not openly giggling at that.

Once back in the storage compartment, Farah unrolled her wet suit and suspended it, so that it could dry out. She was finishing to do that when Dean approached her with a few small tin cans in his hands.

"Here are a couple of cans of sardines and of flaked tuna for you. I have a can opener if you need to use one. Do you have water with you?"

"I do have a bottle of water with me, thank you."

She took the cans offered by him and put all but one sardine can in her bag and took out a set of camping utensils and a bottle of water, then sat on a small, empty plastic crate turned upside down. She discreetly watched the two Americans as she ate her sardines. They also opened a couple of cans of fish and ate them, sitting while facing her. She didn't fail to notice that, while they had put down their carbines, both wore pistols in either shoulder or belt holsters.

"Do you mind if I put my pistol shoulder holster on after eating?"

"Go right ahead, miss." Replied the one nicknamed 'Sparrow', who was still rather formal with her. "Grashev's goons could show up without warning and it is thus good policy to be ready for them if need be."

"Thank you! So, how do you propose that we go about this mission while stuck on this ship, Sparrow?"

"Well, as much as I would like to blow up this ship and its cargo of weapons right away, I have orders to find who is supposed to facilitate the transit of these weapons once we hit port in Turkey. We suspect that the Saudis and the Russians are not the only ones to have their hands dirty in this affair."

"If it would be only for my opinion, I would say that the Turks have something to do as well with this. The Turks have been rather passive concerning ISIS, even while those barbarians were committing massacres right on their border. Also, their president is hostile to President Assad of Syria, whose army is in turn fighting ISIS."

"...and a few other groups." Added Dean, making Farah nod her head.

"I would lie to say that you are not right about that, 'Stryker'. However, if the Turks, or some people in Turkey at the least, are aiding this weapons scheme, then we may not be able to expect any help from the Turkish authorities once in Iskenderun."

Erik nodded once at that.

"You are correct about that, miss. We will thus act as if the Turkish authorities are complicit in this, which means that we will work completely undercover in Turkey. Do you have a passport and other identity pieces with you that would allow you to go around in Turkey?"

"I have the papers and cards I used in Spain with me, along with some cash. In view of how well equipped you seem to be, I suppose that you are not lacking either in false papers?"

"Correct! What I am hoping to do is to see in Iskenderun who will show up to pick up the weapons. Then, we could get the information we need from that somebody."

"What about the Russians escorting the weapons right now?"

"Ideally, we will evade them during this sea trip and get off the ship as soon as we arrive in Iskenderun, so that we could both be free of them and be ready to follow whoever will pick up the weapons."

"That sounds like a feasible plan to me. So, we just hide during this trip and do nothing in the meantime?"

"Not exactly. While I want us to follow this trail all the way to Turkey, we have to ensure that we can destroy those weapons in the case our opponents decide to change their plans and reroute the weapons. We will have to be especially alert when this ship will make its scheduled stop in the port of Limassol, in Cyprus. A lot of questionable dealings happen in Cyprus, due to its proximity to many countries bordering the Mediterranean. I intend to place a few demolition charges in place, just in case."

"A sensible precaution, I must say. I concur." Said Farah calmly. In reality, her mind was now going into high gear, trying to fit that piece of info with the plan of action she had received from her superiors in Tehran before sneaking aboard the ship. Blowing up the weapons, while an acceptable solution if things went badly, was certainly not the preferred one in Tehran. Erik, after looking at his watch, made a show of starting to undo the laces of his running shoes.

"It is late and we had a long day. We all should catch some sleep before this ship leaves Santa Maria."

Both Dean and Farah agreed with that and made themselves as comfortable as they could, with Farah using one of the big canvas tarps stored in the compartment, folding it a few times to make it a sort of passable mattress for herself. She however stayed fully dressed, with her pistol laid under her rolled diving suit, which she used as a pillow. Having to sleep in the same compartment than two American male agents made her understandably nervous, making it hard for her at first to fall asleep. She finally reasoned that, if they had done nothing against her in Santa Maria, when she didn't even know that they were around, then they had even less reasons to attack her now, something that may attract the attention of the Russian commandos on the ship. With that thought in her head, she closed her eyes and let the fatigue of her last day overtake her.

**06:55 (Madrid Time)**

**Saturday, May 30, 2015**

**Bow storage compartment, MV Heraklion**

**Inlet port of Santa Maria, Spain**

The muffled rumbling and vibrations from the big diesel engines of the ship coming alive woke Farah up from her slumber. Her brain, still foggy from residual fatigue, then reminded her where she was and with whom, something that made her instinctively reach for her pistol to make sure that it was still where she had put it. It was, to her profound relief. Sitting up on her improvised mattress, she saw that both Americans were also waking up. Dean smiled to her while waving his hand.

"Good morning, Farah! Slept well?"

"I could have used more sleep, to be honest, but that folded tarp made a decent mattress."

"Good for you! Are you hungry for breakfast?"

"I am getting there. However, I will do my morning prayers first, then will go to the washroom before eating."

"Okay! Just make sure to fit your silencer on your pistol before leaving the compartment, in case you meet someone upstairs."

"Will do!"

Getting on her knees on the mattress, she faced East and did a short, silent prayer to Allah. Next, she put back on her running shoes and screwed her silencer on her pistol.

She was about to leave the storage compartment when Erik stopped her with an urgent gesture of the hand. He then showed to Farah a small computer tablet, which had its color screen on.

“Please wait a little bit: a sailor is presently using the washroom upstairs.”

A look at the screen made Farah’s eyes pop wide open.

“You have cameras covering this passageway and the one above, plus the washroom?”

“We also have placed motion sensors to alert us if anyone enters this section of the ship. We like to play it as safe as we can: no sense in running unnecessary risks, as there are already enough of them in our job.”

“A sensible philosophy, I must say. I wish that I could be as well equipped as you are.”

That brought a rare smile on Erik’s face as he looked up at her.

“You have stingy bean counters in Tehran, Farah?”

“Well, my country is suffering under severe international financial and commercial sanctions, remember? A lot of our resources are also presently spent countering the ISIS advance in Iraq. You know too well what would happen to the Shiites in Bagdad if ISIS ever manages to capture the capital.”

That brought a somber look on Erik’s face, who replied in a subdued tone to her.

“I unfortunately can imagine too well the consequences, Farah. That is why we have to work together to help counter the plans of those barbarians.”

Those words helped somewhat to soften up further Farah’s opinion of those two Americans. She now truly hoped that she could successfully fill all her mission objectives without having to oppose those two men. That could however prove hard to do, in view of what Tehran wanted done about the weapons. She also suspected that they would be quite hard to take out, even if attacked by surprise. Farah thus had plenty to think about when Erik finally told her that it was now safe to go upstairs to the washroom.

The day went by quite uneventfully for the trio, with the cargo ship proceeding east from Cadiz and passing within hours through the Strait of Gibraltar, entering the Mediterranean and sailing parallel to the coast of Northern Africa. All that time, they stayed inside the storage compartment, going out to the washroom only when strictly necessary and doing as little noise as possible. Thankfully, the crewmembers had few

reasons to visit the bow section and mostly stayed aft or on the open weather deck. A group of two Spetsnaz commandos did effect a short patrol around the bow section in the morning, but their inspection tour proved to be a perfunctory one, with the Russians only entering the main compartments to look briefly inside for anything unusual. While they passed through the passageway where the trio's compartment was, they did not look inside, to Farah's relief. That event gave her the occasion to see how cool and professional her two involuntary companions were, with no signs of nervousness or anxiety shown by the Americans, who simply crouched quietly behind drums with their carbines at the ready and waited for the Russians to go away before resuming their routine.

Farah faced a dilemma as night fell at around nine thirty in the evening. She needed to go out on the open deck in order to be able to use her satellite telephone and send a report to Tehran, but couldn't pretext that she was simply going to the washroom, as the cameras placed on that deck would show to the Americans that she was going somewhere else. She finally decided to be open about it, in the hope that the Americans would let her do her things. She however approached Dean instead of Erik, having found him easier to deal with at a personal level up to now. The big American, who was cleaning a huge pistol, looked up at her and smiled.

"Yes, Farah?"

"Uh, I need to go out for a minute, so that I could send out a short report on my present position and situation."

Instead of a flat 'no' or of an offer to 'escort her around', she was surprised to simply get a renewed smile from the one she still knew only under his nickname of 'Stryker'.

"Go right ahead, Farah: your need is legitimate and doesn't endanger our mission. Just be careful while on the weather deck."

"Thanks for your comprehension, Stryker."

"My pleasure, Farah."

Farah then stepped outside, carrying her equipment pack on her back. As soon as she was out, Dean looked at Erik, who was typing a text report on his tablet.

"We may want to ask Ian to try intercepting that communication if he can, Erik."

"That was already planned, big guy. I am going to notify him right now to expect a satellite communication from our present position."

Four minutes later and thousands of miles away in the United States, the supervisor of a special team of signal analysts at the National Security Agency got a short warning on his computer that prompted him to type a pre-selected command in his system, directing the electronic ears and powerful analytical computers at his command to listen and sift through the radio traffic presently going through the communications satellite covering the area of Spain and of the Western Mediterranean. It took him only seconds to filter and select a specific signal, which he then recorded for later translation and analysis.

Now hiding under a canvas tarp covering two piles of boxes on the open weather deck, Farah first took out her GPS receiver unit and switched it on, then noted down her present precise position. Next, she took her satellite telephone and formed a number that she had memorized before leaving on her mission. A man's voice answered her from Tehran after a few rings.

"Central speaking! Identify yourself!"

"This is Agent 26, codename Scheherazade, calling from the Eastern Mediterranean. I am safely aboard the ship transporting the cargo interesting us. Here is my present position: 36 degrees, one minute, twelve seconds North, four degrees, eleven minutes, forty seconds West. The ship is heading due East at about twelve knots."

"Position copied! Anything special to report?"

"Affirmative! About twelve Russian special forces soldiers are aboard, escorting the shipment. There are also two American agents, probably CIA, who are hiding on the ship. They are fully armed and very well equipped and have as a mission to prevent the shipment to be delivered to its buyers. They also intend to find the identity of the Turkish intermediaries involved. They happen to know me by name and appear to have spotted and identified me while in Spain. I have told them that I was ready to work with them, since we all want to prevent the intended delivery to take place, and they seem to trust me, to a point. I request urgent instructions about how to handle them."

There was an understandably long pause on the line, then a new male voice came on, which she recognized as that of her handler in Tehran.

"Agent 26, you are authorized to work in concert with those two Americans as long as our goals coincide. When this will not be the case anymore, you will have to

neutralize them before the ship is boarded. We need that shipment intact. Do you have questions at this point?"

"Negative! I will call again in about 24 hours, to give an update on my position and situation."

"Then, may Allah be with you, Scheherazade."

The line then went dead, leaving Farah to ponder her latest instructions. She felt conflicted at first with the idea of having eventually to eliminate the Americans, but her faith and loyalty to her country quickly won over her doubts.

## **22:17 (Madrid Time)**

### **United States Navy nuclear attack submarine USS California (SSN-781)**

#### **Trailing three nautical miles behind the MV Heraklion**

"Sonar, report on the target ship!"

"It is dead ahead at a distance of three nautical miles and doing twelve knots, sir."

"Excellent! Helm, keep on present heading and stay at periscope depth. Sonar, advise me at once if any warship approaches us or if any ship or boat makes a move to get close to the target ship. Exo<sup>10</sup>, you have the con! I will be in my cabin if you need me."

Commander John Marston then left the cramped control room of his attack submarine to go get some rest. His orders about the MV Heraklion were clear and simple: he was to stay close enough to it to be able to react quickly to about any situation concerning it. The real sport was however going to be in the Eastern Mediterranean, near the coasts of Israel, Lebanon and Syria, waters that were constantly patrolled by dozens of ships and maritime reconnaissance aircraft from a number of rival nations.

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<sup>10</sup> Exo : Short for Executive Officer, the title for the officer who is second in command on a U.S. Navy warship.

## **CHAPTER 5 – UNWELCOME GUESTS**

**15:38 (Rome Time)**

**Tuesday, June 2, 2015**

**Bridge of the MV Heraklion**

**52 nautical miles northwest of Malta, Mediterranean Sea**

Having been advised by a sailor that the captain of the ship had received a message for him, Major Gennady Koslov climbed gingerly the access ladder from the stern deck and walked inside the ship's bridge, where he found Captain Philipopoulos sitting in his command chair behind the helmsman.

"You have something for me, Captain?"

Stavro Philipopoulos gave him an introspective look before answering him: presented to him as the leader of a group of private security contractors paid by Viktor Grashev to protect his present cargo, Koslov gave Stavro the impression of being much more than just some mercenary. However, Grashev had paid Stavro very well to close his eyes and shut his mouth during this trip.

"Yes, Mister Koslov! We just received an urgent message from the Meridian Import-Export Company, addressed to you. Here it is."

Koslov took the message and started reading it. As decided in advance, any message to him from Grashev would be in clear, but would contain certain key words and passwords to both authenticate it and convey its hidden meaning. What Koslov read however infuriated him to no small degree, making him look up angrily at Stavro.

"This can't be! I had no prior warning about this!"

"Neither did I, Mister Koslov. From the tone of it, it seems that this was forced on Mister Grashev at the last minute and against his best judgment. Would you know by chance who those extra passengers due to board the ship in Malta are?"

"No, but they can only complicate my job to insure the security of our present cargo. When will we arrive in Malta, Captain?"

"We should dock in Malta in about five hours. By the way, I don't have enough cabins left to accommodate those extra passengers, unless your men would be willing to cram themselves in a few less cabins."

"No way! These...new passengers will have to find berths in the bow section. I don't want them near my men."

Stavro raised an eyebrow at that, surprised by the vehemence of the Russian.

"Is there something I should know about these men, Mister Koslov?"

Koslov, realizing that he had let too much of his emotions show, made a dismissive gesture.

"Not really, Captain. They are just from a long-time rival private security firm that stole many contracts from us in the past. It seems that the buyer of your cargo shipment decided to hire them for the last part of the trip, where they will escort it inside Turkey. I think that this was an unwise decision on his part, but I am paid to follow the directives of my customer, so I will have to live with this. Thank you for advising me about this message, Captain. I will now go pass the news to my men."

Stavro didn't say a word then but followed Koslov with his eyes as the Russian left his bridge. The idea of having aboard his ship two rival teams of mercenaries that hated each others' guts didn't appeal at all to him but, like Koslov, he was paid to follow the directives of the customer.

Going to his cabin inside the lower level of the bridge superstructure, Koslov reread Graschev's message carefully. It was definitely from him, since it included one of the one-time passwords preselected before the departure from Santa Maria. The meaning was also clear, if you knew how to read between the lines: eleven ISIS fighters were going to come aboard the ship in Malta, at the insistence of those stupid Saudis, and would 'help' escort the shipment of weapons to Iskenderun and inside Turkish territory. Apparently, either the Saudis or ISIS didn't fully trust Russia in this venture and wanted to play it safe. That however was going to force Koslov and his men to cohabit with people they would normally gladly kill on sight. This was not going to be fun.

## **20:52 (Rome Time)**

### **Port of Rosetta, Malta**

Koslov stayed a good five paces behind and to one side of Captain Philipopoulos as the latter met the first of eleven men coming up the gangway from the quay. All of them wore khaki coveralls and carried each a bulging kit bag. They were not openly

armed, but Koslov was sure that those kit bags contained plenty of weapons. Surprisingly, the ISIS fighters didn't have Semitic traits on the most part, looking instead like common Europeans of either white or black skin. Koslov then understood on hearing their leader speak with a British accent that they had to be Western converts to Islam who had been recruited by ISIS. Those converts in fact formed a sizeable portion of the ISIS forces and were often their best trained fighters, and also some of their most fanatical ones. They also had the advantage of being able to pass incognito in most countries of Europe without attracting undue attention. Philipopoulos then brought the ISIS leader to Koslov to introduce the two men to each other.

"Mister Gennady Koslov, this is Mister John Wadsworth, the leader of the newly arrived team."

"Happy to meet you, Mister Wadsworth." Lied Koslov.

"The same here, Mister Koslov." Replied the ISIS man while shaking hands with the Russian. Philipopoulos then cut in, trying to shorten as much as possible the contacts between the two groups.

"Mister Wadsworth, there are unfortunately not enough cabins in the stern section for your men. I thus have prepared a compartment in the bow section. If you and your men could follow me."

As the eleven newcomers followed the captain towards the bow, one of Koslov's Spetsnaz soldiers near him whispered in his ear.

"Those black asses<sup>11</sup> are bound to make the rest of the trip quite insufferable, sir. Should we stay away from them?"

"As much as possible, yes! Unfortunately, there is only one mess for the crew and passengers. Our men will have to show much restraint during meals, as I can't vouch for those murderous bastards."

In their storage compartment, Erik and Dean were alerted by the beeping signal from their motion sensor installed on the upper deck. Looking at the corresponding camera window opened on Erik's tablet computer, they saw the firsts of a group of men in khaki coveralls entering the bow section behind Captain Philipopoulos.

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<sup>11</sup> Black ass : A common pejorative term used by Russians to describe non-Caucasians they deem inferior.

"This can't be good news for us." Said Erik as he watched the newcomers go towards a forward compartment that was crammed with triple bunk beds and was probably used to carry migrants on certain trips. One of the men then spoke to a comrade in Arabic, making Dean frown before looking at Farah, who was now approaching them, curious about what was happening.

"Farah, you know Arabic well. Can you translate what these bozos are saying?"

"Sure!" Replied the Iranian agent before listening carefully as more of the newcomers spoke Arabic between themselves while their lineup snaked slowly forward along the passageway.

"One says that he would rather kill those Russians than work alongside them. His comrades are agreeing. He..."

Farah suddenly tensed up as another newcomer said something that made the others laugh. Erik also saw her expression harden, while intense hatred appeared on her face.

"One of them just joked that he would rather be back in Raqqa, at the side of his teenage slave bride. These bastards are ISIS fighters!"

"I kind of was worried about that." Said Erik, his own expression hardening. On his part, Dean shook his head slowly in wonderment.

"Whoever sent those guys on this ship sure didn't think straight: the Russian Spetsnaz soldiers that came on the ship in Santa Maria probably fought a number of times Islamist extremists in the Caucasus region in the past. This is a perfect recipe for causing a bloody fight on this ship."

To his surprise, his remark made a smile appear on Erik's face.

"What? What did I say to amuse you?"

"That perfect recipe for a fight: I think that you just gave me a really nice idea."

Farah, who had not listened to that, as she was busy listening to the ISIS fighters visible on the tablet's screen, was dismayed on seeing one of the newcomers being shown by the captain the washroom compartment the trio had been using so far, with the ISIS fighter then going inside the washroom, probably to relieve himself.

"Damn! What are going to do now if we need to use the toilet? These bastards are now going to be all over that deck."

"Then, we will have to improvise something, Farah." Replied Dean before looking around at the various items they had found at first in the compartment. His eyes quickly stopped on a dozen large white plastic cans with steel handles stacked on a shelf, along with other items. Going to the cans and reading the labels on them, he saw

that they were five gallon cans of a powdered mixture meant to be spread over oil leaks on decks, in order to absorb the oil and avoid accidents from slipping on the oil patch. Weighing each can, he found two of them that were half empty and proceeded in pouring the content of one in the other, ending with one can being empty. He next grabbed a large plastic garbage bag from a box, opened it and fitted it to the inside of the empty can, then smiled to Farah.

"Here you go, Farah! I will pour some of that absorbent mixture in the bottom, to help absorb a bit the odor of our urine. We will then only need to add a bit more powder every time we relieve ourselves. We will of course keep the lid of the can on when not using it."

While his idea was definitely practical, Farah still hesitated while eyeing the big plastic can.

"Uh, we are going to use this here?"

Dean smiled reassuringly to her, understanding her hesitation.

"Don't worry, Farah: we are not going to play peeping tom on you. I will set this can in that corner, behind that line of drums, in order to provide some intimacy."

"Thank you, Stryker. Decidedly, you are a perfect gentleman."

That made the big agent grin and puff his chest.

"Hey, I'm the darling of CIA secretaries, back in the States. In more favorable circumstances, I would have loved to invite you for supper."

Farah smiled briefly at that, then became serious again and looked at Erik.

"So, what will we do about those ISIS bastards? With 23 men now escorting those weapons, the job of destroying them once in Turkey will become quite difficult."

"Not if we cut that number before we arrive in Iskenderun." Replied Erik in a cold voice.

**12:07 (Rome Time)**

**Wednesday, June 3, 2015**

**Crew mess, MV Heraklion**

**140 nautical miles west of Crete**

Most of the crew of the MV Heraklion was already eating lunch at the tables of their mess, along with six of the Russian 'private security guards', when the eleven men that had come aboard in Malta entered the mess. The crewmembers tensed up at once

on seeing that the newcomers were fully armed, carrying AK-47 assault rifles, pistols and knives, while the Russians eyed the ISIS fighters with suspicion. Acting as if they owned the place, the Islamists went to the counter where an assortment of bread, cheese, cold cuts and olives was laid, with their leader reading quickly the menu scribbled on a small chalkboard hooked to a wall. That reading seemed to incense him and he looked darkly at the cook, visible through the service wicket opening of the adjacent kitchen.

“Pork souvlakis?! Are you trying to force us to eat impure infidel food?”

The Greek cook, who had not been told that the newcomers were Muslims, shrugged while wiping his hands with his apron.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I was not told that you needed a special diet. Besides, the supplies I have onboard are rather limited in scope. If you are ready to wait a bit, I will cook quickly some fish fillets for you and your men.”

“Please do!” Replied the ISIS squad leader, John Wadsworth, before going to the cold buffet table. He swore to himself when he saw the cold cuts of ham and sausages.

“More damn infidel food!”

One of the Spetsnaz soldiers, a beefy, muscular senior sergeant who had fought Chechen Islamist rebels in the past, took exception to that and threw Wadsworth a black look.

“Hey, I like my ham and sausages, so quit complaining, you black ass!”

Wadsworth, like the rest of his men, pivoted around at once while putting one hand on his holstered pistol and looking at the Russian with murder in his eyes.

“You fucking godless communist! I should teach you to pay proper respect to Islam.”

In response, the Russian senior sergeant got up from his bench and bent forward, his knuckles on the table in front of him, while staring coldly at Wadsworth.

“Just try, rag head!”

One of the ISIS fighters, incensed at the Russian’s choice of words, pointed and cocked his AK-47 assault rifle, making in return the six Spetsnaz soldiers draw in a flash their pistols and point them at the Islamists, who also pointed their weapons. The crewmembers of the cargo ship, caught in the middle, froze in fear as the Russians and the Islamists faced each other with their index fingers on the triggers of their weapons.

The ISIS leader had a mean smile as he stared at the Russians over the sights of his pistol.

“Eleven of us against the six of you, and you don’t even have rifles with you. Maybe we should kill you all right now and thus simplify our job in Turkey.”

“And you would also endanger the shipment by starting a fight on this ship. Nice thinking, asshole!” Replied the Spetsnaz senior sergeant. Wadsworth threw him a hateful look and started pressing gradually on the trigger of his pistol, aiming at the head of the Russian. A harsh order barked in English was then shouted from the direction of the entrance of the mess.

“DROP YOUR GUNS, NOW!”

Turning his head towards the door of the mess, the ISIS leader saw that Major Koslov and one of his soldiers were crouched just beside the frame of the door and were pointing their compact AKSU-74 assault rifles at him and his men. In the position the two Russians were, they had the Islamists in enfilade and could shoot down the lot of them in seconds. Containing his rage, Wadsworth slowly lowered his pistol while giving an order in Arabic to his men.

“Lower your guns, but keep them in your hands: we will not make ourselves defenseless against those infidels.”

As his men obeyed him, he switched to English, addressing Koslov.

“We will keep our weapons with us, Koslov. That is non-negotiable.”

Koslov debated for a moment if he should simply shoot now and get rid of these idiots, but had to decide against it: the Islamists had the passwords to allow the shipment of weapons to go through the ISIS lines in Syria.

“Fine, but you leave this mess now and return to eat in only one hour, without your weapons. From now on, you will have your meals after my men and the crew have eaten, so we can avoid some stupid move from you. You do otherwise and I will exterminate you and your men without hesitation. Now, GO!”

With the other Spetsnaz still pointing their pistols at them, the ISIS fighters had no choice but to leave the mess in single file, closely watched by the Russians. However, before leaving last, Wadsworth stopped beside Koslov and stared at him with hatred.

“This is not over, Russky!”

“Start thinking about the mission instead of turning this into a personal feud, you imbecile. Your leaders need that shipment and my leaders also want it to be delivered as contracted, so cut the crap and tell your men to cool down, for everyone’s sake. I

heard by the way your comment about killing us all during the trip. Be assured that my men will be watching you and your men closely from now on. I will also make sure that your words get passed to those in higher places who negotiated the delivery of this shipment.”

For an instant, Koslov thought that Wadsworth would jump on him, but he restrained himself and walked away at a furious pace. Koslov watched him and his men disappear past the next corner of the passageway, then looked at his men inside the mess.

“Finish eating quickly, men, so you can go relieve our men presently on watch. Tell them at the same time not to trust those ISIS assholes and to be on their guards when near them. Sergeant Fedukin, come see me for a moment.”

The senior sergeant came to him at once and stopped at attention in front of Koslov.

“Yes, sir?”

“How did this happen?”

Fedukin answered him at once, giving him a truthful and complete description of the incident to his officer, who gave him a severe look at the end.

“This incident could have ruined our whole mission, Sergeant. I know that these assholes are despicable bastards, but try to avoid inflammatory words in the future. Understood?”

“Yes sir!”

“Good! Make sure that the men stay on guard from now on. I don’t trust for one second those fanatics. Dismissed!”

As his big NCO returned to his table, Koslov thought with bitterness at the dilemma the coming of the ISIS fighters aboard the ship was now presenting him. Whoever had decided to send those fanatics sure didn’t think much before taking their decision. However, he was now the one stuck trying to make this impossible situation work out.

## **CHAPTER 6 – POURING GASOLINE ON THE FIRE**

**01:06 (Rome Time)**

**Thursday, June 4, 2015**

**Bow storage compartment, MV Heraklion**

**190 nautical miles west of Cyprus, Eastern Mediterranean**

Farah, who had trouble sleeping, woke up on hearing a few light noises inside the compartment. Getting up from behind the drums that hid her improvised mattress, she cautiously stuck her head out, her pistol ready in her right hand. What she saw was Erik and Dean seemingly getting ready for some kind of fight, with their black balaclavas down over their faces, black thin gloves on their hands and tactical vests around their torsos. They also had impressive-looking night vision goggles with four light intensification tubes set at angles to give a wider field of view. Each of them were armed with their silenced FN 90 carbines, pistols, knives and even grenades.

“Uh, has something new come up, guys?”

“Not really, but we are going to change that, Farah.” Replied Dean, serious. “Basically, we will go cut down on the number of armed men we will eventually have to face.”

“But, that will alert these bastards to our presence on the ship.” Objected at once the Iranian, to which Erik shook his head.

“Not if they appeared to have killed each other. I will have to ask you not to venture outside of the compartment while we are out: bullets may fly thick in the hour to come.”

“You are sure that I can’t help you?” Insisted Farah, getting fully up and showing her silenced pistol. Erik looked at her in silence for a moment, giving her points for gutsiness.

“Thanks for the offer, Farah, but this is the kind of job me and my partner have been doing for years now. You will be able to help us fully once we are in Turkey.”

The two men then left the compartment after checking on their surveillance cameras that no Russian or ISIS fighter was out in their area of the ship. Farah debated for a moment about following them anyway but finally decided against it. She was realistic enough to know her limits, while the two Americans certainly looked like they could handle about

anything. She however decided to use that chance to go sift through the equipment bags left behind by the CIA agents. Going first to the pack belonging to 'Sparrow', the one who appeared to be the leader of the duo, she undid quickly the top flap and opened it wide. She heard a very faint noise then but didn't think anything of it until her head started turning and her eyes lost their focus a few seconds later. She then understood with a flash of fear that the American must have booby-trapped his pack with some kind of gas release mechanism. It was however too late for her and she fell unconscious in a heap over the opened equipment pack.

Cautiously making their way out of the bow section and onto the open weather deck, Dean and Erik used to the maximum the cover afforded by the covered piles of crates and boxes stowed on the deck, moving as silently as cats while scanning the night with their goggles. The first man they saw was a crewmember, standing on the port open bridge wing and smoking a cigarette while contemplating the sea and the night sky. The second one was armed and also stood on the open bridge, slowly and methodically scanning the deck forward of the bridge superstructure. Erik saw a third man, also armed, standing on the starboard open wing. He silently pointed that man to Dean, who then split up from his partner to make his way towards that sentry. On his part, Erik got as close from the bridge superstructure as he could and, at the first moment the other sentry looked into another direction, leaped forward silently to cover the remaining few yards and go hide in a dark corner of the structure. A radio message from Dean came in a few minutes later through his radio earpiece.

"Starboard side sentry down and hidden from sight. The way is clear."

"I copy that." Replied in a whisper Erik, who then moved alongside the forward bulkhead of the bridge superstructure, turning its starboard corner and getting to the starboard side access hatch, where he found Dean waiting for him, crouched beside the hatch and a combat knife in his right hand. The blade was covered with blood.

"After you, Erik."

Erik opened the hatch as quietly as he could, but still could not help some screeching noise coming from the poorly lubricated hinges. Thankfully, nobody seemed to hear or react to that and the two agents went inside a lit passageway before closing back the hatch behind them. From the ship's blueprints they had studied in Rota, they knew that they were now in the section containing the passenger cabins. Since the ISIS fighters were lodged in the bow section and since the crewmembers slept one deck lower, the

occupants of the cabin giving on this passageway had to be Russian Spetsnaz soldiers. The two agents didn't care much about who they would kill tonight, as long as enough Russians were left alive afterwards to launch a retaliatory attack on the ISIS fighters. Going to the door of the nearest cabin, a standard wooden model with a door knob, instead of a steel hatch, Erik gently tried to turn the handle but found it locked. That could only mean that someone was inside, probably sleeping. Taking out a set of lock picking tools, Erik quietly worked on the door lock for a moment, until a small metallic 'clic' told him that he had unlocked the door. Before slowly pushing the door open, though, he pointed the overhead lights of the passageway.

"Shut those lights off: they could wake up whoever is inside when I will open the door."

"Right away!" Replied Dean before walking softly to the light switch a few yards away and turning it off. With the passageway now pitch black, Erik activated the small infrared light that was part of his night goggles, allowing him to see again despite the total absence of white light. Only then did he push the door and stepped inside the cabin, with Dean ready to back him up with his silenced FN 90. He found only one man sleeping in the cabin, despite having a double bunk bed in it. The black coverall of a Spetsnaz soldier, suspended alongside a black tactical vest to wall hooks, confirmed the identity of the sleeper, who was snoring lightly. Approaching the man silently, Erik studied his face for a moment as he stood over him, his combat knife out and ready. He smiled on recognizing the sleeper as being the leader of the Spetsnaz squad. Then, without saying a word, he brutally covered the man's mouth with his left hand at the same time as he pressed his razor-sharp blade hard against the man's throat and pulled the knife across it, severing the right carotid artery and the trachea in one swift move. Erik kept his left hand in place as the sleeper opened his eyes, abject horror in them. The Russian tried to get Erik off him, but he bled out quickly, while he also drowned in the blood now flowing down his trachea and filling his lungs. The man thrashed in his bed for a few seconds while emitting gurgling sounds, then became inert, his eyes fixed and unfocused. The odor of urine, coming out of the dead man's bladder and soaking his underwear as his muscles relaxed, followed next. Withdrawing his hand, Erik contemplated for a couple of seconds the man he had just killed. He didn't feel some kind of sick joy at having killed this man, who had done nothing personally against him, nor did he regret his action: it had simply been a necessary act made in order to help

accomplish his mission. He next went to the dead man's uniform while speaking softly to Dean.

"That guy was their leader. I'm going to see if he had anything of interest for us with him. Watch the door in the meantime."

Searching the man's uniform, then his equipment pack, took Erik about four minutes, but those minutes paid off, as he found a small notebook with writing in Russian in a pocket of the uniform. Reading quickly the words and numbers inside the notebook, Erik smiled while looking up at Dean.

"I think that I have the name and phone number of at least one intermediary in Turkey, possibly two. We will be able to have Ian run them through his databases and find out who they are. With luck, we may now have the last link to this weapons deal."

"Great! If that pans out, we won't need any more to enter Turkey and follow these weapons all the way to the Syrian border."

"Don't be too fast about that, partner: we still need to run that info here and see what it really is. Until we know for sure who is the Turkish facilitator, we will continue to follow the shipment, up to its final destination if need be. Mister Moore would not be satisfied with less and I also hate unfinished business."

"Alright, I get it. Now, how many more Russians do you want us to kill tonight?"

"Two or three more should do: we want enough of these Russians to survive to take on those ISIS bastards."

"Two or three it will be." Replied Dean in the same tone he would take to say that he was going to get a few beers.

Fifty-two minutes after leaving their storage compartment, Dean and Erik returned to it, their job done and both of their knives bloodied. Dean smiled on seeing an unconscious Farah crumpled over Erik's equipment pack.

"I told you that she would try to search through our things."

"Of course she would! Why would I booby-trap my pack otherwise? Our sleeping princess should be waking up in about twenty minutes. Put her back on her improvised mattress in the meantime while I send an urgent update to Ian and Langley." Taking first the time to disconnect and remove the gas pill mechanism he had fixed to his own equipment pack, Dean then went to Farah and gently lifted her inert body in his arms, transporting her a few yards to her improvised mattress and putting her down

softly on it. He sighed in regret as he contemplated her beautiful face: she would have made a nice date, if not for the fact that she was basically an agent for an enemy of the United States.

When Farah woke up, her throat parched and her mind foggy, she had trouble at first to remember what had happened to her. Then, details came back to her as her eyes started to focus. She nearly recoiled when she saw that 'Stryker' was sitting beside her, watching her while smiling to her. Was he going to kill her now that he knew that she had tried to search through the kit of his partner? For one thing, she was surprised to be still alive. Her confusion only grew when she saw her pistol nearby, its magazine pulled out and simply left still full of bullets beside the weapon. They had not even disarmed her!

"You could have killed me for trying to search through your packs. Why didn't you?"

Dean grinned to her, apparently genuinely amused.

"My dear Farah, we would actually have been disappointed if you had not tried to search our things. In your place, we would have done the exact same thing, except that we would have checked first for booby-traps. However, I will caution you not to try this again. If you do, there will be consequences."

"And my pistol? You are not going to disarm me?"

Dean's grin was then replaced by a serious look.

"No, because you may well need it to help defend this compartment in the next few hours. We just killed a few of the Russians in a manner that will point to those ISIS bastards. With any luck, the Russians and the ISIS men will kill each other soon, after the remaining Russians wake up and find their comrades dead, their throats cut open. We then expect bullets to fly liberally around this ship."

Farah, still somewhat disoriented and shocked, had to give points to the Americans then: while ruthless, their plan actually had good chances of succeeding, thus literally clearing the deck for them and her.

"And if they do kill each other, then what? We still don't know who the intermediary is in Turkey."

"Well, such a massacre could well prompt someone important to show up in Iskenderun to clean up this mess and send the weapons on their way. There is nothing like a few dead bodies to shake up the barrack, right?"

“When I think that I believed American agents to be soft and sentimental...”

Those words made Dean laugh briefly.

“We can be...when we want to be.”

On this he returned to his own corner of the compartment, leaving Farah to wonder what else she would learn from those two American men during this trip.

### **05:29 (Rome Time)**

#### **Passenger cabins' section, MV Heraklion**

“Sir!...SIR! WAKE UP! WE FOUND ZAITSEV DEAD, MURDERED! SIR!”

Senior Sergeant Fedukin finally decided to forcibly open the door to Major Koslov's cabin and furiously rammed it with his left shoulder, breaking it open after two hits. The scene he found inside both horrified and enraged him.

“THOSE FUCKING RAG HEADS! I'M GOING TO KILL THEM ALL!”

Another Spetsnaz soldier then entered the cabin, his face pale.

“Sergeant, we found Vishenko and Kallinin dead, their throats cut while they slept.”

The man then saw the body of his officer and reeled back in shock. Still furious, Fedukin grabbed him by the front of his coverall and forced him to look up in his eyes.

“GET A HOLD OF YOURSELF, DUBROV! WE NEED TO AVENGE THEM AND KILL THOSE ISIS BASTARDS. GATHER OUR SURVIVING MEN AT ONCE AND TELL THEM TO JOIN ME HERE, READY FOR COMBAT.”

“Uh, yes, Sergeant!”

Only four minutes later, he had his remaining seven men facing him in the passageway. Their faces were hard, with more than a hint of lust for revenge in their eyes. Fedukin gave the tone by arming his AKSU-74 assault carbine.

“Let's kill those ISIS bastards to the last! Be careful: they are probably waiting for us. We will thus try to surprise them by going in from further forward of their compartment in the bow: I have noticed a hatch leading down to the anchor chain wells. From there, we will have access to the bow accommodations compartment. Follow me!”

Farah could not help jump nervously when the first burst of automatic fire echoed around the bow section, followed closely by more bursts and a few grenade explosions. Dean listened to the starting battle for a moment, smiling.

“Nice little battle we have here now. We better get ready, in case one rat tries to hide in our compartment to fight it out.”

Her heart beating faster now, Farah took a firing position behind the barrels hiding her improvised mattress of folded canvas tarps, her CZ 2075 9mm pistol pointed at the access hatch of their compartment. While she had been part of the Revolutionary Guards Corps Intelligence Bureau for four years now and had already conducted a number of missions in hostile territory, she had yet to fire a weapon in real combat. Up to now, she had been used mostly in a surveillance role or as a courier, carrying sensitive information or documents into hostile countries, helped in that by her linguistic abilities and her polished education about foreign cultures. However, she had trained extensively with weapons and was a more than decent pistol shot, thus felt ready for this fight. Her two involuntary companions also took firing positions behind their barrels on the other side of the compartment, their FN 90 carbines at the ready. However, Erik also monitored closely the images and sounds recorded by their surveillance cameras planted on the deck above them. After maybe two minutes of intense fighting punctuated by nearly non-stop series of automatic weapons bursts, three ISIS fighters appeared on the camera placed in the passageway of the upper deck, firing their weapons while retreating by leaps and bounds under fire. One ISIS fighter was seen on camera falling, hit in the chest, with the two remaining fighters retreating further down the passageway. Erik then saw the first of the Spetsnaz pursuing them appear and the end of the passageway, sticking his head and torso out from behind a corner long enough to fire a burst from his AKSU-74 carbine. Dean, who was also watching the action on the tablet’s screen, gave Erik a questioning look.

“Should we let some of those guys survive, or should we finish off what’s left once this battle is over?”

Erik thought that over for a moment: both options had advantages and disadvantages to them.

“I think that we better let a few of them survive, preferably Russians. If they all die, the captain of this ship could well panic and decide to abort the delivery of the weapons, in which case we would be unable to identify the Turkish intermediaries in this affair.”

Erik then turned his head to look at Farah.

“What do you think about that, Farah?”

She hesitated for a moment before responding, stunned to see him ask for her opinion. What she didn't understand was that his question to her was mostly to test her and make her feel more trusting of him and Dean, something that could be useful later.

"Uh, I would tend to agree with you: if that captain panics, he is liable to call for the help of the Greek or Cypriot Coast Guard, in which case we may be eventually discovered. Explaining our presence on this ship could then be a bit difficult."

"A good point. We will thus let the Russians clean up those ISIS bastards without showing ourselves. If the captain of this ship has any brains, he will then do his best to avoid a close inspection of his ship on arrival in Limassol, probably by cleaning up and covering the damage from this fight as much as he can. The surviving Russians will anyway probably tell him to do so. The last thing they would want would be for the Cypriot customs to find and seize the shipment of weapons in Limassol."

"So, they will have to walk on eggs in Limassol." Said Farah. "I wonder what that bastard Grashev will think about this fight, once he learns about it."

That made Erik smile as he imagined the face of the Russian arms dealer then.

"He will be positively thrilled, I bet."

Senior Sergeant Fedukin was the one who killed the last remaining ISIS fighter on the ship, cornering him in a dead-end passageway and then throwing a grenade in. He gave a hateful look at what was left of the Islamist, already knowing that this victory had come at a cost: only three of his men were still alive by now, with one of them being slightly wounded. Those ISIS bastards had proved a tougher nut to crack than he had expected after all. Turning around, he joined his remaining men, who were busy ensuring that the ISIS men were all truly dead, using their knives to finish off the ones still breathing. He went first to his wounded man, who had been hit in his upper left arm, and examined quickly his wound.

"Sit down on this bunk bed, Vasilie: I will have to disinfect and bandage that wound."

As he took out his field bandage and a wrapped alcohol swabbing cloth from a pouch of his tactical vest, he looked at his two other men.

"Misha, Boris, you start getting rid of the bodies of these bastards. Throw them overboard: the sharks will take care of them."

"With pleasure, Sergeant." Replied Junior Sergeant Misha Markov. "Uh, what about our own dead men?"

Fedukin thought that question over for a moment, undecided at first. Ideally, he would preserve the bodies of his comrades, so that they could be returned later to their families, but keeping them on the ship may cause many difficult questions from various authorities if found.

“We will bury them at sea with full honors tonight. For the time being, we will put their bodies away in a secondary storage compartment. First, though, we get rid of those pieces of shit.”

Misha and Boris nodded their heads at that, then grabbed the feet and arms of a dead ISIS fighter and started on their way to the open weather deck, from which they would be able to throw the body overboard.

As the Russians were cleaning up the mess on the upper deck, watched by their surveillance camera at that level, Erik saw that an encrypted message was arriving via satellite on his tablet. Hoping that it was what he was thinking, he processed the message through the decoding program contained in his tablet computer, then projected the message in clear on the screen, reading it quickly.

“Good news, guys: that name and telephone number we found in that Spetsnaz officer’s notebook have been traced and identified. That Izmeth Pasha is actually a high-level member of the governing AKP Party in Turkey and is also a close aide of President Erdogan. Farah, feel free to inform Tehran of this tonight: the more hounds we get after this guy, the more chances we will be able to expose more members of this conspiracy.”

“Thank you!” Said Farah from her corner, truly grateful. So, the Turkish government, or at least members of it and of the AKP Party, was truly involved in this. That actually didn’t surprise her much: Erdogan and his AKP Party had become more and more openly supportive of Wahabi extremists in the last few years as it did its best to impose stricter Islamic rules and laws in Turkey, an officially secular country for over a century. She wondered how much more of this the Turkish Army would stand for, especially if this affair became known publicly, before deciding that the AKP Party had to go. Erdogan had done his best in the last years to weaken the leadership of the Turkish Army by arresting a number of top generals on charges of conspiracy but, sooner or later, the remaining senior army leadership was going to say ‘enough’ and finally act decisively. That would not be by far the first time that the Turkish Army would have conducted a coup in order to protect the secular system in Turkey and this time it would

be more than justified to act, in Farah's opinion. The fact that the CIA agents were still showing some confidence in her and kept passing information to her agreeably surprised her, but also made her feel bad: she may just have to betray that confidence soon.

## **CHAPTER 7 – PORT OF CALL**

**22:35 (Rome Time)**

**Thursday, June 4, 2015**

**MV Heraklion, port of Limassol**

**Cyprus**

Captain Philipopoulos was a nervous wreck as his ship was being tied down to a quay of the Cypriot port of Limassol. He and his crew had done their best to clean up and camouflage the damage from the crazy battle between the two groups of ‘private security’ men, patching bullet holes and painting over the patches and also gathering and throwing overboard the empty bullet casings. As a result, his crewmembers were both exhausted and badly shaken, with more than a few talking about having had enough and leaving the ship in Limassol. It had taken all of Philipopoulos’ eloquence and quite a few thousands of Euros in extra pay bonuses to convince these crewmembers to stay with his ship. Hopefully, Viktor Grashev would reimburse him for this extra expense, which had come from Philipopoulos’ advance for accepting this cargo. Standing besides the captain on the bridge and wearing his black coverall, but carrying only a pistol, Senior Sergeant Fedukin was equally nervous. He was also impatient to go ashore, so that he could jump in a taxi and do a speed run to the capital, Nicosia, where he intended to hand-deliver an urgent report for Moscow via the Russian embassy’s commercial attaché, in reality a GRU<sup>12</sup> officer. The response from Moscow to his message could then in turn significantly affect the rest of this trip. He suspected that Moscow had not liked this business of the Saudis forcing a group of ISIS fighters aboard the MV Heraklion. Now, they would have even more reasons to go hammer some sense in those arrogant idiots. Fedukin however doubted that more Spetsnaz soldiers could be sent on such short notice, unless the departure of the cargo ship from Limassol would be significantly delayed. He was thus resigned already to having to assume the responsibility of ensuring the safety of the weapons shipment with only two men, a responsibility that, in the Russian Army, normally would be taken only by an officer and not a simple senior NCO.

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<sup>12</sup> GRU : Glavnoye Razvedyavel'noye Upravleniye, or Main Intelligence Directorate of Russia.

Captain Philipopoulos suddenly felt a bit better when he recognized the leading Cypriot customs officer now coming up the gangway to inspect his ship: Senior Inspector Andreas Karamanlis had a good business rapport with him and was quite pliable to discreet transfers of cash. Right now, Philipopoulos could use all the good will he could get from Karamanlis.

"Let's go down to the weather deck to greet our visitors, Mister Fedukin. Let me do the talking: I know well the senior customs officer."

Fedukin nodded in understanding and followed the captain out of the bridge and down the ladder connecting it to the main weather deck. They arrived at the top of the gangway as the five Cypriot customs officers were about to step on the deck. The leading Cypriot agent smiled on seeing Philipopoulos and saluted him.

"Permission to come aboard, Captain Philipopoulos."

"Permission granted, Senior Inspector Karamanlis."

The two men then exchanged handshakes before the captain pointed Fedukin to Karamanlis.

"May I present you Mister Fedukin, a private security guard hired by the Meridian Import-Export Company of Spain to escort a shipment of high value, high technology machine tools from Russia. He has two more men with him. You know how dangerous the waters off the Libyan coast are these days."

"Yes, I do." Replied Karamanlis before shaking hands with Fedukin. "Could I see your papers and weapons carrying permit, Mister Fedukin?"

"Of course, Inspector!" Said Fedukin, not overly concerned: he had with him multiple sets of the best faked papers the GRU could produce. He calmly took out his Russian passport, security guard permit, Interpol-approved weapons carrying permit and an employment contract from the Meridian Company, handing them to Karamanlis. The latter studied them for a few seconds, then took out of his briefcase an official stamp and applied an entry visa on Fedukin's passport before handing him back his papers.

"Welcome to Cyprus, Mister Fedukin. You may go ashore as you please, minus your pistol, of course."

"That is a given, Inspector. I am anxious to go experience your marvelous beaches: I heard a lot of good things about them."

"Indeed!" Replied Karamanlis, smiling in amusement. "There are a lot of Scandinavian female tourists frequenting our beaches these days, many of them wearing scandalously small swimming suits."

Karamanlis then concentrated back his attention on Philipopoulos.

"So, what are you bringing to Cyprus this time, my friend?"

"I have a few hundred crates of bottles of Spanish sherry wine and 200 tons of canned foodstuff to unload here from the weather deck. The rest of my cargo, which is inside my holds, is destined to Turkey."

Karamanlis didn't miss the winkle Philipopoulos made while saying his last sentence. Understanding at once the message, he turned around to look at his junior customs agents.

"Inspect only the cargo on the weather deck: the rest is headed to Turkey."

"Yes sir!"

Both satisfied and relieved, Philipopoulos then gave to Karamanlis the cargo manifest taken out of a pocket of his vest.

"Here is a copy of the manifest, for you to keep. I highlighted the items due to be unloaded here in Cyprus."

"You are decidedly a very easy man to deal with, as always, Captain Philipopoulos. Let's go to your cabin, so that I can review this manifest properly, out of the wind."

"Of course! This way, please."

Leaving Fedukin to watch the gangway, the two men went to the Captain's cabin, which opened on the same level than the weather deck and was inside the bridge superstructure. Once inside and with the door firmly closed and locked, Philipopoulos went to his work desk and unlocked one of its drawers, then pulled out a thick envelope before handing it to Karamanlis, who promptly examined its content: it was filled with twenty Euro banknotes. Karamanlis counted out a total of 5,000 Euros, a very appreciable sum in Cyprus in these rough economic times. Quite satisfied, Karamanlis shook hands with Philipopoulos after pocketing the envelope.

"It is definitely a pleasure to deal with you, Captain. You can be assured that the cargo inside your holds will not be disturbed by my men. Uh, you wouldn't be able to tell me what is in your holds, would you?"

"Just the latest in machine tool technology." Replied Philipopoulos. If Karamanlis was disappointed by his answer he didn't show it and left after a last

goodbye to the Captain. The latter had to go sit on his work desk, blowing air out in relief: thank God that Karamanlis was in good humor tonight!

**03:08 (Rome Time)**

**Friday, June 5, 2015**

**Open weather deck of the MV Heraklion**

**Port of Limassol, Cyprus**

With the deck of the ship utterly deserted at this hour and being obscure save for a few spotlights illuminating the area of the gangway linking the ship to the quay, Farah was able to sneak out of the bow section and go hide under a tarp-covered pile. With her GPS unit and her satellite telephone in hand, she quickly called her handler in Tehran and gave the present position of the MV Heraklion, then resumed as succinctly as she could what had happened in the last 24 hours, plus passing the information about the identified Turkish intermediary. The news of the deadly fight between the Russians and the ISIS fighters seemed to both amuse and please her handler.

“Excellent! There is thus only minimal security left aboard your ship. That can only help the incoming phase of this mission, Sheherazade. We will take care of that intermediary in Turkey. What I need from you now is to call us again as soon as you can after your ship leaves port, so that you can give us an update of its position. If you could then send updated positions every hour, it will be perfect. One last thing, Sheherazade: you will have to be ready to eliminate the two agents travelling with you before noon tomorrow, in order to prevent them from interfering with our operation.”

Farah felt her stomach turn acid on hearing that. While she perfectly understood the reasons for such an order, she had now spent over six days in close contact with the two Americans and had developed a decent if not truly warm rapport with them. The idea of having to kill the big, handsome ‘Stryker’ especially hurt her. She however kept her doubts to herself and responded in as firm a voice as she could muster.

“Message understood! I will make arrangements for that. Sheherazade out!”

Closing her satellite telephone and her GPS locator, she stayed immobile and quiet for long minutes under the tarp, mentally debating what she was going to do in the next hours. She finally returned to the hiding storage compartment, her mind still conflicted but resigned to do what had to be done. She found both Americans sleeping at this time and quietly returned to her own sleeping corner to get some rest. With hundreds of tons

of cargo to be unloaded in Limassol, the MV Heraklion would not be leaving port before at least the evening, something that would leave her ample time before the real action started.

### **14:46 (Rome Time)**

#### **MV Heraklion, port of Limassol**

Captain Philipopoulos frowned on seeing the senior surviving Russian guard, Vladimir Fedukin, return to the ship with two strangers, one man and one woman. Hurrying to the top of the gangway, the merchant marine officer gave an inquisitive look at the big Russian and his two companions.

“Welcome back aboard, Mister Fedukin. May I ask who your two friends are?”

“You may, Captain. They are going to accompany me and my men to Iskenderun. They were flown in on an urgent basis on the request of Mister Grashev.” Philipopoulos gave a none too pleased look at the two newcomers: the man was tall, athletic and blond, with a square jaw, while the woman had long black hair, was nearly as tall as the man and looked quite strong. While having a feminine body, she had the expression of a tomboy and could probably be quite dangerous by herself. Both newcomers wore informal civilian outfits but screamed ‘bodyguards’ to the Captain. However, the latter resigned himself quickly to having more potential for trouble on his ship and made a welcoming gesture.

“Then, welcome aboard the MV Heraklion, lady and gentleman. Mister Fedukin will be able to guide you to cabins that are now vacant. I will see you further at supper time.”

The trio of Russians then left the Captain and went towards the aft bridge superstructure. On the way, Fedukin signaled to his man presently on watch on the open bridge port wing, shouting at him.

“COME DOWN TO MY CABIN: I WILL PASS SOME NEW INFORMATION.”

The Spetsnaz soldier nodded his head in response and started on his way down from the bridge level. Two minutes later, he had joined Fedukin and the two newcomers in Fedukin’s cabin, where the other Spetsnaz soldier had been sleeping. That soldier was now awake and sitting on his bunk bed, waiting for the senior sergeant to brief them. Instead, it was the male newcomer that spoke up once the group was assembled.

“Let me present myself and my comrade to you, men. I am Captain Yevgeni Ponomarev, Assistant GRU Resident Officer in Nicosia, and this is Lieutenant Alexandrina Petrova, also from the GRU. The GRU Resident Officer, once briefed by Senior Sergeant Fedukin about the events on this ship, contacted Moscow and got in return new orders concerning this mission. Since time was too short to be able to get more reinforcements to Cyprus from Moscow, the Resident sent me and Lieutenant Petrova to reinforce and take over command of your team. Unfortunately, that was all the assets he could afford to provide on such short notice. From now on, I will be in charge of this team, and this until the weapons have been delivered to the right persons in Turkey. Essentially, the mission of this team stays the same, but this time we will not accept the arrival on this ship of any more of those ISIS bastards: Moscow will make that point clear to those who brought the first batch of ISIS fighters aboard in Malta. The rest of this trip should thus be rather uneventful. The only big hurdle left will be to have the weapons go unimpeded through Turkish customs once in Iskenderun. That part will be handled by me and by the Turkish intermediary involved in this deal, who will be waiting for the ship in Iskenderun. We will then continue with the weapons inside Turkey, until they are safely inside Syria. Officially, the sea containers holding the weapons will be containing humanitarian aid destined to refugee camps in Syria. The Turkish intermediary has already arranged for the appropriate paperwork and permits to facilitate the passage of the Syria-Turkey border at the Turkish border point to be crossed. Once in Iskenderun, we will all be traveling in civilian clothes, with only pistols in conceal carry mode and knives on us. Our other weapons and special equipment will be hidden in our kit bags before we get off this ship. Any questions, men?”

The three Spetsnaz soldiers shook their heads then, to Ponomarev’s satisfaction.

“Excellent! The ship is not due to leave port before late tonight. Me and Alexandrina will be staying aboard in the meantime. As for you, I want you to change into civilian clothes and go ashore, unarmed, to play tourists a bit in order to better play your cover identities. Feel free to go to a beach, eat in restaurants and do some shopping, but no alcohol! If I smell alcohol on your breath on your return, there will be consequences for you on return to Russia. Am I understood?”

On the soldiers nodding soberly, the GRU officer took out a thick envelope that he gave to Fedukin.

"This envelope contains cash to be used by you to play tourists, courtesy of the GRU Resident's special funds. Split it equally between yourselves before going ashore. You may now go change."

As the happy Spetsnaz soldiers split the cash money between themselves, Ponomarev and Alexandrina went to drop their big civilian backpacks in the former cabin of Major Koslov. The tall blonde gave an assertive look to her partner and superior as they were emptying their packs.

"After what happened with those ISIS bastards, can we really have confidence in that Turkish intermediary? What if he change plans on us without warning?"

"Unfortunately we will have to trust him once in Turkey: he is the only one who knows which contacts to use in the Turkish custom services to facilitate the clearance of the shipment. He also has the information concerning who to contact once inside Syria. The best we can do if he springs a surprise on us will be to contact Moscow at once and await new orders."

Petrova made a grimace on hearing that.

"Not exactly my idea of a good arrangement. What about any possible opposition to our shipment from other intelligence services? Can we expect the Mossad, or even the Syrian General Security Directorate to meddle with it?"

"The way this mission has been going up to now, we must be ready for anything, Alexandrina. We will have to be extra vigilant and be ready to react to anything."

Ponomarev then briefly stopped his unpacking, a disillusioned expression appearing on his face.

"To do all this in order to arm those murderous ISIS bastards... I know that we have firm orders and we are going to follow them, but what the hell was Moscow thinking? Collecting information on visiting NATO warships stopping in Cyprus was much more to my liking."

## **CHAPTER 8 – CLASH AT SEA**

**01:23 (Istanbul Time)**

**Saturday, June 6, 2015**

**MV Heraklion, sailing out of Limassol**

**Cyprus**

Having informed first 'Stryker' that she was going out to send a position report, Farah made her way cautiously out of the bow section and went to hide in her now customary spot under a tarp covering two separate piles of crates on the weather deck. It took her only a few minutes to contact by satellite telephone her handler in Tehran and pass the news that the cargo ship was leaving Limassol, along with its present position, heading and estimated speed. She had put back in her small haversack her GPS locator unit and her satellite telephone and was starting to crawl out of her hiding place when a harsh female voice speaking in English made her freeze, while her heart jumped in her chest.

"DON'T MOVE! YOU DO ANYTHING STUPID AND I WILL SHOOT YOU ON THE SPOT. NOW, COME OUT SLOWLY, HANDS AWAY FROM YOUR BODY."

Not knowing about the presence of the two GRU agents on the ship, Farah quickly thought about what she could do now. Unfortunately, the woman who had found her was now shouting in Russian to somebody, probably one of the surviving Spetsnaz soldiers. Stuck in her tight spot, Farah had no way to move quickly, thus could not surprise the Russian woman, whoever she was. As for shooting her, that would only provide her a short respite, that if she could win that firefight, something she doubted. The other Russians would then hunt her down and may thus discover the hiding place used by her and the two American agents if she tried to return to it. On the other hand, those two Americans may just be her only hope for help now. Bitter at her poor choice of options, Farah resigned herself to whatever would come and spoke up in English.

"I am coming out now. Don't shoot!"

"No tricks, or I shoot!"

Before obeying the woman, Farah quickly took off her haversack and her pistol and hid them in a small recess between two crates, then slowly crawled out of her hide. A

Spetsnaz soldier was arriving at a run as she was emerging from under the canvas tarp, with the Russian woman pointing an AKSU-74 carbine at her from a safe distance.

“STAY ON YOUR KNEES, WITH YOUR HANDS UP!”

As the woman watched her, the Spetsnaz soldier quickly searched her, taking away her folding knife and showing it to Petrova.

“She only had this knife with her, Lieutenant.”

Petrova in turn gave a hard look at Farah.

“Who are you and what are you doing on this ship?”

*‘Time to be a good liar.’* Thought Farah before answering, still using English and faking terror.

“Please, don’t hurt me! I only wanted to get into Turkey clandestinely.”

The look from Petrova then turned to a dubious one.

“Sure! And why couldn’t you enter Turkey normally, like about everyone else?”

“My father is an ethnic Kurd accused of being a terrorist by the Turks. They would arrest me or any other member of our family the moment we show up at a customs point. I didn’t have the money to pay for a faked passport, nor did I know how to get one, so I decided to get aboard clandestinely. Please, don’t shoot me! I just wanted to join my family in Turkey.”

Petrova eyed her with suspicion, unsure about that woman: her story actually would make sense...if she was what she claimed to be. She however could not afford to take risks with that clandestine passenger. Looking at the Spetsnaz soldier, she gave him an order in Russian.

“Tie her hands, then bring her down to the forward cargo hold furthest from the bridge superstructure and watch over her while I go get Captain Ponomarev.”

“Yes, Lieutenant!” Replied the soldier before taking a plastic cuff from one pocket and, roughly pulling Farah’s hands behind her back, tying them none too gently. He then forced her up, his AKSU-74 pointed to her back.

“Walk this way and don’t make any stupid move, or you will regret it.”

Mortified and worried that this could ruin her mission’s outcome, Farah had no choice but to obey and meekly let the Russian push her in the direction of the deck hatch giving access to the forward cargo hold. The soldier held her by her shirt’s collar as she climbed down the steep ladder, in order to prevent her from falling. Once down at the bottom of the cargo hold, which was filled to near capacity with stacked sea containers,

the soldier pushed Farah to a small space left behind a pile of sea containers, then forced her to sit on the steel deck.

“Don’t move and don’t speak, or I will have to forcibly shut you up.”

Grimly hoping that her story would somehow fly, Farah obeyed him and rested her back against the nearest bulkhead, staying quiet while looking at the Russian soldier with a beaten puppy expression, doing her best to play her role as an harmless stowaway.

The tall Russian woman came back only fifteen minutes later, accompanied by a blond man who eyed Farah with cold eyes.

“What is your name?”

“Fatmeh Barzani! My father’s name is Massoud Barzani.”

“And where is your father right now?”

“He is presently hiding in Anatakya, a coastal town south of Iskenderun.”

“And where are you coming from?”

“I was working as an illegal immigrant in Nicosia and regularly sending money to my family in Turkey. I got the news that my father had fallen seriously ill, so I decided to go join him to help my family during his convalescence.”

“Hmm, I see!”

Farah relaxed a bit then, as the Russian appeared to believe her. The man then suddenly hit her violently on her left cheek with his fist, making her head snap around. He then stepped forward and brutally pulled her hair, forcing her face upward as she spit blood.

“Do you take us for idiots? We found your satellite telephone, GPS locator and silenced pistol, which you had hidden under that canvas tarp. You will tell me that a simple Kurdish expatriate girl would have such items with her? Who are you and who do you work for? The Mossad? Syrian Intelligence services?”

“I told you: I am simply a Kurdish...”

A second powerful hook hit her, this time on the right cheek, making her fall sideways on the deck. The Spetsnaz soldier watching her pulled her back to the vertical at once as she spat more blood, along with a broken tooth. Ponomarev gave her a hard look as she grimaced with pain.

“If you think this is bad, wait for what you will get if you still refuse to speak. So, who are you and who do you work for? Why were you hiding on this ship?”

Knowing that her story about being a Kurdish illegal immigrant was now hopelessly full of holes because of the discovery of her equipment and pistol, Farah resolutely looked up at the Russian.

"Fuck you!"

That earned her another savage blow, this time a direct in her left eye. The hit made her head project backward, hitting the steel bulkhead behind her with a resounding 'thud' and leaving her half knocked out. As she wobbled, still on her knees, Alexandrina Petrova put a hand on Ponomarev's shoulder.

"Let me work up that bitch, Yevgeni. I know how to break her kind. You have more important things to do than to waste your time on her."

Ponomarev gave her a sober look: Petrova had a reputation as an agent who could be quite brutal, nearly sadistic, when the occasion called for.

"Very well, Alexandrina. Don't kill her before you are sure that she told you everything of interest to us, though."

"Don't worry, Yevgeni: she will live long enough to regret ever being born."

"Then, she is all yours. Be careful, though: she may be a fully trained agent and could be dangerous if you are not careful."

"I am always careful, Yevgeni. I will inform you the moment she will talk."

Giving a last, unsympathetic look at Farah, Ponomarev then walked away, leaving Petrova and the Spetsnaz soldier with the prisoner. Petrova looked around her at the setup of the hold and showed to the soldier a steel pipe running horizontally along the bulkhead behind Farah, about seven feet up from the deck.

"Help me suspend her from that pipe. We will also tie her feet apart with some of your plastic cuffs. But first, let's strip that bitch!"

"With pleasure, Lieutenant!" Replied the soldier, a mean smile appearing on his face. The two Russians then ripped and cut away Farah's clothes, leaving her completely naked. Petrova grinned as she eyed her now naked prisoner.

"My, such a pretty body to work with. This will be fun indeed. Okay, let's untie her, so that we can pass her arms over her head. Don't even think about resisting, bitch, or you will regret it."

Still expecting resistance from her prisoner, Petrova took out of a pocket a hand taser and, applying it to Farah's left nipple, pressed the trigger, sending a 50,000 volt shock through her body and making her convulse uncontrollably for seconds. The soldier then used that opportunity to cut off her plastic cuff and pull her arms forward and then up

before tying them again, this time with two plastic cuffs. Both Russians joined their strength to raise Farah up and tie her wrists to the overhead pipe, using two more plastic cuffs for that purpose. Looking down at Farah's ripped clothes, Petrova bent down and grabbed her shirt, cutting a large piece out and rolling it into a ball before forcibly stuffing it in Farah's mouth, gagging her. Next, she tied each of the Iranian's ankles to vertical pipes, spreading open her legs. Her work done, she stepped back to eye with a mean smile her naked prisoner, suspended and helpless.

"That should do just fine. I hope that you are comfortable, bitch, because the fun is about to start."

She then looked at the soldier standing beside her.

"I am going to go get a few things from the ship's repair shop. In the meantime, feel free to enjoy her body."

"Understood, Lieutenant." Replied the Spetsnaz man, eyeing with glee Farah's naked body. As Petrova left the cargo hold, the soldier stepped in front of Farah, very close to her, with his hands roaming all over her body, feeling her breasts and penetrating her vagina with his fingers.

"You better talk right away, pretty girl, because you won't be pretty for very long if you don't talk."

The gagged Farah could do nothing but look down at him with fury as he fondled her. His lust fuelled by her nakedness, the Russian then unzipped his fly and penetrated her none too gently.

He had ample time to come to an orgasm, close back his fly and summarily wipe her genitals with a piece of ripped cloth before Petrova came back with a canvas bag.

"So, had some fun with her, soldier?"

"I sure did, Lieutenant. She has a nice, sensitive cunt if you ask me."

"Good! You may now leave me alone with her."

The soldier, a bit disappointed by that, nonetheless left without a word. Now alone with Farah, the Russian woman eyed her with a cruel smile.

"Listen, bitch, and listen well. Even though you are gagged, you will just need to nod your head when you will be ready to answer my questions. Until then, I will work you up until you do talk. This is now your last chance before I start. Are you ready to answer my questions?"

With her mission now possibly doomed and with little hope of being able to free herself from the Russians, Farah could only do one thing now: deny to these unbelievers any information that could help them in their mission to deliver weapons to the cursed ISIS bastards. She thus vigorously shook her head, making Petrova fake disappointment.

“That’s not very smart, bitch. Before I start with the serious things, let me just tenderize you a bit.”

Grabbing Farah’s belt, a narrow leather one with steel studs decorating it, Petrova started swinging it with vigor, flogging thoroughly the breasts and front torso of the Iranian for a good minute before taking a pause.

“So, ready to talk yet, or do you want more?”

Farah, crying with pain, desperately shook her head in response.

“Too bad for you, bitch.” Said Petrova before resuming her flogging. After six more minutes of that treatment, and with her front covered with red welts and bleeding scratches from the studded belt, Farah passed out, to the disappointment of the Russian.

“You damn bitch! Wait until you wake up, then you will really start to suffer.”

When Farah slowly came back to consciousness, with pain radiating from her wounds, she saw after a few seconds that the Russian woman was still facing her but was holding both a thin steel pipe section and a welding lamp. She was busy heating one end of the pipe with her welding lamp and smiled when she saw that Farah was conscious.

“Well well, the bitch is back with us! Look at the nice thing I have for you here.”

With the heated end of her pipe now a dark red, Petrova put her welding lamp down on the deck, then approached Farah, who involuntarily trembled with fear as she eyed the red hot pipe. The Russian grinned on seeing her fear.

“I will now give you a chance to talk before I start rolling this pipe across your breasts, bitch. So, are you going to be reasonable now?”

Near panic but unwilling to let that Russian break her, Farah shook her head a couple of times, attracting a false look of commiseration from Petrova.

“Decidedly, you are as stubborn as a mule. Too bad for you.”

Farah closed her eyes and bit in her gag as Petrova approached her with her hot pipe. The searing, horrible pain she expected never came. Instead, she heard a gurgling sound, followed by the metallic noise of the pipe hitting the deck. Opening her eyes, she

saw with a mix of surprise and immense relief the tall and strong 'Stryker' standing behind Petrova and cutting her throat open with his combat knife. Throwing the now dying Russian face first on top of the red hot pipe, Dean quickly came to Farah and started cutting the ties immobilizing her ankles.

"I am sorry that I didn't come earlier, Farah: when I didn't see you return from the open weather deck, I went searching for you with my partner. It however took us some time before finding where you were."

He next cut the ties that suspended her and held on to her as she fell down to the deck. Sobbing from the pain, she clung to him in a pure reflex of relief and gratitude. More touched than he wanted to recognize, Dean held her naked body in his arms for a few seconds, time for her to get over her crying. She finally looked up at him with eyes still wet with tears, her voice half choked up.

"Thank you! I will never forget this."

"You can thank me later, Farah. Let's put your clothes back on before we get out of this hold."

"I can't: that bitch cut up my clothes."

"Then, we will have to improvise, won't we?"

Bending down over the dead Russian woman, Dean quickly undid her jeans and pulled them off her before giving them to Farah.

"Here! They may be a bit too long, but simply roll up the excess length."

She hurriedly slipped the pants on as Dean also removed the Russian's T-shirt, which he gave to her. Farah was able to use her own socks and running shoes, which were still intact. Once dressed, Farah faced again Dean, who handed her the AKSU-74 carbine and Glock 17 pistol that had belonged to Petrova, along with two spare magazines for the weapons.

"Here you go, Farah: no point in going around naked."

Farah couldn't help smile at Dean's attempt at humor.

"Thanks, Stryker: you are a great guy indeed."

"Don't mention it! Sparrow is above us, hiding on the weather deck and watching the exit of this hold."

"What do we do now? Those Russians took my satellite telephone and my GPS locator, plus my pistol. They know that I am a secret agent, even though they still don't know from which country."

“Well, with that Russian woman dead, there is now no way to hide the fact that you were not alone in hiding aboard that ship. We will thus have no choice but to complete the cleanup on this ship before the Russians could alert Moscow or Grachev.”

“And then what?”

“Then, with any luck, the captain of this ship will still head to Iskenderun to unload his cargo of weapons, at which time we will be able to get our hands on that Turkish intermediary.”

“But, once he knows that someone aboard the ship has killed the Russians escorting the weapons, that intermediary will never show up in Iskenderun, fearing a trap. At the very least, we will have to sabotage the ship’s radio sets to prevent the captain from sounding the alarm.”

“A very good point indeed, Farah. I think that my partner will take you up on that idea.”

Climbing up the succession of ladders leading to the weather deck was a slow affair at first, Farah being stiff and sensitive from her flogging. Dean showed patience with her and went slowly as well, something that allowed him to scan and listen carefully ahead of him. Thankfully, they didn’t meet another Russian during their climb and cautiously emerged on the dark open deck, finding Erik crouched nearby behind a big crate. The latter made a sign for them to hurry to him, which they did at a crouch. Dean then spoke to him in a whisper.

“A Russian woman was torturing her but that bitch is dead now. Farah proposed that we destroy the ship’s radios, so that the captain or the Russians can’t give the alert about us.”

“We will certainly do that. How is she?”

“She was extensively flogged over her front torso but I was able to stop the tortures in time to avoid much worse for her. She will be okay, albeit she will be a bit stiff for a while. I gave her the Russian’s weapons, since her pistol and satellite telephone were seized.”

If Erik had misgivings about that last point he didn’t say so to Dean and pointed at the bridge superstructure, where a Russian was visible, standing on the bridge open port wing and walking slowly while scanning the sea around the ship.

"We have no choice now but to kill the remaining Russians if we don't want them to alert their Turkish intermediary due in Iskenderun. We will also sabotage the radios, as suggested by Farah. We will do all this as quietly and covertly as we can. If possible, we will throw the Russians' bodies into the sea, so that the crew won't know for sure what happened. With luck, the captain will panic and will simply get to Iskenderun at top speed, without turning around to return to Limassol."

"What if he does return to Limassol?"

"Then, we will have to blow up the ship and its cargo of weapons."

Erik didn't miss the fact then that Farah stiffened slightly on hearing that. He already knew from her intercepted calls that her superiors in Tehran had plans about the weapons that did not correspond completely with the CIA plans. While he was ready to give Farah some slack, he definitely still intended to keep a close eye on her.

"Farah, I think that you should go back to our hide and wait for us there: you need to rest after what you went through."

"But, I want to help you kill those Russians."

"Do you have experience in sneaking to a man and then kill him with a knife, quietly?"

Seeing Farah hesitate, Erik insisted.

"Believe me, Farah: this is no job for an inexperienced agent, however motivated you are. One slip, one shout and our plan will be down the drain. Please, go back to our storage room."

"Alright, I will go." Conceded Farah in a bit of a downcast voice. She then turned around and crawled on all fours towards the bow section, staying close to the covered piles of crate for concealment. Dean watched her go before looking at his partner.

"That girl does have guts aplenty, Erik. She did not give us away under the tortures and she still does want to do her part despite what she suffered through."

"Maybe, but I'm still not ready to trust her more than necessary. Granted, I am sure that she wants as much as us to prevent those weapons from getting into the hands of ISIS, but those weapons would be very tempting for many other groups in the region, starting with the Hezbollah militia. The Israelis wouldn't be very happy if all those missiles fell into the hands of those pro-Iranian Lebanese Shiites."

"True! You know what they say about the second most important thing to have in life: after having good friends, it is to have good enemies."

Erik smile at that, amused.

"I heard that one before. She probably could qualify as a good enemy, I will give you that. Well, enough talking: let's go kill a few Russians."

"Yeah, and let's not forget about the radios, too." Added Dean.

## **06:17 (Istanbul Time)**

### **Captain's cabin, MV Heraklion**

"CAPTAIN! CAPTAIN! OPEN UP!"

Grumbling at the one who had just awakened him with his frantic pounding on his cabin's door, Stavro Philipopoulos jumped out of bed and walked heavily to the door, opening it. He then found himself facing one of his sailors, who seemed to be bordering on panic.

"Yes, what is it, George?"

"The Russians! They all disappeared during the night! Their cabins are splattered with blood!"

That bombshell woke up Philipopoulos in a mighty hurry and he stared with big eyes at his sailor.

"But, there was no noise of a gunfight, not a single shot heard. How could that be?"

"I don't know, Captain. What do we do now?"

"We stay on our present course for the moment. I will get dressed, then will radio for instructions. I should be on the bridge in ten minutes. You may now return to your post."

"Yes, Captain!"

Closing his door and going to his locker, Philipopoulos thought bitterly about how this apparently lucrative contract for him was turning progressively into a nightmare. If he had known in advance about all that was happening on this trip, he would have refused that contract without hesitation. However, now that he had the cargo aboard his ship, he had no other choice left to him but deliver it, especially since he was now less than half a day away from Iskenderun. You simply didn't run away from a shipment of this value without suffering serious consequences. The fact that 24 men and one woman had been killed up to now on his ship because of those 'machine tools' amply demonstrated

how badly his customers could react to him turning around now, this close to Iskenderun.

Six minutes later, Philipopoulos walked out of his cabin and went up to the radio room, a small compartment situated behind the bridge. His crew was too small for him to have a dedicated radio operator, so the compartment was empty most of the time. He only needed to have one of the sailors on bridge duty to periodically go check the queue of e-mails received and recorded on their ship's communications computer, which used a satellite communications link, in case some urgent message came from his parent company. As for the international distress frequency, it was permanently on, plugged into a loudspeaker in the bridge, so that the duty helmsman could listen to it. Entering the radio compartment, the Captain froze the moment he looked at the communications computer: its display screen was dark, as if it would have been turned off. Swearing to himself, Philipopoulos quickly tried to switch it on, without success. He then went down on his knees to check if it had been somehow unplugged by accident, but found all the wires in their proper place and well plugged. After a minute of increasingly frustrating efforts, he had to give up on the computer: it was as good as dead. Going for his other means of communication, he went to sit in front of the two powerful HF radio transceivers. More swearing came out when he found that the two radios were also dead.

"Somebody sabotaged my radios!" He exclaimed, slamming his fist on the table supporting the radios. Who had done that was evident: the same ones who had killed the Russians and made them disappear. Cold sweat suddenly appeared on Philipopoulos as he fully realized the meaning of all this: he and his crew were stuck aboard the ship in the company of a group of assassins capable of killing a dozen well-trained and armed men, and this without making a noise. Philipopoulos didn't know about Farah, as Ponomarev had not told him anything about finding a stowaway last night, so he could only speculate about who those assassins could be. One thing was for sure: he was certainly not going to order his sailors to proceed with a search of the ship. For one, he could then risk seeing his sailors disappear as well one by one. Secondly, his sailors would probably flatly refuse to conduct such a search, something he honestly wouldn't blame them for. Thinking hard for a long moment, he finally had to recognize that he had only one viable option left to him: to keep on and sail to Iskenderun, where he would finally be able to get rid of his cursed cargo. Philipopoulos

promised himself that he would then proceed with the biggest drinking binge of his sailor's career, that is if he was not going to die before with his throat cut open.

**11:08 (Istanbul Time)**

**Bridge of the MV Heraklion**

**93 nautical miles southwest of Iskenderun**

**Eastern Mediterranean**

Stavro Philipopoulos raised his binoculars again to have another look at that strangely behaving yacht that had been sailing parallel to his route for hours now while staying a good six miles away to his eight o'clock. It could be simply a yacht also headed to Iskenderun, but then why go only at a speed of twelve knots, when it could clearly go much faster? If he would be placing bets, he would have said that the yacht was actually trailing his cargo ship. But why would it do that? Stavro's expression hardened when the thought came to his mind that the yacht may be linked to whoever had killed the Russians. It would actually make sense, with the yacht possibly standing by to eventually retrieve the killers still hiding aboard his ship. Thankfully, he was now less than eight hours away from Iskenderun. Going back inside the closed bridge, the Greek captain went to the navigation radar set and examined the screen. The yacht following him was there alright, but Stavro frowned on seeing an unusual number of other boats within detection range. At least a dozen spots were grouped tightly and were actually heading directly towards his ship, while a lone ship was also approaching at quite a fast speed from another direction but was much further away.

"What the hell is going on now?" Asked Stavro to himself. Going out on the starboard open bridge wing, he used his binoculars to scan the horizon, trying to see the group of boats coming from the direction of the Lebanese coast. After a minute or so, he started to see the biggest boat of the group, some kind of motor yacht. He was still observing that ship when one of his sailors shouted at him.

**"CAPTAIN, A HELICOPTER IS APPROACHING FROM FIVE O'CLOCK!"**

"What now? Is my ship coated with honey, to attract everyone around like this?" Raising his binoculars in the indicated direction, he saw nearly immediately the helicopter in question, a small model that could carry maybe four or five persons. It was indeed coming straight at his ship, flying at an altitude of maybe 500 feet. Stavro kept watching it as it grew closer, trying to see its markings. He suddenly felt blood rush to

his head on finally having a view of its markings as it was about to pass on the starboard side of his ship: it bore the Israeli Star of David! Being boarded and having his cargo inspected by the Israelis was something he definitely did not need right now. Unfortunately, the Israelis had given themselves the right to challenge and inspect any ship they found suspect, even in the international waters in this part of the Eastern Mediterranean, and God knew how suspicious the Israelis could be. Now having gloomy thoughts about possibly ending in an Israeli jail, Stavro kept watching the Israeli helicopter as it made a full circle around his ship before veering towards the incoming armada of small boats. Stavro knew that such helicopter types didn't have the autonomy to come all the way here from the Israeli coast and return safely. It thus had to have come from an Israeli patrol boat large enough to carry and launch helicopters. Such ships were typically very fast and also heavily armed, so trying to evade it was definitely not an option. Stavro was still thinking about what to do about that incoming Israeli patrol ship when a puff of smoke followed by a trail of smoke suddenly rose from the larger boat of the incoming armada. The shocked Greek merchant marine captain saw the trail of smoke describe a curve as it rose towards the Israeli helicopter. The helicopter pilot saw that and tried hard to avoid it, performing a snap turn while diving towards the sea. The missile, as Stavro now understood what it had to be, followed the helicopter's path and collided with it nearly head on. The ensuing explosion and fireball pulverized the helicopter into small bits, making Stavro drop his jaw wide open.

"My God! After this, the Israelis won't even bother asking who they are firing on."

Running inside the bridge, he hit the switch for the ship-wide P.A. system.

"TO ALL THE CREW: CLOSE IMMEDIATELY ALL THE WATER-TIGHT DOORS! EVERYBODY WILL THEN DON LIFE JACKETS BUT WILL STAY AT THEIR POSTS FOR THE TIME BEING. WE MAY BE BOARDED SOON."

In the bow section storage room where they were hiding, the Captain's announcement made Erik and Dean active at once, while Farah sat up on her improvised mattress, awakened from a nap.

"What? What was that about?" She asked, a bit confused at first.

"Somebody with guns is approaching this ship, that's what." Answered Dean as he hurried to put on his tactical vest. "As for who it could be in this part of the Mediterranean, take your pick. I am personally betting on the Israelis."

"Shit! That's the last thing I need."

"Come on, Farah!" Replied Dean, trying to cheer her up a bit with humor. "Iranians agents are always welcomed in Israel."

"Yeah: in Israeli jails, that is. Ending in one of them was not one of my goals in life."

Erik, staying dead serious, made a reassuring gesture to Farah.

"Don't worry about the Israelis, Farah. If they ever board this ship, you will tell them that you are Fatmeh Kadoumi, a Lebanese citizen working for the CIA as a local contact and facilitator. You do still have your fake Lebanese passport in the name of Fatmeh Kadoumi, I hope?"

"Uh, yes, I do." Said Farah, stunned, having a hard time believing that the two CIA men would protect her against the Israelis, who were supposed to be their closest allies in the region. That made her feel even worse about what she could possibly have to do soon. Retrieving and pocketing her Lebanese passport and her wallet, which were contained in water-tight plastic bags, Farah then armed herself, finally slinging the small haversack containing her satellite telephone, her GPS locator unit and spare ammunition. As soon as she was ready, Erik and Dean, themselves carrying their weapons and equipment packs, left the storage compartment, Farah in tow.

### **11:21 (Istanbul Time)**

#### **Israeli Saar 4.5 Class fast missile attack craft Keshet**

The commander of the 488 ton Israeli fast attack craft heading towards the MV Heraklion slammed a fist on his chart table on hearing the ultimate, frantic radio call from his helicopter pilot. With now only static on the air frequency, Lieutenant Commander Eli Livni shouted orders at his officers and operators in the tiny combat center of the craft.

"Start firing at that group of small boats ahead with our aft 76mm gun! Radio: signal to Haifa that we have intercepted a flotilla of hostile boats and that our helicopter has been shot down by a surface-to-air missile. Give our present position and that of the hostile boats as well."

"Should we use our anti-ship missiles, sir?" Asked his weapons officer, a young, inexperienced lieutenant. Livni shook his head at that.

"Shoot million dollar missiles at boats worth less than a tenth of that? No! We will go with guns only. As soon as our 30mm and 20mm cannons are within effective range, have them open fire as well on those boats."

"Yes, sir!"

"Sir," then shouted the surface radar operator, "a group of about eight boats has detached itself from the rest of the flotilla and is heading directly towards us at high speed. Distance: 9, 300 meters and closing."

"Aggressive bastards, aren't they?" Said the operations officer, Lieutenant Dan Weissmann, facing Livni from across the chart table. "My bet is that they are Hezbollah."

"A strong possibility indeed, Dan. But then, why were they rushing towards that Greek cargo ship, as if to board it? That ship must contain something of value that the Hezbollah wants. Once we are rid of those Hezbollah bastards, we will go investigate that cargo ship."

"Understood! I will get an operator on getting the info available on this MV Heraklion."

Livni then went to look through a window of the small bridge at the approaching boats and the cargo ship with his binoculars. He still could not distinguish the attacking boats at this distance, but he was able to study the shape of the cargo ship, which had by now increased its speed noticeably. Livni was not surprised by that: a common tactic of merchant mariners when approached by pirate boats was to increase speed to the maximum, to render boarding more difficult.

A few minutes later, the 30mm and 20mm cannons of the Keshet started to add their fire to that of the single 76mm automatic gun, targeting the approaching fast boats. However, the attackers seemed to have planned for such an encounter and had split up in four pairs, all of them spreading out and zigzagging to make Israeli targeting more difficult. Allied with their small size and high speed, their tactic was mostly working up to now, despite the deluge of shells fired by the five guns of the Keshet. Livni was now getting worried by this. If those boats were indeed manned by Hezbollah militiamen, then the possibility of suicide ramming attacks could not be discounted. Heavy 14.5mm and 12.7mm machine guns mounted on the boats then opened fire on the Israeli craft once at a distance of 900 meters. Their fire was mostly wild, due to the waves making the boats bob up and down, but they were firing enough heavy bullets to get a few

dispersed hits on the Keshet now. One 14.5mm bullet smashed through a window of the bridge, missing Livni by a mere foot and making him swear.

“Fucking bastards! HEAVY MACHINE GUNS: OPEN FIRE ON APPROACHING BOATS!”

Having been waiting for that order for a while already, the gunners manning the four Browning .50 caliber heavy machine guns of the Keshet started firing at once, chasing after the rushing speed boats. The noise level from the firing guns was now making talking difficult on the small bridge of the Israeli attack craft. One of the attacking boats, hit by a couple of 30mm explosive shells, suddenly veered hard to left, out of control, to then capsize. The boat following it, far from being intimidated into turning away, then augmented its speed even further, going straight at the Israeli missile craft. Livni’s blood froze in his veins when he saw that there was only one man aboard that speed boat.

“INCOMING SUICIDE BOAT AT TWO O’CLOCK! TARGET THAT BOAT AS A PRIORITY TARGET!”

The four heavy machine guns and two 20mm cannons then redirected their fire on the boat rushing at them, straddling it with near hits. The boat driver, showing nerves of steel, kept coming, zigzagging as well to render the Israeli aiming more difficult. The other attacking boats used that opportunity to approach further, with only one 76mm gun and a twin 30mm cannon left to target the six boats coming from three different directions. Livni felt bile in his stomach as he understood that, at this rate, at least one attacking boat was probably going to be able to get to his ship despite the best efforts of his gunners. The Iranian-developed small boat swarm tactic was now proving as effective as it had been feared to be. The identified suicide boat was finally hit directly by a few shells as it was now only 200 meters away from the Keshet. It immediately went up in a powerful explosion that confirmed Livni’s worst fears.

“Shit! He must have had at least a hundred kilos of explosives aboard, if not more. SIGNALS OFFICER, CALL HAIFA AND REQUEST URGENT AIR SUPPORT!”

The Keshet was now in a bad spot, receiving dispersed hits by heavy bullets while six fast boats were now within 300 meters from the Israeli missile craft and closing in rapidly. A burst of 12.7mm machine gun fire then hit the bridge of the Keshet, killing one sailor and wounding another, while destroying the surface radar set. The attacking boats then split further up, with the three boats armed with machine guns veering off a bit to run past the Keshet while peppering it with bullets, while the three remaining boats, manned by single drivers, sped directly towards the missile craft. The Israeli gunners,

now firing desperately at maximum rate, managed to hit and destroy one armed boat and one suicide boat before one suicide boat slammed into the bow of the Keshet at a combined impact speed of sixty knots. The impact alone ripped open the thin steel hull of the Keshet before the 440 pounds of plastic explosives inside the suicide boat detonated, utterly destroying the bow section along a good quarter of the ship's length. The Israeli crewmen, violently thrown down on the deck by the explosion, did not have time to pick themselves up before the remaining suicide boat slammed into their craft at the level of the engine room and exploded. The four Harpoon anti-ship missiles stored in their launch boxes above the engine room sympathetically detonated as well from the blast wave of the explosion, adding the force of four 500 pound warheads and four solid propellant rocket engines. What was left of the Keshet disappeared in a rapid chain of explosions, with the surviving Hezbollah militiamen on the attacking boats cheering wildly at the spectacle.

Hiding behind a pile of crates on the open deck of the MV Heraklion, Erik, Dean and Farah had been able to watch the naval battle with the help of their respective binoculars. Erik lowered his binoculars for a moment, his face somber, when the Keshet exploded. Hearing Farah speaking softly in Farsi, he turned his head towards her and saw her praying on her knees, her head lowered. Somehow, he doubted that she was praying for the dead Israelis.

"Why are you praying now?"

She answered him while keeping her head lowered, her tone of voice neutral.

"Brave men were dying in battle. What could be more appropriate now than to pray for their departing souls?"

Worded that way, Erik couldn't find anything to say against that and concentrated back his attention on the flotilla of small boats still approaching the cargo ship. While they were faster than the cargo ship and were gaining on it, the fact that the MV Heraklion was now at its top speed promised a long chase before the armed boats could catch up with it. Captain Philipopoulos, probably bordering on panic by now, then made what Erik thought was the biggest mistake possible: he put his engines on idle. He then spoke via the ship's P.A. system, his voice resonating through the ship.

"THIS IS THE CAPTAIN! TO ALL THE CREW: ABANDON SHIP! I SAY AGAIN, ABANDON SHIP!"

"Aww, for Christ's sake, he's shiting me!" Exclaimed Dean in exasperation as the Greek crew started lowering one of the ship's motor launches, while the cargo ship glided to a stop. Erik was also rather nonplussed by that, as it was basically offering the ship on a platter to the approaching small boats, who were now about three miles behind and still going at top speed. As for Farah, while she stayed apparently impassive, she was secretly jubilating: this was exactly what she had been hoping for. She however frowned when she noticed that the big yacht that had been following the Heraklion on a parallel track was now heading directly towards the cargo ship at top speed.

"Hey, look at that yacht! Its behavior is abnormal, to say the least."

"Agreed!" Said Erik before raising his powerful binoculars to his eyes again. From this distance, the only thing he could distinguish about it was that there were people visible on the forward deck and bridge of the yacht. The crew of the Heraklion, jubilant at seeing that someone was going to be able to retrieve them quickly, soon sped away from its ship and towards the approaching yacht, leaving Erik, Dean and Farah alone aboard the cargo ship.

Stavro Philipopoulos was nearly in tears as he contemplated his cargo ship from the back of the motor launch speeding away from it: it had been his personal pride ever since he had taken command of it just after it had been built. To have to abandon it like this now was heart-wrenching to him. It was however better than having to face the armed pirates that were going to board it in a few minutes. Looking back at the yacht coming towards the motor launch, Philipopoulos examined it. It was a big, fast and modern luxury cruiser yacht, the kind you would expect a Hollywood celebrity to own. That reassured him about the ultimate fate of his crew and of himself: at least, they were not going to have to spend hours and possibly days at sea before being rescued. As the launch was getting close to the yacht, which was now cutting down its speed, probably to facilitate their rendez-vous, Philipopoulos was able to detail the men visible on the deck of the yacht. Doubts came to his mind when he noted that they did not wear beach clothes or sailors' uniforms, but rather an assortment of jeans and T-shirts. There were also no women visible, only men. As the launch came to within fifty yards of the yacht, Philipopoulos suddenly saw that the men on the deck were carrying assault rifles slung on their backs. His sudden fear turned into terror when those men grabbed their rifles and pointed them at him and his crewmen, while one man on the yacht shouted in Arabic.

"ALLAH U AKBAR!"

Philipopoulos didn't have time to try to veer away from the yacht before a volley of automatic rifle fire swept the inside of the launch, killing or wounding all of its occupants. A second volley of bullets then finished off those still moving or moaning in the boat.

On the MV Heraklion, Farah watched with horror as the Greek crew was being massacred.

"But, Hezbollah men wouldn't do that! Why kill those poor bastards?"

Erik looked sharply at her then: her involuntary exclamation had just confirmed his theory about who had been chasing the cargo ship with armed boats.

"So, that was your plan all along, Farah: to help the Hezbollah take this shipment of weapons rather than simply destroying it."

The Iranian returned his stare, unrepentant.

"Yes, that was my mission, as given to me by Tehran. If that could reassure you, I was going to help you destroy those weapons in the case that the Hezbollah couldn't get to it in time and if ISIS was in danger of obtaining them."

"Well, the ISIS is here now, Farah." Announced Dean, who was observing the incoming cruiser yacht with his binoculars. "They just raised a black ISIS flag aboard that yacht."

Shocked by these words, Farah snapped her head towards the yacht and raised her binoculars to her eyes. She swore in Farsi when she herself saw the sinister black flag now flying from the mast of the yacht.

"Those murderous blasphemers? Here?"

She then looked back at Erik and Dean, a fierce expression on her face.

"These bastards will arrive here well before what's left of the Hezbollah flotilla could get to us. We must stop them from boarding this cargo ship!"

"Well, it seems that our respective mission objectives have merged again...for a while." Said Erik in a sarcastic tone. "However, we are only three, with carbines as our biggest weapons and a limited amount of ammunition, and we don't know how many ISIS fighters there are on that yacht. It is going to be a tough fight. Are you with us in this, Farah?"

"Of course I am! Do you expect me to sit and let these murderers of Shiites come aboard? However, we have a billion dollars' worth of advanced weapons on this ship: can't we use some of it to repel those bastards?"

That brought a big grin on Dean's face.

"An excellent idea, Farah! We should make it quick, though: that yacht will take only minutes to arrive and board us."

"You go down in the forward hold with Farah and get something to stop that yacht." Ordered at once Erik. "In the meantime, I will stay on deck in case that yacht closes in too soon for you to find anti-tank weapons."

"Got it! You're with me, Farah!"

Fully realizing how short time was, Farah didn't waste precious seconds in objecting and followed Dean at a run towards a deck hatch that led down into the forward cargo hold. They slid down the succession of ladders until they set foot on the bottom deck of the hold, which was filled with big forty foot steel sea containers stacked four-high. Dean then went to the nearest container and, breaking the customs seal on it, opened one of the two heavy doors closing its front. He then faced a wall of stacked cardboard boxes piled up nearly to the ceiling and held together with transparent plastic wrapping film. The markings on the boxes were however easily readable through the wrapping.

"Furniture sets! They must have hid the weapons behind a few rows of those boxes. Farah, you are smaller than me: get up on my shoulders and see if you can slip inside between the top of those boxes and the ceiling. If yes, then tell me what's behind the boxes."

Farah obeyed him at once, putting one foot in Dean's cupped hands and climbing on his shoulders. One look was enough for her and she immediately started wiggling her way inside on top of the boxes of furniture.

"I can fit in, barely. Give me a second."

After maybe ten seconds, Dean heard her muffled voice from inside the container.

"I am now on top of green weapons containers, Dean, but the writing on them is in Russian."

"Can you see letters or names that you could read at least partly?"

"Uh, yes! I can make one word here: IGLA."

"That's no good for us: these are anti-aircraft missiles. Get out now: we will have to look into another container."

"Coming!"

Farah wiggled her way back to the front and slid down, stepping on Dean's shoulders before jumping down back on the deck. The duo then went to the next container and opened it to repeat the operation. To their disappointment, that second container also

proved to be holding anti-aircraft missiles. Luck however smiled to them when Farah was able to read the markings on the weapons crates in the third container they opened.

"I have something different here. The name I can see looks like a 'P', followed by an inverted 'U', then an inverted 'L' and the number 32."

"RPG-32 anti-tank rocket launchers! That's exactly what we need! Come back out: we will have to get rid of the boxes in front of these weapons crates."

Farah just had time to get out and jump back down on the deck when Dean's earpiece came alive.

"Stryker, get back on deck at once with Farah: that yacht is now less than fifty yards away and I can see at least twenty armed men ready to jump aboard as soon as they are side-by-side with our ship."

Dean swore to himself in frustration: a couple of minutes more and they would have had enough firepower to sink that yacht. He then looked at Farah, who was wondering why he was not starting to cut the wrapping around the boxes in the container.

"We are out of time: the ISIS yacht is about to board us. Let's run back up to the weather deck."

The duo, with Farah having to give her maximum to be able to follow Dean up the ladders, arrived on deck just as a first burst of automatic fire rang out. The yacht was now only maybe a dozen yards away from the aft port side of the Heraklion, with a multitude of armed men on its forward deck and along its railings, pouring fire back at Erik, who was using the forward port corner of the bridge superstructure block as protective cover. Stopping and crouching for no more than two seconds, Dean fired a short aimed burst from his FN 90 bullpup carbine, downing two of the armed men on the yacht, then resumed his running towards Erik's position. Following his example, Farah also stopped briefly and fired a burst from her AKSU-74 carbine, helping to cover Dean's rush forward and hitting one ISIS fighter. She felt satisfaction then to be able to engage those fanatical murderers and make them pay a price here and now. She had to duck quickly behind a pile of crates stacked on the deck as dense return fire flew over her head. Using all the tricks Ali Gorani had taught her as her firearms instructor back in Iran, Farah then engaged in a ferocious firefight with the ISIS fighters, supporting the two Americans as best as she could and killing or wounding at least two more of their enemies. The two American agents then stunned her by jumping aboard the yacht as soon as it bumped against the side of the Heraklion. They then separated, each of them

advancing along one side of the yacht and methodically shooting down any ISIS fighter appearing in their path in a masterful display of combat shooting. Farah couldn't help feeling admiration at that sight, but she suddenly had to raise and point her carbine in a hurry in order to shoot a gunman that had just appeared on the bridge of the yacht, just above Dean. The man shouted in pain and, losing his balance, fell over the side bulwark of the bridge, crashing on the deck just in front of Dean. The big American then gave her a quick thumbs up sign while keeping his eyes and his weapon pointed forward. Proud of herself, Farah used a short lull in the enemy firing to come out from behind her cover and rush towards the stern. She was about to get to the forward port corner of the bridge superstructure block when she saw two ISIS fighters step over the side railing of the yacht and climb aboard the cargo ship, right at the stern. She stopped and kneeled to fire a burst that dropped both men. That burst also emptied her last magazine for her AKSU-74. Swearing while throwing away the now useless empty magazine, she ran to the two men she had just killed. Both wore tactical vests with multiple ammunition pockets full of magazines for their AK-47 rifles. Bending over one of the dead men, she quickly grabbed a full magazine from his tactical vest and inserted it at once in her carbine. She had just chambered a fresh round when another ISIS gunman appeared at the corner of her right eye, standing below her on the aft deck of the yacht. Her heart pounding hard, Farah raced to point her carbine as the gunman did the same. She beat him by a mere fraction of a second, killing him with a burst in his torso. The man however had time to press his trigger, firing a long burst as he fell back, already dying. One of the bullets from the gunman ricocheted against the steel railing of the Heraklion and clipped Farah in the lower right leg, making her scream in pain. Trying her best to ignore the pain from her wound, Farah undid the tactical vest of the dead man she was standing over and put it on. Now in possession of six full AK magazines and four fragmentation grenades, Farah withdrew behind a big ventilation air intake and examined quickly her wounded leg. She was relieved to see that it was actually a superficial wound, little more than a long scratch: she had been very lucky indeed. Taking off her T-shirt, she tied it around her leg, using it as a temporary bandage. Once this was done, she stuck her head out for a second to assess the situation on the yacht. She couldn't see any living ISIS fighter left on the deck of the yacht and was in time to see 'Sparrow' rush down a deck hatch, entering the yacht while 'Stryker' covered him. The two Americans seemed to have things fairly under control on the yacht...for the moment. She then thought about her mission and what she should do next. Even

though she had orders to that effect, Farah was not ready anymore to shoot the two CIA agents, particularly the big 'Stryker'. She however still could help deliver the weapons in the hands of the Hezbollah without hurting the two Americans. She gave a thumbs up signal to 'Stryker' as he was about to follow his partner inside the yacht.

"I WILL STAY TO DEFEND THE CARGO SHIP."

Dean nodded his head at that and went down the deck hatch, disappearing from Farah's sight. Feeling a bit bad at having to play a trick on him, Farah got up and, limping slightly, started climbing the ladder leading up to the command bridge and wheelhouse. Once on top, she quickly embraced the decks and bridge of the yacht, which she was now dominating from her new position. Seeing an ISIS gunman starting to come out from a bow deck hatch, she shot him dead with a short burst, then entered the wheelhouse of the Heraklion. Going to the engines controls, she pushed them forward all the way, hoping that they would respond to her commands. Thankfully for her, the big diesels had been simply on idle instead of being fully shut down and picked up in power at once, pushing the big cargo ship forward. Elated, Farah next went to the steering wheel and turned it hard to the right. Picking speed slowly, the MV Heraklion's bow started swinging towards the incoming armada of Hezbollah boats and detaching itself from the yacht that had been commandeered by ISIS. Farah's triumph was however short-lived, as four dots appeared in the distance sky, flying low and coming in fast.

"NO! NO! NOT NOW! STAY AWAY, YOU FUCKING ISRAELIS!"

Her swearing didn't help one bit, as the four dots quickly turned into four heavily armed Israeli F-15 fighter-bombers. They dove first on the Hezbollah boats, firing in succession volleys of unguided rockets and destroying three boats in their first pass. One shoulder-launched SA-7 missile was fired from the largest boat before it was obliterated by rockets, but the Israeli planes released a string of countermeasure flares that succeeded in decoying the missile away. Under the furious eyes of Farah, who had quickly returned her engines to idle setting, the Israeli fighter-bombers each performed three more passes, firing either unguided rockets or their 20mm guns and decimating the Hezbollah flotilla. Only one boat survived the attack and turned away to speed back towards the Lebanese coast. The Israeli jets, now probably out of ammunition, didn't bother chasing it and left, flying back towards Israel. Crushed by this cruel twist in circumstances, Farah went to sit for a moment in the Captain's chair, wondering what she would do next. Since the Israelis had not bothered to save even a few rockets for the Heraklion, that

probably meant that they intended to board and capture it soon to see what it was transporting. An Israeli patrol ship or more planes could thus appear at any time in the next hour. A plan then quickly formed in Farah's mind. Now resolved to succeed at any cost, Farah went to the ship's autopilot system and set it on a rough setting towards the Lebanese coast, then put the engines back at near full power. Once this was done, she limped out of the wheelhouse and, with a last regretful look towards the yacht where the two Americans were still fighting out ISIS fighters, went down to the weather deck, then headed towards the forward hold.

"I SEE ONE FLEEING TOWARDS THE BOW, ERIK!" Shouted Dean to as he was putting a fresh magazine in his carbine. He just had time to chamber a round, point his carbine and fire before the man could go up a ladder leading to the bow deck of the yacht. Hit in a leg and buttock, the man fell back down the ladder, screaming with pain. Dean then finished him with one bullet in the head. Breathing fast from the adrenaline rush of combat and with his ears ringing badly from all that shooting inside a restricted space, he cautiously examined his surroundings for any remaining ISIS fighters. The fight had been hard and furious, with the ISIS men not ready to give an inch and proving to be better fighters than what Dean had seen from the average Middle East gunman in the past. The inside of the yacht now reeked of the smell of burned gunpowder and spent brass cartridge were everywhere, rolling around the bobbing decks and making walking treacherous.

"DECK CLEAR!"

"CLEAR ON MY END AS WELL!" Shouted back Erik, also apparently half-deafened by the gunfire and a few grenade explosions. The two men then proceeded in a methodical search of the yacht, searching for any possible hiding gunman. They however found only bodies, including those of a mature Caucasian couple with single shots to the head. Erik looked down gravely at the dead man and woman with gray hair.

"Probably the legal owners of this yacht. The ISIS men must have hijacked their yacht, possibly in Cyprus, before murdering them."

"You're probably right about that."

"Where is Farah, by the way?"

"She stayed on the cargo ship, to prevent any ISIS gunman from climbing aboard. I saw her kill at least two of those bastards that had set foot on the Heraklion."

"Very well: time to go up and see what is happening with those Hezbollah boats."

When they stepped in the open air, on the aft deck behind the bridge of the yacht, it was to be just in time to see four Israeli F-15 fighter-bombers obliterating the Hezbollah flotilla with rockets and guns. Erik was disturbed and not a little displeased to see that the cargo ship was now a good mile away, idle in the water.

"Damn! Farah must have attempted to bring the Heraklion closer to those Hezbollah boats. She is a persistent woman: I have to give her that."

"Talking of persistent, the Heraklion is now picking up speed again and heading southeast, towards the Lebanese coast."

"Shit! We must catch back with her and stop that ship. Either that or have the USS California sink it."

Even though Dean knew that Erik was right, he still felt a bit of misgiving then.

"Uh, the Israelis are more than probably going to either intercept her or sink the Heraklion before it could get to Lebanon. Do we really need to have the Heraklion torpedoed?"

Erik gave a sober look to his longtime partner.

"Starting to have feeling towards her, Dean? That's not your style during missions."

"I know, but she actually saved my skin a few minutes ago, by shooting down a gunman that had appeared above me without me noticing. In truth, I don't know anymore if I should treat her like a friend or a foe."

"Well, let's catch up with her first. Then we will see how to treat her. Let's go to the wheelhouse."

Climbing the ladder leading up to the wheelhouse of the yacht, they entered it, with Dean going to the engines controls while Erik went to the steering wheel. However, the engines stayed silent when Dean pressed the ignition switch.

"Shit! The engines are not responding. I'm going to have to go down in the engine room to check them."

"Okay! In the meantime, I will keep an eye on what is going on around us and the Heraklion."

A few minutes after Dean had gone down, Erik received a radio call from him.

"Bad news, Erik: some lost bullets have damaged the engines."

"Can you repair them?"

"I think so, but it will take some time. I would say one hour at a minimum."

"Damn! The Heraklion will be quite far by then."

"It will more likely be at the bottom of the sea or heading towards an Israeli port with a boarding crew by then, Erik."

"Hum, you're probably right. Do your best with the engines. I will stay up here in the meantime."

Erik then settled himself in the Captain's chair and drank some water from his water bottle. Next, he took out a hand-held encrypted radio transceiver from a pocket of his tactical vest and sent a short message.

"Neptune, Neptune, this is Nemesis, over!"

A response came in a few seconds later, after his second call.

"This is Neptune! Send, Nemesis!"

"From Nemesis: we are now off the cargo ship and on a private yacht now dead in the water. That yacht had been hijacked by ISIS gunmen, who then tried to board our cargo ship. We have succeeded in repelling and killing those gunmen, but our companion traveler stayed aboard the cargo ship and set it on a course towards the Lebanese coast. Be advised that an Israeli airstrike took out the small boats sent by the Hezbollah to grab the ship. We are now expecting the Israelis to either board the cargo ship or sink it in the hour to come. However, be ready to torpedo the ship if it is about to arrive safely in a Lebanese or Syrian port, over."

There was a slight delay before he got a response to that last phrase.

"Neptune understood! Keep us posted, Nemesis."

"Will do! Please inform Washington of all this in the meantime. Nemesis out!"

Pocketing back his radio, Erik then resumed his observation of the fleeing cargo ship.

"Come on, Farah! This is no time to slack on the job!"

Swearing and sweating, Farah climbed the ladders from the bottom of the forward hold, heavily laden with three SA-24 missiles, complete with their firing grips and battery assemblies. She finally arrived on the weather deck and put down her three missiles with a sigh of relief. Taking a minute to recuperate a bit, she then went back down in the hold again. After another sixteen minutes, she was back on the open deck with another SA-24 missile launcher, plus one RPG-32 launcher and six 105mm anti-tank shaped charge rockets in their expendable launch canisters. Taking another break and drinking some water, Farah resumed her efforts four minutes later, bringing her missiles and

rockets up to the bridge's wheelhouse. She was taking another rest, satisfied with her work, when a dot flying low on the horizon attracted her eyes. It was coming roughly from the direction of the ship's bow and seemed to be heading towards her. Farah, understanding at once who that could be, took a deep breath and grabbed two of her SA-24 missile launchers, bringing them out on the open bridge starboard wing. Two more trips and she had all her heavy weaponry ready by her side as she examined the approaching aircraft with her binoculars. It was a big, powerful CH-53 Super Stallion heavy transport helicopter, a model only owned by Israeli Forces in this part of the World. Another four dots then appeared in the sky, but those came in much faster, soon growing into four F-15 fighter-bombers. They swept over the cargo ship in the thunderous noise of their jet engines, apparently to examine it before the helicopter could get to it. Farah carefully stayed hidden behind the bulwark of the open bridge wing as the jets sped overhead, then grabbed one of her SA-24 launchers and readied it for firing. Once that was done, she quickly removed the end caps from the three other SA-24 missile launch tubes, in order to be able to fire them more quickly in the minutes to come. A lot of things had been said about Russian-made weapons, good and bad. One thing they definitely were, however, was being easy to both operate and maintain. Farah had received some training in the past with practice models of the SA-7 GRAIL missile, the ancestor of the SA-24, and she found the controls to be very similar to those of the SA-7. Staying behind the bulwark in order to stay unnoticed until she was ready to fire, she activated the system's thermal battery and put on her head the system's headset, then rose from her kneeling position and pointed her launcher, putting her sight's crosshairs squarely on the approaching helicopter, now about half a mile away and flying 200 yards above the surface of the sea. Triggering the missile's infrared seeker, she waited to hear a shrill whistle in her headset that indicated that her missile's seeker had acquired its target. She then pressed the trigger all the way. The missile flew out of its launch tube in a flash, trailing smoke from its rocket engine. The pilot of the heavy helicopter saw the missile launch and reacted immediately, starting a sharp turn away to the left while shouting at his copilot to fire their countermeasure decoy flares. Pairs of flares started popping out of the helicopter's tail, where the flare launcher was situated, but the missile, not fooled by them, kept tracking the helicopter as it turned away. Despite firing away over twenty of its decoy flares, the CH-53 was still hit squarely in one of its turbines by the SA-24, which had much more advanced and improved counter-countermeasures systems and a more sensitive seeker than its preceding models. Its

warhead, also bigger and more powerful than that of its predecessors, exploded inside that turbine, ripping it off the helicopter and breaking three of the giant rotor blades. Completely thrown off balance and spinning out of control, the heavy helicopter tipped over and went down like a rock, crashing into the sea with its five crewmembers and 28 embarked commandos. It sank out of sight within seconds, with no one coming out of it.

Not taking the time to celebrate her triumph, Farah threw away the now empty missile launcher and grabbed a second SA-24, switching it on and shouldering it. By the time she was getting up again, a missile launcher on her right shoulder, the four Israeli F-15s were performing wide turns to come back towards the cargo ship while firing decoy flares. Knowing that she didn't have much time left, Farah sighted her launcher on the leading fighter-bomber and fired her second missile. The decoy flares of the F-15s, actually similar to those of the doomed heavy helicopter, proved again to be ineffective against a model of missile that the Israelis had not encountered yet in combat. Farah's second missile went true, exploding against the aircraft's tail, just between its two jet engine exhausts. Both engines caught fire at once and lost power, with pieces of the tail flying off. Suddenly finding himself with both engines out and with his F-15 dropping towards the nearby surface of the sea, the Israeli pilot decided to eject out of his doomed plane. His parachute barely had time to open and slow him down to a safe falling speed before Farah fired her third SA-24 missile. To the fury of the surviving Israeli pilots, their decoy flares and countermeasures again proved ineffective against the SA-24. The missile hit squarely the now leading second F-15 as it was nearly facing the cargo ship, entering one of the two engine air inlets and exploding inside. This time, the pilot had no chance to eject, as the fighter-bomber disintegrated into a big fireball, raining flaming debris all over. Now completely enraged, the two surviving F-15 pilots dove on the MV Heraklion, aiming at its stern and bridge superstructure while arming their 1000-pound bombs. Farah, grabbing in a hurry her fourth SA-24, barely had the time to point and fire it at the lead F-15 coming directly at her before the Israeli pilots released their heavy bombs. She now could only watch the cluster of Mark 83 bombs as they fell towards the cargo ship and herself.

"May Allah be merciful!"

Her ultimate missile exploded just a few feet behind the exhaust nozzles of the fighter-bomber and gravely damaged both nozzles, putting one engine on fire and shutting down the other. As Farah felt savage joy on watching the third F-15 go down, six of the

eight Israeli 1000-pound bombs slammed into the stern of the MV Heraklion near the waterline, penetrating deeply inside the hull before their delayed fuzes detonated them.

Far in the distance, a good six miles away, Erik saw through his binoculars the trails of smoke from the four successive surface-to-air missiles going up and hitting first a helicopter, then three F-15s one after the other, with one fireball marking the destruction of one F-15 and falling flaming torches marking the shooting down of the two others. Then, maybe five seconds later, a cluster of powerful explosions reverberated on the horizon, soon followed by a column of thick black smoke and a series of fireballs. Erik's face was somber when Dean, attracted by the noise of the explosions, emerged from the engine room's aft deck hatch and looked in the direction of the explosions.

"What the hell happened over there, Erik?"

"It's Farah! She apparently was able to get a few surface-to-air missiles out of one hold of the Heraklion and used them against the Israelis. She was able to shoot down one helicopter and three F-15s before the Israelis bombed the hell out of the cargo ship. Our mission is now done: those weapons will never get into the hands of ISIS." Dean was silent for a long moment then, staring at the fireballs that kept going up on the horizon. He finally looked up at Erik, who was still on the bridge of the yacht.

"What do we do now, Erik?"

"I will call the USS California once those Israeli jets will have flown away and ask it to pick us up."

"And then?"

Erik's eyes hardened as he spoke again to answer his partner.

"Then, we go pay a series of visits, first to that Turkish intermediary that was due to welcome the MV Heraklion in Iskenderun, then to a certain Viktor Grashev."

## **12:27 (Istanbul Time)**

### **Surviving Hezbollah boat**

The four militiamen that occupied the sole Hezbollah boat to have survived the Israeli airstrikes had cautiously played dead when the second wave of F-15s had arrived, putting their engine on idle and lying down motionless inside their fast motor boat. By then, the MV Heraklion had been steaming at top speed towards the Lebanese coast for quite a few minutes already and was actually only about two miles away from

the boat. The militiamen, one of which was an experienced fisherman and boat driver, were thus able to watch in detail the battle over the Greek cargo ship, which had now stopped. The leader of the boat watched with growing admiration and glee as someone aboard the cargo ship fired anti-aircraft missiles at a fast rate, downing one heavy Israeli helicopter and no less than three of the redoubtable F-15 fighter-bombers in quick succession.

“By Allah, our contact on that ship is truly worthy of Heaven!”

His glee however turned into sorrow when a series of powerful explosions cut the cargo ship in half, with the stern half sinking capsizing and sinking quickly while the forward half kept erupting into a long string of secondary explosions that sent burning ammunition and missiles up in a spectacular display of fireworks. The boat driver, a man in his late forties sporting some gray in his hair and beard, then spoke in a subdued tone.

“I believe that our contact is now in Heaven, Fadi.”

The senior militiaman nodded his head while following with his eyes the sole surviving Israeli fighter-bomber, which was now heading back towards Israel.

“I am afraid that you are right, Ishmael. Still, let’s go see if we could pick up at least his body: it deserves a proper burial as a true martyr.”

The boat driver pushed his engine throttle to near maximum and steered his boat towards the site of the wreck. Both parts of the cargo ship had now sunk under the waves, the rushing sea water having apparently extinguished most of the burning ammunition. What the Lebanese militiamen found at first was a field of floating debris, but no bodies. After a few minutes of searching and as they were about to give up, one militiaman shouted while pointing at something about thirty yards away.

“THERE! I SEE A FLOATING BODY!”

Their hopes up, the Hezbollah men drove to that body, finding the corpse of a man wearing a black bandana around his head. Fadi swore when he saw the bandana.

“A fucking ISIS fighter! He must have come from that yacht that tried to board the cargo ship.”

“He was shot in the chest, Fadi.” Remarked another militiaman as he examined more closely the body. “Our agent on the cargo ship must have killed him.”

“More reasons to honor his memory, Ali.”

They then resumed their search, leaving behind the dead ISIS man. A faint cry for help was then heard from the starboard side as they were navigating through a thick field of

floating debris. The boat driver reacted at once to it, steering in the direction of the shout. He saw a hand waving above the waves as another shout in Arabic was heard.

"I see someone alive, ahead and maybe a hundred meters away."

"Ali, Hakim, have your rifles ready, in case that is another ISIS bastard. Ishmael, proceed cautiously."

"Understood, Fadi."

Approaching at a slow speed and with three of the militiamen pointing their rifles, the boat soon came within direct sight of a head sticking out of the sea. Another shout for help then made Fadi do a double take.

"A woman? Could it be our agent on the cargo ship?"

"We better be cautious, Fadi." Said the boat driver. "The ISIS is known to be using a few female fighters, especially for suicide missions."

"You are right. Still, hold fire until we are sure who that is. Get us no nearer than ten meters from that woman, Ishmael."

"Got it!"

The four Hezbollah men were soon able to detail the face of a very pretty young woman who was swimming afloat with some effort, being apparently exhausted. Still suspicious, Fadi shouted at her in Arabic.

"WHO ARE YOU?"

"I'm Lieutenant Farah Qalibaf, of the Iranian Guard Corps Intelligence Bureau. My codename is 'Sheherazade'."

"Show me that you can speak in Farsi!"

The woman did switch to Farsi then, speaking with an Iranian accent that Fadi recognized.

"Is that better now? Please take a decision quickly: I was wounded and I won't be able to stay afloat for very long."

Now convinced, Fadi nodded to his boat driver.

"Alright, Ishmael, get close to her. Ali, Hakim, be ready to pick her out of the water."

Less than a minute later, an exhausted Farah was pulled out of the water and helped inside the small motor boat, with Fadi quickly examining her leg wound.

"You were lucky, Lieutenant Qalibaf: you have only a superficial wound. We will be able to treat it properly once back in port."

"Which port will you be heading to?"

"To Beirut!"

"Good! I will thus be able to send quickly a report to Tehran from there."

Fadi nodded his head and smiled to her with genuine admiration.

"What you did on that cargo ship was fantastic! To be able to destroy one Israeli heavy helicopter and three fighter-bombers..."

"Yes, but I failed into my primary mission: to deliver those missiles in your hands."

"Nobody expected the Israelis to interfere this far north of their coast. Neither was the ISIS expected to send men to board your ship. You did all that was humanly possible in view of the circumstances. Now, rest. We will be back in Beirut in a couple of hours."

As the boat turned around and picked up speed towards the Southeast, Farah couldn't help look one last time towards the West, where the ISIS yacht was barely visible in the distance, still dead in the water. She closed her eyes for an instant, thinking for herself.

*"Goodbye, Stryker, or whatever is your real name. I wish that I could have known you better."*

## **CHAPTER 9 – SETTLING ACCOUNTS**

**20:13 (Madrid Time)**

**Thursday, June 11, 2015**

**Viktor Grachev's villa, Puerto Real**

**Spain**

Viktor Grachev closed the line he had opened on his smart phone with a frustrated punch of his left index. A deal that had promised to make him rich enough for him to go in real retirement had turned completely sour in a matter of days, for reasons he still didn't fully understand. First, there had been this stupid decision by the ISIS, supported by Prince Al Rashid, to send a contingent of ISIS fighters aboard the Heraklion, to 'help escort the shipment of weapons'. That had certainly proved quickly to be a dumb move, with those Islamist fanatics attacking the Russian special forces soldiers Moscow had sent from the outset to escort the weapons. Then, all radio contact had been lost with the Heraklion after its departure from Cyprus, as it was approaching Syrian and Turkish territorial waters. Viktor still had no explanation for that loss of radio contact, but he certainly suspected that foul play had been involved there. But by whom? Then, the whole scheme had literally blown up, with the news that the Heraklion had been sunk by an Israeli airstrike off the coast of Lebanon. That piece of news had in fact come rather late and in small bits at a time, as if the Israelis had something to hide in this case. After four days of contradictory news reports that involved mostly speculations at first, the BBC, which had excellent sources in Cyprus and Lebanon, had published just this morning a new report that claimed that surface-to-air missiles had been fired at Israeli planes from the Heraklion, prompting the Israelis into bombing and sinking the cargo ship. That report also alluded to the fact that the Israelis had suffered some stinging losses in that encounter, but had not been able to give definite details. Viktor was however not surprised by the allegation that the Israelis had suffered losses: after all, the Igla-S missile was the most advanced model of portable surface-to-air missile system to ever been produced in Russia, with the batch sent on the Heraklion being actually fitted with the latest counter-countermeasures algorithms developed to date. But who could have fired those missiles at the Israelis? Only the Spetsnaz

soldiers guarding the shipment knew that those weapons were aboard. Of course, the ISIS fighters that had boarded the ship in Cyprus had also known about them, but they had been all killed by the Spetsnaz by the time the Israelis bombed the ship. Or had they really been killed to the last? What if one or more ISIS fighters had survived and had then hidden on the ship, unbeknown to the Spetsnaz soldiers? They could then have possibly sabotaged the radios and killed the remaining Russians before stupidly firing at the Israeli planes and provoking a lethal response by them. Right now, that was the most plausible scenario that Viktor could think of that would explain what had happened in the Eastern Mediterranean. Whatever had truly happened then, the consequences for Viktor had certainly been negative. While he still had in his secret bank accounts the twenty million Euros he had received as a first advance on his personal fees for this deal, the non-delivery of the weapons had meant that the remainder of his promised fee, fifty million Euros, had not been paid. Another negative consequence had been the threats against him that had followed from some very pissed off ISIS leaders, who had bet big time on that shipment of weapons to reverse their winding fortunes in Iraq. As a result, he was going to have to spend more of his precious money on personal protection. Lastly, he now had to contend with an angry and fearful Prince Al Rashid, who was doing his best to deflect all the blame on Viktor for that fiasco, which had cost 800 million Euros to the collection of Saudi billionaire princes and Turkish high level officials secretly supporting ISIS. It was not that Viktor actually feared that vain and arrogant Saudi prince, but rather the possibility that Al Rashid would now do something really stupid that would expose him to the unhealthy attention of the Spanish authorities. Already, the Greek maritime shipping company to which the MV Heraklion had belonged was being put under investigation by Interpol following the ship's sinking by the Israelis. It was only a question of time before Viktor himself would receive the visit of Interpol agents. He was however confident that they would find nothing to put against him: the whole deal had been too well hidden, particularly on the Moscow end of it, and there was nothing left in Viktor's warehouse that could incriminate him. Still, that fiasco was proving to be a giant pain in the ass for him right now.

Deciding that a dip in his pool would dissipate some of his stress and worries, at least temporarily, Viktor left his private study and went to his adjacent bedroom, where he changed into a pair of swimming trunks and put on a robe and a pair of plastic sandals. Grabbing as well a large beach towel and his smart phone, which he put in a

pocket of his robe, he then went down the main staircase of his villa, setting foot in the lobby and walking to the back of his residence. His chief bodyguard, an ex-Spetsnaz officer, seeing him go towards the swimming pool, preceded him outside and looked around for any sign of threat. Viktor waited for a moment inside the rear door of his villa, understanding that Fedor's job was now more essential than ever. On his bodyguard giving him a nod, Viktor stepped out on his rear patio and took off his robe, putting it and his beach towel on top of one of the long chairs set by the side of his swimming pool. He then went to the edge of the swimming pool and bent to dip one hand in the water, testing its temperature: it was just right. Satisfied, Viktor went to the low diving board and climbed on it, then took three quick steps and jumped up. The shock of the sudden temperature differential between the water of his pool and the hot ambient air made Viktor forget for a moment his worries. Propelling himself back to the surface of the water, he then stayed on his back, floating face up while pedaling slowly with his feet. Fedor, who had stayed by the side of the pool to keep watch, suddenly saw his employer's head explode like a ripe melon, projecting blood and brain tissue in the water. Maybe a second later, as he was about to shout the alarm, he heard the distant report of a rifle shot. His trained ears made him look at once in the general direction from which the shot had rang. His eyes concentrated at once on the trees to the South of the villa: the sniper must have been hiding in there. Fedor never heard the second shot, a bullet hitting him in the forehead and blowing open the back of his head before the sonic bang reached his ears.

Four hundred yards away, Erik put the safety back on his scope-equipped FNH SCAR-H 7.62mm automatic rifle, then climbed down from the tree that had served as his nest for the last two hours. He walked quickly among the trees while keeping an eye out for any possible witness to his deed. While it was unlikely that anyone would be in this patch of woods at this hour, Erik never left anything to chance. If someone was indeed unfortunate enough to see him, then he would have no choice but to kill that witness. It was something he would truly regret, but many necessary things in life often turned out to be regrettable. He knew that fact too well from his own personal past experience, both as a Navy S.E.A.L. officer, then as a C.I.A. clandestine agent. The best he could do to avoid such hard choices was to be careful and to plan well in order to minimize the possibility of innocents being caught in the middle during his missions. After a 200 yards walk, Erik arrived at the spot where Dean was waiting for him in their rented car. His

partner gave him a questioning look, to which Erik spoke while putting his rifle back in its protective leather bag.

“The job is done: Grachev and his head bodyguard are now in Hell. You can call Ian and tell him that he can now empty Grachev’s secret Swiss bank accounts.”

“With pleasure!” Replied Dean before grabbing his encrypted radio. Since they had already intercepted and copied the account numbers and access codes of the secret bank accounts used by Grachev, emptying them by transferring their content to other bank accounts was going to be child’s play for Ian Dorset, their team’s analyst and computer guru. Those twenty million Euros would then go to a special, clandestine C.I.A. fund used to provide for the needs of C.I.A. agents and informants forced by circumstances to adopt new identities and retire in anonymity for their own safety and that of their families. Some of that money would also be used to provide for the families of agents who had died on missions that could not be acknowledged publicly and had thus disappeared in the eyes of the regular world. With no proof of death, the insurance companies used by the families of the dead agents always refused to pay their life insurance policies, thus often leaving the families in dire financial situations. Unfortunately, serving your country often proved to be a thankless task. Once his call to Ian was made, Dean looked back at Erik, who was now taking place in the front passenger seat.

“We’re going to Madrid next, I presume?”

“Yup! We have a few more rotten bastards to take care of there.”

Dean had started the engine and was about to back out of their hiding place when he spotted a car coming down the same dirt road he had driven on earlier, which connected to the trail he had used to get to his present place. Keeping his eyes on his rear view mirror, he gave Erik a quick warning.

“Incoming car down the dirt road!”

Twisting his head and half turning in his seat, Erik also saw the car, a gray Volvo station wagon, as it slowed down while approaching the junction with their dirt trail.

“Shut the engine and get out to hide in the bushes, quick!”

Dean didn’t have to be told twice and exited the car at a crouch, but took the time to lock the doors before joining Erik behind a dense bush to observe the Volvo, which was now turning onto the dirt trail.

“Who the hell could be coming here at this hour?”

"I don't know but I hope that they don't see our car: it is not as well camouflaged as I would wish right now."

The two agents anxiously watched the Volvo through the vegetation as it approached on the dirt trail at slow speed.

"It looks like this bozo is looking for a place to hide, like us." Said Dean while keeping his eyes on the car. To his relief and that of Erik, the newcomer turned off the trail and drove the Volvo to a spot between two trees before he could pass in front of their own car. A man and a woman soon got out of the station wagon, with the man retrieving a large bag from the back seat and saying a few words to the woman before disappearing with her through the woods towards Grachev's villa. Erik shook his head slowly, nearly amused.

"First us, then the Iranians, now them: Grachev is decidedly a popular man around here. That guy spoke in Hebrew to the woman, by the way."

"The Mossad<sup>13</sup>?" Said Dean, a bit surprised. "Why them and why this late?"

"The Israelis lost one patrol boat, two fighter-bombers and two helicopters in the encounter at sea with the Hezbollah and the MV Heraklion, barely five days ago. In fact, I am surprised that they have not reacted more quickly to investigate the Spanish link with the MV Heraklion and its cargo of missiles."

"Hum, you're right! I wonder if they are here to spy on Grachev or to kill him."

"Either way, they arrived a bit late. Let's leave discreetly while we can and before the police shows up."

"Wait! I still have at least one GPS tracker bug in the car. Let me mark their car first."

"An excellent idea, actually. I will cover you while you install the bug."

Hiding the GPS tracker, which was equipped with a magnet at its base, inside the right rear wheel well of the Volvo took less than a minute to Dean. Going back to their own car, the two C.I.A. agents got in, with Erik grabbing the GPS tracker's receiver unit out of Dean's equipment bag before sitting in the front passenger seat.

"I have a clear and strong signal from the bug. You can now drive out of here."

"With pleasure!"

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<sup>13</sup> Mossad : Israeli intelligence service.

Starting his engine, Dean then backed out of their hiding place and drove on the dirt trail, joining with the dirt road 200 yards away and turning on it to return to Highway CA-32, heading back to Naval Station Rota. As they got on the highway, they saw three Spanish police cars pass at top speed in the opposite direction, their gyro lights and sirens on.

"Looks like Graschev's surviving bodyguards called the police after all." Said Dean. "I wonder how they will explain to the police what happened and why."

"Simple: they may just claim that some organized crime group had tried to muscle in on Graschev's import-export business and that he told them to fuck off. That's what I would say anyway. I wonder how our Mossad friends will react to all this."

"Oh, I am sure that they will have some pungent words in Hebrew to describe the situation." Replied Dean, grinning.

**19:08 (Madrid Time)**

**Friday, June 12, 2015**

**Apartment building, Calle de la Cruz**

**Madrid, Spain**

Maria Franco was nearly sick with worry as she unlocked the door of her apartment and entered, closing and locking the door behind her. She had learned about Graschev's murder through the morning television news, like her boss at the American embassy, Ronald Atkins. Atkins, while not grieving one second for the dead Russian, had been perplexed by that murder, wondering aloud to Maria about who could have done that deed and also swearing about the way Washington was keeping him in the dark lately. Now rightly afraid that the ones who had killed Graschev could follow the trail between him and herself, Maria had left her work at the American embassy as soon as she had been able to. Now back in her home, the secretary sat heavily in her sofa facing the television and used the remote control to switch on the set, intent on watching the latest news. After watching in vain for fifteen minutes and not seeing any update on Graschev's murder, she gave up and went to her small kitchen to prepare her supper, but left the television on. She nearly jumped to the ceiling when her telephone rang ten minutes later. Anxiously checking the caller identification window of her telephone, she felt relief on seeing that it was her occasional lover and boss and picked up the handset.

"Yes!"

"Maria, this is Ronald." Said Atkins on the line, sounding seriously shaken. "I have some bad news to pass on to you."

Maria tensed up at once at those words, now expecting the worse.

"What is happening, Ronald?"

"I...I was just called in the Ambassador's office. Basically, he announced to me in rather dry and terse terms that I was being recalled to the United States immediately. He also told me that you have just been fired from your job at the embassy. I tried to plead your case but the Ambassador wouldn't budge or even tell me why you were fired. I somehow suspect that all this came from Washington and that our liaison has been discovered."

"My...my job, gone?" Could barely stutter the young secretary, feeling blood rush to her head and becoming dizzy. "But, how could they do that? I have been working at the embassy for over five years and always did a good job there."

"I know, Maria, but I believe that the quality of your work was not a factor here. It had to do about our liaison, in my opinion. You will have to come to the embassy tomorrow to pick up your things there and get your official letter of termination. Unfortunately, you are officially being fired and won't get any letter of recommendation from the embassy to help you get a new job."

"But, that's unjust! How am I going to find a job now with such a black mark on my curriculum? You know how bad the job market is right now in Spain."

"I know, Maria, and I am sorry for you but there is nothing I can do for you. I myself expect to be fired once I am back in the United States."

"And your wife? Does she know about our liaison?"

"No! In fact, she still doesn't know that I am being recalled to the United States. I still am trying to find a way to put it to her in a gentle way. Again, I'm sorry, Maria."

Atkins then hung up, leaving a shaken Maria holding her handset for a moment. Tears then came to her eyes and she put down the handset before starting to cry. From a fairly comfortable life with a good job, helped with the money she had received periodically from Viktor Grachev for spying for him at the American embassy, she now saw her future basically crumble to dust. With a firing notice now in her dossier, she was never going to be able to find another decent job as a secretary and was likely to join soon the numerous ranks of the unemployed in Spain. She was probably going to lose her apartment and her car in the weeks to come, when she would be unable to pay her monthly bills. Not once did she think about the two agents that had worked from the

American embassy and that had been captured and tortured to death by Grachev due to the information she had passed to the Russian.

**21:12 (Madrid Time)**

**Saturday, June 13, 2015**

**Calle Cuchilleros, downtown Madrid**

Dean passed by the luxury Mercedes sedan that was now parking near the front entrance of an old-looking Madrid restaurant and himself parked a few spots further down the street. Erik, who was watching the Mercedes in his side mirror, spoke up a few seconds later.

"Prince Al Rashid is now coming out of his car. He is wearing a dark blue suit with sky blue tie. Al Rashid is now walking into that restaurant. I hope that their dress code is not too strict for you to get in there and follow him."

Dean grinned at those words.

"Are you kidding, partner? You happen to be working with the best dressed agent in the service."

Erik gave an amused look at Dean, who was wearing one of his customary dark suits with white shirt. He was also wearing for this job a pair of micro camera-equipped spectacles with polarizing lenses.

"True! Go see if they will let you in: hopefully it will not be fully booked yet."

"Don't worry: I will make myself convincing. I will have my hidden camera on and working, so that you could watch Al Rashid with me."

Erik nodded once his head before Dean stepped out and walked towards the restaurant, which was named 'Sobrino de Botin'. Erik then got out as well and took place in the driver's seat. While he was not a true virtuoso of car driving like Dean, he was a more than decent driver and had followed special driving courses with the C.I.A.. Taking out of the glove compartment a small electronic tablet tuned to the frequency of Dean's hidden camera, he activated briefly his radio microphone.

"Hacker Boy, this is Sparrow: Stryker is following our target inside the 'Sobrino de Botin' restaurant. You can watch his camera view on channel three."

"Got that!" Answered nearly at once the analyst from his hotel room not too far from Erik's location. Erik then settled in for what promised to be a fairly long wait:

Spaniards tended to take their time when having supper, on top of eating supper much later than the rest of Europeans or the Americans.

A maître d' welcomed Dean with a smile at the entrance to the dining room and spoke to him in Spanish.

"Do you have a reservation, sir?"

"No, but I was hoping to find a table still available, preferably in an intimate corner: I am scouting the best restaurants in Madrid in order for Anthony Bourdain to choose places of interest for his next visit to Spain."

The maître d' was obviously impressed by the mention of the well-known CNN culinary critic and globe-trotter and bowed slightly to Dean.

"We do have a few tables left available, sir. Please follow me."

Dean followed the man to a small, empty table situated near the back of the restaurant, in a part formed by a brick-walled arched extension to the main room, and sat down, accepting the wine card offered by the maître d'. A discreet look showed him Prince Al Rashid, sitting by himself at a table about twenty yards away and presenting his right profile to him. He also saw the sign above the entrance door of the restaurant that proclaimed it to be dating back to 1729. Suitably impressed by that and while keeping a discreet watch on the Saudi prince, Dean reviewed quickly the wine card, finally settling his choice on a half bottle of fine red Bourgogne wine. As he waited for the waiter to bring his bottle, he noticed a small framed picture hooked with many paintings and other pictures on the walls of the restaurant: it showed the celebrated writer Ernest Hemingway, who obviously had come at least once to this restaurant, probably in the 1930s. The entrance of another customer, a young woman wearing a shawl over her hair, made him glance briefly at her as she walked towards Al Rashid, who was now getting up from his chair to greet her with a smile. Dean immediately turned his head away, his heart jumping in his chest, and used the menu list to partially hide his face, while he spoke in a low voice for the benefit of Erik and Ian, who were listening to his hidden radio microphone.

"Sparrow, you won't believe this but Farah just walked in the restaurant. It seems that Al Rashid was waiting for her."

"Farah? As in Farah Qalibaf? But, how could this be possible? The MV Heraklion blew up under her."

"I don't know, but she is here now and is about to sit at Al Rashid's table. What the hell could she be doing with him?"

"That will be your job to find out, big guy. Do your best not to be recognized by her in return."

"No shit! I will keep you posted."

Luckily for him, there were quite a few other customers in the restaurant and he was partially lost in the crowd. Still, he kept his head down most of the time to hide his face as much as possible, pretending to be studying his menu. A waiter came a few minutes later to take his order. As the waiter walked away, Dean hid his mouth with one hand while speaking in his hidden microphone.

"Al Rashid seemingly invited Farah for a date, judging by his manneurisms, with Farah smiling back to him. They certainly don't seem to be talking business, especially the way Farah is rubbing one leg against Al Rashid's leg under the table. I am ready to bet that Farah is setting a trap for Al Rashid."

"Then, if that's the case, we won't interfere and will only make sure that Al Rashid doesn't escape his just reward. If Farah somehow screws up the job, we will then take over from her."

"Understood."

A wine waiter soon brought to Dean his bottle of wine and made him taste it before filling his glass and walking away. Dean noticed that, while Farah had ordered a bottle of mineral water, Al Rashid had ordered some wine for himself, something that made Dean sneer to himself.

"A nice hypocrite indeed: ready to support blood-thirsty Islamist extremists in the name of Islam but not ready to obey the restrictions of his own faith."

He was however not surprised by that: experience had shown him that many rich and powerful Muslims were often quite liberal when in private about the Islamic restrictions concerning alcohol, the same as some supposedly righteous Catholic and Protestant preachers who abused children or cheated on their wives. Sipping quietly on his wine while discreetly watching Al Rashid and Farah Qalibaf, Dean was served nearly at the same time as them and started eating his food. He didn't have to fake his contentment, as his roast lamb was truly superb and well worth of a Michelin rating.

Dean was nearly finished eating when Farah got up from her chair after saying something to Al Rashid, who simply nodded his head. Dean suddenly tensed up when Farah started walking towards his table. He then realized that the entrance to the restaurant's washrooms was situated in his back, down his part of the restaurant. Swearing at his bad luck, Dean covered his mouth with his napkin, as if to wipe it clean, as Farah got near him. She still hesitated for a step while looking down at him. Then, without another look at him or a single word, she walked past him and went into the women's washroom. Dean was however not fooled for one second and knew that she had recognized him. Thankfully, she had managed to keep control of herself. It now remained to be seen what she would do next. She in fact could be very well be calling some other Iranian agents right now from inside the washroom for all that he knew. He thus called again Erik on the radio.

"Sparrow, Farah just recognized me while going to the washrooms but didn't really let it show. Be on your guard, in case she calls in for some help."

"Understood! I will be extra vigilant."

About four minutes after going in the washroom, Farah emerged from it and, again ignoring Dean, walked past him to return to Al Rashid's table. She however discreetly let drop on Dean's table a small piece of folded paper that the big American then negligently covered with one hand. Grabbing it and lowering it in his lap before unfolding it, Dean quickly read the short message written in English on it.

'Stay away from Al Rashid: he dies tonight. Am happy to see you again, Stryker.' Dean reread the second sentence twice, then pocketed the small piece of paper and calmly finished his plate, then asked for his bill. He was walking out of the restaurant maybe fifteen minutes later, with Farah and Al Rashid still eating their meals and exchanging pleasantries. Now on full alert, Dean took only seconds to spot a parked car nearby in which three men sat, waiting while looking at the restaurant. He spoke in his hidden microphone while approaching his car.

"I exited the restaurant, with the target and Farah still inside. We have three probable Iranian toughs in a blue Honda Accord parked about thirty yards behind us. Slide back in the passenger seat and let me drive."

"Got it!"

The moment Dean was behind the wheel and had closed his door, Erik gave him a questioning look.

"How did she look? Was she banged up?"

"I didn't see any bruises on her face or arms, Erik. For her to survive the Heraklion's sinking is little short of miraculous if you ask me."

Erik reflected on that for a moment before replying.

"Well, she seemed to be a tough girl. Let us hope that she also proves tonight to be a competent assassin."

They didn't have to wait very long, Al Rashid coming out of the restaurant with Farah 25 minutes later, both apparently having had a good time. The couple then got in Al Rashid's Mercedes, which pulled out of its parking spot nearly immediately. The blue Honda Accord Dean had spotted earlier started after the Mercedes after a few seconds, following it from a distance of approximately sixty yards. Dean got behind them in turn.

"I bet that they are going to go to Al Rashid's official residence in Madrid." Said Dean as he kept his eyes on the Mercedes and the Honda and steered expertly through the often frantic downtown Madrid traffic, keeping a safe distance while avoiding to lose sight of his main prey. Erik nodded at his remark while looking down from time to time at their GPS tracker receiver unit, which was getting a steady signal from the GPS bug they had plugged to the bottom side of Al Rashid's Mercedes.

"It seems so, from the direction they are going now. I wonder if..."

Dean glanced at his partner when the latter hesitated.

"What's wrong, Erik? Did we lose the GPS signal?"

"No! We gained a new signal instead: the Israelis are behind us."

"What? You're shitting me!"

"Nope! That Volvo station wagon that you tagged near Grashev's residence in Puerto Real is now behind us and about to pass us."

"For fuck's sake! Talk about a three ring circus! So, we have us from the C.I.A. tailing a Saudi prince who is with an Iranian agent, who is in turn tailed by a car full of Iranian toughs, and now we have a Mossad team bringing the rear."

"Not for long: here they come passing us!"

Dean couldn't help look at the gray Volvo station wagon as it doubled him and sped to a position in front of him, behind the Iranian team's car.

"I saw two guys in the front and one woman in the back."

"Correct! Drop behind a bit now, in order not to be noticed: I will guide you with the GPS receiver."

“Right! I wonder how the Israelis learned that Al Rashid was involved with Grachev.”

“My bet is that, following the sinking of the MV Heraklion, some of the contributors to the weapons deal panicked and talked too much, with the Mossad picking up pieces of information leading to Al Rashid. If that’s the case, then I suspect that the Israelis want to kidnap Al Rashid instead of killing him, in order to make him tell them who else is involved.”

Dean tensed up on hearing that last sentence, as it would mean that the Israelis would most probably eliminate any embarrassing witness to that kidnapping. That would include Farah, who would be for the Israelis a simple date of Al Rashid. The Saudi prince had a reputation for chasing women when in Spain, mostly professional escort girls or women ‘presented’ to him by businessmen hoping to buy his favors in order to obtain lucrative contracts in Saudi Arabia. Dean was surprised by his own gut reaction to the possibility that Farah could get killed soon. By all C.I.A. definitions, Iranian government secret agents were considered as virtual enemies of the United States. Dean had made a professional rule to not let his attraction to the opposite sex influence him during a mission, especially if that member of the opposite sex was technically an enemy. By all rights, the prospect of Farah’s death should leave him completely cold, yet that was not the case, at least not completely.

In Al Rashid’s Mercedes, Farah was showing a façade of sweetness and eagerness towards the Saudi, letting his left hand roam along her right leg and herself kissing him a few times while caressing his chest. In reality, she was fighting her revulsion at having to let such a pig touch her, but her mission called for her seducing him in order to be alone with him, so that she could then kill him. The Mercedes was now rolling through a commercial district, which was nearly deserted at this late hour. As they were passing by a parked van, the driver let out a short, surprised exclamation just before Farah heard a series of weak detonations. The Mercedes then swerved wildly, apparently out of control, as the driver fought to stabilize and slow it down. He was however only partially successful and the Mercedes’ front right bumper smashed into the rear of a parked car, driving the rear left wheel of that car in all the way to the level of its rear left door. Farah, like Al Rashid, was brutally projected forward by the impact. However, contrary to Al Rashid, she was wearing her seat belt and ended up being only shaken, with her chest hurting from the belt’s stopping her forward motion. Al

Rashid was not as lucky and was propelled head first in the windshield, flying over the right shoulder of his driver, while the latter's anti-collision airbag deployed with a bang, saving him from smashing his face against the steering wheel. Farah was still shaken and confused when she heard running footsteps approaching, along with shouted words. Her blood froze when she recognized and understood the words: they were in Hebrew! Unfortunately, she was unarmed, as she had to contend with the possibility that some bodyguard at Al Rashid's residence could have searched her for weapons as a matter of security routine. Realizing that whoever had caused that accident would probably not leave living witnesses behind, she quickly rolled down her window and let her head down while keeping her eyes half opened but alert, faking unconsciousness. Three seconds later, a man stopped just outside her door, level with her window. He had a pistol equipped with a silencer in his right hand, which he used to quickly shoot the driver in the back of the head. He then looked at Farah, still immobilized by her seat belt and unmoving, and passed his armed hand inside through her opened window, aiming at her head. That was when she went into action, snapping her head up to avoid the incoming shot while grabbing the man's forearm with both hands and pulling hard while turning away the muzzle of the pistol. Pulled towards the inside of the car by Farah's surprise move, the man's face hit hard the top frame of the car door, making him push a shout of pain. A second shout of pain, much louder and longer, followed as Farah bit his forearm with all her strength while trying to grab away the pistol. Unable to use his left arm at first, the gunman let go his pistol under the effect of the pain while he desperately tried to pull himself away. Ripping the pistol from his jerking hand and gaining control of it, Farah quickly pointed it at the man and fired twice from point blank range. Hit twice in the area of the heart, the man crumbled in a heap beside the Mercedes as two more persons approached the car at a run. Undoing in a flash her seat belt, Farah then bent down over the rear bench seat, just in time to avoid five bullets that shattered the rear window of the Mercedes. With her heart now beating hard and fast, she prepared herself to what promised to be a life or death gunfight, using Al Rashid's inert body, slumped over the front seats, as partial cover. Those approaching the Mercedes did not have time to get to it, as another car was heard screeching to a halt maybe twenty yards behind it. The Mossad agents who had prepared the ambush of the Mercedes, using a folding spiked mat to do so, turned around to face the newly arrived car, their weapons pointed at it. What could have been a simple passerby turned out to be the car full of Iranian agents, ready to back Farah up. The three Iranians got out of their vehicle in a

flash and, using their car as a cover, opened fire on the Israelis with their AKSU-74 automatic carbines. Two of the Israelis, those nearest to the Mercedes, were gunned down in the first seconds of the fight, while the three remaining Mossad agents returned fire while running for cover. Less than three seconds after that, the gray Volvo station wagon arrived on the scene and, after embracing quickly the situation, also screeched to a halt, this time ten yards behind the Iranians' car, disgorging three more Mossad agents. Now caught in a pincer, the three Iranian agents fought ferociously, sending bullets in both directions and turning the until then quiet street into a deadly battlefield. Another Mossad agent was hit and killed in short order, while two of the Iranians were hit just after that. The lone remaining Iranian then fired at an Israeli at the same time the latter fired back at him. Both bullets hit their marks, with the Iranian and the Israeli crumbling to the pavement. The four Israeli agents who were still intact then took a second to recover from the sudden, brutal and unexpected gunfight, taking stock of their losses while their ears still rang from the loud detonations of the gunfight.

Inside the Mercedes, Farah understood at once on hearing the gunfight start that her fellow agents had arrived on the scene and were now engaging the Israelis. She could have used that distraction to get out of the car without being noticed by the surviving Israelis, but she had a mission to properly finish first. Passing her right arm between the two front seats, she fired two bullets into Al Rashid's brain, who was still unconscious. With this done, Farah opened the rear right door of the Mercedes and crawled out of the car and onto the street pavement, staying on her belly for a moment to avoid the bullets still flying around at the time. The Israelis, who had to concentrate on the attacking Iranian agents, were turning their backs to her and didn't see her come out of the car. As Farah took a crouching stance behind the right rear wheel of the Mercedes, she felt rage fill her as she saw two of the surviving Mossad agents advance to the Honda and give the coup-de-grâce to Hassan, Mohammed and Fahmi. As for the two other Israelis still up, they were checking on their people and, in one case, starting to apply first aid. Cold resolve in her, Farah pointed her silenced pistol and, aiming carefully, shot in the head one of the Israelis who had finished off her supporting agents. The other three Mossad agents didn't see him fall immediately, while they didn't hear her silenced pistol. Farah then shot the second Israeli near the Honda Accord, dropping him like a broken puppet. The two remaining Mossad agents then belatedly realized that there was still an active shooter around them and started frantically looking around them

at the parked cars and the shops lining the street. Farah's third shot was also on the mark, exploding the brain of the Israeli closest to her, who had taken refuge behind a parked van. The fourth Israeli however avoided her next bullet, running to take cover opposite her on the other side of the Mercedes. Remembering a trick she had seen in an action movie when she was a teenager, Farah went down on the pavement at once, the rear right wheel providing her partial cover, and looked under the Mercedes. She then saw a pair of feet on the other side and, a mean smile appearing on her face, shot one bullet through the man's right ankle, shattering it to bits and making the Israeli scream in agony as he fell on the pavement, holding his bloody leg. Farah shot again, this time in the man's opened mouth, killing him instantly. With adrenaline flowing through her veins and with her heart racing, Farah got up from the pavement and went in turn to each of the Israelis. All were dead, except for one man that was moaning and semi-conscious, with a bullet in his right lung. She was about to finish him with a head shot when she changed her mind and refrained herself from firing. It was not because she was having pity on the Israeli, but rather because the Spanish police was bound to react and arrive on the scene soon. Then, that Israeli agent would be available to them to be arrested and interrogated. Anything that could embarrass Israel would certainly be welcomed in Iran. Her last act was to go check quickly on her own agents. Unfortunately, the three of them were dead, finished off with bullets to the head. Giving them a last, respectful bow of the head, Farah then ran away as the sound of police sirens approaching could now be heard.

Erik, like Dean, frowned on hearing the noise of a ferocious gunfight with automatic weapons some distance ahead. Looking down at his GPS receiver display, he saw that both the Mercedes and the Volvo had stopped along a nearby street, close to each other.

"Al Rashid's car, along with the Mossad car, is now stopped about 400 yards ahead of us. It must have fallen into an ambush. From the noise of that gunfight we can now hear, my bet is that the Israelis and Iranians are now fighting over possession of the Mercedes."

"You want us to jump into that fight as well?" Asked Dean while driving along the illuminated avenue they were following. Erik shook his head at once.

"No! That fight is liable to attract police attention very quickly, on top of probably being witnessed by many passersby. We don't want to be seen near that gunfight

scene. Al Rashid is probably dead now, or is about to be. If not, and if the Israelis capture him alive, he will still be made to pay at their hands, unless the Israelis are dumb enough to make a deal with him in exchange for information. Personally, I wouldn't trust that damn Saudi prince with a ten foot pole. If he is just found wounded, then we will know it soon enough and will then be able to pay him a nightly visit in hospital. Either way, he's toast and our mission will be completed."

While Dean didn't say a word then, Erik could feel that something was eating him up and he gave him an inquisitive look.

"You are worried about Farah, is that it, Dean?"

"As difficult as it is for me to say, yes, I am worried about her. It's not a feeling that I can explain easily. In fact, I can't even explain it properly to myself. I never felt like this before during a mission, especially concerning an enemy agent."

Erik nodded his head, able to at least partly understand his partner's misgivings.

"Well, she did act more like an ally than like an adversary during this mission and she did fight at our side, even though our respective mission objectives diverged at the end. Right now, she was doing what we were prepared to do ourselves."

"And what about the Israelis? Many in Washington would say that we have an obligation to help an ally, no?"

Erik snickered at that last sentence.

"An ally, sure! The same ally that keeps spying on us and interfering in our internal politics while expecting us to shield them constantly from sanctions at the United Nations. The same ally that knowingly strafed and torpedoed one of our ships, the U.S.S. Liberty, off the coast of the Sinai, in order to prevent it from intercepting Israeli radio signals during the 1967 Six-Day War, killing 34 of our sailors and wounding another 171 in the process. They wanted to get in on the action? Then let them deal with the aftermath! Slow down and park in the next available spot."

Wholeheartedly agreeing with his partner, Dean slid their rental car in the next parking spot he found available, then looked at Erik.

"What are you seeing on the GPS receiver?"

"Al Rashid's Mercedes is still not moving, while the Israeli Volvo is stopped a few dozen yards behind it, with presumably the Iranian team's car sandwiched in the middle."

The noise of the distant gunfight then stopped, making him look up at the nearby corner that their avenue made with the street where the battle had happened. A small crowd of

pedestrians was now forming at that corner, cautiously looking down the street towards the scene of the fight. A few pedestrians were now filtering through, having run away from the gunfight. After maybe four minutes, and with two Spanish police cars passing by them at top speed with their gyro lights and sirens on, Dean nearly shouted while looking at the street corner.

"I SEE FARAH! SHE SEEMS UNHURT!"

Erik saw her as well and examined her critically from a distance. While her dress was dirty, probably from crawling on the pavement, she indeed appeared unhurt. Not surprisingly, there was no weapon evident on her. Farah, understandably in a hurry to get away from the scene of the gunfight, quickly reassured some of the bystanders that were worried about her and walked quickly up the avenue, unknowingly coming towards the two C.I.A. agents. Rolling down his window, Erik addressed her in English as she was about to walk past his car.

"Do you need a lift to somewhere, miss?"

Slowing down and tensing up while snapping her head towards where the voice had come, Farah stopped abruptly on recognizing Erik and Dean. After a brief hesitation, she nodded her head.

"You are most kind, sir. I accept your offer with pleasure."

Walking to the car and opening its rear right door, Farah took place on the rear bench seat, closing the door just before Dean drove out of the parking spot. Erik rolled back up his window before twisting his head to look somberly at the Iranian woman.

"Are you okay, Farah?"

"Yes, I am alright." Answered Farah, measuring the irony of having an American CIA agent worrying about her physical well-being after a fight with Israeli agents. "By the way, Al Rashid is dead: I put two bullets into his brain."

"That is one good news indeed. What happened exactly down that street?"

"The Israelis had prepared an ambush for Al Rashid's car and threw a spiked mat under its tires, causing it to crash into a parked car. I was able to disarm and kill the first Israeli that approached the Mercedes before he could kill me. My team of backup agents then arrived on the scene as I was about to be surrounded while still inside the Mercedes. I used the ensuing firefight to first kill Al Rashid, then to get out and help my colleagues. Unfortunately, all three of them got killed in the gunfight, but not before killing or wounding many of the Israelis. I then killed the remaining Israelis, except for

one wounded man, whom I left to be picked up by the Spanish police. I guess that tomorrow's morning newspapers will be full of that gunfight."

"A rather safe guess, I would say." Replied Erik, who didn't say anything about being sorry about Farah's colleagues, as it would have been both inappropriate and prone to be misunderstood. Neither did he comment about the dead Israelis. Farah secretly appreciated his tact then, as the death of her three partners had hit her hard. This now made four colleagues that had been killed by her side during this mission. While she knew that they would be both remembered and honored, such losses truly saddened her. She then extended her left hand and put it on Dean's right shoulder, speaking softly to him.

"Could you please drop me at the next subway station you see?"

Dean briefly looked over his shoulder to smile at her.

"No problem, Farah. By the way, how did you manage to survive the destruction of the Heraklion?"

"It was actually something just short of a miracle. When the Israeli bombs hit the cargo ship, they went in deep, digging a path all the way to the middle of the ship before exploding. The ship then broke in two, with the stern section, where I was, floating briefly away from the part that was burning and exploding before starting to sink. A Hezbollah boat that had survived the first attacks by Israeli planes and was playing dead in the water in order to avoid attracting fire saw me from a distance, firing missiles up in the air. After the Heraklion broke up in two and sank, that boat approached the site of the wreck in order to try to find survivors. They found and retrieved me, then brought me to Lebanon, where I took a plane back to Spain. Allah was merciful in my case."

"Indeed!"

Dean slowed down and stopped his car by the edge of the sidewalk less than a minute later, within thirty yards of a subway station entrance. He then looked at Farah with a sober expression.

"Here you go, Farah. Please take care of yourself."

"Thank you, both of you. Let us hope that we won't meet again in unfavorable circumstances."

"I hope the same, Farah." Replied Dean, meaning it. Farah then got out of the car, her purse still worn by its strap passed across her chest. Just before starting to walk towards the subway's entrance, she quickly bent down and, passing her head by

Dean's opened window, gave him a brief kiss on the lips. Dean sighed with regret as he watched her disappear down the steps of the subway's entrance.

"Too bad that she is working for the wrong government. She was definitely a woman worth knowing."

"Well, none of us had control about which country we were born in." Said Erik quietly. "Imagine what we could have become if we had been born in, say, Russia or even North Korea."

Dean closed his eyes for a second while shaking his head in disgust.

"Me, a North Korean? I would have killed a few of those clowns ruling the country before they would have killed me."

"But you still would be dead. Sometimes, fate gives you a rotten hand and you then have no choice but to play it in order to survive."

**09:06 (Washington Time)**

**Monday, June 15, 2015**

**CIA headquarters**

**Langley, Virginia, U.S.A.**

Julian Moore greeted the three men and one woman with a smile and a handshake as they were introduced in his office by his secretary, who then closed the door behind them.

"Well done, people! You prevented something truly frightening from happening and potentially avoided us some painful losses around Syria and Iraq. Please, let's sit down around cups of coffee."

Dean, Erik, Ian and Julie sat down in the easy chairs surrounding the low coffee table set in one corner of the office, with Moore sitting next to Julie. The Assistant Director for Operations took the time to pour coffee in the cups of his agents and let them add sugar and cream before looking at Erik.

"Could you resume in as few words as you can how your mission went, Mister Johnson?"

"With pleasure, Mister Moore." Said Erik before starting to speak, recounting the general lines of their mission and its main events. That still took him a good fifteen minutes, while Moore scribbled some notes as Erik spoke. At the end, Moore nodded, his expression sober.

“That weapons deal was a truly nefarious affair. Russia’s role in it is most worrying and just showed us to what extremes President Putin is capable of in order to attain his strategic goals, even when those goals appear completely twisted to us. It also showed us that Putin is plenty able and willing to backstab a so-called ally when it suits his needs. We are now making sure via some backchannels that President Assad of Syria learns about the role of Russia in this affair. With some luck, that may render Assad a bit more reasonable, even though I personally wouldn’t bet on that.”

Julie Prost made a face at that.

“Neither would I. Assad and Putin really deserve each other. What about the Turks and the Saudis? I hope that those so-called allies of ours are not going to get away scot-free with their role in this.”

“Officially, they will not be publicly implicated. Unofficially, there will definitely be political consequences for them to pay. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the word is that heads are about to roll there, literally. King Salman has been apprised about the role of some of his princes and ministers in this affair and he has already put discreetly a number of those men under strict house arrest, while other men lower down the local food chain have been thrown in jail and are now being extensively interrogated. More arrests should follow in Saudi Arabia in the coming days and weeks. As for Turkey, President Erdogan and his clique are still vehemently denying any role in this affair despite the links you uncovered. It still didn’t save them from seeing all current military contracts with us suspended, with the threat of us publicizing their role in the weapons deal with ISIS if they start protesting about those contract suspensions. We also contacted discreetly a number of the most senior Turkish Army commanders to inform them about this affair, while President Obama has personally called President Erdogan to lambast him about his hypocrisy concerning ISIS. I wouldn’t be too surprised if the Turkish Army decides soon to conduct a coup and depose Erdogan and his clique of ISIS-loving Islamists. We at the CIA will follow the situation in Turkey closely and may even intervene clandestinely there, if the President decides that this becomes necessary. If that’s the case, then you will be among the first to be sent.”

Erik nodded his head at that.

“We would be honored to be chosen for such a mission, Mister Moore. In truth, much of that infection in Turkey will probably need to be cauterized via clandestine operations, in order to avoid political chaos and civil war there.”

“I believe so as well, Mister Johnson.”

“What about Israel in all this?” Asked Dean. “Have they contacted us yet about this affair?”

“The Mossad did contact us to ask if we knew more about the MV Heraklion and the weapons that were aboard it, but we told them that we didn’t have any extra information available. The role and even the presence of your team was not revealed to the Israelis. Mind you, their losses in this affair have been truly stinging for them: over a hundred men killed, one patrol boat sunk, three F-15 fighter-bombers and two helicopters destroyed in the encounter with the Heraklion, plus eight Mossad agents killed and another seriously wounded and now held by the Spanish police in Madrid. The effectiveness of the SA-24 against their combat aircraft has particularly shaken them, while our own experts are now seriously reappraising their evaluation of that missile system.”

“Yeah!” Agreed Ian Dorset while making a face. “Imagine what that shipment of SA-24s, along with the GPS jammers and laser detectors, would have done in the hands of the Hezbollah. Israeli Air Force generals would have had nightmares about that.” Moore nodded once before clapping his hands together in good humor.

“Well, this leaves me with only one item I wish to know more about: that Iranian female agent that you met in Spain and on the MV Heraklion.” Moore, who was very observant concerning the physical reactions of the people around him, didn’t miss the fact that Dean Price stiffened ever so slightly at his words. He however didn’t remark on that and let Erik speak.

“Well, Mister Moore, this Farah Qalibaf certainly proved to be a competent clandestine agent. Despite working with only minimal operational and technical support, she did quite well by any standards. She nearly succeeded in delivering the Russian weapons in the hands of the Hezbollah and did succeed in killing Prince Al Rashid, despite Mossad’s interference. She proved to be skillful, brave and resourceful, while her stand on the Heraklion against Israeli air attacks could easily be called heroic. Personally, while undoubtedly loyal to the Iranian government, she was not some sort of rabid religious fanatic or loud anti-American type and was both reasonable and cooperative while with us. My opinion is that she should be considered dangerous if working against us, but also opened to loosely cooperating with us when both American and Iranian interests converge, even though that should be quite rare indeed.”

“Hum, an interesting assessment indeed, Mister Johnson. Make sure that a detailed profile of that Farah Qalibaf is produced and put in our database.”

"I will, sir. Anything else, Mister Moore?"

"No! You may now go back to your desks and complete your respective reports. Again, congratulations for a mission well done."

"Thank you, sir!"

The group then got up from their seats, with the four agents leaving Moore's office to return to their work desks. As they walked down the executive hallway, Dean smiled to Erik, who was level with him on the right side.

"Do you still have on ice those fish you caught in Vermont, Erik?"

"I sure do! Why?"

"Well, if you guys are interested, I could then cook those fish and invite you all for supper. What do you think?"

"An excellent idea! What about you, Julie and Ian?"

"I'm certainly game for some fish, especially if Dean is the one cooking them." Replied Ian Dorset enthusiastically.

"Me too!" Added Julie Prost. "I keep hearing about your culinary exploits, big guy, so it is high time for you to prove yourself equal to your reputation."

"Then, let's do it tonight!" Announced Dean with a satisfied smile. Julie Prost gave him a sneaky look then.

"Something tells me that you wouldn't have minded at all to invite that Farah Qalibaf as well, if she would have been here."

Dean sighed while rolling his eyes, his mind going back to the face and body of the Iranian agent.

"I honestly can't deny that, Julie. I just wish that she be a friend rather than a foe."

"Well, she was a friend...for a while." Replied Erik philosophically.