



# A DEADLY TANGO

A spy thriller novel  
By

**Michel Poulin**

# **A DEADLY TANGO**

A SPY THRILLER NOVEL

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**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 WHICH ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. ALSO, THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION. WHILE MANY PERSONS MENTIONED IN THIS NOVEL EXIST, THE WORDS AND ACTIONS ATTRIBUTED TO THEM IN THIS NOVEL DO NOT CORRESPOND TO REALITY OR TO PAST HISTORY.**

### **ABOUT THIS NOVEL**

This novel is a sequel to FRIENDS AND FOES and continues the adventures of two CIA action agents, Erik Johnson and Dean Price, tasked with some of the most difficult and violent clandestine missions in the service of the United States.

### **Other novels by this author**

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**TABLE OF CONTENT**

CHAPTER 1 – CIA ACTION AGENTS .....	5
CHAPTER 2 – IN THE SERVICE OF IRAN.....	18
CHAPTER 3 – A NEW MISSION.....	23
CHAPTER 4 – THE CITY OF LIGHTS .....	32
CHAPTER 5 – AN UNEXPECTED MOVE.....	42
CHAPTER 6 – MONACO .....	53
CHAPTER 7 – REACTIONS .....	82
CHAPTER 8 – FALLOUT .....	92
CHAPTER 9 – POLITICAL STORM .....	101
CHAPTER 10 –NEW PLAYERS .....	110
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	116

## **CHAPTER 1 – CIA ACTION AGENTS**

**19:49 (Mexico Time)**

**Friday, September 11, 2020**

**Private jungle road near Dimas**

**Sinaloa State, Mexico**



The Sun was getting low on the western horizon, making shadows spread at the feet of the trees and bushes in the dense forest lining both sides of the private gravel road. That suited just fine the two men hiding among the trees, just off the road. Both men were separated from each other by a good thirty meters and had taken camouflaged positions along the southern side of the gravel road, next to a sharp turn which led towards a large, luxurious-looking villa situated atop a low hill. Each man also had an assortment of weapons and equipment next to them, ready for instant use. The man nearest the road turn, in a position that allowed him a direct view of the property on the hill, then spoke in a low voice in his light radio headset's microphone while keeping his binoculars at eye level.

"Get ready, Stryker: Lopez' convoy has just left the villa. I count four escort vehicles full of thugs, plus one probably armored four-door beige Mercedes sedan."

"Understood, Sparrow! I'm ready for them." replied on his own radio the second man, using like his partner their codenames rather than their real names. That man, a muscular and solidly-built, 185 centimeter-tall Caucasian with brown hair cut very short, then grabbed one of the two ready-to-fire AT4-CS anti-tank rocket launchers lying next to him in the long grass and shouldered it after taking its safety off, then made its front opening stick out between branches of the bush hiding him. His partner, a fit-looking but lean man with medium-length brown hair and a short, carefully trimmed beard, also took the safety off his own weapon, a FNH SCAR-H 7.62mm automatic rifle equipped with a day/night scope and a laser dot sight, then flipped away a protective cover on a small black box to which a thin wire leading towards the road was attached. He then waited patiently as the convoy of five vehicles approached from the direction of the villa. His prey today was named Juan Manuel Lopez, a top enforcer of the powerful Sinaloa Mexican drug cartel and a man truly worthy of the qualifier of 'human monster'. Lopez

and his thugs had tortured, killed and dismembered literally hundreds of people in the past, be they rival drug dealers, policemen, journalists, judges, politicians or simple common citizens who had made the mistake of opposing the Sinaloa drug cartel or of objecting to its activities. A number of American federal agents, mostly from the Drug Enforcement Agency, or DEA, had also been killed by Lopez, most often after being horribly tortured to make them reveal the names of their informers. Lopez had even tortured young children in front of their parents in order to make the latter talk. Worse, Lopez was known to often participate in those torture sessions and was said to show sadistic pleasure in them. Someone in Washington had finally said 'enough' and had sought the help of the CIA and of its Special Activities Division in order to get rid of Lopez. That in turn had brought Erik Johnson and Dean Price to this spot of Mexican jungle, ready to dish out his just reward to Lopez.

The small convoy, with a jeep and a pickup truck full of armed thugs in the lead and with the Mercedes sedan sandwiched between the two pairs of escort vehicles, soon arrived at the turn in the gravel road. It however had to slow down significantly in order to take the sharp curve. That was what Erik Johnson was precisely hoping for. Letting the two leading escort vehicles pass first, he then waited until the Mercedes sedan, in which he could see Lopez' inside, sitting on the back seat, arrived over a spot on the road under which a culvert passed in order to let rainwater drain down one of the shallow drainage ditches dug alongside the road. Erik's left thumb then pressed the red button on the small box he was holding. The sixty kilos of Semtex plastic explosives previously placed inside the culvert by Dean Price detonated just as the belly of the Mercedes was above it. The armored body of the car then could do little to protect its occupants from the tremendous explosive blast, which ripped open both the floor and the gasoline tank of the vehicle while projecting the Mercedes in the air. The gasoline inside the tank ignited at once, with its flames filling the inside of the car through its ripped open floor. The Mercedes sedan, transformed into a flying torch, flipped around and did two full rotations before crashing back down belly-up on the road. Knowing that nobody could survive that kind of hit, Erik let drop the improvised explosive device's command box and quickly grabbed a sort of handle with trigger lying in the grass to his left, while starting to point his rifle. The drivers of the two escort vehicles following the Mercedes understandably braked hard at once in order to avoid the flaming wreck now blocking the narrow road. As eight heavily-armed Sinaloa thugs jumped out of their

vehicles, Erik then triggered the Claymore mines actuator he was now holding. A total of eight directional fragmentation mines, four on each side of the road in the segment before the curve, then exploded, sending tens of thousands of deadly steel fragments in overlapping arcs completely covering a good fifty meters-length of the road. The eight thugs, along with their two drivers who had stayed at the wheel, were instantly shredded and killed or severely wounded by the shrapnel. With that part of the problem taken care of, Erik then shouldered his rifle and pointed it at the two lead escort vehicles, ready to support his partner. However, Dean Price proved to be in no need of help. As soon as the Mercedes had been blown in the air by the hidden I.E.D., he had fired his first AT4-CS anti-tank rocket at the jeep leading the convoy, having kept it in his launcher's sight as soon as it had turned the sharp corner in the road. The driver of the jeep did not have time to react to the destruction of the Mercedes other than by looking in shock at his rearview mirror before the rocket, designed to destroy light armored vehicles and bunkers, hit the front radiator of his vehicle and exploded, sending a hot jet of plasma through the engine block which burned its way to the jeep's interior. While the blast and fragments from the shaped charge rocket killed the three passengers of the jeep, the unfortunate driver was also run through by the hot plasma jet, which instantly incinerated its internal organs before exiting his back and cutting off the legs of one of the two thugs sitting in the back. The jet finally penetrated the gasoline tank of the jeep, making it burst in flames. With the flaming jeep careening off the road and crashing in the northern side drainage ditch, Dean quickly threw away the now empty AT4-CS launch tube and grabbed his second ready-to-fire AT4-CS, shouldering it and aiming it at the second escort vehicle, a Toyota pickup with six armed thugs aboard it, braked hard while veering to avoid the destroyed leading vehicle. To his credit, the driver of the pickup reacted correctly for these circumstances and did not stop, instead accelerating once past the flaming jeep in order to escape what was obviously a well-prepared ambush. That however didn't save him or his comrades from getting hit by the second AT4-CS rocket fired by Dean. The 84mm caliber, HEDP 502 High Explosive Dual Purpose warhead of the rocket impacted the windshield of the pickup truck and penetrated it, literally slamming into the chest of the driver before exploding. All the occupants of the truck were killed instantly by the blast and fragments from the 440-gram charge of Octol high explosive. The now driverless vehicle, its engine still roaring, then sped by Dean's position before leaving the road and smashing against a tree, snapping it in two. Dean smiled briefly at that sight.

“Those crazy Mexican drivers...”

He however became serious again at once and looked up the road, towards where Erik was hidden, while speaking in his radio microphone.

“The two front escort vehicles are now neutralized. How are you doing on your side, Sparrow?”

“The three other vehicles of the convoy are also neutralized. Quickly throw away your empty launcher tubes in the jungle and then join me in sweeping the field to check for any possible survivor. Then we will start phase two of our mission.”

“Understood!”

Grabbing the two empty AT4 launch tubes he had used, Dean then ran inside the jungle, covering a good seventy meters before stopping among the trees and looking around him. Seeing a thick bush which had grown close to a large tree, Dean approached it and looked in the space between it and the tree. He smiled with satisfaction on seeing that thick, long grass covered that surface, mixed in with other plants. Taking his empty AT4 tubes, he carefully laid them on the ground and rearranged the grass and leaves in order to hide them from visual sight. Now, it would take a very deliberate and careful search covering a large area away from the road to discover them. Even if someone discovered them, it would not mean much then, as the serial numbers and other identifying markings had been removed from them before the mission had started. Once done with that task, he ran back to the road, where he found Erik crouched against a tree on the northern side of the road, wearing his equipment backpack.

“Get your pack, Dean: we will want to move before the goons left in that villa send someone to check on this ambush scene. I already checked the bodies around: they were all dead, save for one wounded bastard whom I finished off with my knife. We will put silencers on our weapons before advancing towards the villa.”

“Got it!”

Less than a minute later, the two CIA paramilitary agents entered the jungle and started marching quickly at a crouch among the trees, heading for the villa while staying within sight of the gravel road leading to the property. As they were starting to be able to see the villa through the trees, Erik made an urgent hand signal for Dean to stop and

hide. Maybe twenty seconds later, two pickup trucks filled with armed thugs sped by them on the road, prompting a smile on Erik's lips.

"Thirteen less thugs left inside the property. Let's use this to break in. Follow me!"

Dean did so, staying about five meters behind Erik, until the latter stopped and crouched behind a large tree next to a clearing in the forest which hugged the villa's iron fence. Moving slowly and cautiously, Dean joined up with his long-time partner and friend and took out his binoculars to examine the villa and its surroundings.

"Hum, it seems that this Lopez bastard built his villa like a fortress: there is at least fifty meters of vegetation-free ground between the fence and the villa and its annexes, with a further twenty meters of open ground between the fence and the forest. I also see two widely-separated mirador towers built into the villa, each occupied by one visible man."

"Correct, but there is more: I see a power cable coming from the villa and connected directly to the iron fencing. My bet is that this fence is electrified. Also, I see two surveillance cameras mounted high on swiveling bases atop the corners of the fence, plus a guardhouse at the gate that looks more like a bunker than a simple hut. Lopez did take his security seriously."

"With the number of people hating his guts? No shit! What do we do now?"

"We eliminate the sentries, then we run to the villa via the main gate. You take care of the man in the gate hut, while I will take care of the mirador watchmen. Get ready... On the count of three... One, two, three..."

Both rifles, their barks drastically muffled by the oversized silencers used by Dean and Erik, fired at nearly the same instant. The man in the gate guardhouse was first to fall, his head exploding from the impact of the 7.62mm bullet from Dean's FNH-SCAR rifle. The watcher in the western mirador tower was next to drop a mere half second later. The other watcher in the eastern mirador tower was able to hear the faint detonation from Erik's rifle but, with the origin of the noise made very hard to locate thanks to the silencer Erik was using, was still looking frantically around when he too was killed by a bullet to the head. Quickly inspecting the windows on the façade of the villa with his rifle scope, Erik saw one more armed man posted behind an upper floor window, his head and the muzzle of a rifle barely visible. Without further delay, Erik fired his third shot, killing that hidden guard, then spoke quickly to Dean.

"Let's go!"

Running into the open and going around the gate guardhouse and through the opened gate, all the while keeping their automatic rifles raised and aimed, the two CIA action agents hurried to the main entrance door of the villa, getting to it in less than half a minute and briefly stopping outside on each side of it in order to listen for a moment. The only thing they heard was the frightened voices of two women speaking to each other in Spanish, somewhere inside the house. Dean, who spoke fluent Spanish, in contrast to the still rough Spanish of his partner, who had specialized in Russian, German and Arabic instead, spoke softly to him.

"Sounds like two frightened female domestic employees. They are wondering if they should hide or flee. Do we spare them?"

"We will give them one chance to live but, if they start screaming, shoot them at once. We will however gag and tie them if we don't kill them. Time to put our masks on."

Imitating Erik, Dean unrolled the balaclava tuque they were wearing, covering his face with it. He then raised his rifle, ready to cover his partner's entry into the house. Cautiously testing the door's handle first and finding it unlocked, Erik then pushed it open and hurried to step away from it, in case a shooter was waiting inside. Nothing happened, so he ran inside with his rifle pointed, ready to shot any threatening person inside. What he found inside the frame of an open door connecting a room with the entrance lobby on the left side was two mature women wearing the distinct dresses and white aprons of domestic aides. Dean immediately put one index up across his mouth, signaling the terrorized women to keep quiet. The younger of the two women, who was still at least forty years old, did speak, but kept her voice low.

"Please, don't kill us: we are only cooks and servants."

"We won't if you keep silent, madam." replied Dean in Spanish. Despite that, the woman spoke further, still in a low voice.

"Are you Federales<sup>1</sup>? One of your officers is being held in the basement. We could hear her screams as Señor Lopez was torturing her."

Erik and Dean exchanged a quick glance on hearing that. Their goal now, apart from getting rid of the remaining thugs serving Lopez, was to look for an American DEA agent who had disappeared four days ago while investigating the drug enforcer's operations in

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<sup>1</sup> Federales: Common popular term to designate members of the Mexican Federal Police.

the region. If they would have to help other captives, then that could greatly complicate their job. Taking a quick decision, Dean asked a question to the younger woman.

“Where is she held exactly?”

“There are cells and other reinforced rooms in the basement, down a staircase past that door at the far-right corner of the lobby.”

“Thank you! However, we will have no choice but to gag and tie you now, just in case some of Lopez’ men show up. I will ask you both to stay up and face the wall while putting your hands behind you.”

The two maids nervously nodded their heads, then did as he had said, allowing Dean to tie their hands in their backs with plastic cuffs. He then gently led them inside a large kitchen and made them to sit down in a corner out of sight of the door. Next, he tied their ankles as well and used the women’s aprons to gag them, before smiling to the maid who had talked with him.

“Thank you for your help, madam. Just be patient and someone will come to help you. By the way, do you have a cell phone?”

The maid nodded in the affirmative, then looked down at the front chest pocket of her uniform, prompting Dean into searching it. He did find a cell phone in it and pocketed it before smiling again to the Mexican woman.

“Thank you for the cell phone: we will give it temporarily to that female Federales once we will have delivered her. You should get it back within a day or two.”

Dean then straightened up on his feet and looked at Erik, who was watching the outside through a window of the kitchen. Since there were witnesses present, he spoke to his partner in his own rough Russian.

“There are basement cells, with a staircase in the far-right corner of the lobby.”

“Then, our agent should be down there as well.”

Erik then left the kitchen and crossed the entrance lobby, his rifle at the ready. The two agents didn’t encounter anybody else and were able to get to the far-right door without incident. Opening that door cautiously and listening for a moment, Erik heard what sounded like muffled crying. Having heard such kind of crying before, his heart sank for a moment.

“I can hear tortured people crying. Be ready but also be careful where you shoot, Dean.”

“Understood!” replied his partner, his expression hardening: he, like Erik, hated anyone using torture, for whatever reason, even if the torturer was an American agent or

police officer. Now doubly cautious, he followed Erik down the concrete steps of the staircase, to finally emerge in a fairly large room which was apparently used as a kind of guardroom, with a small table and four chairs, two steel lockers and a camp cot in one corner. A steel door was visible along one wall, with a set of keys hooked nearby to the wall. Grabbing the set of keys, Erik then looked through the small peeping hole in the steel door.

"This looks like a cell block to me. Nobody is visible in the hallway. Let's check it out. You check the left side cell doors while I check the ones on the right side."

Unlocking the steel door, Erik then entered the cell block and saw that there were six steel doors on each side. Searching the place with Dean, he found that the first door on the right was that of what was obviously a torture chamber. His jaws tightened as he looked around at the various instruments inside, including whips, pliers, car batteries and blowtorches.

"Fucking bastards!"

Walking out of the torture chamber, Erik went to the next door, finding this time a small concrete cell. His heart jumped in his chest when he saw a young woman, naked and crying, lying on the hard floor inside. Quickly unlocking that door, he hurried to the woman and crouched next to her to examine her. She had obviously been tortured hard, with whip marks all over her body and traces of electrical burns on both her nipples and clitoris. The woman, who was maybe in her late twenties, opened the one eye that had not been shut by blows and looked up at Erik, speaking in Spanish.

"Please, help me! Help me or kill me, but don't leave me here alive."

Erik thought of himself as a hardened man who could control his emotions. However, that desperate plea nearly broke his heart and he caressed the woman's forehead with one of his gloved hands.

"We will take you out of here, miss. Are you a Federales?"

"Yes! Lieutenant Felicia Chavez. You don't sound like a Mexican. Are you American?"

"No, Russian. Let's say that Lopez tortured and killed one person too many."

Erik then looked towards the hallway and shouted out in Russian before Dean could blow away his lie by speaking up in English.

"I FOUND THE MEXICAN FEMALE OFFICER. DID YOU FIND OUR MAN?"

Understanding quickly Erik's subterfuge, Dean answered back in Russian.

"YES, BUT HE IS DEAD. HE DIED FROM HIS WOUNDS."

"ANYBODY ELSE IN THE CELL BLOCK?"

"NOT YET! LET ME LOOK AT THE LAST CELLS."

Returning his attention to the Mexican woman, Erik spoke softly to her in his rough Spanish.

"Can you walk, miss?"

"I...I'll try." said Felicia Chavez, who then sat up first, wincing from the pain of the whip marks on her back and buttocks, then tried to get up. However, she then fell back on her bum while agony showed on her face.

"My...my feet! They pulled my toenails out."

Looking down at Felicia's feet, Erik saw that her toenails were effectively missing, with caked blood covering her toes.

"Svoloch<sup>2</sup>! Don't worry, miss: we will carry you out of here."

Taking the Mexican woman in his arms, he then lifted her off the floor and straightened up. Thankfully she was a fairly small woman and didn't weigh much, making it relatively easy for him to carry her. He then got out in the hallway and met Dean there. His partner gave a pained look at the tortured naked woman, then spoke to Erik, still using his limited Russian.

"Nobody else. I took photos of our man. We go?"

"Yes! Lead on!"

With Dean in front of him, Erik carried Felicia out the cell block. However, before going back up, he went to check the steel lockers sitting in one corner of the guardroom. While one contained some food and water, the other contained two boxes full of clothes. Felicia then spoke urgently at the sight of one of the boxes.

"My clothes! They are in there."

Temporarily sitting her on the small table in the guardroom, Erik then pulled out both boxes, one of which contained female clothes. Emptying it on the table, next to Felicia, Erik however kept for him the snub-nosed revolver inside it, while he examined the police badge and I.D. card held in a leather holder. The woman was indeed a Mexican federal police officer. Keeping the revolver but giving her the leather holder, he eyed Dean, who had extracted a pistol and a badge holder from the other box and was

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<sup>2</sup> Svoloch: 'Bastard' in Russian.

pocketing them. One look back from Dean told Erik that those had belonged to the now dead DEA agent. Erik in turn looked at Felicia.

“Please dress quickly! The rest of Lopez’ goons could return any time now.”

Felicia did her best to comply, but her wounds, particularly her pulled out toenails, made that both painful and difficult. Erik finally told her to forget about her shoes and asked Dean to carry her on his back. Dean did so, holding both of her legs at waist level, while Felicia, now resting over his backpack, wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Okay, let’s go now!” said Erik in Russian once Felicia was on Dean’s back. Going back up the concrete stairs with his rifle pointed up, Erik arrived at ground floor level to find the lobby still deserted. However, as the trio was approaching the front door, he heard the engine noise of two vehicles approaching rapidly. Signaling to Dean to quickly put Felicia down inside the kitchen, Erik looked outside by a window of the lobby and saw two pickup trucks as they were about to stop in front of the main entrance, with the thugs in their back ready to jump out. Taking a flash decision, he switched at once the safety switch of his rifle to ‘auto’ and stuck the muzzle of his weapon out of the window, aiming quickly before firing a long burst of 7.62mm fire. That burst swept the leading pickup truck with deadly effect, killing or wounding the five men sitting or standing in the back of the truck. The driver of that vehicle then braked hard in order to stop and be able to jump out, but only managed to make Erik’s second burst more accurate. Both the driver and front passenger had only time to open their doors before being cut down in a hail of bullets. With still half of the bullets in his fifty-round C-Mag being available, Erik started switching his fire to the second pickup truck, but was beaten to it by Dean, who fired his ready 40mm grenade from the grenade launcher attached under the barrel of his assault rifle. While small, that 40mm explosive-fragmentation grenade was enough to cause a butchery aboard the truck. The thugs who were not killed outright were then finished off in successive volleys of deadly accurate rifle fire from the two CIA agents. Both agents then cautiously went out on the porch to check for survivors, ending up finishing off four gravely wounded thugs. As Erik completed the tour of the fight scene, Dean then walked quickly to the large, four-door garage attached to the villa, and entered it via a side door. Maybe three minutes later, one of the garage doors opened up and Dean rolled out at the wheel of a white minivan, stopping next to Erik and rolling down his driver’s window before smiling to his partner.

“Your taxi is here, mister.”

“Good job! Let’s get the poor Lieutenant Chavez. We will also bring out those two maids. Make sure to keep your face masked until we drop them off.”

With Dean stepping out and going back inside with him, both of them first took care of carrying Felicia Sanchez inside the minivan, installing her as comfortably as possible in one of the rear seats. The Mexican woman couldn’t help look with wide eyes at the carnage in front of the main entrance door.

“Dios mio! You two are positively deadly.”

“Pah, routine stuff for us, Lieutenant Chavez.” replied Dean in Spanish while grinning to her. “As we said earlier, Lopez pissed off the wrong government, so we were sent to do a little cleanup.”

With Erik staying with Chavez and the minivan, Dean then returned inside the villa and went inside the kitchen, where he quickly cut the plastic cuffs tying together the ankles of the two maids, then politely helped them to get up on their feet while speaking to them in his fluent Spanish.

“If you will please follow me, ladies. We will leave this place and will drop you off in Dimas.”

“What about those cuffs around our wrists, mister?” asked the older maid, still less than reassured. Dean smiled at that question.

“We will cut them off just before dropping you off, madam. Sorry if we are a bit cautious still. This way, please: your taxi is in front of the main entrance.”

Partly reassured by Dean’s friendly tone, the two maids followed him outside, only to stop and look with big eyes at the dead bodies and wrecked vehicles littering the front porch of the villa. Tapping gently their backs, Dean encouraged them towards the minivan, where they sat next to Felicia Chavez. The younger maid eyed with sorrow the torture marks visible on Felicia as Dean took place at the wheel and started the engine.

“I am truly sorry for what they did to you, miss. Unfortunately, we couldn’t alert anybody without risking the lives of our whole families.”

“I understand, madam: too many people live in fear of that Lopez bastard.”

“LIVED in fear.” corrected Dean from his driver’s seat. “Lopez is now roasting in Hell, along with his goons.”

“I hope that the Devil will be especially harsh with him.” pronounced the eldest maid, making the two other women and Dean nod in approval.

Going down the gravel road linking the villa with the main road to Dimas, they were soon at the site of the ambush, where Dean had to slow down to a crawl in order to avoid the various vehicle wrecks and the crater in the road caused by the I.E.D. As he was slowly zigzagging around those obstacles, Felicia stared at the bodies and wrecked vehicles before looking at Dean and Erik.

“You two are a mini-army! Who the hell are you exactly?”

The answer from a smiling Dean was only one word.

“Spetsnaz<sup>3</sup>!”

“Whoever you are, you did a good deed in the eyes of God.” replied the older maid before rolling down her window and spitting at the still burning Mercedes containing the cremated body of Juan Manuel Lopez. “May you roast in Hell for eternity, you sadistic bastard. Now, I won’t have to cook anymore for you and your thugs.”

The rest of the drive to Dimas, a small town near the Pacific coast, was spent in a much more relaxed atmosphere after that. However, instead of rolling into town, Dean stopped the minivan in front of a small convenience store at the eastern limit of Dimas, next to a gasoline station, then pointed a nearby taxi stand, where two taxis were parked, to the two maids.

“We will drop you here, so that you can take taxis to wherever you need to go, ladies. Here is some cash money to pay for the taxis. I will ask you at the same time to accompany Lieutenant Chavez to the nearest medical clinic first and help her until she is in safe hands.”

The younger maid looked with disbelief at first at the pile of Mexican pesos, which was equivalent to over 200 American dollars, then smiled to Dean.

“You are most generous, mister. Uh, what about my cell phone?”

“Right!” said Dean, fishing out that cell phone from one pocket. He however gave it to Felicia Chavez instead of to the surprised maid, while explaining himself.

“Let’s allow Lieutenant Chavez to make a phone call to someone she can fully trust, before we drop you off. One call, Lieutenant, and do not describe us or this vehicle

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<sup>3</sup> Spetsnaz: Popular abbreviation for the Russian words ‘Spetsialnovo Nazhacheniya’, meaning ‘Special Purpose’. Title given originally to Soviet special forces units of the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence department.

during your call: I will be listening. I suppose that most of the local police force here was in Lopez' pocket."

"You are unfortunately too right about that, mister. However, my Federales partner should still be around, searching for me."

"Can you fully trust him, Lieutenant?"

Felicia then smiled for maybe the first time since they had found her.

"I believe so: he is also my fiancé."

"I see!" said Dean, breaking into a grin. That however didn't stop him from listening carefully to the words Felicia used during her call. He didn't miss the tears of joy when she was able to connect with her partner and fiancé: that liaison was apparently an authentic one. Felicia ended her call by giving the name and address of the nearby convenience store to her fiancé before closing the link and giving the cell phone to the younger maid. Keeping his mask on, Erik stepped out quickly and helped Felicia get out of the minivan, carrying her in his arms and sitting her on a nearby public bench as the two maids hurried to the nearby taxis. Before returning to the minivan, Erik discretely passed to Felicia her service revolver, along with some cash money, prompting Felicia into thank him in Spanish.

"Thank you for saving me, mister. May God be with you."

"Spasiba!" replied with a smile Erik, using the Russian word for 'thank you' before walking back to the minivan and sitting inside it. Felicia had conflicting emotions as she watched the minivan drive away in the direction of Highway 150. As a police officer, she should have tried to arrest those two men, who were illegal foreign agents and who had just killed over thirty men on Mexican territory. However, without their intervention, she would still be in the basement of that villa, being tortured and raped every day by Lopez and his men. By the time that her partner's car showed up at top speed, accompanied by a pickup full of Federales policemen, she had decided to plead mental duress and shock in order to explain her apparent lack of memories about the two Russians to her superiors.

## **CHAPTER 2 – IN THE SERVICE OF IRAN**

**20:08 (Bagdad Time)**

**Saturday, September 19, 2020**

**Private residence, Al-Karkh District**

**Western shore of the Tigris River**

**Bagdad, Iraq**



“General, the girl sent by Youssef is here.”

“Is she as nice-looking as that bastard promised me?” asked General Abdul Bakr al Hussein to his majordomo, making the man smile while bowing to him.

“She certainly is, General.”

“Then, bring her in.”

“At once, General.”

Al Hussein, wearing only an embroidered robe and a pair of sandals, waited in the middle of the large, luxurious lounge of his private residence in downtown Bagdad, impatient to see what kind of girl the pimp had sent him for tonight. Al Hussein knew that Youssef delved in human trafficking and that he often offered minors to his customers, but the Iraqi general didn’t care about that, as long as the girl was pretty and sexy. His majordomo finally returned with two bodyguards escorting a tall young woman dressed quite modestly with a long robe and a hijab<sup>4</sup>. While she was not as young as Al Hussein had wished for, she was tall, with very nice curves, and was positively beautiful, with long silky black hair framing a soft face with large brown eyes.

“I present you Fatmeh, sent by Youssef, General.” said his majordomo while bowing to Al Hussein. The latter nodded and made a dismissive gesture with one hand to his bodyguards.

“Youssef has chosen well. You may leave us, Fadhi.”

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<sup>4</sup> Hijab: Shawl covering the head and used by Muslim women.

With the majordomo closing the doors of the lounge behind him, Abdul Bakr smiled to the woman, who appeared to be in her mid-twenties and who wore makeup and a few cheap jewels.

“Please come forward, Fatmeh.”

The young woman obeyed him, stopping once two paces away from Abdul Bakr and allowing the latter to better detail her. She was indeed beautiful and her eyes reflected both intelligence and character. That pleased Abdul Bakr who, contrary to many powerful Iraqi men, did not like quiet, slavish girls. The more action the better, in his opinion. Taking a step forward, he then raised both of his hands and started gently running them down each side of the woman's face. His hands then continued downward, to go around the contours of her breasts, which proved both large and firm. Now truly fired up by her, Abdul Bakr smiled again to her and went to sit on a comfortable sofa nearby before speaking again to the escort girl.

“Show me what you have to offer me, Fatmeh. Do it in an artistic way.”

The woman bowed respectfully in response, then started slowly dancing in front of Abdul Bakr while humming a soft tune. Taking off her shawl after a few seconds, she then continued dancing and whirling around. Next, she opened and shed her robe, then her sandals, ending with a set of fine lace lingerie that had probably come from Paris. Abdul Bakr sucked air in as he admired her body: her set of lace lingerie was more akin to what could be called a string bikini than to a set of bra and panty and left very little to the imagination. For one thing, Fatmeh's nipples protruded out from rings in her lace and string bra, while her firm, well-rounded buttocks were left completely uncovered, with only one lace-covered string splitting her butt. As for her groin, which was closely shaved, the front of her 'panty' was made up of a grand total of three lace-covered golden strings which both split and outlined the contour of her outer vaginal lips. The escort girl smiled on seeing the effect she was making on her customer.

“You like what you see, General?”

“Oh yes!” replied Abdul Bakr, his eyes gleaming with desire. “Please come closer but continue dancing and stripping.”

The woman obeyed and danced her way to within one pace of Abdul Bakr, who was still sitting in his sofa. The string bra was next to come off, leaving her with only her string bottom. That came off as well a few seconds later, leaving her completely naked and allowing the Iraqi to salivate while admiring her nudity. With her string bottom in her hands, the escort playfully showed it to her sitting customer while starting to dance

around his sofa. Abdul Bakr bent his head backward to admire the bottom of her breasts, now hanging over him as she was passing in his back, her string panty still in her extended hands. Suddenly, without warning, the escort girl passed the back string of her panty over Abdul Bakr's throat and, twisting its extremities behind his neck, pulled on both extremities with all her strength. By the way that the panty string around his throat sank into his skin, Abdul bakr understood with horror that the panty string was in reality a garotte covered by a band of lace. However, his understanding came too late, as he was now in the most vulnerable position possible, sitting unarmed and with his assailant in his back and using the sofa he was in to pull even harder on the extremities of her garotte. With his breathing tubes completely closed off and his fingers unable to pull the garotte off, Abdul Bakr's vision started to be tainted with red as the escort girl's smile turned into a hateful rictus.

"You won't be able anymore to sell the guns you stole from the Iraqi Army arsenal to ISIS<sup>5</sup> fighters in this country, you bastard!"

Keeping pulling with all her strength, the woman held her grip for a good thirty seconds more, until Abdul Bakr stopped thrashing in his sofa and became totally inert. With her garotte still around his throat, she checked him for a pulse and, finding none, finally untied her garotte. Seeing a large bed in the adjacent bedroom, she grabbed Abdul Bakr's body under his armpits and dragged him with some effort into the bedroom, where she pulled the dead man on top of the bed and placed him on his left side before covering him up to his chin with the bedsheets. Next, she recuperated her pieces of clothing and dressed back. However, Captain Farah Qalibaf, of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Intelligence Bureau, was not finished here yet and started a careful, detailed but also silent search of Al Hussein's apartments.

After searching the bedroom for hidden safes or documents, Farah checked the big lounge but found nothing of interest there. Things changed when she searched Al Hussein's private study. She first found and grabbed a small notebook in one drawer of his work desk, then went through his rolodex and noted down the names, numbers and addresses of those she thought could be of interest for the Intelligence Bureau. Continuing her search, she then found a small safe embedded in a wall and hidden behind a painting. Since she was no expert at safe-cracking, she felt some

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<sup>5</sup> ISIS: Islamic State in Irak and Syria. Also known as 'Daesh' and as the 'Islamic Caliphate'.

discouragement at first but then noticed that the safe used a fingerprint recognition pad instead of a numerical keyboard. Such fingerprint recognition pad systems were actually becoming more and more popular for owners of safes, for the good reason that no one could simply steal the combination or force the owner of the safe to reveal it. In essence, only the owner in person could open such safes. The model she was looking at used a single digit recognition pad, most probably for a thumb. In this case, Farah had the solution right at hand, in a matter of speaking. Returning into the lounge, she grabbed an antique but still sharp sword that had been hanging from a wall, then went into the bedroom, where she took Al Hussein's right hand and, pulling on it, laid it on the nearby nightstand. Inserting a thick folded bedsheet between the hand and the nightstand's top surface, she then raised high the sword in her hands and carefully aimed before slamming down the blade's edge, cutting off the right thumb of the dead Iraqi, along with parts of his other fingers. Wiping clean the sword's blade with a bedsheet, Farah then grabbed the cut thumb and walked out of the bedroom, putting first the sword back in its original place before going into the private study. A satisfied smile came to her lips when the safe unlocked itself once she pressed the cut thumb on the recognition pad. Opening the safe and throwing away the thumb, she quickly emptied the safe, putting its content on the carpet so that she could more easily examine it. There was a collection of various documents, piles of cash money in various currencies, a loaded revolver and also a few small boxes. Intrigued, Farah opened one of the boxes to check its content. Her eyes widened at the sight of the dozens of cut diamonds inside the box.

"Damn! Arms trafficking was certainly very profitable for that bastard."

Pocketing that box, she then checked the other three boxes, finding more diamonds, along with a collection of beautiful emeralds and rubies. She pocketed those as well, along with the thick bundles of American dollars and Euros which had been in the safe. She however had no intention to keep all those riches for herself, as she was a profoundly honest person and considered herself incorruptible. Rather, that cash money and gems were going to help the families of the Iranian agents who had died in the service of the Islamic Republic of Iran and to fund Iranian clandestine operations. Next, she quickly reviewed the documents from the safe. All of them proved of interest, with one file in particular making her smile: it contained a number of compromising documents and photos which Al Hussein had probably used to blackmail a number of senior Iraqi government officials. Those would most probably prove very useful to the

Intelligence Bureau. Inserting that file and a few other documents in a large envelope she first emptied of its original content, she then slipped that envelope down her string panty, then covered it with her robe. Replacing in the safe what she had not grabbed and closing back the safe, Farah also picked up the cut thumb from the carpet and walked out of the study. Her last task was to clean up as best she could the bloody mess she had done in the bedroom, so that any visitor would not immediately notice anything alarming. Once that was done, she went to the main double doors of the private suite and opened one door, stepping out of the suite and closing the door before smiling to the two Iraqi bodyguards standing outside the double doors.

“I’m afraid that I burned out the General: he is now sleeping.”

The two bodyguards smiled at those words: this was a rather frequent scenario where their boss was concerned.

“I will escort you out, miss.” offered the senior bodyguard, making Farah bow her head to him.

“That would be kind of you indeed.”

While being the figure of serenity as she followed the bodyguard, Farah’s heart was in reality pounding like crazy from anxiety: one slip right now could be fatal to her. Thankfully, all went well and she was able to safely exit the residence and walk into the adjacent street, where she promptly hailed a cab and sat on its back seat, giving to the driver an address in a Shia district of Bagdad. Her next step now would be to meet with her local Intelligence Bureau contact and arrange for the real Fatmeh escort girl to be safely released from where she had been hidden.

## **CHAPTER 3 – A NEW MISSION**

**10:21 (Tehran Time)**

**Monday, October 5, 2020**

**Intelligence Bureau Department**

**Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Headquarters**

**Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran**

“Well done, Farah! You are getting pretty good at this.”

Farah smiled with satisfaction at that compliment from her knife fighting instructor and walked forward to the painted wooden target panel she had been using to practice her knife-throwing technique. She was finishing to collect back her four small, razor-sharp throwing knives when none other than Mossein Fadoumi, the deputy director for operations of the Intelligence Bureau and also her superior, walked into the training room and came to her. Farah at once came to attention as Fadoumi approached her: on top of being her superior, Mossein Fadoumi was a man she highly respected. Himself a veteran of clandestine operations abroad, Fadoumi genuinely cared for his agents and never sacrificed them unless grave circumstances called for martyrdom. Like Farah, Fadoumi was also proud of his Persian blood and of the illustrious history of Persian civilization, which extended for over three millenniums in the past. Also like Farah, he was incorruptible, contrary to too many Iranian officials these days, even in the ranks of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps.

“Good morning, sir!”

“And good morning to you, Farah.” said Fadoumi before eyeing briefly the target, whose center area was covered with blade marks. “I see that you are turning into an expert knife thrower.”

“I am improving, sir...slowly.”

“Always modest, are you? I like that! Could you come with me to my office? We have to discuss some operational matter in private.”

“Of course, sir!”

Giving back her knives to her instructor, she then followed Fadoumi out of the training room and down the basement hallway. Her superior spoke to her as they were walking together.

"By the way, you will be pleased to learn that the cash money and gems you brought back from your last mission has now appreciably inflated the pension fund used to help the families of our martyred agents. I made sure that none of it was stolen by some other official."

Farah gave a cautious look at Fadoumi while continuing to walk.

"And are there still many such officials around, sir, if I may ask?"

"You may, my good Farah and, unfortunately, the answer to that is 'yes'. I am personally pained to say that too many senior officers of the IRGC have let the attraction of luxury and power corrupt them. Many of those same senior officers also are proving to be hypocrites and let their lust for women taint both their judgments and actions, all the while claiming to respect the ideals of our faith. Maybe more women in power would be a good thing inside the IRGC. Unfortunately, I am a realist and that is only a dream for the moment, although I still can personally do a few things about that."

They were mostly silent after that, until they arrived at Fadoumi's office, situated on the third floor of the IRGC's headquarters building. Inviting Farah to sit in one of the sofas furnishing his large office, Fadoumi then sat on the same sofa while keeping a prudish distance from her.

"Farah, while many in the Intelligence Bureau still think of you as inferior to them simply because you are a woman, know that I strongly disagree with them and highly value your services. You have successfully completed all your missions during the last five years and your mission in Spain in 2015, while called by some here a failure because the weapons you were escorting were destroyed by Israeli warplanes before we could reroute them towards our Hezbollah allies, was in reality a success in my opinion. Apart from preventing the delivery of those weapons to ISIS, you managed to shoot down three Israeli fighter-bombers and one heavy helicopter, using some of the portable surface-to-air missiles destined for ISIS. That exploit, plus your killing of the Saudi bastard who had arranged that arms deal with ISIS, rightfully earned you a promotion to the rank of captain at that time. Well, I can tell you now that, after pleading your case with higher authorities, your last mission in Bagdad earned you another promotion, this time to the rank of 'major', effective today."

Farah felt a wave of pride and joy on hearing that. However, before she could say something, Fadoumi raised a hand to keep her silent.

“However, I will not make the mistake of sticking you in some office, where you would simply direct other agents. You are too skilled and talented to be wasted on simple paperwork. You in fact belong in the field, especially in sophisticated foreign places where you can use your charms, culture and intelligence to the fullest. Consider yourself from now on to be my special agent for solo operations abroad, Major Qalibaf. While you will certainly have all the support that our services can provide to you while on a mission abroad, you will be expected to do most of the main work by yourself. That is mostly in order to increase plausible deniability in case your mission turns sour.”

Farah nodded soberly her head at that, understanding the deeper meaning of Fadoumi’s declaration: she could not allow herself to be captured alive by some enemy of Iran and will have to prevent her actions from being directly connected to Iran. That would seem both harsh and unjust by many, but she could perfectly understand the need for that. Spy work was definitely not for angels and one had to be ready to pay the price in case of failure. In that aspect, Farah firmly believed that this made Iranian agents superior to most foreign clandestine agents, who too often let their soft sentimental values override their sense of duty and sacrifice.

“I understand, sir. Do you have a new mission for me, sir?”

“I certainly do, my dear Farah.” said Fadoumi before getting up from the sofa and going to his work desk, where he picked up a large envelope before returning to the sofa and handing the envelope to Farah.

“You will find all the information and details you will need for your next mission inside this envelope, Farah. I can tell you right away that your mission will be of paramount importance and may involve the sheer survival of our country from a possible new threat. However, you will have to do your utmost to deflect the responsibility of the consequences of your actions away from Iran, ideally by making some enemy of ours look responsible for them. You will have access to any equipment or resources you would need which cannot be traced directly to Iran. Go back to your office and study this mission file carefully, then come and see me if you have any questions or requests about it. One last thing: don’t tell anybody else about it, even in this headquarter. Secrecy and discretion will be keys to your success in that mission.”

“You can count on me, sir. I will succeed or die, anonymously.” replied Farah, making Fadoumi nod in approval.

“Well said, Farah. However, your name will always be remembered here, by me. Good luck in your mission, Major!”

“Thank you, sir!”

Farah then got up from the sofa, imitated by Fadoumi, and walked out of his office, the large envelope in her hands.

**13:56 (Washington Time)**

**Wednesday, October 14, 2020**

**Underground pistol shooting range**

**CIA headquarters complex, Langley**

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

The junior female agent was about to enter the underground pistol shooting range of the CIA headquarters to do some pistol practice with her 9mm Glock compact pistol when a loud detonation made her jump nervously.

“Was that a bomb?” she asked to her friend, another CIA junior agent.

“Sure sounds like one, Sylvia. However, the blast came from inside the range.”

As Sylvia’s friend cautiously opened the entrance door to the pistol range, another tremendous blast shook the basement, making both women twitch. Walking in, they went to the rangemaster, who wore a pair of ear defenders while watching two men doing some practice shooting. Sylvia was about to ask him a question when another blast reverberated around.

**BOOM**

“What the hell is that, mister?”

“That is Agent Dean Price practicing with his hand cannon, miss.” replied the rangemaster while making a grimace.

**BOOM**

“And what is he shooting with?”

“A Smith & Wesson 500 revolver in caliber .500 S&W Magnum, miss. It is presently the most...

**BOOM**

"As I was saying, it is presently the most powerful handgun caliber in the World. If the blast from it would disturb your own shooting, then I would counsel you to come back at another time, miss."

"Uh, I think that I will..."

## **BOOM**

Giving up in disgust, Sylvia and her friend then left, leaving the rangemaster alone with the two shooters present on the firing line. The second shooter, a lean, bearded man, was thankfully firing a much more standard 9mm pistol. That bearded man suddenly tapped the shoulder of his partner to make him stop shooting when his cell phone rang. With only the muffled noise of the ventilation system now heard, the agent raised his phone to one ear and spoke calmly.

"Erik Johnson speaking!"

Johnson then heard the voice of Julian Moore, the deputy director of operations for the CIA and the direct superior of both he and of his partner, Dean Price.

"Johnson, this is Julian Moore. I need you and Dean Price in my office, pronto! I just got some information that needs to be checked overseas."

"We are on our way, sir." replied Johnson, who then cut the link and looked at Dean Price. "Director Moore wants to see us, pronto! We will clean our handguns later. Just pack away your cannon and carry it with you in its case."

"Got it!"

Collecting their guns and equipment and packing them in their transport cases, the two agents soon left the shooting range and took an elevator up to the executive floor of the main building, where Moore and the other deputy and assistant directors of the CIA had their offices. The pair didn't speak during the trip, knowing from experience that it would be useless to speculate on what kind of mission they were going to get next. Presenting themselves to Moore's secretary, they were promptly admitted into the DDO's office. Julian Moore, a tall, pot-bellied and balding man in his fifties, was about to greet them when he sniffed the air and frowned.

"Hell, you two smell like you just fought a battle!"

"We were punching holes in targets down at the pistol range, sir." replied Erik Johnson, making Moore nod in understanding.

"Aah, that would explain the smell of gunpowder. Well, let's make it short and sweet, gentlemen. Please sit down!"

The two agents did so, putting down on the carpet their gun cases before Moore passed to them two identical files. Opening those files, the agents found inside photographs of two different men, along with a document stamped 'Top Secret', as Moore started to speak again.

"The pictures you are looking at are those of two Pakistani men, Doctor Afizullah Ghaneef, a top flight nuclear physicist specializing in nuclear weapons design, and Major General Mohammed Khan. Khan is in charge of the Pakistani nuclear arsenal and is quite a powerful man in Pakistan. Both men arrived separately in Paris two days ago, each accompanied by a few men best described as bodyguards. Officially, they came to Paris as tourists, but you will understand that I have some problems swallowing that explanation. The French also seem to find that hard to believe and have put both men under discreet surveillance. However, we can't and we won't rely on the French to find out the true motives for the coming of those two Pakistani men to Paris. The fact that both are intimately linked to the Pakistani nuclear arsenal is enough by itself to make me wonder about the true goal of their visit in France."

"I agree with you, sir." said Johnson. "One such man coming to Paris could be simple tourism, but two...and on the same day? That's too much of a coincidence. Are they scheduled to meet some senior French official? Could they be in Paris to discuss some kind of weapons deal with the French?"

"That could effectively be a possibility, but why would Pakistan send men involved with nuclear weapons? Besides, no meetings with French officials are scheduled for them, as far as we know."

"Maybe they want to buy uranium from the French, Boss?" proposed Dean Price. Moore thought that over before shaking his head.

"I don't think so. The Pakistani can buy uranium from the Chinese, who already provide Pakistan with all sorts of weapons and equipment. No! It has to be something else. Right now, our best way to discover what the Pakistanis are up to in France is to go inquire by ourselves. I am thus sending you two to Paris to find the truth about this."

"Aaah, Paris! The women! The food!" said dreamily Dean Price, attracting an amused smile on Moore's face.

"I will concede that Paris is an excellent place to find both of those things, but please remember that you will be going there on business, Mister Price, not for pleasure, unless of course if you consider your work as pleasure."

"Of course, Boss!"

"Good! Take those files with you and study them. Once you have a plan in mind about how to proceed in France, come back to see me and we will then finalize the outlines of your plan of action for this mission. Oh, one last thing: try not to decimate the French secret services while in Paris. They are after all supposed to be our allies."

That attracted a caustic smirk on Erik Johnson's face.

"Well, the French are very good at being quite selfish themselves in their methods and goals, sir. They may well try first to play rough with us."

"Then, that would be a different case, Mister Johnson: you will always have my permission and benediction to defend yourself and other agents of the CIA, from whoever threatens you. Well, I will now let you go, so that you could study those files. However, do that quickly: we probably don't have much time before those two Pakistanis conclude their business in Paris."

"Understood, sir!" said Erik.

"Got it, Boss!" added Dean in his customary, irreverent way.

Grabbing their gun cases before getting up from their chairs and leaving Moore's office, Dean and Erik then returned to their work spaces, situated in what was called a secure contained information facility, or SCIF in short, a room specially built to block and prevent any electronic eavesdropping from the outside or electronic emission spill from the inside. There, normal cell phones and other portable electronic devices connected to exterior networks could not work, while computer network connections could only be made via specially-protected data lines. All that was so that one could view and work with highly classified information without risks of eavesdropping or leaks. Since Dean and Erik, like other CIA agents and analysts, routinely worked with highly classified information, their work desks had been installed inside such a SCIF room, along with the desks of a dozen other employees of the CIA. Together, their group formed a special analysis and intervention section under the direct command of DDO Julian Moore, tasked with the most delicate and risky missions of the CIA. More than ever lately, Erik Johnson was happy about that command arrangement, as the present Acting Director of the CIA was in his opinion nothing more than a political hack of the worst kind with zero

experience in intelligence work and who had already put at risk a number of agents by his inept and haphazard leadership, on top of ignoring the information and advice from his own CIA analysts simply because he didn't agree with them for purely political reasons. Erik couldn't wait until the coming November presidential elections, so that some sanity could return soon to the American governmental machine.

Sitting back at their respective desks, which faced each other across a moveable partition, Dean and Erik studied carefully the documents contained in their mission files before looking at each other.

"We will definitely need some field support agents for this job." said Erik. "We simply can't watch and trail two men just by ourselves without risking to lose them at one point."

"Agreed! We will have to enlist the help of some of our agents in place in France to conduct basic surveillance of those two Pakistanis. We also would need the help of someone able to understand conversations in Urdu<sup>6</sup>."

Both men looked as one at a strongly built, matron-like woman in her mid-thirties whose work desk was situated only a few paces away.

"Julie, how is your Urdu?" asked innocently Dean, making Julie Prost eye him critically from her desk.

"More than fair, actually, Dean. My Pashto and Dari are also quite good. Why do you ask?"

"Because we are going to leave on a mission to investigate the true intentions of two important Pakistani men who recently arrived in Paris, supposedly as tourists, and we would need someone able to listen on to their conversations."

The CIA analyst and linguist, who could be described in many ways except as pretty, opened her eyes wide on hearing that.

"Paris?! Hell, count me in!"

"Then, consider yourself as part of our mission team, Julie."

"Yes!" exclaimed the female analyst, pumping her right fist in the air. Erik Johnson smiled at that, then looked at another analyst who had his work desk inside the SCIF, a thin, unimpressive-looking young man who was the screaming image of a nerd.

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<sup>6</sup> Urdu: Principal language spoken in Pakistan.

"Hey, Ian, are you knowledgeable about nuclear weapons and their technologies?"

Ian Dorset, a true genius hiding in the shell of a very unassuming young man, raised his nose up from the scientific journal he was reading and looked at Erik through his thick glasses.

"Uh, depends! I am not really competent in nuclear physics calculations but I know quite a lot about the triggering and command mechanisms of various nuclear weapons types."

"I'll take that as a yes. Would you be ready to go to Paris for a mission with us?"

"I always like to work with you and Dean. Will I get a chance to hack a few computers there?"

"Most possibly!"

"Then, count me in."

"Excellent! Roll your chair up to my desk, so that you can see what we have. YOU TOO, JULIE!"

With the two analysts rolling their chairs close to his desk and that of Dean, Erik then showed them the mission file given to him by Julian Moore, explaining to them their mission parameters before letting them read the file. At the end of it, Erik looked soberly at his three CIA colleagues.

"Since the bulk of our mission will involve surveillance and trailing, we will need quite a lot of specialized equipment in order to do the job. Start thinking about the equipment you would like to have with you in Paris and make a list of it. We will then collate our lists and will arrange for the equipment to be delivered tomorrow to our embassy in Paris via diplomatic bag. Once that will be taken care of, I will start taking care of our false papers and travel documentation. Ideally, we should all be in Paris in two days at the most..."

## **CHAPTER 4 – THE CITY OF LIGHTS**

**22:45 (Paris Time)**

**Friday, October 16, 2020**

**International Arrivals Terminal, Charles-de-Gaulle International Airport**

**Roissy-en-France, Paris region, France**

The French customs and immigration officer looked briefly at the passport handed to him by the elegantly dressed traveler, then at the man with a short beard standing in front of his wicket.

“And what is the purpose of your trip to Paris, Mister Herbert Jones?”

“Business!” answered Erik Johnson. Nodding his head, the French functionary stamped his passport and gave it back to him, along with a blue-colored, numbered ticket.

“Please give this ticket to the customs officer who will process you once you will have your baggage with you, Mister Jones.”

“I will, sir. Thank you very much.”

The next person at the officer’s wicket was a big, tough-looking matron wearing the kind of low-quality, tasteless dress French citizens had come to expect from many American women. The smile the matron gave to the officer did nothing to make her less ugly.

“High! I came to shop for the latest Paris fashion!”

‘*You certainly need it!*’ thought the Frenchman while examining her passport, which was in the name of ‘Jane Proctor’. He quickly stamped her passport and gave it back, along with a white numbered ticket.

“Have a nice stay in Paris, Miss Proctor.”

At the adjacent wicket, another French immigration officer got an American passport from a tall, square-shouldered man with short brown hair.

“What is the purpose of your visit to France, Mister Pickering?”

The American answered while giving him a malicious smile.

“Girls, girls and more girls, mister. I always dreamed of visiting your famous cabarets, like the Moulin Rouge, the Crazy Horse and the Lido.”

The French official couldn't help give the man an amused smile.

"I see!"

Stamping the passport of 'Donald Pickering', he gave it back to the American, along with a yellow ticket.

"Have a good time in France, Mister Pickering."

"I certainly intend to, mister!"

A family of four was next at the wicket, followed by a thin, unimpressive-looking young man with thick glasses who timidly gave his passport to the French official.

"Hello, sir! My name is Lyam Duckworth and I came to France to do some historical research for a university thesis."

"What historical period are you particularly interested in, Mister Duckworth?"

"The Middle Ages, particularly the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries."

"Then I strongly suggest that you visit the Cluny Museum, in the 6<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement. It specializes in the High Middle Ages and contains many fascinating historical pieces, sir."

"Oh, thank you for that information, sir! Uh, is it possible by now to visit the Notre-Dame Cathedral? I was heart-broken when I saw it go up in flames on television."

"I am afraid that it is still closed for reconstruction, Mister Duckworth. I am truly sorry about that. Here is your passport, plus a ticket you will have to present at the customs counters."

"A true shame, really, about the Notre-Dame Cathedral. Thank you again for the information."

The French official nodded to that: all the French citizens had been heart-broken to see the ancient cathedral burn down last year, as it constituted a true national historical treasure.

At the customs counters, both 'Jane Proctor' and 'Lyam Duckworth' were waived through after being asked a couple of simple questions, while 'Herbert Jones' saw his suitcases briefly opened and scanned visually before being waved through. However, 'Donald Pickering' got a much more thorough check of his suitcases by a pair of French customs officers, which included a young and pretty but also all-business woman. That French woman repressed a smile when she found four boxes of extra-large condoms inside one of Pickering's suitcases, along with a couple of vibrators. Either the man was

dreaming in color or he was truly able to attract women to him. Eyeing him up and down, the French woman had to recognized that the American was a handsome man.

“May I remind you that the age of consent in France is fifteen, Mister Pickering? I am telling you that because some human traffickers abuse minors and often try to make them pass as older girls while exploiting them.”

“Oh goodness! I only date women who are clearly over the age of twenty, miss: I like women with at least some experience.”

“I see! Well, in that case, have safe fun in France, Mister Pickering.”

“Thank you, miss!”

Watching ‘Donald Pickering’ walk away after closing back his suitcases and loading them back on his baggage cart, the female customs agent whispered to her male colleague.

“Quite a number, that American. Hopefully he is not some kind of pedophile on the hunt for young girls.”

“You never know these days, Marie.”

The four CIA employees boarded separately a bus linking the airport with the Rond-Point de l’Étoile in Downtown Paris, where the famous Arc de Triomphe stood. Sitting in widely separated seats in the bus, they kept quiet during the nocturnal trip through Paris, with Ian Dorset actually being truly fascinated by the lights and sights of Paris, which he had never visited before. As for his three colleagues, who were seasoned travelers, they simply used the trip to sleep a bit, in order to combat the jump of six hours ahead of Washington time caused by their trip. Coming out of the bus at the subway Station de l’Étoile, the four agents stayed separated and wandered a bit around, so that they could each stagger the time at which they took taxis to go to their hotel, the Balzac, where they had reserved rooms in advance. The Balzac, which occupied an old, six-story-high stone building typical of Downtown Paris buildings, was a comfortable, high-end hotel with the kind of prices you got to expect in Paris, with room prices typically starting at 200 dollars or more a night. However, it had the advantage of being close to the Pakistani embassy, situated along the Lord-Byron Street, where General Khan and Doctor Ghanef were staying.

Dean Price, or rather ‘Donald Pickering’, was the last of the four to show up at the Balzac Hotel, dragging behind him his large suitcase on wheels and carrying a travel

bag. Going to the reception counter of the hotel, he put his passport down on the counter while speaking in good but accented French to the small, jovial-looking man in his fifties standing behind the counter.

"Good evening, mister. My name is Donald Pickering and I made a reservation from the United States for a room."

The receptionist nodded his head and typed a command on his desktop computer, looking at the screen for a couple of seconds before smiling to Dean.

"We effectively have a reservation in your name for a period of one week, Mister Pickering. Do you wish to pay for your room in advance in full or in part, sir?"

"I will pay in full right now. You do accept credit cards, I believe?"

"Of course, sir! We also accept payments in either Euros or in American dollars. It will be a total of 1,623.60 dollars, sir. You have Room 511. Here is your key, sir."

"Thank you!"

After grabbing the old-style room key that the receptionist had laid on the counter, Dean took out his wallet to take his credit card provided by the CIA and pay for his room. As he did so, someone entered the lobby of the hotel and walked to the reception counter. That person, a woman by the tone of the voice, spoke in French to the receptionist.

"Do you have anything for me, Mister Lebrun?"

"I effectively have a small envelope that was left for you, Miss Kareshmian. Here it is."

Having the immediate impression that he had heard that female voice before, Dean twisted his head sideways to look at the woman, a tall and beautiful one with long, silky black hair, at the same time as she looked at his face for the first time. Both immediately froze in surprised shock while staring at each other, prompting an amused thought in the receptionist's brain.

*'Talk about love at first sight for those two!'*

Dean Price and Farah Qalibaf stayed frozen for a moment before Farah painted a fake smile on her lips and asked a question to Dean.

"You? What are you doing in Paris?"

"Me? I could ask you the same."

Keeping to herself the choice swear words coming to her mind, Farah quickly switched gears and pointed to one of the sofas located in a distant corner of the lobby.

"Let's go sit over there and discuss about our respective visits to Paris."

"A good idea."

Her heart beating fast, Farah walked as calmly as she could to the said sofa, sitting in it and then putting the small envelope given to her by the receptionist in her large purse, while Dean sat at the other extremity of the sofa, keeping some distance with her. The two then stared again at each other in silence for long seconds before Dean spoke up, his voice kept low and his tone soft.

"You look as beautiful as ever, Farah, or should I use another first name with you?"

"You can call me 'Fatmeh' and thank you for the compliment. And you, what name should I call you?"

"Call me 'Donald', or preferably simply 'Don'. I suppose that you are not in Paris simply on vacation, Fatmeh?"

"What if I said that I was, Don? After all, everybody needs to take some vacations from time to time. Paris is such a beautiful and romantic place anyway." Dean smiled at that, genuinely amused.

"Paris is definitely a romantic place, especially with you around. We may have our differences but I admire your courage and resolve."

Farah's eyes softened noticeably at those words.

"Thank you again, Don: you truly have a way with women. Know that I also admire you as well: you are a true man in all aspects and you also are an honorable man, something I see too rarely."

"Well, now that we have complimented each other, could you tell me frankly if you are here on business or on vacation? On my part, I am ready to recognize that I am on a business trip."

"I appreciate your truthfulness, Don. I will thus tell you in turn that I am here on business. I truly hope that our business goals today are not mutually exclusive."

"Maybe they could actually be complementary ones, Fatmeh. Remember the way we worked together in Spain, five years ago."

"Worked together or tolerated each other, Don?" replied Farah with a sarcastic smile, making Dean grin.

"Well, the important thing is that we didn't shoot at each other then. Hopefully, it will again be the case this time. I tell you what: as long as our respective missions won't impede each other or collide together, I am ready to ignore your presence in Paris."

"That is most reasonable, Don. I am thus ready to pledge to you to keep a similar deal with you. By the way, is 'Sparrow' with you in Paris?"

Dean hesitated a bit before replying to that but finally decided that Farah would find out about that anyway by simply watching the goings in and out of the hotel.

“Yes, he is, but I won’t say more about my mission over that. And you, still mostly playing lone ranger?”

“Mostly, with only a few helping hands in the background.”

“Glad to hear that, Fatmeh. Should we go up to my room and drink to our mutual agreement there?”

Farah grinned, amused by that and by the barely concealed invitation it constituted. She however didn’t reject it at once and stared softly at the big, muscular American. While he represented and worked for a government she loathed, he was personally the kind of man many women would find most attractive. Furthermore, he had proved to be a man loyal to his word, on top of showing that he was a highly skilled and brave secret agent. Finally, they had left on good terms five years ago, when they had last seen each other.

“No poison, dagger, bullet or garotte?”

“None! I promise only caresses, kisses and tenderness.”

“Deal! Let’s go upstairs!”

Dean, not believing this positive response from her, got on his feet and accompanied her to the bank of two elevators sitting at one end of the lobby. Going up to the fifth floor, he led her to his room, unlocking the door and opening it before inviting her in with a smile.

“After you, miss!”

“Thank you, Don!”

Dean closed the door behind them and gallantly helped Farah take off her leather coat, suspending it in the closet of the hotel room before himself removing his sports suit’s jacket. Next, he went to the minibar of the room and opened it before looking at Farah.

“What would you like to drink, or do you follow Islamic restrictions about alcohol?”

“Mineral water with ice will do, Don.”

“A judicious choice.”

Serving to himself a small portion of scotch after handing to her a glass of mineral water, Dean softly knocked his glass against hers while smiling to Farah.

“To our mutual health!”

“To our health!” she replied before taking a sip while still looking into his eyes. She then put down her glass, imitated in that by Dean, and started slowly undoing his shirt.

“You once were able to see me naked. Let me have the same privilege now with you...”

**00:38 (Paris Time)**

**Saturday, October 17, 2020**

**Room 503, Hôtel Balzac**

**Corner of Rue Balzac and Rue Lord-Byron**

**8ème Arrondissement, Paris**

Erik Johnson sighed, somewhat annoyed, when he finally got on his smart phone a text message from Dean telling him in which room he was lodging. Erik had received similar text messages from both Julia and Ian over half an hour ago. He however put that on account of Dean having possibly spent more time than the others loitering around before entering the hotel and taking his room. Being truly tired from the long air trip and the change in time zones, he then sent a return text message to tell his team members to come to his room at nine in the morning, after a good night's sleep, and went to bed. Unbeknown to him, Farah Qalibaf hurriedly packed up and moved out to another, nearby hotel after leaving Dean's room, not because she was afraid that Dean would do something to her afterwards but to avoid possibly ending face to face in the morning with his CIA partner, the cold, calculating 'Sparrow'.

**08:26 (Paris Time)**

**Saturday, October 17, 2020**

**Reception desk of the Hôtel Balzac**

The receptionist who had been on night shift duty was waiting for his day replacement when he saw a black man wearing an 'Air France' coverall and towing two large suitcases enter the lobby and head for his counter. Having experienced this scenario many times in the past, he greeted the man with a polite smile.

“May I do something for you, sir?”

“Yes! I am delivering two pieces of luggage which were temporarily misplaced. Do you have a Miss Jane Proctor and a Mister Herbert Jones in your list of customers who arrived yesterday?”

"One moment, please!" said the receptionist before consulting his computer for a moment. He then nodded his head and looked up at the deliveryman.

"Yes, we do! They arrived late last night from New York. I can take them for you."

"Uh, I need a signature from the owners of those suitcases. Can you give me their room numbers?"

"I certainly can! Miss Proctor is in Room 412, while Mister Jones is in Room 503. The elevators are to your left."

"Thank you!"

The black man, still dragging the two suitcases on their wheels, went to the elevators and called a cabin, then entered the first one and pushed the button for the fourth floor. Once up on that level, he went to the door bearing the number 412 and knocked on it, getting a muffled answer after a few seconds.

"Who is it?"

"Air France luggage service, miss! You were missing a brown suitcase?"

"I certainly did!" replied Julie Prost before unlocking and opening the door. The black man then gave her one of his two suitcases while speaking to her in a near whisper.

"Our surveillance team reports that Ghanef and Khan are still inside the Pakistani embassy. It also has a word of caution for your team: the French DGSI<sup>7</sup> is also watching the embassy."

"I will pass the word to our team leader. Any problem with our special equipment?"

"None! Here is an envelope with the radio frequencies and callsigns used by our surveillance team, plus the callsigns assigned to your team. We were also able to intercept and note the frequency used by the DGSI agents posted near the Pakistani embassy. Those guys are pros but their equipment is rather dated: I guess that they have budget problems even more severe than our own."

Julie smiled in amusement while taking the offered envelope, which had been made to look like a delivery voucher.

"I can sympathize with them. Thank you very much!"

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<sup>7</sup> DGSI: Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure, or Internal Security General Directorate, the French counter-espionage apparatus.

Julie then closed and locked back her door before dragging the large and heavy suitcase to her bed, on top of which she laid it flat before opening it to inspect its content. She nodded with satisfaction on seeing that the computers, signal intercept devices and other surveillance equipment were all intact, wrapped inside some pieces of clothing.

Going up by one level, the black deliveryman went to Erik's room and knocked on it, repeating the same procedure he had used with Julie Prost and then giving to Erik his last suitcase, which contained the weapons, ammunition and individual miniature radios to be used by the team, on top of giving a copy of the information he had given to Julie. Once his door was locked again, Erik opened the suitcase on top of his bed and smiled as he contemplated the arsenal inside it: diplomatic pouches were so useful to send weapons and other sensitive equipment and documents inside foreign countries.

At six before nine, Dean was the first to show up for the team meeting called by Erik. He however spoke to him in a low voice as soon as the door closed behind him.

"Heads up! I saw Farah Qalibaf, our Iranian friend, on arrival at the hotel. She recognized me instantly but kept her cool and spoke in private with me for a moment: she is on a mission in Paris but swore to me that it was not targeting American citizens or interests. In return, I told her that I was not actively working against Iran and we mutually agreed to stay out of each other's way. I suspect that she has by now moved out to another hotel, just in case."

"Does she know which room you are in, or which are the rooms occupied by the team?" asked Erik, on alert at once.

"She heard my room number when the receptionist gave me my key." lied Dean, feeling bad about doing so. "However, she wouldn't know about our other rooms."

"Then, pack your things and move to this room: we can't risk that some Iranian hit team tries to attack you in your room. Do it now!"

Dean nodded his head but didn't speak before turning around and leaving. Julie Prost was next to show up at Erik's door, closely followed by Ian Dorset. The bespectacled analyst looked at his watch after looking around the room.

"Dean is not in yet?"

"He came earlier but I sent him back to his room so that he could pack up and move to my room. We had an old acquaintance who happened to also have a room in this hotel: Lieutenant Farah Qalibaf, or the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps

Intelligence Bureau. She saw Dean when he arrived to take his room and spoke to him briefly, assuring him that she was not in Paris to target American citizens or interests. Still, I told Dean to move to here in order to avoid any possibility of him being targeted by the Iranians.”

Julie Prost, her expression now sober, thought those words for a moment.

“Maybe she was truthful about not wanting to hurt Americans here in Paris, but I doubt that she would be in Paris simply for vacation. On the other hand, there is no lack of targets in Paris for Iranian agents, starting with the Saudis, the Israelis and the various groups supporting Sunni extremists.”

“What about the Pakistanis?” asked Ian Dorset, making Julie nod once.

“Them too, but to a lesser degree than the Saudis or Israelis. While Pakistan is persecuting its Shia minority, something that is irritating greatly the Iranians, they have not clashed directly for a long time. I would say that we should take care of our problems here in Paris while letting Miss Qalibaf take care of her own problems.”

“That sounds logical and reasonable enough to me, Julie.” said Erik. “We will thus concentrate on our two Pakistani officials and forget about Miss Qalibaf.”

“By the way, Erik, I received our suitcase containing our special equipment.”

“Excellent! On my part, I got our weapons and radios this morning. We will thus be able to start the serious work right away. I will review our plan of action once Dean is back here with his things.”

It took less than ten minutes before Dean Price, wearing one of his customary dark suits with sunglasses, showed up with his two pieces of luggage. Letting him barely enough time to drop his things in one corner of the room, Erik then reviewed the information they had on their two Pakistani targets and studied a detailed map of their Paris district with his team, discussing about how to proceed next. At the end, Erik tried to lighten the atmosphere by attempting a joke.

“Well, Dean, if a hit team crashes into your old room or blows it up, then you will know that Farah loves you...to death!”

“Yeah! That would really be fun!” replied Dean with a smirk.

## **CHAPTER 5 – AN UNEXPECTED MOVE**

**20:11 (Paris Time)**

**Monday, October 19, 2020**

**Room 508, Hôtel Balzac**

**Rue de Balzac, 8ème Arrondissement**

**Paris, France**

Erik knocked on the door of Ian's room, using a frequently changing code, and was admitted by Julie, who then quickly returned to her monitoring computer, set on top of the vanity, next to Ian's laptop computer.

"Anything yet?"

"Sweet nothing!" replied the female analyst, sounding a bit discouraged. "If those two Pakistanis came to Paris on vacation, then they have a weird concept of vacation: they have done nothing but stay inside the Pakistani embassy and did not place calls or open internet links of any significance. It is as if they are sitting tight while waiting for something. What? I frankly couldn't tell."

Erik unconsciously brushed his short beard with one hand, perplex.

"This doesn't make sense! We have the general in charge of the Pakistani nuclear arsenal, plus his chief nuclear weapons designer, sitting in Paris and doing nothing? If they are indeed waiting for something specific, like a call or a message, you would expect that such a call or message would have come rather quickly. Instead, it is as if they are being snubbed."

"Snubbed?" protested Julie. "Who the hell would snub such important men? It would take someone with supreme arrogance to do that."

"Like our own President?" said Ian from his computer station, attempting some caustic humor. That made Julie's eyes roll.

"Yeah! That would be like him to do that. I..."

Julie, who had put on again her headset she used to monitor the cell phones used by Khan and Ghanef, suddenly stopped speaking, apparently concentrating on something she was hearing. Erik made a point of not breaking her attention and stayed silent. After maybe a minute or so, Julie looked up at him, her expression sober.

“General Khan just received a phone call in Arabic, asking him and Ghanef to go right away to the Saudi embassy. Apparently, Khan did not like the tone used by the caller but still said that he would go.”

“The Saudi embassy? He and Ghanef came to Paris simply to wait for the Saudi embassy here to contact them? Why didn’t they simply go to Saudi Arabia in the first place if they have truly important business to conduct with the Saudis?”

“Maybe because what their business is about needs to stay absolutely secret?” proposed Ian. “Such important Pakistani men visiting Saudi Arabia would twitch the ears of many foreign secret services. On my part, if I would hear about those two men visiting Saudi Arabia, I would wonder at once if Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were planning to cooperate in the nuclear domain. On the other hand, any general deal about simple nuclear powerplants could have been arranged much more easily, using their customary diplomatic contacts. I can see only one reason for Khan and Ghanef to pursue such clandestine backroom contacts with Saudi Arabia: they want to discuss nuclear weapons with the Saudis.”

Erik stiffened at once on hearing that, while Julie let out a pungent swear word.

“Fuck! That actually would make sense. Any such talks between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia would instantly make a lot of people very nervous, including us! We don’t want the Saudis to have nuclear weapons, as much as we don’t want the Iranians to have nuclear weapons. That would completely destabilize the whole Middle East! The Israelis would also go bonkers about that.”

“And exchanging delegations, even if made discreetly, would be noticed at once by a number of secret services, what with all the electronic and satellite surveillance covering the region.” added Ian. “By coming to Paris for a banal reason like tourism, Khan would attract much less attention, at least in theory, and would make it much more difficult to connect the Saudis to him. Unfortunately for him and Ghanef, their stratagem was somewhat sabotaged by their notoriety as leaders of the Pakistani nuclear weapons program. I wonder who apart from us and the French had their ears raised by their coming to Paris? I could easily see the Mossad getting its nose into this.”

“Or the Iranians!” said Julie, thunderstruck by a sudden revelation. “What could have pushed an Iranian agent like Farah Qalibaf into taking a room in a hotel close to the Pakistani embassy, other than to watch Khan and Ghanef? You do realize, Erik, what would be the reaction of Iran if it learned that the Saudis were trying to clandestinely acquire nuclear weapons from Pakistan?”

"They would most understandably go to war in an instant, before the Saudis could have operational nuclear weapons." said Erik, now grim. "But would the Saudis and the Pakistanis be really crazy enough to do something this risky?"

"Yes!" was Julie's immediate answer. "The Saudis view nuclear weapons as the ultimate deterrence against Iranian aggression, while the Pakistanis sorely could use the sort of money the Saudis would pay to acquire ready-to-use nuclear weapons. The Pakistanis could easily ask for tens of millions of dollars per nuclear weapon sold to the Saudis. The Pakistanis are also no friends of Iran, mostly for religious reasons and also because of Afghanistan, where they have often contrary interests."

"But would the Saudis risk alienate us in such a way?"

"Why not? Only a few months ago, the Saudis basically spat in Putin's face and started an oil price war just as the Covid-19 pandemic was gathering steam and making oil prices fall, all that so that they could regain control of the World oil markets. Don't forget as well what kind of man is holding power in Saudi Arabia these days. Prince Mohammed Bin Salman may want to pass himself as a reformer, but he is in reality acting like a simple dictator, arresting or killing those who oppose him. His only serious opponent right now in the Middle East, if you discount Israel, is Iran."

"And the Israelis have been rather soft towards him lately, since he opposes the Iranians." said Ian from his chair. Erik thought furiously about all this for a moment before taking a decision.

"Well, all this may make a lot of sense, but we simply can't be satisfied with mere suppositions. Our bosses will expect some hard proofs of all this before they would pass this information to the White House. We will thus do our best to find out the details of this possible nuclear weapons deal between the Pakistanis and the Saudis. I will alert our street surveillance team to be ready to tail Khan and Ghanef once they leave the Pakistani embassy. On our part, we will need to get close to the Saudi embassy in order to be ready to listen to any cell phone connection coming from there. Me and Dean will thus drive and park near the Saudi embassy with a cell phone intercept and relay unit. Julie, you will need to keep listening to those two Pakistanis' cell phones. Any new call they will get may prove crucial for us to learn what will happen next."

"Got it! I will record everything we will hear from those phones."

"Excellent! I will now need to bring with me a cell phone intercept unit and a relay unit."

Julie went at once to the big suitcase containing her electronic devices and took out two small box-like devices, one of which was connected to a tiny parabolic antenna, then gave them to Erik after programming a few parameters into them.

"Here you go, Erik. You will just need to point the antenna towards the embassy building and to connect the relay unit to your smart phone while you keep the line with me open."

"Got it! With luck, we will know a bit more about this crazy possible deal in a few hours. Stay safe and be careful about who could knock at your door."

"We will, Erik." assured Julie, who then presented a shopping bag to her team leader. "Here, use this, so that you don't go around openly with these things inside the hotel."

"Thanks!" said Erik, taking the bag and putting his electronic devices before walking out of the hotel room.

### **20:39 (Paris Time)**

#### **Rental car, parked near the Saudi embassy**

#### **Rue de Courcelles, 8ème Arrondissement, Paris**

Dean, having just parked their rental car, on which they had replaced the original plates with fake ones, sighed while eyeing the unbroken line of stone façades formed by the buildings lining both sides of the Rue de Courcelles, on which the Saudi embassy was established: Each building was either directly touching its neighbors or left at most a tiny crack between them, the product of a city having experienced severe urban crowding for centuries already.

"I hate Parisian urbanism: not a single narrow alley or dark corner to hide in. Just an unbroken line of stone walls with only windows and doors breaking it at intervals. Tailing suspects or discretely watching a house is so much easier in New York."

"I have to agree with you on that, Dean." replied Erik, sitting in the front passenger seat of their car. "You know what else stands out, apart from a guy standing against a wall at night, next to the street?"

Dean snickered at that question, already guessing the answer.

"Two big guys sitting for hours inside a darkened car parked along a street at night. All those cop and spy TV shows should get real about that. I'll get out of the car and go walk around a bit. If something happens, just call me by radio."

“Okay! I’ll take care of pointing our cell phone intercept antenna and our laser window snoop.”

Dean nodded his head at that before stepping out of the car: the ‘laser window snoop’ was a device that projected a laser beam tuned to a frequency invisible to the human eye. When pointed at the window of a specific room in a building, the laser beam detected the slight vibrations in the window glass pane caused by voices or noises inside the room and then sent back those vibrations to the laser device, which then translated these vibrations back into the original noises or words. Such devices had proved priceless many times during past missions, allowing agents to listen to conversation from a safe distance.

Thankfully, a slight drizzle was falling at the time, which gave a good excuse to Dean to raise the collar of his coat and pull down his wide-brimmed hat, thus hiding nearly completely his facial features. The few other pedestrians circulating on the sidewalks either did the same, opened umbrellas or took refuge in one of the numbers of street cafés and bistros opened at this hour. Keeping a calm, steady pace, Dean eyed discretely the Saudi embassy, an old stone building to which had been added four extra stories made of concrete, as he walked along the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street. As he was passing in front of the embassy, he heard a radio message from Erik, who was still inside their car.

“Heads up, Stryker: our ground surveillance team is signaling that the targets’ car is approaching. It also signals that at least two other cars, one from the French secret services and another one still unidentified, are also tailing the target car. We thus have to use extreme caution.”

“Understood, Sparrow!”

More on guard than ever now, Dean continued to walk towards the corner with the Boulevard de Courcelles, where a bistro terrace was visible. As he had been warned, a big Mercedes CLS 450 sedan with General Khan and Doctor Ghanef sitting inside then turned into the Rue de Courcelles, then slowed down and stopped temporarily in front of the old carriage entrance of the Saudi embassy, which gave access to the small internal courtyard of the building. There, the Saudi guard manning the small watch hut next to the entrance briefly checked the identity of the car’s occupants, then opened the tall double doors for the Mercedes and let the vehicle drive in. A few seconds later, a French-made gray Citroen Berlingo minivan also turned into the embassy’s street. Dean

was able to see that three men were sitting inside when it passed by him before slowing down and parking close to the embassy. A third car then also turned on Rue de Courcelles, coming from the same direction as the two preceding ones. This time, Dean saw that two men and one woman were inside the compact Fiat 500 sedan. He had to control himself in order not to jerk his head around when he recognized the woman in the Fiat. Keying discretely his radio microphone, he called at once his partner.

“Stryker to Sparrow: heads up! The red Fiat 500 that just turned into the street has Farah aboard. That third car is thus carrying an Iranian team. Pass the word to our tailing team.”

“Will do!”

Dean continued walking until he got to the street corner, where he took temporary refuge under one of the large umbrellas of the bistro’s terrace. Thinking about it, he entered the bistro and went to its bar counter, where he sat on a stool and ordered a double espresso coffee. Pivoting his stool to be able to look outside, with the Saudi embassy plainly visible to him, Dean thought furiously about the implications of seeing Farah Qalibaf here tonight. It was now evident that the Iranians were in Paris to either watch or target the same two Pakistani men the CIA were interested into. As for the French, either they were also interested directly into Khan and Ghanef, or they were watching them to prevent some foreign illegal action on French territory. In view of the positions and qualifications of the two Pakistani, Dean was ready to bet that the French were also suspicious about the true reasons for their visit to France. However, that still left him and the rest of the CIA team in a delicate situation, with two opposing teams involved on the same case, plus with the Saudis now known to be active players in this game. As he thought that, the car used by the CIA tailing team, a sub-compact blue Renault Clio hatchback, parked next to the bistro, in view of the embassy and with a man and a woman inside. Those CIA agents were actually legal residents in France who had been working undercover in country for many years already. Neither Dean nor Erik wanted to see those two agents exposed or captured because of the present mission, as their long-term presence in France was quite important to the CIA’s overseas network of human assets. Thus, Dean and Erik were prepared to risk themselves to protect those two agents if something went wrong. The popular belief that some agents were ‘expendable’ was actually an utter imbecility: good clandestine agents took years to form and put in place and none could be considered ‘expendable’, except in the minds of soulless bureaucrats or of incompetent and uncaring handlers and senior officers.

During the first decades of existence of the CIA, which had been formed after 1947 out of the Organization of Strategic Services, or OSS, many clandestine agents had been needlessly sacrificed or wasted because of the utter incompetence of the then senior leaders of the CIA, starting with the Director himself. One of the worst in that aspect had been Director Allen Dulles, who had initiated many operations which, apart from being costly, monumental failures, had also been completely illegal according to the mandate of the CIA given to it by the Congress. Thankfully, those days of poor, uncaring management were gone...well, mostly. The problem was now closer to the White House rather than at the CIA headquarters in Langley.

Dean suddenly noticed two suspiciously-acting cars, Peugeot 2008 four-door sedans, which had just parked temporarily on one side of the Boulevard de Courcelles, opposite the corner of the intersection where his bistro and the CIA tailing car were. Those two cars had parked close behind one another and both had four men each aboard. Furthermore, those men were all looking at the CIA tailing car. Dean thus keyed urgently his radio microphone.

"Stryker to Sparrow! Tell our tailing car to leave at once: I see what could be two cars full of probable French counter-intelligence agents parked nearby and staring at our team's car. I am going to return to our own car now."

"Got it!"

Paying quickly for his coffee, Dean then got up from his stool and walked out of the bistro to head back to his car. As he was approaching it, he spoke again in his microphone.

"Sparrow, step out of the car with your equipment and find a fixed observation point: I may have to assist our tailing team in the next minute or so."

"Understood! I already told our team to vamoose from here. Try to avoid killing anybody if you have to act, though. We don't want the French to become truly mad at us."

"Got it!"

As he was getting to a few meters from his car and was about to cross the street, Dean saw Erik step out, a sports bag containing his equipment in one hand. Erik did not speak to him or even looked at him before walking away from the car and the Saudi embassy, in search of a hidden observation spot. As Dean was opening the driver's door, he looked briefly towards the intersection beyond the embassy and tensed up: the

two suspected DGSI cars had just started pulling out of their parking spots as the CIA tailing car was speeding away in the opposite direction on Boulevard de Courcelles, towards the nearby Parc Monceau. Hurrying to sit down behind the wheel, he then started his engine and got into gears before racing out of his parking spot. He however took the time to maliciously wave up his left hand as his car sped by Farah's parked car.

In the Iranian team's car, Farah's eyes were attracted to a dark blue Peugeot 508 GT sports sedan parked on the opposite side of the street: a man had just stepped out with a sports bag in one hand. That man then started to walk away from the embassy. However, his profile felt familiar to her, so she briefly raised her binoculars to her eyes to examine him. She stiffened nearly at once while swearing quietly to herself.

"Sparrow, here?"

Another man walking to the Peugeot 508 then attracted her attention as well, especially because of his height and large shoulders. She also recognized him when he briefly turned his head to look towards the Boulevard de Courcelles.

"Stryker!"

Conflicting emotions now filling her, she lowered her binoculars and looked at her two agents assisting her.

"Heads up, men! It seems that the American CIA is also interested in Khan and Ghaneif, possibly to prevent them from selling nuclear weapons to the Saudis. I know that man who just got into that Peugeot 508 GT: he is a CIA agent who helped me during a mission in Spain five years ago."

"Should we kill him, Major?" asked her driver, Hassan Kosravi, an experienced and highly skilled agent in his own right. Farah shook her head at once.

"No! Those CIA agents may actually prove useful to our mission by distracting Khan and the French away from us. Again, they may be pursuing the same goals as us, so let's avoid them as much as possible."

The dark blue Peugeot 508 GT then raced by their parked car, with its driver briefly waving hello to the Iranians, making Kosravi swear.

"That bastard knew that we were here!"

"Yes, he did." added Farah, who had been able to positively identify the CIA agent she knew as 'Stryker'. "Hassan, Ali, please remember that those two Americans we just saw are among the most skilled, dangerous CIA agents you could ever encounter. Never underestimate them."

“So, what do we do now, Major Qalibaf?” asked Ali Suleiman.

“We continue watching and following Khan and Ghaneif, in order to find more information about this possible nuclear weapons deal. Keep in mind that we have at least one French DGSI car parked less than twenty meters from us, so make sure that your silenced pistols are ready and close at hand.”

Feeling in his element as he turned onto the Boulevard de Courcelles in his Peugeot 508 GT sports sedan, Dean was able to spot at once both the two suspected French DGSI cars and the small Renault Clio driven by the pair of CIA clandestine local agents. The Renault Clio was going about as fast as the fairly dense evening traffic permitted but the two Peugeot 2008 running after it were driven by trained drivers who knew the streets of Paris like the bottom of their pockets. Thinking quickly about his possible courses of action, Dean then decided to use his car like a ram if that was what was needed to stop the DGSI cars from catching the Renault Clio. However, before accelerating to cut the distance between him and the trailing DGSI car, Dean quickly drew his compact backup handgun, a snub-nosed Smith & Wesson M.E. .44 Magnum revolver, and stuck it between his upper legs. With that done, he accelerated brutally and veered right, in order to approach the nearest DGSI car from the rear right. As soon as his car's bumper was level with the rear right wheel of the Peugeot 2008, Dean turned hard his driver's wheel to the left, making his car slam violently against the DGSI's rear right corner and pushing it to the left, then braked hard in order to quickly break contact. Taken completely by surprise, the DGSI driver lost control of his vehicle, which started rotating wildly in the middle of the traffic before ending in the path of a delivery truck coming from the opposite direction. The poor truck driver barely had time to swear violently once before he T-boned the DGSI car, smashing its right side and dragging it over a good thirty meters before the truck and the sedan crashed together into a parked car, coming to a brutal stop.

Dean was however not finished yet and accelerated again to catch up with the lead DGSI vehicle, whose driver and passengers were still not aware of what had just happened to their comrades. Rolling down fully his driver's window, Dean then grabbed and held his snub-nosed revolver in his left hand and rested his left elbow on top of the door ledge while still holding his gun. He then approached the DGSI car from its right rear while staying in the right lane of the boulevard. The Peugeot 2008, along with the

traffic around it, was doing a good 45 kilometers per hour when Dean fired one shot, piercing its rear right tire and making it blow up. As the French counter-espionage driver was attempting to keep control of his suddenly swerving car, Dean rear-ended it and then pressed to the maximum his accelerator, thus pushing the DGSi car into the path of a city transit bus to its right. The front of the bus rolled over and crushed the hood of the sedan, hopelessly trapping it under the big public transit vehicle. As Dean expertly swerved past them, both the DGSi car and the bus ended crashing into a line of parked cars along the right side of the boulevard, leaving the French agents and a number of bus passengers seriously shaken but with only light to moderate wounds. His own car's body work now seriously smashed up but with his vehicle still able to roll with little problems, Dean ended up stopping side by side with the Renault Clio two traffic lights later. He looked and smiled at the pretty woman in her thirties whose face still reflected tension and worry and who was sitting in the front passenger seat, shouting out in English to her and her male companion.

"YOUR PURSUERS ARE NOW OFF THE ROAD. GO HIDE YOUR CAR AND CHANGE YOUR PLATES. YOU HAVE THE 'GOOD NIGHT' FROM STRYKER."

"THANKS, STRYKER!" was able to reply the woman before the light turned green, with Dean then turning right and driving away into the night.

## **21:26 (Paris Time)**

### **DGSi Citroen Berlingo surveillance minivan**

#### **Parked along Rue de Courcelles, near the Saudi embassy**

"Bravo Two, this is Alpha, over."

The leader of the three-man DGSi surveillance team sitting inside their parked Citroen Berlingo minivan grabbed the microphone of his vehicle's radio transceiver and answered the call while keeping his eyes on the nearby Saudi embassy.

"Bravo Two listening!"

"Bravo Two, from Alpha: we have some bad news to pass to you. Your two backup vehicles suffered grave accidents while pursuing that suspect Renault Clio. Both vehicles were heavily damaged, while seven of our agents are now in hospital. Thankfully, their wounds are not life-threatening. This however leaves you alone to do the job for the moment, as it will take some time to get a new backup team, over."

The team leader exchanged shocked looks with his two agents before speaking on the radio again.

“Alpha, what happened to them, over?”

“Apparently, a blue Peugeot 508 rammed them and caused them to lose control of their vehicles. We suspect that this Peugeot 508 was in collusion with the occupants of the Renault Clio. You should thus exercise extreme caution from now on and keep an eye for that blue Peugeot 508, over.”

“Uh, Bravo Two understood! Out!”

The French team leader, a tough-looking man in his forties, blew out air as he hooked back the radio’s microphone.

“Wow! Two cars demolished and seven men in hospital? Whoever we are facing tonight is playing for keeps.”

“So, what do we do now, Paul?” asked the agent sitting on the rear bench.

“We continue watching the embassy and wait for Khan and Ghanef to come out, then we will continue tailing them. Also, keep a sharp eye out for a banged up blue Peugeot 508.”

Some twelve minutes later, the French agents saw the carriage entrance doors of the Saudi embassy open up and the Mercedes CLS 450 roll out into the street, prompting the driver of the minivan to start his engine and follow the Mercedes from a respectful distance. However, the DGSi men did not notice the red Fiat 500 which also left its parking spot to then start tailing both the Mercedes and the minivan. Once the vehicles were out of sight, a dark silhouette holding a bulging sports bag came out from behind a large steel garbage bin sitting close to a wall. Acting as if everything was normal, Erik Johnson then started walking calmly towards the intersection with the Boulevard de Courcelles, where he was planning to hail a taxi and return to his hotel. Hopefully, Dean, with whom he had quickly lost radio contact with due to the distance and the surrounding high buildings, would show up there intact. Erik now knew a few interesting new things, thanks to his window laser snoop and cell phone monitoring unit, things which were making it necessary to urgently redirect the team’s efforts into a new direction.

## **CHAPTER 6 – MONACO**



**13:48 (Paris Time)**

**Tuesday, October 20, 2020**

**Hôtel Le Forum, 16 Avenue d'Alsace**

**Principality of Monaco, Mediterranean coast of France**

Dean smiled to himself when he saw that a pretty young woman was manning the reception counter of the hotel 'Le Forum'. Followed by the three other members of his team, who had traveled together by train to Monaco from Paris, he went to the counter and put his (fake) passport on it before speaking in his fluent French.

"Good afternoon, miss! My name is Donald Pickering and my group booked two rooms from Paris late last night."

The female receptionist, who was actually more than just pretty, returned his smile while consulting her computer.

"And your rooms are waiting and ready, Mister Pickering. Since it is a bit off-season right now, we were able to give your group two rooms with an unobstructed view on the port next to one another on the top floor of the hotel."

"Aaah, excellent! We still don't know how long exactly we will be staying in Monaco, miss: we came to have discussions with a group of marine biologists and it

could go on for a few days to a few weeks. Could we pay in advance for five days and then rebook as needed if we have to stay longer?”

“No problems, Mister Pickering! As I said, we are in the off-season and half of the hotel is presently empty, so there are still plenty of rooms available. Could I have the passports of your companions as well, sir, so that I can register them?”

“Of course, miss! Miss Proctor will take the single occupancy room, while us three men will take the triple occupancy room. How much will it be in U.S. dollars for the first five days?”

The receptionist typed for a few seconds on her computer keyboard before answering him.

“It will be a total of 2,163 dollars, Mister Pickering. The price includes breakfast.” As Dean took out his CIA-provided credit card, Ian Dorset nearly choked on the cost of the rooms and whispered to Julie Prost, who was standing next to him behind Dean and Erik.

“Hell, this is quite pricey, no?”

“For Monaco?” replied Julie with a smirk. “This is actually about the lowest price we could find for hotel rooms in Monaco. Most other local hotels will ask you between 300 and 600 dollars a night for a room. And I am not even talking about the cost of meals in Monaco restaurants. Remember that this is a prime destination for rich snobs in Europe.”

“Still, our accounting department is liable to choke on that bill.”

“Let them choke on it! They are not the ones risking their skins in the field.”

Recuperating their fake passports after they had been registered in, the three men and one woman then went up as a group to the fourth floor of the hotel, where their rooms were. Erik nodded his head with satisfaction when he entered the triple occupancy room he was going to use with Dean and Ian: the room was a bit crowded by its three separate single beds but it was clean and the windows gave a nice, uncluttered view of the yachting port of Monaco and of its bay.

“This should do just fine. Unpack your personal things and Ian’s work computer, but keep the rest locked up in our suitcases for the moment: we don’t want some cleaning maid to get suspicious about our activities.”

Following his own advice, Erik then unpacked the suitcase containing his clothes and hygiene items as Dean and Ian did the same. Next, he took out of his equipment bag a

pair of small but powerful binoculars and scanned the port area and the Bay of Monaco with it.

“Hmm, I don’t see the SERENE, either in the port or at anchor: it must still be on its way to Monaco.”

Dean nodded once at those words: the Saudi royal yacht, which belonged to Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, the effective ruler of Saudi Arabia, was supposed to arrive in Monaco today and was where General Khan and Doctor Ghanef were due to hold talks to discuss the clandestine sale of Pakistani nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia. While risky, their stalking of the Saudi embassy in Paris had paid off handsomely, with Erik able to intercept a conversation between the Pakistani men and an envoy of Prince Bin Salman, in which Khan and Ghanef were told to be ready to fly the next day by private jet to Monaco, where they would then go aboard the M/Y SERENE, the huge luxury yacht used by Bin Salman as his royal yacht. If the schedule they had heard was still unchanged, Khan and Ghanef should be about to arrive in Monaco in the next hour or so. By acting quickly, the CIA team had been able to move out of Paris and beat the Pakistanis to Monaco while traveling as a team with all their equipment and weapons, using the French TGV network of high-speed trains covering France. Dean and Erik had learned from experience years ago that, when in Europe, using the various local high-speed rail systems was about as fast as using planes, if you took account of the time wasted getting to and from airports and passing security checkpoints there, on top of making it much easier and safer to carry weapons and special mission equipment. Their trip by TGV from Paris to Marseilles had actually taken only three hours, with the team then taking a train connection to Monaco, whose train station was actually situated only a few minutes away on foot from the Hôtel Le Forum. A similar trip by air would have taken about the same time, on top of exposing the team to the danger of having their weapons and equipment discovered by French security officers posted at airports.

Ian Dorset unpacked his own suitcase, then took out his laptop computer and a miniature satellite dish with its base and connector box. Next, he fixed the dish to the corner of a desk next to a window and oriented it so that it would catch the signals from an American military satellite in geo-stationary orbit over the Mediterranean. Connecting the dish and its control box to his laptop computer, he then powered the latter and established within minutes a link via satellite with the classified U.S. Navy worldwide ship location system. It then took him only a minute to get the information he wanted.

“Erik, the SERENE is about fifty nautical miles from Monaco. It should arrive in about three to four hours.”

“Good! That will leave us some time to prepare.”

Taking out of his own equipment bag his Sig Sauer P229 9mm pistol and its shoulder holster rig, he put the rig on and checked his pistol before holstering it and covering it with a light, baggy wind jacket. Next, he took out and hid on himself a commando knife and an ultra-compact Glock 26 Gen 5 9mm pistol in an ankle holster, plus a miniature radio transceiver with hidden microphone and earphone. As for Dean, he put on a shoulder rig supporting his backup Model 629 .44 Magnum snub-nosed revolver and a miniature radio transceiver. His main weapon, a massive Desert Eagle .44 Magnum pistol, being too big to easily conceal on himself, went into a small sports bag with carrying strap, along with spare ammunition clips. Thinking twice about that, he replaced his Desert Eagle in the bag with an even bigger and heavier Smith & Wesson Model 500 revolver in caliber .500 Magnum equipped with a scope, along with .500 Magnum ammunition and four hand grenades, making Ian Dorset whistle in appreciation.

“We are taking out the really heavy artillery, are we?”

“Damn right we are, Ian! If the French DGSI or the Saudis ever try to annoy us, I want to be able to scare them away with the blast from this baby.”

“Oh, you certainly would get me running with that thing, Dean.”

“Well, let’s go for discretion first.” counseled Erik with a sardonic smile. “We don’t want to change Monaco into a field of ruins...unless we have to.”

“That’s my way of thinking!” replied Dean, grinning. Erik chuckled at that before continuing.

“Okay, we now need to track the movements and communications of Khan, Ghanef and the Saudis if we want a solid base for our next actions. Ian, check with Langley if they have any intercept updates from the NSA<sup>8</sup>’s Echelon<sup>9</sup> System. We will also need to track the movements of Khan and Ghanef once they will be in Monaco.

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<sup>8</sup> NSA: National Security Agency. A highly secretive U.S. government intelligence agency in charge of intercepting and listening to all kinds of electronic signals from around the World, including cell phone conversations, radio messages and Internet communications.

<sup>9</sup> Echelon: A highly sophisticated, computer-controlled signals analysis system used by the NSA to single out electronic signals containing key words chosen by NSA analysts.

Dean, I want you to go rent a fast car, so that we could then tail those Pakistanis inside the Monaco area. Since I am not planning for Ian and Julie to follow us around town, a two-seater will be acceptable, although a four-seater could allow the whole team to leave in a hurry if need be.”

“I will be reasonable about my choice of cars, Erik.” promised Dean before leaving the room. Erik also left the room then, but simply walked to the room next door and knocked on it, using a pre-arranged code and getting a muffled answer from inside.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Jones! We will need you in my room to assist Lyam.”

“I’ll be there in a minute!”

Satisfied, Erik then returned to his room, where Ian was already busy getting an encrypted connection with the CIA headquarters in Langley. With CIA human assets being quite limited in France, Erik had no choice but to rely mostly on technological means in order to track and spy on the two Pakistani men he was interested in. Hopefully, those technological means were going to allow him and his team to obtain information which would then help their mission.

Some ten minutes later, Julie, who had joined Ian at his laptop station, spoke up.

“Erik, we got a few interesting pointers from Echelon and from our Paris team via Langley. First, our Paris team managed to place a GPS tracker in one of Doctor Ghanef’s suitcases while he was waiting to board a private jet in Orly with General Khan.”

“Nice work!” said a smiling Erik, truly appreciating this piece of skilled spycraft. “And what is Echelon saying?”

“That it intercepted more communications by cell phone between Khan and probable Saudi agents on board the M/Y SERENE. Those calls tell us that Khan and Ghanef are to take rooms already reserved on their behalf at the Port Palace Hotel, just next to the yachting port, and to wait there for an emissary to go collect them to bring them to the SERENE, where they will meet ‘The Prince’. That prince was not explicitly named but I could bet that it designates Prince Mohammed Bin Salman himself.”

“That would not surprise me, actually. This business of clandestinely buying nuclear weapons is too sensitive to be let in the hands of mere flunkies, especially the way those Saudi royal flunkies screwed up in the Khashoggi Affair a year ago. Anything else?”

“Uh, yes.” said Julie, looking a bit circumspect. “Miss Farah Qalibaf is also coming to Monaco with her team. Echelon intercepted her last report to her bosses in Tehran. She told them that she would be staying at, hold on to your pants, Le Forum Hotel. It seems that her handlers balked at paying for rooms in other, more expensive hotels around Monaco.”

Erik rolled his eyes, both amused and annoyed.

“Well, it is nice to learn that the CIA is not alone in being cheap with field mission expenses. Damn! It will be a miracle if our team doesn’t end up in a shootout with Farah’s team right here.”

“You want my opinion about that, Erik?” said Julie, dead serious. “Why not collaborate together with her team? Our end goals seem to be quite similar after all and she seemed to be a reasonable person when you encountered her five years ago.”

“Her, maybe, but what about her agents? They may decide that Farah is going too far by accepting to work with us.”

“That is still a possibility.” recognized Julie. “After all, most Iranians would think that a woman’s judgment is not as good as that of a man. We would thus have to be quite diplomatic with Farah and her agents.”

“Us and Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps agents, being diplomatic with each other? Mister Moore would pull out the little hair he has left on his head if he hears about this.”

“Bof! He is about to lose his remaining hair anyway. My take is that, if we don’t come to a gentlemen’s agreement with the Iranians on this, this could sink both of our missions. The Iranians may be politically intransigent and dogmatic at times, but they are not stupid and they can be pragmatic when they want to. Maybe we could flatter their Persian ego to smooth our mutual relations.”

“The way King Leonidas did respond to the Persian envoy in the film ‘The 300’?”

“Uh, definitely not that way, Erik. Besides, they don’t have a Pit of Death in this hotel.”

“Rats!” replied a joking Erik, faking frustration.

Dean Price returned about one hour later, apparently agitated about something.

“Erik, I have rented a sports car: an all-electric Porsche Taycan Turbo S. It can actually seat four persons, although the rear seats are a bit tight. It is now in the nearby train station’s parking lot. By the way, guess who I just met in the lobby of the hotel.”

"Farah Qalibaf and her team?" replied Erik, making Dean look at him as if he was a magician.

"How the hell did you guess that?"

"Easy: Echelon intercepts told us that Farah was coming to Monaco and that her handlers told her to take rooms in a moderately-priced hotel, meaning Le Forum. Did she see you?"

"Of course she did! She was about as stunned and surprised as me when we nearly collided in the reception lobby, so I don't think that she came here just to piss us off."

"Okay! Do you know which rooms she and her team took?"

"I sure do! They asked for top floor rooms with a view on the bay. Farah will be our next-door neighbor, with her goons occupying the room next to hers."

Erik couldn't help lower his head and sigh, while Julie grinned with amusement.

"This is turning into a Keystone Cops comedy, truly!"

"You can add the French DGSI to that Keystone Cops act, Erik." announced Ian from his laptop station. "Echelon says that they are sending a team to Monaco to keep watching Khan and Ghanef, and their bosses seem to be as cheap as our bosses and Farah's bosses in terms of field expenditures."

This time, Erik didn't find that piece of news amusing in the least. While he could possibly make a deal with the Iranians, the French would never consciously allow foreign agents to operate independently on their soil: they were too proud for that. While Monaco was theoretically an independent principality, its foreign relations were still handled in Paris, thus the French DGSI would probably be able to do about anything they wanted in Monaco.

"Like the French would say: MERDE<sup>10</sup>! I have no choice now but to send a report to Director Moore and ask for further instructions. This could turn political big time."

**08:50 (Washington Time) / 14:50 (Paris Time)**

**Office of the CIA's Deputy Director for Operations**

**CIA Headquarters, Langley, Virginia**

**U.S.A.**

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<sup>10</sup> Merde: 'Shit' in French.

Julian Moore nearly sucked air in as he read the latest field report from Erik Johnson: this case was indeed getting more complicated and riskier by the hour. To have his field team sharing the same hotel as the Iranian team was bad enough as it was, but to also see a French counter-espionage team reside at Le Forum could have catastrophic consequences. On the other hand, simply moving his team out of the hotel after only a few hours' stay would only attract the immediate attention of the DGSI, thus would be quite counterproductive. Moore was also hesitant to pass this to Director Clayburn, even though he was supposed to keep him informed about the progress in this mission. Clayburn was a political appointee with zero intelligence experience and was also a total sycophant of the present White House administration. The way the President despised Iran, Moore was sure that Clayburn would refuse permission to Johnson's team to collaborate in any way with the Iranian team and may even order Johnson to eliminate the Iranians, something that could only end in an indescribable mess in Monaco and would compromise the mission concerning the Pakistani plan to sell nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia. Another worry for Moore was about how Clayburn and the President would react to the attempt by Saudis to obtain nuclear weapons. They may just decide that the Saudis were justified in acquiring such weapons in order to counter the threat represented by Iran. Most competent geopolitical analysts and experts would agree that such a thing would greatly endanger peace and stability around the Middle East, but Moore and his colleague in charge of intelligence analysis had already clashed a number of times with Clayburn and with White House officials, who had repeatedly refused to believe the analysis presented by intelligence experts, including those from CIA analysts. Right now, if he would present Johnson's report to Clayburn for a decision, Moore was nearly certain that his response would be nothing short of inflammatory. Mulling all this in his head for a long moment, Moore finally decided to do something that was contrary to normal CIA rules: he was going to have to short-circuit both Clayburn and the White House on this and to act outside of the chain of command. This could well cost him his job, but better that than to risk his field agents for the wrong reasons.

**15:13 (Paris Time) / 09:13 (Washington Time)**

**Office of the Director of the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure  
DGSI Headquarters, Levallois-Perret, Haut-de-Seine Department, France**

“Yes, Miss Lenoir?”

“Monsieur, you have the deputy director for operations of the CIA, Mister Julian Moore, on our encrypted line from Washington.”

Nicolas Lerner, a relatively young man for his position at the age of 42, was a bit surprised by this but went over it quickly.

“Very well, Miss Lenoir. I will take his call.”

Lerner then pushed a button on his telephone, selecting his overseas encrypted line, which used a NATO<sup>11</sup>-approved cypher system, and then spoke in his fluent but accented English.

“Director Moore, to what may I owe the pleasure of your call?”

“Director Lerner, I am calling to seek your discrete collaboration in a very sensitive case concerning the Middle East and which has seen players use French territory.”

Lerner understood at once which case Moore was alluding to, as it was presently his most important priority, but decided to play dumb at first.

“And what would that case be about, Director Moore?”

“A case where two Pakistani officials, General Mohammed Khan and Doctor Afizullah Ghanef, came to France in order to discretely negotiate the selling of Pakistani nuclear warheads to Saudi Arabia. Those two Pakistani officials have now moved to Monaco, but I am sure that you already know about that, Director Lerner.”

Lerner understood by those words that Moore knew about the DGSI surveillance operation against Khan and Ghanef, thus decided to be more open from then on.

“We are effectively aware of the passage of these two Pakistani officials in France, Director Moore. May I ask what the CIA’s interest is in this case?”

“Something I am sure is also of high interest to France, Director Lerner: the possible destabilization of the whole Middle East if Saudi Arabia succeeds in buying Pakistani-made nuclear weapons. You know as well as me how catastrophic such an outcome could be and how much it could hurt the interests of both our nations.”

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<sup>11</sup> NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Founded after World War Two, the NATO alliance had as its initial main goal to help counter the military threat represented by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Both the U.S.A. and France are members of the NATO alliance.

"I have to agree with you on this, Director Moore. So, how could I be of help to you in this case?"

"What I would like is for you to, uh, show some comprehension and tolerance towards the actions my service could take in order to prevent such a nuclear weapons deal from happening. Maybe you could even arrest Khan and Ghanef on some pretext, something that could well compromise their attempts at dealing with Saudi senior officials."

"Unfortunately, I presently don't have enough evidence to justify arresting those two Pakistani men, Director Moore. What we have are only suppositions and suspicions, nothing more."

"Really?" replied Moore, using a disbelieving tone. "You have over twenty agents watching these men and you still don't have more than suppositions? I find that hard to believe, Director Lerner."

"That is however the present situation as we know it, Director Moore." lied Lerner. There were a few seconds of silence on the line before Moore spoke again.

"Director Lerner, understand that the political ramifications of this affair could prove highly divisive here in Washington if it became more widely known. I am presently doing my best to keep this case under wraps, but getting some cooperation from you would help me a lot, or are you truly indifferent to the possible consequences of this affair?"

"Mister Moore," replied Lerner in a more pointed tone, "everything concerning the security and interests of France concerns me greatly. I am well aware of the grave consequences of the Saudis possibly gaining access to operational nuclear warheads, as I am also certain that other countries would also be concerned by this. I am however not ready to let competing foreign agents create mayhem on French soil, as it is my clear duty to prevent such a thing from happening. While I am ready to keep this conversation of ours confidential, I am in the incapacity to help you in this case. I am sorry, Director Moore, but my hands are about as tied as yours. Thank you for your call."

Closing the line and putting down his telephone receiver, Nicolas Lerner thought about the call for a moment. He was actually as concerned as Moore about this possible buying of nuclear weapons by Saudi Arabia. However, Moore had been right about this case being politically divisive, and not only in the United States. A number of ministers in France were presently trying to push the sale of French military and security

equipment to Saudi Arabia, despite the unpopularity such deals would attract if known by the public at large. Lerner was personally against such deals, but he was unfortunately not high enough on the totem pole to block them or even object openly to them. Finally taking a decision, he picked up his telephone and composed the number of his head of surveillance operations, who was in charge of the team sent to Monaco to check on Khan and Ghanef.

### **17:06 (Paris Time)**

#### **Room 408, Hôtel Le Forum**

#### **Monaco**

Farah was discussing with Hassan and Ali about their next moves when a couple of knocks on her door interrupted her and made her look at the door briefly before she made a silent sign for Hassan to go post himself near the door, ready to use his silenced pistol. Walking quietly to the door, Farah waited for a second knock on it before speaking up in French.

“Who is it?”

“Your friendly American neighbor!” said a man’s voice she recognized at once. “Could we talk...peacefully?”

“Uh, of course!”

Before unlocking her door, Farah looked at Hassan, who had his pistol pointed and ready, and spoke to him in a whisper, using Farsi.

“Don’t shoot unless this American draws a weapon or attacks me.”

The way Hassan looked back at her told Farah that he didn’t like this one bit. However, she knew that Hassan was a highly disciplined and responsible agent who was able to control himself in the worst situations. She thus unlocked her door and opened it wide, hiding Hassan behind the door at the same time, to end up facing a smiling ‘Stryker’. The big American, wearing a dark suit and sunglasses, was waving in one hand a small improvised white flag.

“I’m only here to talk, Farah, I swear.”

“If so, would you mind opening wide your vest and then turn around, to prove that you came unarmed? Please step inside first.”

"No problem!" replied Dean before doing as she asked. Farah, not seeing any weapons at his belt or around his torso, then did a pat-down, checking in particular around his ankles, but found nothing.

"Okay: you are clean!"

"Of course, I am clean, Farah: I took a shower this morning."

His reply attracted a new smile on Farah's face.

"Stryker, I must say that I like your sense of humor."

"Only my sense of humor? Gee, I'm hurt! By the way, your goon can lower his silenced pistol: I truly came in peace."

"For what purpose? Discuss the outrageous prices in Monaco restaurants?"

"No! to discuss our plans of action concerning Khan and Ghanef." replied Dean, becoming serious.

"OUR plans? What makes you think that I would be ready to work with you and your colleague, Sparrow?"

"The fact that our two teams have a similar objective: preventing the Pakistanis from selling nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia. Your reasons are of course different to our reasons to want to prevent that, but the end goal is similar. As the saying goes: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. By joining our respective capabilities and collaborating together during this mission, our chances of success can only be greatly increased."

"And what makes you think that my team would need your team's help to succeed, Stryker?"

"Well, I have no doubt that your two goons here are expert at killing someone and blowing up shit, but you must know that the Great Satan<sup>12</sup> possesses many highly advanced electronic spying systems. Those systems allow us to learn things that you may not know about and that could be useful to you. I would be ready to share that extra intelligence with you, if you agree to keep the peace with us and to work in concert with us."

"A tempting offer, I must say, but what tells me that you won't kill me and my men the moment that our mission is accomplished?"

Dean took a hurt expression on hearing her.

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<sup>12</sup> The Great Satan: An expression used by Iranian leaders to describe the United States.

“Come on, Farah! We were able to work together effectively five years ago, when we prevented those ISIS bastards from receiving sophisticated Russian weapons. I am sure that we could again work together to our mutual profit.”

“Okay, big guy, you just earned an extra couple of minutes. Let’s go sit down before continuing this conversation.”

With both Hassan Kosravi and Ali Suleiman staying on their feet and standing in opposite corners of the room, their pistols in hand, Farah made Dean sit on the bed, while she sat on the chair provided with the room’s desk. She then eyed critically the big CIA man: in any other circumstance, she or any other Iranian agent would consider him at once as a mortal threat and react accordingly. However, her past experience from five years ago, along with their night encounter in Paris, had secretly made her fond of the one she still only knew as ‘Stryker’. However, she could not afford to show that fondness in front of her two male agents: that could quickly enough attract accusations of treason against her, something that could doom her once back in Iran.

“I must say first that I am surprised that your government has accepted to work with my team on this case, Stryker.”

She, like her two agents, didn’t miss the slightly embarrassed expression that appeared on Dean’s face then.

“Uh, actually, things are a bit more complicated than that, Farah. Only our direct supervisor in Langley knows and approves about us contacting you. Neither the Director of the CIA nor my President or his intelligence staffers know about it and they would most probably repudiate our deal and recall us if they ever learned about it. Politically, this is like being in the middle of a minefield. Me, my team and our supervisor in Langley are doing something of a rogue operation. However, we are not doing this because we want to betray our country. Rather, we decided that this was the most logical and sensible course of action in order to fulfill our mission, which is to prevent the Saudis from obtaining Pakistani nuclear weapons.”

“I thought that your President was personally quite friendly with the Saudis, especially with Prince Bin Salman.”

Dean let out an audible sigh on hearing those words.

“Trump... I’d rather not talk about him right now, Farah. To prove to you that we really are ready to work with you on this mission, here are a few pieces of info which we were able to get via electronic means: first off, Khan and Ghanef have rooms reserved for them by the Saudis at the Port palace Hotel, next to the yachting port. They have in

fact arrived there by now. Second, the Saudis will soon send to them an emissary who will in turn escort them to the port, where they will take a boat and sail out to the Saudi royal yacht, the M/Y SERENE, which has dropped anchor off the Bay of Monaco. That is where the discussions on the selling of nuclear weapons will be held. So, is all this helpful enough for you, Farah?"

Farah exchanged quick glances with Hassan and Ali before looking back at Dean.

"Maybe! How exactly do you propose that we, uh, work together?"

"Simple: we help your team with our electronic surveillance means and provide you with an armed backup team while you do whatever dirty work needs to be done. Let's say that your government would have much less scruples than my government about shooting up or blowing up Saudis."

"An American CIA team providing armed backup to an Iranian team against the Saudis..." said Farah, smiling slightly. "Many in Tehran would laugh at that notion...or scream in indignation about it."

"That would actually be perfectly understandable to us, meaning me and my team, so my counter to that would be for you not to mention our help, at least officially, and take all the credits for yourself for a job well done. By the way, I mentioned earlier how good American electronic listening systems are. Thus, if you report back to Tehran, be very careful about what you say and how you say it. If Someone else than our direct boss in Washington finds out about our proposal to collaborate with you, then I will be able to kiss goodbye to my CIA's job and may even end up in jail. Believe me when I say that I am risking as much as you in this affair, Farah."

Hassan Kosravi, who had seen all kinds of complicated and sometimes even bizarre situations in his previous 21 years as an IRGC agent, also prided himself about being a good judge of character. If that big American was lying and acting, then he was damn good at it. Taking a decision, he holstered back his pistol and spoke softly in Farsi to Farah.

"I am ready to believe him, Farah. Their help could make our mission much easier."

Ali Suleiman, who was himself no beginner to clandestine field work, hesitated only for a second before also holstering his pistol and speaking to Farah.

"I am also ready to work with those Americans, Farah."

"Thank you both, my friends." Replied Farah in Farsi before switching to English while looking at Dean. "I accept your offer of help, Stryker."

"Thank you, Farah! By the way, be advised that a six-person French DGSI surveillance team is now lodging in this hotel, on this floor. Don't be alarmed by that: they don't know that my team and your team are also lodging here. It is just that their superiors are as stingy as my superiors and your superiors: they were told to use the most affordable hotel in Monaco that would still be acceptable in terms of quality, thus they came to Le Forum, like me and you did. If we play it cool, nothing bad should happen with those frogs."

"Well," said Farah, a bit amused, "this may be the first time when I will have breakfast in a hotel restaurant where more than half of the customers will be packing weapons."

"Pah! I saw worse in a Beirut restaurant ten years ago. Hopefully, that French team will include some pretty ladies." replied Dean, making the three Iranians smile.

"Always the ladies' man, Stryker?" asked Farah, making Dean grin.

"Hey, you are talking with the darling of the CIA's secretaries, Farah." He however became serious again in an instant.

"I believe that our next move should be to put Khan and Ghanef's hotel under surveillance, so that we know when they will leave it to go by boat to the SERENE. I already rented a car and will drive it, with one of your men with me to watch the people entering and leaving the hotel. In the meantime, my partner will keep listening to the Pakistani's cell phones and will keep you up to date on what he is hearing. By sharing the job, we will be able to work in shifts and be able to catch some sleep from time to time."

"That sounds like a simple, reasonable plan to me. Hassan, you will go first to watch the Port Palace Hotel with Stryker. Ali, you will go sleep for a few hours, so that you could replace Hassan in six hours."

"Understood, Major!"

Dean instantly smiled on hearing that last word.

"You are now a major, Farah? Wow! Congratulation!"

"And you, Stryker? Did you get a promotion out of your mission in Spain five years ago?"

"Me? I am still a field underling who is kept in the dark and fed shit. My only reward is that they still allow me to date the secretaries in Langley."

Even the normally cold and impassive Hassan Kosravi snickered and smiled at that theatrical response: at least, a surveillance shift with that big American could end up being less tense than he had expected it to be.

**17:41 (Paris Time)**

**Monaco train station's parking lot**

**Avenue d'Alsace, Monaco**

Hassan Kosravi's eyes opened wide when he arrived with Dean at the parking spot of the car the American had rented.

"A Porsche? It must cost a fortune to even rent it."

"It is effectively not cheap." recognized Dean, who was carrying a sports bag containing his surveillance equipment and heavy weapons. "However, it is the perfect car for surveillance in Monaco. This is a Porsche Taycan Turbo S, with four-wheel all-electric drive. It is extremely quiet, very agile, is compact and, most importantly, very fast and nimble."

"How fast?" asked the Iranian agent as he admired the lines of the four-door sports car.

"It has a top speed close to 270 kilometers per hour and can accelerate from zero to 100 kilometers per hour in 2.8 seconds. It should do perfectly for us. I however hope to return it intact, so we will try to avoid gunfights and car bumping as much as possible."

"Wow! You could nearly run in a F-1 competition with this."

"It would actually have a chance in Monaco, as the circuit here emphasizes agility and acceleration over pure speed. Hop in!"

Hassan took place in the front passenger seat, a very comfortable padded model, and admired the dashboard while Dean sat behind the wheel and switched on the car. To Hassan's surprise, who had never ridden in an all-electric car before, there was absolutely no engine noise or other noise to indicate that the Porsche was now on, other than the fact that the dashboard lit up.

"You are right, Stryker: this car is extremely quiet."

"Wait till we speed a bit: it will stay quiet, except for the noise of the tires rolling on the pavement."

Dean then looked around the parking lot for a few seconds before rolling out of his spot. However, instead of leaving the half-empty lot, he rolled in absolute silence to a new

spot between a delivery van and a big utility SUV, both of which were much longer and higher than his Porsche, attracting a question from the surprised Hassan.

"Uh, why did we move to a new parking spot?",

"I needed to find a spot out of direct view of the security cameras protecting this parking lot: I want to change the plates on this car, in case someone notices us and tries to trace who owns it."

"Oh, I see!"

Dean searched for a moment inside his sports bag and took out a pair of German license plates and a screwdriver before stepping out of the car. It took him only four minutes to change the plates on the Porsche before returning with the rental plates inside the car. Putting the plates inside his sports bag, he then smiled to Hassan, who was still acting suspicious about him, something he frankly could excuse him for.

"We are ready to roll. By the way, call me 'Donald' instead of 'Stryker' from now on: 'Stryker' sounds so codename."

"Donald... Is that your real first name?"

"Of course not!" replied Dean, grinning. "Do I continue to call you 'Hassan'?"

"Yes! It is a common name around the Middle East. How are we going to proceed from now on, Donald?"

"We will drive around a bit and pass near the Port Palace Hotel a few times to spot its various entrance and exit points, then will park in a spot near the hotel on John F. Kennedy Avenue and start watching the people going in and out of it."

Hassan nodded his head, satisfied, as Dean rolled out of his present spot and left the parking lot, turning right on Avenue d'Alsace, then right again on Boulevard Rainier III. All along, the Porsche proved to be stunningly quiet, allowing Hassan to speak without needing to raise the volume of his voice.

"These electric cars are truly silent: I will remember that for the next time I will need a car for surveillance operations."

"Do take into account the limited autonomy between charges of electric cars, Hassan. For highway tailing on long distances you will be better off with a hybrid, gasoline-electric model. However, this Porsche is good for over 600 kilometers between charges and Monaco's territory is very small, so we have plenty of battery power for this job."

Dean then drove down to the yachting port area and passed slowly in front of the Port Palace Hotel, continuing on down J.F.K. Avenue and turning on a side street in order to check the rear façade of the hotel. After some eight minutes of slow driving around, Dean finally backed into a parking spot which was in direct view of the hotel's main entrance, but which was also in a shadowy zone away from the nearest street light. Once parked, Dean searched again in his sports bag and took out two compact day/night scopes, handing one to Hassan.

"Here, use this to check those coming in and out of the hotel. However, be discrete with the way you use it. Khan and Ghanef still have a few Pakistani security goons with them and we don't know who will come with that announced Saudi emissary."

"Don't worry about me, Donald: I have plenty of experience at this kind of game." After a few seconds of silence, Hassan spoke softly while eyeing the hotel's entrance.

"Farah told me and Ali that you helped her during a mission in Spain five years ago. Would you care telling me more about that?"

"No problem, as I strongly suspect that she reported our encounter in detail once back in Iran. Basically, we were both checking on a Russian arms dealer operating from Spain, who was suspected of being about to send a big shipment of advanced weapons to those ISIS bastards. Since both of our countries wanted badly to stop that deal from happening, me and my partner Sparrow decided to join forces with Farah on that mission or, at least, not interfere with each other. That deal proved beneficial to both of us and we both ended hiding on the ship carrying the weapons from Spain to Turkey. However, a bunch of ISIS fighters tried to board our cargo ship off the Lebanese coast and we had to fight them off. Farah and I ended up mutually saving each other's lives during that fight and I gained a lot of admiration and respect for her. Our political ideologies may be very different, but she is still in my eyes a very brave and skilled woman."

"And a very pretty one as well, right?" asked Hassan, wanting to see what 'Donald' would respond to that. Dean simply nodded his head soberly once.

"That I can't deny, Hassan. However, don't think that Farah or me would betray our respective countries just because we admire each other. I would still kill her, although with regret, if my mission called for it, and I believe she would do the same on her part. However, my partner and I have pledged to collaborate peacefully with your

team for this mission and we intend to keep our word. If we ever have to shoot at each other during some future mission, then so be it.”

It was the turn of Hassan to nod his head once: his instincts told him that he could trust this big American’s word on this.

Some forty minutes later, the voice of Erik sounded in Dean’s radio earpiece.

“Heads up, Stryker: Khan just got a call telling him that an emissary is about to arrive at his hotel and that he is to come down and wait for him at the entrance.”

“Understood, Sparrow. We will keep our eyes opened.”

Dean then looked at Hassan, who was scanning the persons walking along the sidewalks with his scope.

“The Saudi emissary will soon show up and the Pakistanis were told to come down to the entrance to wait for him there.”

“Got it! What is your plan for once that emissary shows up?”

“We will take photos and films of that emissary, then will tail his car. I suspect that he is going to then drive Khan and Ghanef to the yachting port, where they will board a fast boat to go on the SERENE.”

“I don’t like that last part, to be frank. Once on the Saudi royal yacht, they will be out of reach for us and we won’t be able to listen on to what will be said on that yacht. We should simply kill those two Pakistani bastards and sabotage this nuclear weapons deal at once.”

“Too risky...and possibly futile. We would then risk seeing the Pakistanis and Saudis complete this deal inside their own territories, making it a lot more difficult for us to interfere with it. On the other hand, once Khan and Ghanef will return from their meeting on the SERENE, I am sure that Khan will want to send a message or make a call to Pakistan to report on the progress of the talks and possibly to seek approval for any final price agreed to by the Saudis. Then, we will be in a much better position to kill that deal.”

“Hmm, you are right.” conceded Hassan, seeing the logic in Dean’s thinking.

Seven minutes later, Hassan saw Khan and Ghanef come out of the hotel’s main entrance, surrounded by four Pakistani bodyguards.

“Here are Khan and Ghanef! They are now sitting on the sidewalk bench nearest to the hotel’s entrance.”

"And I see a big Mercedes coming up along the avenue... it is now slowing down and is about to stop in front of the hotel: this may be our Saudi emissary."

With Dean switching to a digital camera with zoom lens while Hassan continued to use his day/night scope, the two men watched as the Mercedes came to a stop near the bench on which Khan and Ghanef sat. What appeared to be two bodyguards in suits stepped out of the Mercedes, with one of them opening the rear right door of the sedan for the Pakistanis. Dean suddenly heard Hassan swear briefly in Farsi before continuing in English.

"That bodyguard opening the rear right door: I recognize him! That is a French-born ISIS fighter known in Iraq as 'al-Harb', who is actively wanted there for multiple war crimes. His real name is Jean Levasseur and he is wanted by Interpol for the massacre of hundreds of civilians and of prisoners of ISIS."

Dean's jaws tightened as he focused his camera on the said al-Harb and took multiple pictures of him and of the Saudi car as Khan and Ghanef sat in it.

"A wanted ISIS fighter and war criminal, working directly for the ruler of Saudi Arabia? I am really starting to get pissed about these links between ISIS and the Saudis. I have to report this at once."

Keying his radio microphone, Dean then spoke while continuing to watch the Mercedes.

"Stryker to Sparrow: urgent message, over!"

"Go ahead, Stryker." replied nearly at once Erik Johnson.

"Sparrow, the Saudi emissary's car has arrived at the hotel and is picking up our two customers. One of the bodyguards who stepped out of it is a Jean Levasseur, also known as 'al-Harb', a known ISIS expatriate fighter and war criminal wanted by Interpol. Do you want me to take some special action, over?"

There was a short silence on the radio before Erik spoke again.

"Negative! Follow that car and take as many pictures and films as you can: we will want to send that evidence upstairs, so that a firm decision could be taken, over."

"Understood! Out!" replied Dean, who then looked at Hassan.

"No direct action for the moment. We will follow that car and take as many pictures and films as possible, to allow my superiors to consider more firm action."

"It is disappointing for me not to be able to kill that ISIS bastard right away, but I can see the reasons for waiting. By the way, I could swear that this Mercedes is armored."

"I concur. I have multiple pictures of it and of its license plate. We will be able to investigate this later on. Now, we are going to see where it will go."

Dean then waited until the Mercedes had started to roll away before switching on his Porsche and following the big sedan.

They didn't have to drive for long, as the Mercedes very soon turned on the Quai des États-Unis, along which a long line of big luxury yachts was docked, their sterns next to the quay and their bows pointed towards the center of the harbor. The Mercedes then rolled along the Quai des États-Unis for maybe 300 meters before turning on the Quai de l'Hirondelle, which jutted out from the coast at right angle. Dean, who had carefully studied both maps and satellite photos of Monaco and its port, guessed where the Mercedes was going and decided to veer left once on the Quai de l'Hirondelle, to then go park nearly immediately on the east side of the long quay, which was split in two by a line of commercial low buildings ending with the big structure of the port's Harbor Master's center. Hassan threw a suspicious look at Dean as the latter was parking his Porsche in front of a seafood restaurant.

"What are you doing? We are supposed to follow that Mercedes."

"We are, but on foot from now on and with our equipment. Follow me."

Grabbing his sports bag before stepping out of his Porsche, Dean then started walking towards a small alley that linked the western and eastern sections of the quay while speaking in a low voice to Hassan.

"I suspect that Khan and Ghanef will be dropped on this quay and that they will then board a small boat which will bring them to the SERENE. We will film and photograph as much as possible that small boat and the people on it."

"Oh, okay! I'm sorry if I sounded suspicious for a moment."

"Forget about that, Hassan. You couldn't know."

Hassan then followed Dean, who turned on the sidewalk next to the restaurant's façade and walked for about twenty meters before stopping and taking position behind a large concrete pillar. By then, Hassan was able to see that the Mercedes had stopped along the outer side of the quay, with its passengers stepping out. On the water, attached stern-first to the quay was a powerful speedboat in which stood three men. There was also a small flag floating at the stern pole of the speedboat. Raising his day/night scope and zooming it to better see the details, Hassan spoke up after a few seconds as Khan and Ghanef were escorted aboard the speedboat.

“That speedboat is flying the Saudi flag: it must be one of the boats of the SERENE.”

“I know, I am filming this and taking in the details.” replied Dean while keeping his eyes on the mini-screen of his digital camera. “With these images, we will be able to prove to my superiors that the Saudis are mixed up with Khan and Ghanef, with the Saudis also using the services of at least one ex-ISIS fighter and war criminal. That should wake up a few people in Washington.”

“Would you be ready to give me copies of those images and films afterwards?” asked Hassan. Contrary to his expectations, Dean nodded his head at once.

“Why not? We are working together towards a common goal, aren’t we?”

“Thank you!” said Hassan, meaning it. His opinion on the big American going up one notch, he then continued observing the speedboat. He stiffened and swore as the speedboat was about to leave the quay.

“The man who just retrieved the mooring lines on the speedboat, the one in black coverall and with a pistol belt, I believe that he is another ISIS fighter wanted in Iraq. I can’t remember his name just now. Can you take a good picture of his face, Donald?”

“I sure can... Done!”

Dean continued filming as the speedboat then drove away from the quay and started sailing out of the harbor. As soon as it was out of his sight, he put his camera back in his bag and looked at Hassan.

“Khan and Ghanef will most probably spend a few hours on the SERENE before returning to their hotel. Time for us to bring back our loot to our teams, so that we could send an alarm to our capitals.”

**13:53 (Washington Time) / 19:53 (Paris Time)**

**Office of the Deputy Director for Operations**

**CIA Headquarters, Langley, Virginia**

**USA**

Julian Moore was going through his ‘in’ pile when his chief analyst, Francis Cooper, knocked on his door.

“Yes?”

Cooper, a grizzled veteran of field work who had turned analyst after being wounded seriously in Afghanistan and had then eventually become the chief analyst of the Operations Division, stuck his head in the door frame.

“We received a report from our team in Monaco and I believe that you should see it and then pass it upstairs. There are a few disturbing things signaled in Johnson’s report.”

“Alright! Show it to me, Francis.”

Walking quickly to Moore’s desk, Cooper then handed him both a file and a flash drive.

“The file contains the report and the prints of the more significant pictures taken by our agents in Monaco, sir, while this flash drive contains the video images of interest filmed by them. Basically, we have solid proof that Khan and Ghanef are presently dealing directly with the Saudis, probably with Prince Bin Salman himself. On top of that, the photos taken show that Bin Salman is actively sheltering and employing ex-ISIS fighters who are wanted for war crimes by both Interpol and the Iraqi government.”

“WHAT?” nearly shouted Moore, anger suddenly flaring up in him.

“You heard me well, sir. We now have photographic proof of this. One of those ex-ISIS fighters is a Jean Levasseur, aka al-Harb<sup>13</sup>, a French expatriate who has massacred hundreds of civilians and tortured and killed dozens of prisoners in Iraq before disappearing when the Caliphate crumbled.”

Moore didn’t reply to that and did his best to contain his anger while reading the printed report and then watching the videos taken in Monaco. Cooper pointed to one of the men in the Saudi speedboat as it was still moored at its quay.

“This man is another ex-ISIS fighter and foreign expatriate, an American named Michael Sutherland who took the nom-de-guerre of ‘al-Eiqab<sup>14</sup>’. He is in fact wanted by us for war crimes in Iraq and Syria. It is now apparent that he is working directly for the Saudi royalty. Allied with the fact that we now have solid proofs that the Saudis are trying to buy Pakistani nuclear weapons, I believe that this case should be kicked upstairs to Director Clayburn.”

Moore gave a skeptical look to his chief analyst.

“I would tend to fully agree with you on that, Francis, but I am not sure that our good Director Clayburn will have the good sense and balls to push for action with the

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<sup>13</sup> Harb: Arabic word for ‘war’.

<sup>14</sup> Eiqab: Arabic word for ‘punishment’.

President. Don't forget that Bin Salman and our President have a good rapport and that they agree on Iran being a mutual threat. Could you clean up this report and the previous reports and take out any mention of collaboration and active contact between our team and the Iranians in France? I want Director Clayburn to believe that we gathered this intel all by ourselves."

"Understood, sir! You should have the edited reports within one hour."

"Excellent!"

With Cooper leaving him the file and the flash drive and then leaving the office, Moore was left alone to think about these new developments. An idea then brought a smile to his lips. Even if Clayburn would refuse to act on Johnson's reports, there was still something he could do by himself to make the Saudis a bit miserable. Grabbing his telephone receiver, he punched the button for the encrypted overseas line and then composed a number, ending up with a female voice answering him in French.

"DGS Command Center!"

"Miss, this is Julian Moore, Deputy Director of Operations at the CIA, in Langley. I need to speak urgently with Director Lerner about a possible threat to French national security..."

**21:38 (Paris Time)**

**Room 408, Hôtel Le Forum**

**Monaco**

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Donald! Can you open?"

"One minute!"

Hiding under a pillow her silencer-equipped .22 caliber pistol, Farah then went to the door of her room and unlocked it, smiling to Dean after opening her door.

"Come in, Donald!"

"Thanks!" said Dean, who then walked in to allow Farah to close back and lock her door. The Iranian woman then looked at him soberly.

"You came for work, I presume?"

"You presumed right, Farah. We intercepted a cell phone conversation by Khan, who called someone in Pakistan from the SERENE. In it, Khan was asking approval for a deal worth 900 million dollars for the delivery of ten Pakistani-made fission-type

nuclear warheads, each of a yield of 35 kilotons. He also said that the Saudis wanted to discuss as well the possible buying of more nuclear warheads in the future.”

Farah paled visibly on hearing those words and had to lean again a nearby wall.

“Ten nuclear bombs? By Allah! That would be enough to cause immense damage to my country. Are you sure about that information?”

“Quite sure!” replied Dean, who then showed her a small flash drive stick. “We made a copy of those intercepts in both original and deciphered forms on this drive. It is now yours to keep. I promise that we didn’t include any kind of virus or hacking tool in it. However, I would again stress to you not to send this data verbatim to Tehran: it would unmask to Washington the fact that we are passing to you some highly classified information.”

Farah took the tiny stick and examined it for a second before looking back at Dean.

“Why? Why are you giving me such precious information? Many leaders in your country would like nothing better than to see Iran devastated by nuclear strikes, while most Americans consider us as a threat to them.”

“You may be right about that, Farah, but many more other Americans would not condone an unprovoked nuclear attack on Iran by Saudi Arabia. Our President may be chummy with Prince Bin Salman, but many in our Congress and among the American population at large have little love for Saudi Arabia as well. Contrary to some of our leaders, they still remember that most of the terrorists in the 9/11 attacks were Saudis. Furthermore, we don’t wish for another large-scale war in the Middle East, especially if it involves nuclear weapons.”

“Thank you, Donald, from the bottom of my heart. I will make sure that my superiors in Iran will receive this information quickly...in a cleaned up, anonymous format.”

“Then, I will ask you to make your superiors understand this: please do not use this to initiate a war with Saudi Arabia, in which case the United States would be forced reluctantly to defend the Saudis. Let us take care of this...quietly.”

“I will pass along your warning, Donald. Anything else?”

“Not at this time. However, I also came to collect either Hassan or Ali, so that one of them could come with me to resume surveillance of the Port Palace Hotel once Khan and Ghanef return from the SERENE.”

“Both are gone for a few hours, to take care of something. I will go with you as soon as I will have transmitted your info to Tehran. Just wait in your room until I call you in a couple of hours.”

“Then, I will go take a nap, in order to be rested before starting again our surveillance work. See you then!”

Dean then walked out of the room, leaving alone Farah, who still had the flash drive in one hand. Looking at it again, she inhaled deeply, then walked to her laptop computer and switched it on from its ‘sleep’ status.

### **23:17 (Paris Time)**

#### **Private auto parts shop and repair garage**

#### **Rue des Dominicaines, District of Belsunce**

#### **Marseille, France**

Ali Boumediene felt reassured enough to put his pistol back at his belt after looking at his late visitors through the steel security grill protecting the glass door of his auto parts shop and garage: one of the two men was an old customer who had proved to be discreet and to pay cash on the spot. Unlocking and opening his door and the security grill, he let in his two visitors, looking quickly up and down his street to check for suspect vehicles or people before closing and locking them back. Turning to face his visitors, Ali briefly bowed to the older man and spoke to him in Arabic.

“Salaam aleikum, Hassan! What may I do for you at this late hour?”

“And aleikum salaam to you, Ali! My friend and I are in need of some of your special auto parts. As the Americans would say, we want to do a ‘cash and carry’ deal.”

“Aaah, the kind of deal I prefer! Follow me, please!”

Ali then led his two visitors through his auto parts sales section, then into a connecting warehouse, where he went to a solid-looking steel door leading down to the basement. Unlocking that door and going down a flight of concrete steps, he ended up in a vast basement lined with multiple concrete pillars and containing dozens of crates and boxes of varying sizes and shapes. He then proudly swept his arms around.

“My Ali Baba Cave, still well furnished, as you can see. So, what do you need exactly, Hassan?”

“Explosives! Lots of them and of the most powerful type you have. Also, I would need detonators, ignition wires and a Deadman’s switch.”

The mention of the last item prompted Ali into eyeing somberly his older customer.

“A Deadman’s switch? You are not planning...”

“Don’t worry, Ali: that is as a last resort only. So, do you have all these things?”

“The detonators, ignition wires and Deadman’s switch are no problems. I also have plenty of death chord if you wish some, plus a few radio-controlled detonator units. As for powerful explosives, you are in luck: I recently received something quite special from Libya. Come!”

Walking along the piles of boxes and crates, the trio finally stopped in front of a series of solid-looking polymer crates of the kind used to ship high-value weapons like portable missiles. Opening one of the crates, Ali smiled to Hassan while pointing a finger at the content of the crate.

“You won’t find much better than this, my friend: those cylindrical containers you see are packed full of a mixture of HMX and RDX, two of the most powerful explosives known to this day. They are in the form of a white powdery substance and are quite stable, despite having about 66 percent more detonating power per kilo than TNT.”

“I know about HMX and RDX.” replied a smiling Hassan, pleased by this. “May I ask where these explosives come from?”

“You may! They were originally the explosive filler inside a number of aircraft bombs which belonged to the Libyan Air Force. With the chaos actually reigning inside Libya, many of those bombs and also dozens of artillery shells were, uh, acquired by one of my suppliers in Libya. However, I must caution you that those explosives are quite a lot more expensive than TNT, or even C4 or Semtex.”

In response, Hassan grinned and took something out of one pocket of his trench coat and showed it to Ali, whose eyes widened at the sight of the three small bars of gold in Hassan’s hand.

“I have more of those, if needed. So, how much for 400 kilos of that mixture, plus detonators, wires and switches?”

“FOUR HUNDRED KILOS OF HMX-RDX MIXTURE?” exclaimed Ali, taken aback. “What the hell are you planning to blow up? The Eiffel Tower?”

“No!” replied a grinning Hassan. “Just an enemy of Iran. By the way, would you happen to also have some body armor in your magic cave?”

**19:18 (Washington Time) / 01:18 (Paris Time)**

**Office of the Director of the CIA**

**CIA Headquarters, Langley, Virginia**

**USA**

Julian Moore hid his frustration as he was finally able to meet Director James Clayburn in his office. Clayburn had been absent from the headquarters for most of the afternoon, being in Washington and meeting with a few friends who were Republican members of the Congress. Even after returning to Langley, Clayburn had refused to meet with him until he would finish his supper. Apart from being an ignoramus in terms of intelligence work, the acting director of the CIA tended to take his job as a sinecure. Still, Julian had no choice but to deal with him for urgent or important business. Clayburn, a tall, thin man in his late fifties, eyed Moore critically as he entered the large office.

"So, what was so important for me to see, Moore?"

"Some very disturbing info our team in Monaco obtained, info that was then supported by a cell phone call intercepted by the NSA, sir. First, this suspected Pakistani deal with Saudi Arabia to sell nuclear weapons to the latter is now confirmed. The negotiations between the two Pakistani envoys and Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, who is presently aboard his royal yacht, anchored off Monaco, are continuing and are now turning around the selling price for ten fission nuclear warheads, with more warheads to possibly be sold to the Saudis at a future date."

Even though he knew little in geo-political or military terms, Clayburn still caught on the importance of this matter and stiffened in his chair.

"Ten nuclear weapons? Do we have some solid proof of this?"

"We have intercepted and decoded transmissions between the Saudi royal yacht and Pakistan which I believe to be conclusive proof of this, sir. There is more."

"What?"

"Prince Bin Salman is both sheltering and actively employing a number of ex-ISIS fighters who are wanted for war crimes, including one American expatriate who is on the FBI wanted list. Two of them were photographed and then identified by our team in Monaco. Here is what we have in terms of photos and report to date, sir."

Taking a chair, despite the fact that Clayburn had forgotten to offer him one, Moore sat down and waited patiently while his director read the file handed to him. Another irritant

about Clayburn was the fact that he was a rather slow reader, something of a handicap in intelligence work. After some four minutes of reading and rereading, Clayburn finally raised his nose from the classified file to look at Moore, concern on his face.

“This is indeed turning into a very serious matter, Moore. I will bring it to the attention of the President’s National Security Advisor tomorrow morning.”

Moore hid his disappointment then: he had hoped that Clayburn would have been smart enough to understand that this needed to go directly to the President. However, Clayburn was showing to be true to form...again.

“With your permission, sir, I would like to obtain a higher priority in terms of support from the NSA and our National Reconnaissance Office<sup>15</sup>, in order to obtain still more information.”

“Sounds logical to me. I will also discuss this with the National Security Advisor tomorrow. Good job on the part of your team in Monaco. I will inform you at once of the decisions taken tomorrow at the White House. Thank you for bringing this to my attention.”

Understanding that he could not expect more action from Clayburn tonight, Moore got up and walked out of his office. He had to restrain himself in order not to slam the door on his way out.

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<sup>15</sup> National Reconnaissance Office, or NRO: American intelligence department in charge of satellite-based imagery and sensors intelligence.

## **CHAPTER 7 - REACTIONS**

**17:02 (Paris Time)**

**Wednesday, October 21, 2020**

**Room 406, Hôtel Le Forum**

**Monaco**

“Any new directives from Langley, Ian?” asked Erik to the young analyst as soon as he was back in their room. Dorset, who was wearing a headset connected to his laptop computer, shook his head.

“No! According to Mister Moore’s short message one hour ago, he is still waiting for a reaction from Washington.”

“A reaction from Washington...” repeated Erik in a frustrated tone. “You might just say instead that Nero is playing his fiddle while Rome is burning.”

“Well, Nero did realize that Rome was burning, Erik.” replied Julie Prost, who was monitoring the cell phone traffic coming out of the Port Palace Hotel. “I am not sure that our Dear Leader in the White House even realizes the seriousness of the present situation with the Pakistanis and the Saudis.”

“Our Dear Leader... Thankfully we all voted by anticipation in advance of the presidential elections due on November 3. If not, we could well be still stuck here on election day, waiting for Washington to grow balls and act. To return to the local situation, how are Dean and Ali doing? Anything new on their side?”

“Not yet,” replied Ian, “although we are expecting to see Khan and Ghanef to soon leave their hotel and return to the SERENE for more talks with Prince Bin Salman. Hopefully, we will then be able to intercept more interesting conversations via satellite.” Erik nodded his head at that: with Dean watching the Port Palace Hotel, he was confident that they would be able to keep a close watch on Khan and Ghanef.

At that very moment, Dean, sitting inside his rented Porsche with Ali Suleiman, focused his eyes on an approaching Mercedes sedan.

“Heads up, Ali! I see the Saudi Mercedes approaching from our right.”

“And I see Khan and Ghanef inside the hotel lobby: they are about to come out. Since we did not hear a call to them to prepare, it must mean that they had a prearranged meeting hour.”

“I concur!” said Dean before speaking in his radio microphone. “Stryker to Sparrow. We have the target vehicle in sight. Our customers are about to leave their nest, over.”

“Understood, Stryker. We will extend our ears to the maximum, out.” Satisfied, Dean then concentrated back on the approaching armored Mercedes 450. He however stiffened on noticing something which raised his suspicions at once.

“I see a blue van that had been parked further down the street and which is now pulling out of its spot from behind the Mercedes... A green Peugeot sedan is also rolling out of its parking spot. Something is going on.”

Ali, now concentrating on the two vehicles signaled by Dean and using his day/night scope, spoke up two seconds later.

“Watch out! I can see a man dressed in black commando gear sticking his head out of the back section of the van and speaking to the driver and front passenger while pointing at the Mercedes.”

“What about the green Peugeot?”

“I see four men inside it and they are all looking at the Mercedes.”

“The DGSI! The French may be about to pull a swifty on Khan and Ghanef.”

“A swifty? What does that word mean?”

“A swifty means someone pulling a surprise move on another person. I’m calling this in, but we won’t interfere with this, Ali: we will just observe. Stryker to Sparrow: we have a possible situation developing. The frogs may be on the move.”

Both Dean and Ali then watched on as the Mercedes 450 rolled to a stop in front of the main entrance of the hotel, with the man they knew as Jean Levasseur, aka al-Harb, then stepping out to open the rear right door of the sedan for the approaching Khan and Ghanef. The two Pakistanis were still about six meters away from the Mercedes when the green Peugeot suddenly stopped in front of the big sedan, blocking its path, while the blue van screeched to a halt a mere meter behind it. Armed men dressed in black commando garb then poured out of the van, their sub-machine guns pointed. Ali immediately thought that this could only go badly: a murderous fanatic like al-Harb could not be expected to surrender peacefully. He was quickly proven right, as Levasseur’s first reflex was to draw a pistol in a flash from under his suit’s vest. The leading French

DGSI commando then made the mistake of yelling a warning to Levasseur to drop his weapon. While legally obliged to give a verbal warning first before opening fire, that cost the French agent dearly, as it gave time to Levasseur to fire first. His 9mm bullet struck the DGSI agent at the level of his right collar bone, missing his throat by mere centimeters and hitting a spot not protected by the armored tactical vest of the agent. The DGSI officer went down at once, unable to fire a single shot. However, Levasseur did not have the chance to fire a second time, as three French commandos opened fire simultaneously with their sub-machine guns, peppering the ex-ISIS fighter with more than fourteen bullets. Levasseur then crumbled down on the sidewalk, dead. With the two right side doors of his vehicle still wide open, the driver of the Mercedes panicked and, trying to get out of the trap laid by the French, put his sedan in reverse, only to slam violently against the front bumper of the DGSI van. He then tried to push aside the green Peugeot, ramming it, only to attract a volley of gunfire from the French agents inside the Peugeot and from the black-clad commandos. While the bullets fired from the Peugeot did not penetrate the thick armored glass windows of the Mercedes, the two opened right-side doors let in a hail of 9mm bullets that killed the driver. As the pedestrians near the scene of the battle fled in panic towards the nearest cover they could find, two of the DGSI agents ran to Khan and Ghanef, forcing them to kneel and then lay face down on the sidewalk with their hands and feet spread apart.

Inside the Porsche Taycan Turbo S, Dean and Ali watched on as the French arrested Khan and Ghanef, while agents checked out both Levasseur and the driver to make sure that they were dead. Dean then radioed to Erik.

“Stryker to Sparrow: the frogs got angry, took out the Mercedes and arrested our targets, over.”

Back in the hotel, Erik mulled for a few seconds about the possible consequences of this event: this could either derail or help his mission, depending on the reactions of the various players concerned. He then keyed his radio microphone to answer Dean’s message.

“Sparrow to Stryker: I copy your message. Go to the port and check if anything happens there, over.”

“Stryker understood, out!”

After replying to Erik’s message, Dean then pulled his Porsche out of its parking spot as discretely as possible, in order not to attract the attention of the DGSI agents now

swarming the area of the front entrance of the hotel. He had time to see both Khan and Ghaneef being handcuffed and loaded into the DGSI van before he was out of sight of the fight scene. Ali, who had sent his own radio message in Farsi to their hotel, looked at him as Dean drove down the J.F.K. Avenue.

“Where are we going now?”

“To the Quai de l’Hirondelle! We are going to see what the reaction to this will be there. Maybe the French will also want to arrest and question the occupants of the Saudi speedboat.”

“But the Saudis will claim diplomatic immunity and will refuse to let the French take them in: they are part of the crew of the Saudi royal yacht.”

“You are quite right about that, Ali. However, the French tend not to put kids’ gloves on when they decide to act. They may just ignore the protests from those Saudis and arrest them anyway, pretending to need to ‘control’ their identities. That’s what I would do anyway in their place.”

Ali didn’t find anything to say to that and simply nodded his head as Dean turned onto the boulevard next to the quays of the port and sped towards the Quai de l’Hirondelle.

Dean was soon parking his Porsche in nearly the same spot as the day before. Leading Ali to a good observation point on the opposite side of the quay, he then patiently waited for the Saudi speedboat to appear while scanning visually the activity around the quay. The noise of the gun battle from the Port Palace Hotel had attracted most people present on the quay or inside the commercial establishments lining the quay to come out and look in the direction of where the gunfire had come. It thus made it easier for him to spot two parked cars in which a total of eight men were sitting, apparently not curious about the recent source of noise.

“Heads up, Ali! You see these two parked cars full of men, the blue Citroen and the gray Peugeot?”

“Yes! They effectively look suspicious to me as well. You think that they are waiting for the boat from the SERENE?”

“I could bet on that. Whatever happens, we only watch and film: I want to see what the French will do.”

“Understood, Donald.”

Looking around the yachting harbor and waiting for the Saudi speedboat, Dean only saw at first a solitary large, sleek boat of the type smugglers favored, in the process of leaving the harbor. Ignoring it, he patiently waited, with Ali at his side behind the concrete column. The Iranian then spoke softly, keeping his voice low.

"Whatever happens next, I will at least have had the satisfaction of seeing that al-Harb bastard die."

"I certainly won't cry for him, Ali. Now, if the French could also arrest that Michael Sutherland, aka al-Eiqab, that would truly make my day."

"Here comes the Saudi boat!" suddenly said Ali, making Dean's eyes sharpen as the same speedboat as yesterday evening appeared from behind the mass of the harbor master's building. Using his camera with zoom lens to scan the occupants of the boat, Dean grinned after a few seconds.

"Sutherland is aboard the speedboat. Apparently, the men in the Mercedes didn't have time to send a warning message by radio to the SERENE. If the DGSi laid a trap for them, then these bastards will jump right into the frying pan."

With Ali also watching with his scope, Dean started taking a few still pictures of the speedboat and of its occupants as it approached a free portion of the quay. He then switched to video mode once the boat bumped against the quay. To his satisfaction, it was the said Michael Sutherland, wearing a pistol belt around his black coverall, who stepped on the quay to tie a mooring line. The French agents apparently were waiting just for that as, the moment that the mooring line was solidly tied to the quay, six men stepped out of the two waiting cars and ran to the speedboat while yelling in both French and English.

**"FRENCH POLICE! DON'T MOVE AND RAISE YOUR HANDS! NOW!"**

Again, the ex-ISIS fighter on the quay did as Dean had expected him to do: his right hand immediately flew to the pistol holstered at his belt. This time, however, the French agents didn't give him a chance to draw and shoot. Four pistols barked nearly at once, making Sutherland jerk before crumbling like a broken puppet on the quay. What followed stunned Dean by its sheer stupidity. Instead of using their heads and surrendering to the French agents, in which case they would have been able to claim their innocence or whatever diplomatic immunity they could have used, the two other men aboard the speedboat produced AKSU-74 compact automatic carbines and opened fire on the French agents. Four of the DGSi officers went down under the hail of bullets,

with the remaining two officers hurriedly seeking cover behind nearby cars, low walls or columns. As one of the men in the speedboat kept firing at the French agents, forcing them to keep their heads down, the second man started frantically cutting with a large knife the mooring rope tying his boat to the quay. Understanding that the men in the boat could well manage to escape and sail back to sea, Dean took a decision and, opening his sports bag, took out of it his Smith & Wesson 500 revolver in caliber .500 Smith & Wesson Magnum.

"Fuck it! I'm not going to let those bastards escape. Let's kill those bastards, Ali!"

"With pleasure, Donald." Replied the Iranian, grinning as he took out his FN Five-Seven 5.7mm pistol. However, before he could fire it, a monstrous muzzle blast and ear-splitting detonation made him jump sideways.

## **BOOM**

The two French agents still fighting it off with the boat occupants saw the man who was trying to cut the mooring line be literally projected off the deck of his boat and into the water of the harbor. The man firing at the French agents then swiveled around to aim his AKSU-74 in the direction from where the shot had come, only to be stitched from crotch to head by a dense burst of automatic fire. The gunman was dead before he could fall flat on his back. Back behind the column protecting them, Dean looked with big eyes at Ali's pistol.

"I didn't know that the FN Five-Seven came in an automatic variant."

Ali replied with a big smile.

"Special modification 'made in Iran', my friend."

"Nice! Let's get out of Dodge before those frogs can regain their senses."

The two men, pistols still in hand, then broke into a sprint, returning to their car.

On the quay, near the moored speedboat flying the Saudi flag, the two intact agents were soon joined by their two drivers. The most senior agent left intact then shouted a few orders around.

"CHARLES, JACQUES, MAKE SURE THAT THOSE TWO BASTARDS ARE DEAD, THEN CALL FOR AMBULANCES. JULIEN, YOU AND I WILL CHECK ON OUR COMRADES."

Running to their four comrades lying around the quay, the two DGSi agents could only see that two of them were now dead, while the two others were gravely wounded and bleeding profusely. Quickly taking out his handkerchief, the senior agent did his best to slow down the bleeding from the belly wound of his youngest agent.

“Merde! I think that the liver was hit. CHARLES, WE WILL NEED THOSE AMBULANCES RIGHT AWAY!”

A minute or so later, as he was despairing of saving his junior agent, an ambulance appeared at the base of the quay, its siren blaring. Soon, two medics came to him and started taking care of the two wounded agents. Less than five minutes later, the two wounded were leaving aboard the ambulance, leaving behind four shaken DGSi officers. The most senior one looked around at the scene of the fight and at the now empty speedboat.

“Damn! Those two Saudi bastards acted as if they owned the place. And who were those two men who helped us during the fight?”

“I don’t know, Robert, but I could kiss their asses right now.” replied another agent.

## **17:29 (Paris Time)**

### **Aboard the speedboat SIRÈNE ARGENTÉE**

#### **Leaving Monaco Bay**

Dean’s impression about the fast boat he had watched leave the yachting port had actually been correct: the SIRÈNE ARGENTÉE<sup>16</sup> was indeed used to smuggle in and out of Monaco both goods and people, including young women kidnapped around Northern Africa and then forcibly brought to Monaco to serve as prostitutes for the rich men who kept visiting the principality. The owner of the boat was a French citizen of Algerian descent, Charles Haroun, who had been in the smuggling business for years already. However, Charles Haroun was not at the wheel of his boat this evening. Rather, his body lay hidden in the forward section of the boat, next to the two powerful diesel engines and to newly-placed 400 kilos of HMX-RDX explosive mixture. It was Hassan Kosravi who was now piloting the boat. Kosravi had killed Haroun yesterday and then taken control of his fast boat. By doing that, Hassan had achieved three useful

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<sup>16</sup> SIRÈNE ARGENTÉE: Silvery siren in French.

things: first, he had gained access to a fast boat at no cost; second, he had silenced the only witness who could later on signal him to the French police; third, and not the least, he had made Haroun pay for having double-crossed in the past another Iranian agent. Now, Hassan was ready to execute his team's 'Plan B' in support of their mission. The team even had a 'Plan C', if absolutely needed. Right now, his target was easily visible in the distance, with the lowering Sun nicely silhouetting it on the horizon. Hassan had heard the noise of two separate gun battles around the port area, after receiving an order via radio from Farah, using a prearranged codeword. Noticing one of the radios fitted to the boat by Haroun, a model made to intercept police and coast guard frequencies, Hassan switched it on and set it to the frequency his team knew to be in use by the French DGSi local team, all the while piloting his boat in a way that would eventually make him pass well behind the SERENE. He frowned on hearing that those ex-ISIS bastards had resisted arrest and had killed or wounded a number of French agents: that had been a stupid, unnecessary reaction by the ISIS fighters. He did raise an eyebrow when the radio conversation mentioned two unidentified men who had escaped after lending a providential hand to a group of DGSi agents under fire. Apparently, Donald the American and Ali had decided to help the French agents against the ISIS fighters. If that was the case, then Hassan could only approve. It also further raised by one notch his appreciation for the said Donald: he decidedly was an enemy that he could truly respect. As for the enemies he was going to face, they were only worthy of Hell. Some 200 meters before passing well behind the stern of the SERENE, Hassan effected a tight turn to the right and gunned his big diesel engines to maximum power. As he was getting level with the yacht, with some 150 meters separating the speedboat from the yacht, he turned his boat again, this time to the left, pointing his bow at the yacht while going at full speed. Hassan then grabbed the Deadman's Switch he had bought in Marseille and closed his left hand around it, holding the contacts in open position. Next, he switched on his main detonator circuit box. Now, even if his Deadman's Switch proved non-functional, an extra, impact-initiated delayed fuse would take care of igniting his explosives. Having studied days before the known layout of the Saudi royal yacht, Hassan corrected his trajectory to point his boat at the section of the yacht containing the royal suite, then crouched down behind the protection of two body armor vests he had laid over and taped to the windshield of the boat, sticking his head only high enough to be able to guide his boat. He could now see a number of men on the yacht who were starting to react to his approach. However, those men all wore the

uniforms of simple sailors, with none of Prince Bin Salman's bodyguards in sight yet. Those bodyguards never had time to react before the smuggler's boat rammed the yacht at a speed of 38 knots, with its aluminum hull crumbling on impact but still splitting open and penetrating the thin steel hull of the SERENE. Hassan Kosravi died when his head smashed against a steel hull panel, with his hand then opening, triggering the ignition of the 400 kilos of HMX-RDX mixture. The explosion inside of the yacht's hull of that charge, equivalent to the power of two modern heavy torpedo warheads, gutted half of the internal volume of the yacht in one mighty blast. To the devastation of that blast was added the incendiary power of a dozen full propane tanks carried in the back of the speedboat. Cut in half and with both parts deformed and on fire, the SERENE sank out of view in less than three minutes, leaving alive only two stunned sailors who had been standing on the open deck near the bow and who had been projected into the water by the blast wave.

On the shore in Monaco, Dean was driving back to his hotel at moderate speed when a big flash on the horizon attracted his eyes. Slowing down further, then parking in front of a restaurant, he grabbed his binoculars and looked towards the sea just as the noise of a powerful explosion reached the coast. Somehow, he guessed what had just happened and was about to call Erik by radio when he heard Ali whisper to himself. Looking at the Iranian agent, he then saw that Ali was actually praying, both of his eyes closed and his head bowed. The full reality of this then struck Dean: either Farah or Hassan were now dead, having executed a suicide mission, probably against the SERENE. Judging from the size and power of the explosion he had just seen, the Saudi royal yacht was probably in the process of sinking, if that had not happened yet. Out of respect to the obvious grief shown by Ali, Dean stayed silent, letting him time to finish his prayers and open his eyes. Ali was however the first one to speak, his tone soft.

"Hassan has now martyred himself in the name of Iran. May his memory be praised for the years to come."

"Was this the SERENE blowing up, Ali?"

"Yes, it was! With luck, that cursed Saudi prince is now dead, roasting in Hell."

Dean looked somberly at Ali for a few seconds before speaking to him.

"Look, Ali, for what it's worth, I truly regret Hassan's death."

"Thank you, Donald. He would have been happy to hear your words."

Dean silently sighed, then rolled out of his parking space without using his radio: this kind of news was best passed on in person.

## **CHAPTER 8 – FALLOUT**

**20:50 (Paris Time)**

**Wednesday, October 21, 2020**

**Monaco Police Station, 9 Rue Suffren-Raymond**

**Principality of Monaco**

When Nicolas Lerner, Director of the Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure, or DGSI in short, stepped inside the lobby of the Monaco Police Station, he saw that one of the agents he had sent to Monaco was waiting for him at the reception counter. A man in his early sixties who had obviously also been waiting for him walked with the agent to Lerner and extended his right hand for a shake.

“Director Lerner? I am Inspector General Richard Marangoni, head of Monaco’s Public Security. Could you please tell me what the hell is going on? Your agents refused to give me more than the most basic details on this case.”

“That’s because this case has an international dimension, is extremely sensitive and also highly classified. Just let me speak a bit with my agent here and I will then be able to brief you in private, Inspector Marangoni.”

Lerner then looked at his agent and spoke softly to him.

“Where is Captain Larivière, Lieutenant Fortin?”

“Dead, sir!” replied Fortin, who was obviously affected by the events of the day. “We also lost Aubertin and Marchand and had two more agents seriously wounded, sir. Our wounded agents are presently being treated at the local hospital.”

“MERDE! What the hell happened? This was supposed to be a simple takedown and capture operation.”

“The suspects proved to be true fanatics and reacted violently at once when we tried to arrest them. They also possessed some serious firepower and did not hesitate to use it. However, all five suspects were killed in the ensuing gunfights.”

“What about the Pakistanis?”

“They did not resist arrest and are here, locked incommunicado in separate cells, sir. They have up to now refused to cooperate and are clamoring to speak with their embassy in Paris.”

“And what about the Saudi royal yacht? The info I got about it was very sketchy.”

This time, it was Marangoni who answered Lerner.

“Our maritime division has sent a number of boats to the site where the M/Y SERENE was previously anchored and only found floating debris and oil, plus a number of corpse and two surviving sailors floating on the surface. Those two survivors said that a small boat rammed the yacht and then exploded with tremendous force, breaking the yacht in two and sinking it. When asked for details about that ramming boat, they were unable to say much, as they had been on the wrong side of the ship at the time and only saw a glimpse of it just before it rammed the SERENE. This had all the hallmarks of a suicide attack. Now, what could you tell me that would explain such a devastating terrorist attack inside Monaco territorial waters, Director Lerner?”

The way Marangoni phrased his question told Lerner that he was reminding him that French police did not have full powers inside Monaco, which had its own independent police service. Unfortunately, the political and international ramifications of this affair went well beyond the possible impacts on Monaco. He however tried to be as polite as possible with Marangoni.

“Inspector Marangoni, while I cannot tell you much details about this affair, due to the extreme sensitivity and high classification of the information about it, know that we are dealing here with what appears to be illegal clandestine activities involving at least Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, with possibly more countries involved as well. The two Pakistanis presently held here first came to Paris, where their presence attracted the suspicions of my services, and subsequently acted in ways which only reinforced our suspicions about the true reasons for their presence in France.”

“And what about those men your agents tried to arrest here in Monaco and who then started those gunfights?”

“They were ex-ISIS fighters and known war criminals wanted by Interpol.”

“But those men apparently worked for Prince Bin Salman. How could they be ex-ISIS fighter?”

Lerner looked somberly at Marangoni as he answered his question.

“That is one of the reasons why I consider this case so sensitive. I believe that you could understand the kind of media craziness any rumors of collusion between Saudi Arabia and ISIS would create, Inspector.”

“I effectively can, Director Lerner.” said Marangoni after taking a deep breath.

"Talking of the Saudis, has the presence of Prince Bin Salman on the yacht been confirmed yet?"

"Yes! The two surviving sailors told us that Prince Salman was aboard the SERENE at the time. However, his body has not been found yet and he is now part of the missing persons from the SERENE. Whatever happens next, this will create quite a wave internationally. Prince Albert has already communicated to me his deep concerns about this terrorist attack."

"Believe me, Inspector: a lot of people are also concerned by this affair, starting with the President of the Republic. I cannot emphasize enough now the need for maximum discretion and restraint in this affair. If you will now excuse me, I will go ask a few questions to the two Pakistanis held here by my men. Expect very soon an extradition request from France for these two Pakistani citizens."

"Then, Director Lerner, know that those men were allowed to call their embassy in Paris, in order to obtain consular and legal aid, as the laws in Monaco allowed them to do."

Lerner swore mentally about that but didn't show his frustration to Marangoni, simply nodding his head once before following his agent into the station.

Lerner was guided to a basement wing which contained a cell block and a few interrogation rooms. In the guardroom, he found two of his agents, plus three Monaco police officers, one of the latter watching a bank of security cameras installed around the cell block and interrogation rooms. There, he addressed his junior team leader.

"Lieutenant Fortin, have General Khan brought to an interrogation room: I want to talk with him...with no witnesses to our conversation. Have the camera and microphone connected to that interrogation room shut off."

"Right away, sir!"

Fortin then led him first to one of the small interrogation rooms, which was empty except for a small table and two chairs, before leaving to go get Khan. That left some time to Lerner to think about what he would ask. He was not actually hoping for much from Khan, but he still had the duty to try to learn extra information from him. Some seventy years ago, in France, that would probably have involved some very rough methods, but things had changed a lot since then. A minute later, Fortin came back with General Mohammed Khan, who had his hands handcuffed in front of him. Lerner then started

the portable recorder laid on the small table and gave a cold look at Khan, who was trying to look defiant.

“Sit down, General Khan! We have a lot to talk about.”

“I won’t say anything before a lawyer from my embassy in Paris shows up. And who are you, by the way?”

“Nicolas Lerner, Director of the DGSI. Don’t expect much help from your embassy, General: you don’t hold diplomatic immunity and you are deeply involved in the illegal trafficking of nuclear weapons. That kind of trafficking is looked at very severely in France.”

“We are in Monaco, not in France, and...” started to protest Khan, who was then cut off by Lerner, whose voice hardened noticeably.

“And Monaco is under French protectorate status, meaning that any question of international security and defense touching Monaco becomes the responsibility of France. We know that you came to France, then to Monaco, in order to discuss clandestinely with Saudi authorities the selling of Pakistani-built nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia. Just that violates a number of international laws and treaties concerning nuclear weapons.”

“I deny your wild accusations! Again, I won’t say anything more before I could meet with a lawyer provided by my embassy.”

“Do as you please, General, but know that this will only aggravate your case in the long run.”

“And what will you be charging me with? You have nothing against me!”

“We might start with charges of illegal international arms trafficking, followed with association with wanted war criminals. At best, you and your colleague will be extradited and banned from French territory. Then you will be able to try to explain to your President how you attracted on him an international scandal of the first order. As for your Saudi contacts, don’t count much on their help: they will have enough trouble of their own after today.”

Lerner didn’t tell Khan that Prince Salman was probably dead now, reserving that piece of news for later on, when it could truly shake the Pakistani. Instead, he looked at Fortin, who had been waiting and watching Khan.

“Lieutenant, bring the prisoner back to his cell, then bring in the other prisoner.”

“Yes sir!”

With Fortin escorting out Khan and leaving Lerner alone, the latter thought about his interrogation strategy with Ghanef. The Pakistani physicist, not having been trained for rough situations like Khan had been as a military man, should be more malleable, especially if using the right techniques. When Ghanef was brought into the small room two minutes later, Lerner was standing on his feet, his arms crossed and with a severe expression painted on his face. He was secretly satisfied to see that the scientist appeared worried, contrary to Khan's aggressive attitude. Letting Fortin push Ghanef down on one of the two chairs, he started again his recorder and eyed coldly the thin Pakistani man in his late fifties as Fortin walked out and closed the door. Lerner kept silent for another ten seconds before speaking in a firm, assured voice.

"Khan told me about your plan to sell ten nuclear warheads to Saudi Arabia for 900 million dollars. You realize what selling those weapons could cause? What were you thinking, Doctor Ghanef, getting implicated in such a highly illegal international arms traffic?"

"But...I accompanied General Khan simply to serve as a technical expert." protested weakly Ghanef. "Khan ordered me to come with him to France. If I had refused, I would have lost my position as head of our nuclear weapons design program. I didn't really have a choice."

Seeing that Ghanef's mind was focused on exonerating himself in order to avoid jail, Lerner decided to continue with his present tactic.

"Really, Doctor Ghanef? Those weapons could have killed eventually millions of people, most of whom would probably be innocent civilians. I don't believe that a judge will think much of your fear of simply losing your job when balanced against that."

"But I am telling the truth! I don't want to see millions of Iranians die in a Saudi nuclear strike, but the Saudis were becoming terrified about the threat posed by Iran and wanted something that could counter-balance that threat."

*'Bingo!'* thought Lerner before replying to Ghanef. "And you think that only ten fission bombs would be enough to completely neutralize Iran and stop it from retaliating against Saudi Arabia? Are you this naïve?"

"No, of course not! However, the Saudis wanted to get even more nuclear weapons from us, in order to build a sufficient nuclear arsenal for themselves. They wanted a second batch of ten fission warheads to follow, but I told Prince Bin Salman that our nuclear weapons program has a finite production capacity and that most of our production was geared towards providing more tactical nuclear weapons for my own

government. As a result of that, he would have to wait until some of our older weapons could become available for sale once more modern designs would have replaced them.”

“And how long did you tell Prince Bin Salman it would take for a second batch of nuclear warheads to become available, Doctor?”

“That we were talking about a good two years, at the least. Bin Salman then insisted on getting a second batch faster, offering to double the price he would pay for each weapon to 200 million dollars, if they could be delivered within a year. General Khan actually felt quite interested by this and was ready to pass that offer to our government. Pakistan is presently hard-pressed financially and that Saudi money would have allowed us the means to acquire more modern weapons in order to face India. However, we were arrested before General Khan could pass that Saudi request to Islamabad via the radios of the SERENE.”

Lerner kept his cold, impassive expression with difficulty as triumph nearly overwhelmed him.

“Very well, Doctor. I will tell the judge who will instruct your case to take into consideration your cooperation. With luck, you may end up being simply expelled from France, instead of serving up to twenty years in jail for arms trafficking. One last point: don’t tell Khan that you cooperated. He could then very well arrange for you to be killed once back in Pakistan. Just tell him that you stayed silent and only asked for a lawyer and an embassy representative. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, mister!” answered Ghanef, who then hesitated for a moment before looking with pleading eyes at Lerner. “My government may still decide to get rid of me in order to stop me for incriminating it. Would you accept to grant me asylum and protection, in exchange for my cooperation?”

Lerner hid his jubilation at that most welcome turn of events and kept his voice neutral.

“I will certainly consider seriously your request, Doctor Ghanef. In the meantime, don’t say a thing to General Khan.”

Keeping his eyes on the pale scientist, Lerner then shouted for Fortin to come in and return Ghanef to his cell. Once Ghanef was gone, Lerner stopped his tape recorder and extracted the precious tape cassette from it, eyeing it somberly: the information on it could literally prevent a nuclear war in the Middle East. Since the information that DDO Moore had provided him had allowed him to use the ‘know it all’ interrogation technique on Ghanef, pushing him to cooperate, it would be only just that Moore would get a copy

of this taped interrogation. Anyway, this case was now obviously way above the sole interest of France.

## **20:53 (Paris Time)**

### **Room 406, Hôtel Le Forum**

#### **Monaco**

Dean gave up knocking on Farah's door after three tries and, after checking quickly that nobody else was in the hallway, glued his left ear to the door and listened for a good ten seconds. When he heard only silence, he then moved to the next room, where Hassan and Ali were lodged, and also listened inside for a moment. Again, he heard nothing. Smelling something suspect, Dean returned to his room, where Erik, Ian and Julie were still monitoring their satellite link with Langley and the two radio frequencies used by the DGSI and the Monaco Police.

"Erik, I believe that Farah and Ali just pulled a PUFO<sup>17</sup> on us: their two rooms are completely silent and Farah did not answer my knocks."

Erik, while frowning at that, didn't appear surprised by that.

"It would make sense for her to disappear now: her mission is basically accomplished, with Prince Salman dead and with both Khan and Ghanef arrested by the French. That planned buying of nuclear weapons is now as good as dead, unless the Saudis persist with it to the point of idiocy. Besides, the DGSI will now scour Monaco to try to find who blew up the SERENE. We should move out as well: our own mission is also pretty well completed."

"What about Khan and Ghanef?"

"We will let the French take care of them: those two will have a lot to answer to the French and they don't benefit from diplomatic immunity, so they are not out of trouble, by a long shot."

"Do you think that the French will suspect that the Iranians had a hand in blowing up the SERENE?"

"They will probably think so, Dean." replied Julie from her monitoring station. "The suicide boat attack on the SERENE is just their style and Iran and Saudi Arabia are

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<sup>17</sup> PUFO: Pack Up and Fuck Off. Old military jargon used to signify a sudden and rapid departure.

constantly at each other's throat. On the other hand, the presence of ex-ISIS members in Monaco may mix the cards a bit. Someone could surmise that they infiltrated the SERENE's crew under false pretense, then blew up the yacht and Prince Salman because Salman was advancing a number of reforms which ISIS strongly disapprove of."

Erik couldn't help make a grimace at Julie's hypothesis, while Ian gave a thumbs down sign and spoke up.

"I don't buy that and I don't think that many people would buy that too. The Middle East may be a royally screwed up place, but this is too crazy and convoluted, even for that region."

"I agree with Ian." said Dean. "I don't see what advantage ISIS would gain by killing Bin Salman. The only player who wins across the board in this present situation is Iran, which makes it even more judicious for Farah to disappear from Monaco before the French start to look for an Iranian connection. I wonder where she went from here."

"Italy, maybe?" ventured Ian. "The Italian border is near, with direct rail links available in Monaco and, with the Schengen Accord allowing for unencumbered border crossings between France and Italy, Farah and Ali could easily move to Italy, where they could take a plane out of Europe."

"That makes a lot of sense, Ian. In a way, I will be happy for Farah and Ali to escape intact: their help was not negligible during our mission and, while quite drastic and dramatic as a solution, Hassan's suicide attack on the SERENE certainly did put the brakes on this Pakistani-Saudi nuclear deal. However, I hate to think about what kind of boiling cauldron the U.S. State Department and the White House will be like tomorrow. Well, with this said, let's move out and disappear as well. Dean, you will travel with Julie by train and escort her back to Paris, where you will drop off our weapons suitcase at the embassy for safekeeping and future use. I will travel separately with Ian and also go back to Paris by train while carrying our electronic equipment suitcase. I am sorry, Dean, but you will have to return your bomb on wheels to the car rental agency."

"Boo ooh sniff sniff! I was starting to love that car."

"Too bad, big guy!" replied Erik with a smile.

Less than fifteen minutes later, Dean went down to the hotel lobby with Julie, loaded with suitcases and travel bags, where Julie cleared her room before leaving the hotel with Dean. Ten minutes later, it was the turn of Erik and Ian to come to the lobby

and clear their room, explaining to the receptionist that their scientific meeting had concluded early because of the big terrorist attack early in the day. The hotel clerk apparently believed them at once, telling them that many of the other customers of the hotel had been spooked by the blowing up of the Saudi royal yacht and by the gunfights in the port area. Once out of the hotel, Erik and Ian simply walked to the subterranean SNCF<sup>18</sup> train station, situated only a few minutes' walk from the hotel. There, they bought tickets to travel to Paris via the TGV service line between Monaco and Marseilles. They studiously ignore Dean and Julie, who arrived in the lineup to the ticket counters after them, and made sure to go sit on a bench along their allotted quay that was well separated from the bench Dean and Julie took. As they waited for their train to arrive, Erik kept discretely scanning his surroundings, on watch for possible French policemen or DGSI agents who would be on the hunt for suspects. He didn't see any such suspect activity but smiled to himself after five minutes while looking at the opposite quay, where the train for Milan had just arrived.

"Hey, Ian," he nearly whispered to his diminutive team member, "I think that you would have won your bet about where Farah was going. Look who is about to board the fourth car of the Milan train."

Ian did look negligently in that direction and contained a grunt of surprise.

"Farah and Ali?"

"That's right. All the rats are jumping ship at about the same time, it seems. Good for Farah and Ali. They technically may be enemies of the United States, but their work did help our mission against a common threat."

"What if you encounter her again in the future, during a mission when Iran would be planning hostile actions towards the United States? Could you kill her then?"

"Without a single hesitation! Well, I could tell her goodbye before she dies but I am sure that she would return the favor to me without hesitation. She may be beautiful and charming, but she is still a pro and I believe her to be utterly loyal to her country."

"Like us?" cautiously asked Ian, making Erik nod.

"Like us, minus the beauty and charm on our side."

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<sup>18</sup> SNCF: Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer, or 'National Railways Society' in French.

## **CHAPTER 9 – POLITICAL STORM**

**16:34 (Washington Time)**

**Friday, October 23, 2020**

**Office of the Director of the CIA**

**CIA Headquarters, Langley, Virginia**

**U.S.A.**

Julian Moore was already fuming when he was introduced into James Clayburn's office, accompanied by Denise Fletcher, the deputy director for intelligence.

*"Two fucking days to get some direction from the White House!"* he thought to himself as he took one of the chairs placed in front of Clayburn's work desk. Even more infuriating had been the public response from the White House following the blowing up of the SERENE. While the medias had not missed the fact that the French government had announced that a number of ex-ISIS fighter wanted for war crimes had been killed in Monaco while employed by Saudi Arabia, the President had completely ignored and avoided that and had instead bemoaned the killing of his 'friend', Prince Bin Salman, praising his 'work in bringing reforms to Saudi Arabia'. In contrast, the reaction from Russian President Vladimir Putin had been just short of a celebratory dance, as he had been fighting an oil price war with Bin Salman for months, an oil price war triggered by Saudi Arabia and which had severely depressed oil prices across the globe. Even inside Saudi Arabia, the regrets about Bin Salman's death had been less than universal and many members of the royal family had already started jockeying to grab power from the now dead crown prince.

Once Moore and Fletcher had taken place in their chairs, Director Clayburn looked at them with gravity.

"Lady and gentleman, we now have a new task given to us by the President. We are to find those who blew up the Saudi royal yacht off Monaco, expose them and make them pay. The President personally believes that the Iranians are probably culpable in that terrorist act and I would tend to agree with him on that."

“Uh, excuse me, Director, but what about the deal the Pakistanis and Saudis were trying to conclude for the sale of nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia?” asked Moore, looking critically at Clayburn. “We are talking about an attempt to introduce more nuclear weapons into the Middle East. Shouldn’t that be considered a priority? And what about the fact that Prince Bin Salman was harboring and using ex-ISIS fighters and war criminals? We should be investigating whether more of those wanted ISIS fighters are hiding inside Saudi Arabia.”

“All that is secondary right now, Mister Moore. The President wants us to concentrate on finding and punishing the killers of Prince Bin Salman and that’s what we will do.”

Denise Fletcher, who was about as pissed as Moore about this, then spoke up in a forcible tone to Clayburn.

“Excuse me, Mister Director, but I strongly disagree! For one, the fact that Prince Bin Salman was employing close to him a number of ex-ISIS fighters raises the real possibility that sensitive secrets we provided to Saudi Arabia may have been compromised by Prince Bin Salman, who may possibly have provided some of those secrets to his ISIS bodyguards. Besides, what tells us that those ex-ISIS fighters were not involved in the suicide attack on the SERENE? They could have gained favor with Bin Salman just to get close to him and learn secrets through him.”

“I don’t believe that for a minute, Misses Fletcher, and...”

“And on what basis are you dismissing that theory, Mister Director?” fired back the DDI in a nearly disrespectful tone, getting truly miffed at Clayburn. “We are supposed to be an intelligence agency, not a wishful thinking agency! Right now, it seems to me that our reports about the Pakistanis trying to sell nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia by holding direct talks with Prince Bin Salman are being completely ignored by the White House, along with the evidence about the presence of ex-ISIS fighters around Bin Salman. Now, we are supposed to forget all that and chase some hypothetical Iranian involvement in this?”

“Careful about how you talk to me, Misses Fletcher!” shot back Clayburn, getting irritated. “I could decide to find a replacement for the post of DDI.”

“Then, if you truly intend to ignore the reports and studies from my analysts, then go ahead and replace me with some political flunky ready to kiss ass on command. We are supposed to contribute to the national security of the United States, not play sycophant to a White House occupant who may well be voted out of office in eleven

days. I am an intelligence expert with 31 years of experience, both in the field and at headquarters, and I care about providing as accurate and factual information as possible to our leaders. Maybe you should start caring yourself about that!”

“ENOUGH, MISSES FLETCHER! I...”

“ENOUGH YOURSELF, MISTER DIRECTOR!” cut in Moore, now resolved to support his DDI colleague to the bitter end. “If you were intending to task my field agents with a mission that would prove both futile and dangerous, then forget it! I will not risk my agents, men and women who have been loyally serving the United States for years at the risk of their lives, just to satisfy some political whim which will do nothing to enhance the security of our country, while at the same time ignoring a real and very serious threat to the stability of the whole Middle East.”

“Mister Moore, I can have you replaced as well...”

“Then do it! But don’t ask me to risk my agents for nothing, because I won’t agree to it! Besides, the late and farcical so-called ‘response’ from the White House on this has already made us waste two full days. That trail in Monaco is now cold, unless you are naïve enough or incompetent enough to think that the perpetrators, if any of them are still alive, would have been dumb enough to stay in Monaco.”

“THAT’S IT! YOU ARE BOTH FIRED!” shouted Clayburn, his face red. “GET OUT OF MY OFFICE!”

Keeping a defiant expression and throwing a last hard look at Clayburn before leaving, Julian Moore walked out with Denise Fletcher, crossing the anteroom occupied by his secretary and ending in the main hallway. Moore waited until he was alone with Fletcher inside an elevator cabin before talking to her in a near whisper.

“Denise, I am going to talk to my deputy, Francis Cooper, and tell him to slow down to a crawl any attempt by Clayburn to send our agents in Europe into a wild goose chase. I will also tell him to lock away in a safe place the info we had on the presence of an Iranian team in France and Monaco. Normally, I would think of that as unethical and unprofessional, but I am not ready to see our agents be risked for nothing while the real problem is being ignored by Clayburn and his White House boss.”

“I will do the same on my side, Julian. God, I hope that the coming elections will restore some common sense to this country.”

Julian could only nod in agreement to that. He also had something else in mind that he could and would do, now that he wasn’t the DDO anymore.

**20:08 (Washington Time)**

**Private residence of Julian Moore**

**End of Tintagel Lane, near the western shore of the Potomac River**

**Region of Arlington, Virginia**

“...France has acquired some solid evidence showing that the late Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman had been harboring and employing in his personal service a number of ex-ISIS fighters who were wanted by Interpol for war crimes committed in Syria and Iraq, using them as bodyguards. Four of those ex-fighters were recently killed in Monaco when they resisted arrest by agents of the DGSJ. Unfortunately, three DGSJ officers were killed and two more seriously wounded when those ex-ISIS fighters opened fire with automatic weapons on them. One of those ex-ISIS fighters was actually a French expatriate named Jean Levasseur, also known under the nom-de-guerre of ‘al-Harb’, who shot and wounded a DGSJ agent in Monaco before being killed by other DGSJ agents. At nearly the same time as those ex-ISIS fighters were battling with DGSJ agents in the port area of Monaco, an unknown number of individuals rammed a speedboat filled with explosives into the SERENE, the Saudi royal yacht on which Prince Bin Salman was, and blew it up, killing the Saudi Crown Prince. We later were able to identify the speedboat that rammed the SERENE as having belonged to a suspected smuggler with past contacts with ISIS. This is making us believe that there is a strong possibility that ISIS members blew up the SERENE after infiltrating the entourage of Crown Prince Bin Salman. Unfortunately, when convoked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about this affair, the Saudi ambassador refused to discuss about this or provide any explanation to our officials. Our security and intelligence services are now deepening their inquiry into this affair, in order to resolve the many unanswered questions we still have about it...”

Julian Moore, sitting with his wife Lynda in a sofa facing their lounge’s television set, snickered as the press conference held by French President Emmanuel Macron continued to be translated on the NBC’s prime time news show.

“When I think that it takes the French to open the eyes of some of those idiots in Washington. Thank God for this straight-talking Macron! I hope that Trump will eat crow after this.”

What Julian didn't say to his wife was that he was partly responsible for having shaped what President Macron was now saying, thanks to a confidential conversation he had earlier with Director Lerner of the French DGSI.

"But you will have still been fired by this Clayburn idiot, Julian." said softly Lynda Moore, some bitterness showing in her tone. "What are you going to do now?"

"Do not worry, Lynda." replied softly Julian to his wife while patting her hand. "While that Clayburn asshole fired me, I still have the right to my accumulated pension, which is nothing to spit at. Besides, with luck, a new president will be elected in eleven days and Clayburn will become the sycophant of a lame-duck president. I still could regain my job as DDO once a new president will take office in January and will then most probably immediately fire Clayburn for incompetence. Still, it makes me angry to see the magnificent work of so many men and women at the CIA being wasted by idiots like Clayburn or, worse, to see their lives risked for no good reasons."

"You're right, Julian." replied Lynda, a bit reassured. A thought then made her smile. "Maybe that new president will even name you as his new director of the CIA." Julian snickered at that, amused.

"Now, that would be something! Talk about sweet revenge!"

**09:44 (Paris Time) / 03:44 (Washington Time)**

**Saturday, October 24, 2020**

**Avenue des Champs Élysées, near the corner with Rue Washington**

**8ème Arrondissement, Paris**

Erik Johnson, who had been walking slowly down the famous Avenue des Champs Élysées, breathing some (relatively) fresh Autumn air, finally stopped at one of the countless café-bistros lining the avenue and sat at one of the tables set on the outer patio-terrace of the establishment, laying the newspaper he had bought a minute ago on a corner of his table. Raising one hand high, he looked at the nearest waiter and used his limited French.

"Garçon! Un espresso double, s'il-vous-plaît!"

The waiter nodded once and went inside the bistro, returning three minutes ago with a steaming cup and putting it in front of Erik.

"Your espresso, sir." he said in English, having obviously detected the strong American accent of his customer.

“Thank you!”

Erik closed his eyes briefly after his first sip, appreciating the strong flavor of his espresso: American coffee, as served in most restaurants in the United States, was merely brown hot water in comparison with the standard expected in Europe, especially in France and Italy.

About four minutes later, as Erik was about to order a second espresso, a young and very pretty woman wearing a pair of jeans and a suede coat and who was walking past the bistro slowed down her walk as she was approaching his table, while looking with apparent wonderment at him.

“Herbie? Herbie Jones? Is that you? Do you remember me? I’m Lisa! We studied together in college.”

“Lisa? Of course I remember you! It’s been a while. But please, come sit down and have a coffee with me.”

The said Lisa obeyed at once and sat down, putting her own newspaper beside Erik’s newspaper. Erik then smiled at the pretty CIA agent he used as a contact with the American embassy.

“It’s been what, eleven years since we saw each other for the last time, Lisa?”

“Make it twelve years, Herbie. God, those days at Boston College sure feel far away in the past. So, what are you doing here in Paris?”

“I’m employed as a professional diver for a team of marine biologists and I am enjoying a break while those biologists are studying our first samples here in Paris. And you, Lisa?”

The female agent made a show of suddenly looking a bit depressed and sighed.

“Well, my direct boss, a really marvelous guy, was just fired yesterday by the asshole who passes as the CEO of our company. A couple of other middle managers were also fired when they tried to protest the shitty management decisions of our CEO. Right now, I am wondering if it is worth staying with the company or trying to find a job elsewhere.”

From a couple of discrete body signs from ‘Lisa’, Erik understood that what she had said was connected to something real. Hopefully, the info she was bringing to him would shed more light on that later on. He then faked commiserating with her and gently put his hand over her hand.

"Don't give up on the company, Lisa: things will get better. In the meantime, what would you like? It's on me."

"A nice cappuccino would be fine, Herbie."

"A cappuccino it will be." replied Erik before shouting at a waiter to pass that order. He then smiled back at Lisa. "Well, tell me about your time in Paris, Lisa."

He and the female agent actually spent a good fifteen minutes talking to each other about fictitious and mundane things, drinking coffee together, before Lisa got up from her chair and nonchalantly grabbed Erik's newspaper on the table.

"Well, it was nice to meet you again, Herbie. Have fun in your diving expedition and take care."

"You too, Lisa!" said Erik, who then watched her walk away.

*"A fine ass she has. Dean would have liked to meet her."*

Finishing first his own coffee, he then grabbed the newspaper left on the table, which had belonged to Lisa, and slipped it inside his coat pocket, then got up and paid his bill to a passing waiter. Adopting again a slow walk, he continued down the avenue, turning left at the next street corner. From there, he accelerated his pace and walked for ten minutes before arriving back at the old hotel used by him and his team. Going up to his small room, he locked the door behind him before taking off his coat and opening the newspaper brought by Lisa, finding a large, fairly thick envelope tucked between the pages. Opening that envelope, he first found in it four thick wads of twenty Euros banknotes. Next, he took out a folded sheet of paper with a printed text on it and a tiny envelope containing a small key. The text on the sheet of paper was short but succinct.

From Chief of Station

Both DDO and DDI fired by Director yesterday for protesting his directives from W.H. ordering them to chase a possible Iranian connection instead of the main problem. Last words from DDO are to not get yourselves sucked into that mess. You are to wait in Paris for further instructions and play the tourists in the meantime. Your credit cards balances have been paid off, with a credit of 1,000 Euros added to each of them, so that you could look and act like tourists. Don't burn everything in one day: it could take some time to untangle the mess at the head office.

The key is for a train station locker at the Gare St-Lazare, where further instructions will be deposited when ready. Check the locker every two days.

Good luck and enjoy your vacation.

Erik frowned on reading about the firings of Moore and Fletcher: both were dedicated professionals who took care of their personnel. As for Director Clayburn, Erik's opinion of him and of his political masters was pretty well unprintable. Pocketing the locker key and folding back the sheet of paper, he left his room briefly, time to go knock on the doors of his team members' rooms and summon them to his room. Less than four minutes later, the three men and one woman were assembled around the bed in his small room. Erik then showed the paper he had received.

"A clandestine courier left me this at a bistro on the Champs Élysées this morning. It announces some bad news from home, plus gives us renewed instructions for our present mission."

"What kind of bad news, Erik?" asked Dean, prompting Erik in handing him the note.

"Here! Read it and then pass it to Julie and Ian. Basically, that Clayburn asshole fired both DDO Moore and DDI Fletcher yesterday when they protested his directives about our mission. It seems that Washington, meaning our Dear Leader President, wants to ignore the business about the Pakistani-Saudi nuclear weapons deal and instead concentrate on investigating any possible Iranian connection to the blowing up of the SERENE. DDO Moore's last instructions were to lay low and not get sucked in that mess. We are to wait for further instructions via our Paris Chief of Station. In the meantime, they sent us more cash money and credit to play the tourists while waiting for new instructions. Here are one thousand Euros in cash for each of you, to be used to play the tourists."

Both Ian and Julie broke into big grins while taking their cash money.

"I will finally have a chance to make a shopping tour of Paris, at last!" said a happy Julie, while Ian split his cash in two wads, pocketing each of them in separate pockets.

"I think that I will start with a tour of the museums around Paris. There is so much history to admire in this city. And you, Dean?"

“Well, I can’t exactly go shop around for guns here in Paris, but I will visit the military museums around the city. I may even go visit the landing beaches in Normandie and the American cemetery there: one of my grand-uncles is buried there.”

“Then, go visit your grand-uncle’s tomb first, while we have a few days off, Dean.” said Erik in a sober tone. “I will have to go check for new instructions in two days and I simply don’t know how long it will be before we are reactivated.”

“Got it! Thank you, Erik.”

“Thank me by saluting your dead grand-uncle. I have only the greatest respect for our veterans who fought and died for our nation. One last thing, to all of you: don’t go around with weapons on your persons during your time off. Public security around Paris is tight and has been so for years, thanks to multiple past terrorist attacks. You may well be stopped and checked at random by some police or military patrol. This is no time for us to have to explain to the French police why we are packing illegal weapons. However, I will ask you all to wear on you miniaturized GPS locator and beacon units, in case somebody captures you. The chances of that happening are very slim, but I believe in exercising constant caution. Got it? Then, have a good time around Paris...or Normandie.”

As Ian and Julie were walking out of the room, Dean went to Erik and looked into his eyes.

“And you, Erik? You also deserve a chance to relax a bit. What are you going to do?”

“Me?” said Erik, smiling for the first time. “I may just go do some recreative scuba diving and harpoon fishing along the coast of Normandie.”

## **CHAPTER 10 – NEW PLAYERS**

**14:25 (Paris Time)**

**Monday, October 26, 2020**

**Passengers Arrival Terminal, Charles-de-Gaulle International Airport**

**Roissy-en-France, northeastern suburbs of Paris**

**France**

The French immigration officer manning one of the arrival reception booths at the Arrival Terminal of the Charles-de-Gaulle International Airport took the passport and arrival card presented to him, then glanced at the big, tough-looking man now standing in front of his wicket. The man actually fitted to a 'T' with the alert notice passed by the DGSI to the immigration and customs services of the airport: single male visitor from either the Indian sub-continent or the Middle East, with special emphasis on Pakistani or Saudi passport holders; age between 25 and 45; looking physically fit and coming for short stays. The immigration officer typed a few information from the passport and arrival card into his computer after discretely pushing a hidden button under his desk, then asked a few questions in a neutral voice to the 'Amir Khan' facing him.

"What is the purpose of your visit to France, Mister Khan?"

"Tourism!" replied tersely the Pakistani man.

"And how long are you planning to stay in France, sir?"

"One week!"

"Gee, *not exactly the talkative type!*" thought the immigration officer before stamping the man's passport and giving the document back to the Pakistani, along with a yellow tag.

"Here you are, sir. Please present this tag to the customs officers when you will arrive with your luggage at their control counter."

The man took back his passport and the tag, then walked away without as much as a thank you. The immigration officer followed him with suspicious eyes for a moment: that guy was the spitting portrait of a foreign government agent, the kind of which the officer had seen a few times in the past, including today.

Inside a high-security room overlooking the arrival area, Captain Jacques Longchamp of the DGSJ was standing behind a row of men and women manning computer stations linked to the immigration control booths located in the arrival hall. When one of the screens turned to flashing red, he went at once to it to look over the shoulders of the computer operator. This was the fifth such alert that had appeared since early this morning. This one, like the four earlier alerts, concerned a single man arriving from Pakistan. Longchamp read quickly the info on the screen, then patted the shoulder of the young female police officer manning that station.

"Record this entry as 'Pakistan Alert 05 of October 26, 2020' and print a sheet, then do a name and facial recognition search of that bozo. I doubt that the name will register, as it is probably a fake one, but maybe the face will tell us something."

"Understood, Captain!"

As the computer operator did as she had been told, Longchamp activated his personal portable radio.

"Agents Miron and Latour, be ready to tag and follow a certain Amir Khan once he has gone through customs checks. His stated designation is the Royal Hotel, on 33 Avenue de Friedland. Check the Alert Notice 05 for a photo and description."

Longchamp then thought about what that Khan and the other four Pakistani men who had triggered an alert notice today were supposed to do in France. According to the alert sent by Director Lerner two days ago, Pakistan was expected to react in an illegal way to the arrest and continued detention of a General Khan and a Doctor Ghanef, both of which were implicated in a highly sensitive case of weapons trafficking. In this case, 'an illegal reaction' probably meant an attempt at freeing by force those suspects or, something the Pakistanis were known to be capable of doing, silencing them. Longchamp snickered to himself on reviewing the hotel address given by Khan on his arrival info form.

"Five fit men of the right age category, arriving separately on the same day and claiming to be tourists, while all going to the same hotel in Paris situated near the Pakistani embassy. Yeah, sure!"

As Longchamp had expected, the thorough baggage check done with Amir Khan revealed no weapons or other illegal items and Khan was allowed to leave the airport

without further ado, but with two DGSI agents trailing him. The Pakistani ISI,<sup>19</sup> while undoubtedly ruthless, was also quite professional and would not be stupid to the point of having his agents try to pass French customs with weapons hidden in their luggage. The weapons for those agents, if they were indeed clandestine agents, had probably arrived in Paris via that unscheduled Pakistani diplomatic pouch courier who had showed up late last night. Unfortunately, one could pass even an anti-tank rocket launcher if one wanted to, hidden inside a sealed diplomatic pouch, which French authorities were not allowed to open or even check via X-rays. Longchamp had the feeling that those Pakistanis could very well soon create some shit storm in Paris.

### **15:02 (Paris Time)**

#### **DGSI Headquarters, Levallois-Perret**

#### **Département de Haut-de-Seine**

Director Nicolas Lerner nearly slammed down his telephone receiver at the end of his conversation with CIA Director Clayburn.

“What an imbecile! We are concerned about more nuclear weapons ending in the Middle East and that idiot is only interested in finding proofs of suspected Iranian involvement in the murder of Prince Bin Salman? And he fired a man like Julian Moore because of this political obsession?”

Doing his best to calm down, Lerner then called up on his computer and reviewed the alerts he had received since last night from his agents at the Charles-de-Gaulle Airport and in Paris. The Pakistanis were up to something: he could smell it. What it was could only be two things, in his mind: the freeing of Khan and Ghanef through some sort of forcible action; or their killing in order to silence what were very incriminating witnesses against the Pakistani government. Both Khan and Ghanef were presently being detained at the new headquarters of the Regional Judiciary Police Directorate, in the 17<sup>ème</sup> Arrondissement, where they were waiting to pass in front of a case magistrate. Checking on that case examination, Lerner frowned when he saw that it was scheduled for tomorrow morning. If anything, that would be when Pakistani agents were most likely to act, while Khan and Ghanef were being transported to the equally new Justice Palace of Paris, situated in the recently completed Renzo Piano Tower. Such action promised

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<sup>19</sup> ISI: Inter-Service Intelligence. The Pakistani military secret service.

to be a violent one, something Lerner wished to avoid as much as possible in such a densely populated district. Something would have to be done before that transfer.

Some three hours later, Lerner received one by one reports which only reinforced his suspicions: each of those five suspected Pakistani agents had visited their embassy shortly after arriving at their hotel and had then come out, all of them carrying sports bags on their way out. He now knew that he had to act, and quickly.

**01:48 (Paris Time)**

**Tuesday, October 27, 2020**

**Third floor hallway of the Royal Hotel**

**33 Avenue de Friedland, 8ème Arrondissement**

**Paris**

The sixteen armed men dressed in black commando outfits and masks and wearing body armor and helmets advanced as silently as possible along the hotel hallway, splitting in groups of three as they passed by selected doors. Their leader, standing in the middle of the hallway, then raised one arm high, signifying to his men to be ready to act. Each group of three commandos from the DGSI Groupe d'Action Opérationnel<sup>20</sup>, or GAO, included a man holding a heavy battering ram and two men ready to storm inside with their sub-machine guns raised and ready. When the group leader lowered his arm, each ram operator swung his heavy steel ram and slammed it against the door handle of the room he was standing in front of, smashing them open, then quickly stepped back to let the two assault men run inside while screaming in English.

**"FRENCH POLICE! DON'T MOVE! HANDS UP!"**

The five Pakistani men, caught asleep and totally taken by surprise, could do little but groggily obey and raise both arms while lying in their bed. They were then quickly and none too gently turned on their belly before their hands were cuffed in their back. Each of the five Pakistani men, still wearing only boxer shorts or pajamas, were pushed out in the hallway by two GAO commandos, while the third commando of each group, the one

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<sup>20</sup> Groupe d'Action Opérationnel, or GAO: Operational Action Group in French. Action and arrest unit of the French DGSI.

who had swung a ram, started searching the room for weapons, explosives and other incriminating equipment and documents. It wasn't long before a hefty collection of sub-machine guns, pistols, knives and grenades were found, photographed and inventoried. The leader of the GAO was in the process of collating the information about that glut of evidence when he received a radio call from his man tasked to check out the minivan rented yesterday by the Pakistanis.

"Captain, this is Lemire! I found the suspects' minivan to be rigged for remote-controlled detonation, with a charge of thirty kilos of Semtex plastic explosives inside. I just disconnected that charge and removed the detonators. It should be safe now, over."

"Thirty kilos of Semtex?! Hell, that could have caused some mass casualties if exploded near the Justice Palace. Alright, take copious pictures of that charge, remote-control device and minivan, then have that minivan towed to our forensic legal garage. Good job, Lemire!"

"Thank you, Captain!"

The GAO leader then threw a dirty look at the five Pakistani men laying on their belly along the hallway: they could have caused quite a bloodbath if not arrested before putting their plan into action. The Pakistani ambassador was going to count himself lucky if he was not summarily called in at the Foreign Affairs Ministry and then thrown out as a Persona Non Grata.

"Okay, men: get these pieces of shit on their feet and bring them down to our cell van."

**09:19 (Paris Time)**

**Thursday, October 29, 2020**

**Outdoor garden terrace of the Atala Hotel**

**10 Rue de Chateaubriand, 8ème Arrondissement**

**Paris, France**

Dean was smiling as he read his morning copy of the newspaper Le Monde while sitting in the outdoor garden terrace of his team's hotel and savoring a cup of espresso coffee.

"Team of Pakistani government assassins arrested... Pakistani ambassador thrown out... Attempts by Saudi Arabia to buy Pakistani-produced nuclear weapons..."

Yeah, the shit really hit the fan for Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. I love it! This should be enough to wake up to reality our asshole of a director in Langley.”

Julie, who was sitting in a nearby patio chair and reading the New York Times, spoke up while keeping her face hidden by her opened newspaper.

“Well, the House Intelligence Committee is now demanding to grill Clayburn about this affair. With Trump’s attention stuck on the coming presidential elections, I doubt that Clayburn will get much support from his manipulator. The only thing that is still unresolved now is who will be our next President? Right now, the polls are still inconclusive.”

“Damn, let’s not end up with four more years of that lying narcissist, please!” pleaded Dean to himself.

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