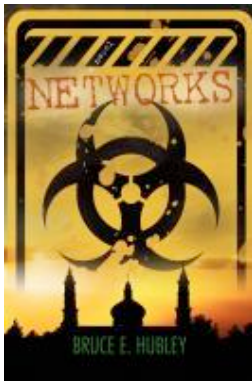


e novel

NETWORKS



BRUCE E. HUBLEY



When the ruling elite of an Islamic nation bent on destruction of the United States obtains a deadly biological weapon, they enlist a terrorist network to disperse the virus. CIA Agent Jason Royce recruits a trio of super-hackers with mastery of the Internet to help unravel the plot. Together they face danger and death as they race to stop a scheme that may annihilate an entire continent, even as the body count grows.

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First Edition

NETWORKS

Bruce E. Hubley

Dedication

Anyone who points at his book and says I did it all myself is probably a liar. There are so many who helped in valuable ways, such as the multitude who read one of the first eight drafts and gave their comments, most of which I heeded. Then there are those who stand with you and offer encouragement, my wife Kathy and my parents, Russell and Bernice. But mostly my father who will be 92 in December of 2012 and wants nothing more than to see this book in print.

Prologue

University of Bafthra, Republic of Quari -- 1997

Research can result in excitement unrivalled in reality and imagination, but at times like this it could also be tedious. This aspect of the profession was avoided in the conversations of the research assistants who reaped these moments. Volunteering for his assistant post was gaining Amondi the supplementary credit to complete his education program, but it jeopardised his sanity. He had long desired a career as a research biologist, and his fellow students at the University of Bafthra agreed that working for the department head, Dr. Ishton Shadira, would provide a worthy reference on any resume.

A weary face thrust through the door of Amondi's lab, a full day's growth of beard shading its chin and cheeks, and observed the student seated before the glassed, air-sealed isolation chamber. "Amondi, you look like you could use a break. How about we get a cup of tea?"

"As usual you are right, Kamil. A cup of tea would go far toward keeping me awake," Amondi replied. "It wouldn't be so bad watching a dozen stupid animals if I knew what I was looking for, but I'm kept in the dark. Only Dr. Shadira and Allah know."

"And Madiric," Kamil added, realising it was not wise to remind his friend of the female scientist involved in the project. "What is it they told you?"

"Any change--" Amondi almost spat the words. A woman had told him. *A woman*, regarded by Dr. Shadira as an equal and empowered to instruct male assistants - sons of Allah. An outrage. Was he not superior to the common farmer and street vendor - a senior student at the prominent university that bore the name of the great Islamic Republic of Quari's capital city? These monotonous nights were all the longer because they granted the young student time to ponder whether the future career justified the indignity.

"--Any change," he repeated, "in the animals' status and I'm to raise an immediate alarm and record everything in meticulous detail. Eight nights I've watched and I know why the last assistant chose a less prestigious credit assignment. These stupid rats and cats and monkeys eat and sleep and

play - never a change. Pathetic creatures.” Both students concentrated their gaze on the animals in the chamber. Although treated well, the creatures were still typical lab specimens with tufts of hair shaved where their bodies provided access for the medical sensors affixed to update subject health records. Pink skin stared back through the cavities in the fur.

“They must expect a change, Amondi. They would not have you here for no reason.”

“*She* assured me that a change will come,” Amondi explained, “but insists that knowing the outcome in advance will influence my observations. I’ve heard rumours of government and military involvement requiring secrecy in the project. If that’s true, maybe I’m better off ignorant.”

The wearied student's mouth gaped, threatening to split his face, as the yawning reflex gripped his stiffening body. There was a kettle in the staff room down the hall, the brimming cupboards beckoned, and the godless creatures could watch themselves for five minutes. He surveyed the multitude of caged specimens. Monkeys groomed each other, a cat scratched in its litter box, and those mindless rats chased shadows on a revolving wheel, getting nowhere, in their tireless effort. “Let’s get that tea, Kamil. This boredom will hasten my death.”

He rose from his chair and accompanied his friend to the staff room. Within minutes, cradling cups, they ambled back to the lab, their moods lightened by the short break, and deposited the steaming containers on the desk as Amondi slumped into the swivel chair, prepared to bid farewell to Kamil, and continue his lonely vigil.

Savouring the hot liquid, the pair scanned the quiet isolation chamber. Too quiet, for even the stupid rats had stopped their tumbling journey. Amondi rose and approached the glass partition, noticing the lack of any activity apparent in the cages. His mild interest transformed into shock with the realization that where there had been movement before he left for his tea, now there was none; but no animals slept - they were dead.

He turned to stare wide-eyed at his companion. “Allah preserve us,” he was at last able to speak. “Five minutes, Kamil. Five minutes was all we took and all the time required for this to happen. *The changes came while I was absent*. When I was to witness the reactions and make my recordings, I made tea. Shadira and *that woman* will crush my career out of existence.” The humiliation he had endured working for a woman had been for nothing, and now he saw a brilliant career being scuttled, all for the sake of a dozen animals. The failure of the experiment and the creatures’ deaths meant nothing to the disillusioned student.

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Looking up, he saw the shock registered on the face of his friend who stared past him, his concentration fixed on the creatures in the glass chamber. Amondi returned his gaze to his deceased charges. He looked where Kamil's eyes stared, to the spots where the hair had been removed from the bodies of the twelve animals, and his own eyes widened in amazement - *the skin was pink no longer - it had turned a pallid shade of blue.*

Canada -- 2000

It was breath-taking. He appreciated that he was not viewing the interpretations of a computer, but rather, the vision of another man. A man had defined to the machine, through thousands of lines of program code, how it could portray its internal functioning to its biological partners in a format that the complex human brain comprehended. It was virtual reality, and the young systems engineer who now sported the helmet and body movement sensors marvelled at the splendour that this union of man and machine created.

"Boss, this is happening shit," the engineer whispered in reverence for the accomplishment. "It's like a city. The components look like buildings and the pathways are the roads. Even the gates to regulate the flow of electrons look like friggin' toll-booths." He grinned inside the helmet as he inspected the activity within the heart of the central processor. The colours were magnificent, and the motion incessant as electrical charges hustled across the virtual city before him. Hundreds flowed at a time; at incredible velocities. Even keeping track of a single pulse eluded his capability, let alone the multitude of activity that flashed and fought for his attention. But leaving this overwhelming, wondrous environment would be the most difficult task.

"I know what you're saying, Harry," the other man in the room spoke. "It makes you just want to sit and watch at first, but it's a test. Try moving toward a specific component - one of the city buildings."

Harry reached out his hand in the direction of what he assumed represented a memory chip in the computer's internal hardware. He glided through space toward the object and experienced the eerie sensation of passing through a wall as he entered the computer's interpretation of this moulded silicon component. The room sparkled with twinkling points of light, rearranging themselves in small and large sections.

Bruce E. Hubley

"I see the RAM, Boss," the engineer said. "It's got to be the CPU swapping data in and out of active memory - as the patterns change. Heavy-freaking shit. We could trace a single byte into memory and alter it with this program. This'll propel Tracers well ahead of corporate computer security departments. They'll never be able to keep us out now."

"Remember, Harry, Tracers aren't interested in changing data on systems we access. I agree this technology will prove useful in locating the data that our clients want. It'll also be good for watching the communication lines during a trace - it'll display the innards of a digital switch. It has limitations though; the computer interpreting your movements in the virtual environment and translating them into commands slows reaction time. Practicality's got to be assessed where the risk of detection is high."

"Maybe so, but it sure is cool," Harry sighed. "Damn, I can't wait to use it for real."

Bafthra -- Capital City, Republic of Quari

Simple is the best - as a rule of thumb it had served Jason Royce well during more than ten years with the most prestigious intelligence agency in the world. At least that was the CIA's opinion of itself. Simplicity was also the guiding factor in establishing the means for his extensive network of operatives and informants to contact him with important information.

A telephone answering machine at a secure site served as the message drop. Each contact possessed the ability, through technology, to disguise his or her voice, although monitoring taps on every phone in the country was beyond even the renowned efficiency of the Quari Intelligence Directorate, and the agent had discounted the likelihood of random taps. As long as nothing unusual occurred which called attention to the line, it would remain secure. No member of his network would dial in from a phone traceable back to the member, and even the CIA network organizer avoided the phone physically. He dialled in, from a non-traceable cell phone each time, and picked up his messages.

Most of his three daily checks proved fruitless, but on a recent occasion there had been one intriguing message, although its significance was doubtful. The Minister of War and Defence had had a meeting imposed on him by the President and was finding it necessary to shuffle his agenda over the next several days. Foreign intelligence agents lack the resources to investigate every conference involving government officials - even those called at a top Minister's inconvenience. *After all*, the CIA operative had

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reasoned, *Shit happens to everybody*. But this meeting, ordered by the President himself, and with the Minister instructed to attend alone, was sufficient to tweak his curiosity. Maybe intriguing was a modest term to describe the possibilities inherent in this situation; besides, business was slow. It wouldn't hurt to give this rendezvous a closer inspection.

Chapter 1: Lift-off

The Bell Jet Ranger medivac helicopter lingered on the pad, its impatient rotary wing whipping the air and creating minor dust storms on the sand-strewn tarmac. Although an ageing piece of equipment, the Ranger still fulfilled its medical purpose with the newer, more advanced aircraft being purchased for the military. Inside the two-room structure serving as office, dispatch, and control for the helicopter operation, three men in lengthy white lab-coats waited for the boarding signal. Two of the men displayed a calm, erect bearing, with their feet planted in the military at-ease style. Their loose fitting coats failing to disguise the physical fitness of their torsos, hardened by conditions and challenges designed to test the boundaries of endurance. To the third man, it appeared that his associates sprang from a common mould: both wore mirrored aviator-style glasses on top of sharp hawkish noses, and sported thin dark moustaches. Their close-cropped hair lacked its usual protective headwear, absent to avoid attracting undue attention from a casual - or not so casual - observer. Age distinguished the two from each other.

The elder was General Effil Huddiam, commander of the Quari military machine that had sustained an humiliating defeat at the hands of the American led Desert Alliance Forces. A slight thickening of the body, and the inevitable wrinkles marked his added years over his associate. The crows-feet radiating from the corners of the eyes and the beginnings of the sagging bags on the tops of the sun-weathered cheeks, indicate his compiling years. But age had also graced him with an assured air of command and self-confidence in his position and power.

Quari had long been a principal power among the Middle-Eastern Islamic nations. With its vast tracts of arid wasteland making for a wilderness unsupportive of enough agriculture to nourish an export trade, Quari had turned to an abundant and profitable resource beneath the sand. Oil had made this a rich nation, but not a rich community, and so the usual scenario had played. A wealthy royal elite had lived in excessive opulence, while the common man knew the most horrid pains of poverty. Unrest was rampant, and in time a military leader achieved enough popularity to rally the capital forces, as well as a significant portion of the Army and Air Corps, to stage a successful *coup d'état*. Once in power, the revolutionary

leader had ceased talking of free elections, equality, and redistribution of wealth. He proclaimed himself President-for-Life, as royal titles were unpopular at that time and place. The government purges had consolidated his authority, and in the end there had still remained the opulent governing elite and a poverty stricken population.

But the taste of power had made the President hunger for more, and he turned his attention beyond his nation's borders. If nothing else, the neighbouring country was a convenient opponent, and both nations' enormous oil revenues had fuelled the fires of conflict for many years. Equalled in strength, cunning, and wealth, the antagonists had fought to a stalemate. Finally, with the original rationale for the war fading from memory, a truce had been reached. Both sides returned to their homes to bury their dead. Nothing was gained.

With the war chest depleted and the people without a victory, the President had ordered the assault of another neighbour. The slick Quari military machine had marched on a small Sultanate having tremendous wealth and massive oil reserves.

Here the President had hoped it would stop - what would the world care for the internal bickering of two dominions of Arabs? In truth, many of the power brokers of the western nations would just as soon the middle eastern countries annihilated each other, were it not for oil. Quari soon discovered the lengths to which the Americans and their allies would go to protect their oil supply, and swift retribution had followed. The loss was bitter, and the Quari citizens had long, clear memories. Revenge occupied many of the minds in the country, and was the reason the General waited for the idling helicopter.

"How long, Colonel?" the General asked, impatience edging his cool military bearing.

The second man remained motionless as his eyes, concealed by the mirrored sunglasses, glanced at the wall clock. "Ten minutes, General."

"Such a waste of valuable time."

"Forced by the spy technology of the infidel Americans, General," the officer said. Avoiding that technology was this man's job.

Colonel Anwar Awasi of the Quari Intelligence Directorate, had been designated by the President to a mission so secret that even his former associates were unaware of his true function. Awasi did not consider himself military. He was of the Intelligence Directorate (ID), concerned with espionage rather than battlefields, and like all ID men, thought himself superior to ordinary soldiers. In some ways Awasi's feelings of superiority

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were justified; his drive, ambition, and cleverness had permitted his rapid rise within the Intelligence Directorate to where, at age thirty-eight, he remained the youngest colonel on the roster. Those qualities had left him little time for anything other than his career, although Awasi considered himself a lady's man; a fact borne out by the number of conquests - all short lived - which he had accumulated. Only one means could be employed to motivate this man - power. Power was the drug that excited the Colonel; both personal power and power for his country. Power was what he swore to take from the western superpowers. Awasi, still young when the oil companies had raided and raped Quari, knew America for what it was, and like others of his generation, he had dedicated his life to bringing this infidel empire to its knees. He still recalled the incident that had cemented his hatred.

"Anwar, come quickly." The fourteen year-old boy beckoned to his best friend of many years. "They are coming. Rich Americans."

The young Awasi joined his companion in eager anticipation of viewing the mysterious foreigners who had come to their country to extract the oil from the deserts. They watched them exit the hotel, dressed in strange clothing and speaking words that had no meaning to the two youths staring in wide-eyed wonderment.

"What is wrong with them?" Awasi mused to his friend. "They look like they have had too much opium."

"Perhaps they have, Anwar." Neither boy had ever witnessed the effects of alcohol, a substance banned by their religion.

The two men approached a pickup truck parked against the curb; the logo of the Amasco Oil Company was emblazoned on the doors. One was climbing into the passenger seat when his companion noticed the Arab boys.

"Whoa, Hughie. Lookie what we got here," he said into the open driver's side window. "Watch me make these camel-jockeys jump and dance." He reached into his pocket and withdrew a fistful of coins, which he tossed onto the road. Laughing as the boys jumped to retrieve the money, he hopped into the seat and turned the ignition. "Did ya see that, Hughie? I must have thrown all of seven cents, and them stupid little bastards think they got a fortune."

"No wonder the bosses like this dump of a country, Cal," Hughie replied, his speech slurred by the alcohol. "They're probably giving the 'Royals' the same kind of percentage - or maybe they go for beads here,

too.” Both men broke into a fit of laughter as Cal hauled the shift lever into drive.

The passion of the moment and the effects of the liquor combined to induce disaster. Instead of applying a gentle, easy pressure, Cal floored the accelerator. The truck leapt from its standing position and hurtled toward the boys.

Awasi heard the race of the engine and looked up to see the vehicle bearing down on their location. “SALIB, JUMP AWAY!” he cried. His own standing jump carried his small, wiry torso clear of the approaching truck, but his shouted warning went unheeded by his young friend.

Salib, engrossed with the coins in the road, failed to notice the danger and heard the warning too late. He glanced up from the spot on the road where he was scooping the coins, the gleaming metal clutched in his hands, and had hardly registered the sight of the instrument of his death before the vehicle rammed his frail body and sent him careening ten feet through the air. He hit the ground to the side of the road with a gut-twisting thud that would remain in Awasi’s memory until the day of his own death.

The pickup reached a screeching halt one hundred feet later.

“Shiiit, you hit that kid, Cal,” Hughie said as he stared out the rear of the cab. “What are we gonna do?”

Both men were sobering as they comprehended the situation. Cal peered at the limp body on the roadside, and fear replaced the joviality in his voice. “We’re getting the hell out of here, Hughie. I ain’t spending the rest of my life in one of their stone dungeons.” He released the brake and slammed his foot down on the accelerator, this time with purpose. The truck sped around the corner and left Awasi running to the lifeless body of his best friend.

The incident was reported; it was investigated, but the driver was never found, and justice was not extracted. As a lad of fourteen Awasi did not understand that the life of a single poor Arab boy could not compare with the lure of tremendous oil revenues, and that the occurrence had been buried in mountains of bureaucracy. But as he matured he learned these lessons, and the bitterness expanded within his heart and soul.

In the helicopter dispatch office Awasi’s sunglasses hid the cold fire burning in his eyes as he recalled his long-dead friend. Twisting his neck he glimpsed the third white-coated figure of their group. The remaining standing party shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his nerves reaching a fraying point.

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“What is the delay, General?” the trio’s only civilian asked, false confidence in his voice.

“We are waiting for the CIA spy satellite to pass out of range, Minister,” the General replied.

“Where are we going?” the Minister risked the question which had haunted him for the past two days since receiving the call from the President

“In good time, Minister. Please be patient.” The General maintained his courteous demeanour.

This third gentleman was shorter and stouter than the others, although not plump. The lean frame and ample muscles hidden by his clothing were proof of a high physical standard maintained by the body’s owner, despite lacking the hardened conditioning of the military lifestyle. He was attempting to compensate for his thinning hair by growing a moustache and beard trimmed in the goatee style. His lack of military bearing evidenced itself as he fidgeted - glancing from the clock to the window, and to the single operator seated before a small communication console. Receiving a Presidential summons to a meeting, with its location and purpose kept concealed, was reason enough for anxiety - even for a man of power.

Minister Abin Zindar was the new Quari Minister of War and Defence. Although the ranking superior of the two military officers, he contented himself in restraining a test of his authority. In Quari the military was the true government; the civilian ministers were figureheads appeasing world opinion and internal political observers. However, the strain of the office remained. His predecessor had disappeared without notice, leaving the post vacant, and it was rumoured that the resignation had resulted from the president’s own trigger finger.

Zindar’s hand threaded his thinning hair, and he prayed that the shiver vibrating his frame remained unnoticed. He concentrated on mastering his nerves.

“I can tell you, Minister, that we are heading into the desert,” said the General. “Do you spend time there?”

“Not recently.” Zindar would have preferred an end to the small talk, but it was clear that the General desired more of a response. “As a boy, I camped in the desert with my father. It has been many years.”

“Indeed. Your father was a tribesman?” the General meant no offence by the comment. The mainstay of the military was the warrior-spirited, Bedouin tribesman, hardened by desert conditions.

“No. He was a banker who dealt with the foreign oil companies. We would camp near the oil-fields in the deep desert when he had to visit.”

“The godless capitalist pigs that pillaged our lands,” Colonel Awasi said, a sneer twisting his thin lips. “Infidels.”

“Our country is a desert, Minister,” the General said, giving the Colonel a sideways glance. “You should reacquaint yourself.”

“I assure you that I’m able to survive a trip to the desert, General,” Zindar replied. “My desire for the comforts and conveniences provided by city dwelling is a matter of preference, shared, I’m sure, by most sane men.”

The General accepted the rebuke and remained silent. He had received a comprehensive briefing on the Minister before arriving at the heliport, and knew of his history and personality. The small talk had been a failed attempt to put the man at ease.

Abin Zindar had been born to wealthy and influential Quari parents, and so he had avoided the poverty and hardships so familiar to the majority of his countrymen. Like many of his peers, Zindar had sought education abroad, in England, where he chose to study economics and political science. But here his olive complexion and ample funds had focused the prejudice of the less fortunate locals, which resulted in his indoctrination into the anti-western sentiments of the zealots of the Islamic nations. Although he never spoke of it, Zindar could identify the specific event in his foreign experience.

As a young student he seldom left the campus for the English countryside or comforts of the town, except on occasions like today, when he needed to make purchases in the local shops. He realized foreigners were tolerated, but not desired, and preferred the enlightened attitude among the educated populace at the college. He had hastened to complete his purchases and commence the brisk walk back to his dormitory.

“Hey, Malcolm. It’s a darkie pack animal,” the voice rang out behind Zindar as he struggled with his packages on the return trip. He quickened his pace as snickers echoed from the boys taunting him.

“What’s your hurry, Eh-rab?” a second voice challenged. “Don’t you want to stop and be friendly?” More peals of laughter assailed his ears. He estimated that there were four local youths following him.

“Show us what you bought, Abdul.” The voice drew nearer. Abin considered running, but the blow that sent the bundles tumbling forced him to stop and face his assailant.

“Please, I wish no trouble,” Zindar pleaded, stooping to retrieve his load.

“He wishes no trouble, lads,” the large boy with meaty fists echoed. He appeared to be the leader of the group. “Well then, you should have stayed at home with your camels and scorpions, Abdul.” The other boys had moved to surround the lone Arab; escape was not an option.

One of the boys selected a wrapped package, and his heavy boot heel crushed the brown paper, causing the sound of shattering glass to echo in the street. If anyone was witness to the actions, none made an attempt to intervene, and Zindar knew he was alone. He picked at the fallen parcels, but the next boot was not aimed at the merchandise. It caught him in the side, knocking the wind from his lungs as he fell. The four boys closed in on the helpless figure fighting to regain his breath.

“Go home, you’re not wanted here, Arab. Take your filthy money with you,” the leader ranted. He landed a well-placed kick at the side of Zindar’s head. The young Arab raised his arms to shield this vital body part. The other boys continued the attack. Feet pounded Zindar’s body - his arms, legs and torso suffered multiple blows, and the pain intensified with each assault. He felt hands rifle his pockets and his wristwatch was yanked from his arm. “Well, not all your money, Abdul. We’ll take what’s here in your wallet.” These were the last words that Zindar heard, and the ensuing laughter played between his ears as another kick caught his temple, and his ailing body fell unconscious.

He awoke several hours later at the college infirmary, his clothing torn and jewellery missing. The bruises on his face and body would heal, but the mental scars would fester. Others knew this, and they attended at his bedside.

“Welcome back, brother. I am Mahdi Khalil.” He was a handsome Arab, and older than Zindar. “You are Abin Zindar. You have been savagely beaten. Do not try to talk now, just listen. I am with the League of Arab Students, and we have encountered this form of violent prejudice on prior occasions. We must stand as one, brother. Only by protecting the backs of our brothers will we survive this time in a foreign land, and only by protecting our nations will we survive the times to come.”

They had talked then, and often again. Time saw the blossoming of the seeds of hatred planted by the British boys. His dedication to his people’s struggle had attracted attention as reports of his commitment and zeal were filed. Before he left England, several bulky dossiers were compiled concerning Abin Zindar. Among the more notable were the files of MI-6,

the CIA, Mossad, and Interpol, but the one to most affect the life of Zindar was the file maintained by the Islamic Freedom League (IFL), which had sensed a great asset to its cause.

The military coup had displaced the royal regime in Quari while Zindar was completing his final year abroad. With the change in power had come the nationalization of the oil fields and production facilities, forcing the foreign oil companies to depart, taking what assets they could, and destroying what was unmoveable. The oil companies had lost millions, but so had Quari investors, including a family named Zindar. The new ruling elite channelled the blame to the United States so that the younger Zindar, upon returning and discovering that the strain had caused the death of his father, vowed vengeance. His years of absence could never be recouped now that his father was at Allah's side. The bonds between the father and son had been strong, and when severed by a swift stroke, the blow to Zindar's mental state was devastating. With his heart hardened and his goals set, the strength embedded deep inside the man had surfaced. The zealots lost control of Zindar as he used them in his desire to crush America. As a young man he had lacked the skills of a leader; these had developed with age and experience.

Upon his return home, the IFL had recruited Abin to the terrorist ranks. Although not a front-line combatant, he proved his immeasurable value as a strategist and schemer. Consulted on operations of consequence and high political profile, Zindar had orchestrated successful highjackings, kidnappings and assassinations during his years with the IFL. His operations displayed a savage disdain for the sanctity of human life. However, because of his importance as a strategist, Zindar never bloodied his hands in his planned offensives, and thus he had never witnessed the horrific results of his plotting.

"I must congratulate you on your appointment to the defence ministry, Minister," General Huddiam spoke again. "Your expertise is legend in Quari and will serve us well in the troubled time ahead."

"I have excelled at planning death and hiding behind terrorist tactics, General," Zindar retorted. "Are you suggesting that Quari's military will adopt these means - especially since we are currently in a state of peace?"

"Peace is relative, Minister, and the military does not condone terror. It is your brilliance as a strategist that we need. War will come again; we exist in an unsettled time and place. Your predecessor was not equal to the task. A pity he killed himself, but perhaps good will come of it."

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“Quite so, General.” Zindar turned his attention to the figure of the officer. “This is indeed an unsettling time, but perhaps as an expert in weapons you will someday explain to me how a man can shoot himself three times in the back of the head.”

“Yes, a truly remarkable talent, Minister.” The General was not to be baited. “Your former superiors in the IFL must have been elated at your appointment.”

“They saw the opportunity to unite their goals with Quari’s,” Zindar replied. “I assure you, General, that my loyalties are to my country first.”

“I have never doubted so, Minister.” Conversation ceased.

Tension was strong, and except for the muted *whop whop* of the idling Jet Ranger blades, as they laboured in the stifling heat, silence dominated the small building.

A short distance outside of Bafthra, Jason Royce shifted his head to glance at his watch. Wiping a bead of sweat from his brow, he felt strands of wavy black hair matted to his damp forehead. Combating the urge to flex his long, gaunt body hidden beneath the surface of the sand, he allowed the time to register on his consciousness, experiencing excitement surging through his stiffening limbs as he realized he was moving from the back-up to the active plan. In five minutes the TCI-31 Surveillance Satellite would descend below the point where it could accomplish photographic coverage of the helicopter port, and only Royce’s camera would be left to record the event. The satellite photos had been his hedge against failure, as the greater the number of alternate photo sources, the better the chances of a successful outcome.

Royce had picked up the message from the telephone drop two days earlier, and had contacted Langley headquarters.

“Bill, this is Jason. My end’s secure, how about yours?”

“Everything’s secure in this building, you ought to know that,” Bill Tingley, Jason’s section head replied. “What have you got that needs voice communication?”

“Interesting information from a network source. Double A reliable,” Royce started. “Seems the new War Minister, Zindar, has a secret rendezvous somewhere, and he has been ordered to attend without the usual gaggle of aides. It’s set for two days from now and even he doesn’t know where.”

“Mysterious enough, but it proves nothing,” Bill replied. “Do you have a take on it?”

“Just a gut feeling, Bill, but I’d like to see who else shows. Something smells and I can’t identify it... yet.”

“Chase it down, Jason. Everyone here knows enough to respect your intuition. Is there anything you need?”

“Just a couple of things. We’re pretty resourceful here at CNN.”

“I never understood why you opted for that cover, Jason,” Bill protested. “We could give you something at the embassy, and at least provide some diplomatic immunity.”

“Absolutely, and a whole lot of attention, Bill. I don’t want to be put under a microscope by the Quari Intelligence Directorate. It would hamper my ability to function.”

“But foreign news correspondent - that’s so cliché.”

“Absolutely again, Bill, but that’s part of the allure. It’s too transparent to be suspicious, and can explain a lot of nosing about with a camera at my side. CNN or CIA, where’s the harm?” This elicited a chuckle from Bill Tingley. “Anyway, you know I don’t stretch my neck too far. I just run my network and pay off contacts.”

This was nothing more than the truth. Buying information is the chief component of modern espionage fieldwork, not midnight break-and-enters and cracking safes as Hollywood depicts. The high-tech environment of electronic surveillance and lasers deciphering vibrations in windowpanes encompasses a small portion of an agent’s trade. These were the techniques of the counter-espionage forces; the top secret, super spy-craft equipment of the movies does exist, but it was employed on the home front. Smuggling this equipment across foreign borders posed dangers, and nations loathed risking their shrouded surveillance equipment by subjecting it to discovery and capture on unfriendly soil.

“It must be your hardy Maine stock, Jason. When we recruited you from Michigan State University eleven years ago, great things were expected, but you continue to surpass those expectations. I’m sure that you live this business twenty-four hours a day,” Tingley offered. While at University, Jason Royce had displayed the rare combination of being a star athlete, during a championship football season, and a top student, graduating with honours. Once inside the CIA he had applied his physical abilities and discerning mind in his rapid rise to the station he now occupied as top field agent in the Mid-East region. His reputation, laden with reports of his keen instincts and exacting intuition, would push through the request he was about to make for use of the CIA’s TCI-31 photo-surveillance satellite.

Networks

“It’s not just dedication to the craft, Bill. If there’s a skill that could save my life, then I’d better hone it to a keen edge. I’ve always believed that simple philosophy that ‘practice makes perfect.’ I can’t think of a better way to spend my spare time.”

He didn’t run operations - he gathered intelligence. Attracted by the glamour and mystique of the international espionage trade, Royce had come to trust what he did as being in the best interest of maintaining world equilibrium, and in the preservation of his country. He had lied, cheated and stole for his country, but in over a decade of service, he had never killed for it. He’d seen his share of death, and had lost friends and colleagues, but he himself had discovered alternatives to taking life. There were occasions when policy had dictated the death of an opponent - what the KGB termed ‘wet work’ - but the agency had specialists dealing with these matters, just as Jason was a specialist in gathering intelligence. The requisite firearm was in Royce’s possession, but he loathed carrying it. Few in the trade armed themselves as the entertainment media suggested. A gun was a give-away of an operative’s authentic status if detained and searched; it could occasion several problems, but answered few. Instead of hardware, Royce chose to believe that his mind was his most valuable weapon. Intelligence used to out-think an antagonist provided much greater satisfaction than violence.

“I like living on that edge, Bill,” Royce continued. “You know that. Quarterbacking on the college team, water-skiing with those acrobatic jumps, and I guess we can’t omit the sky-diving.” Risk had formed a pattern in Royce’s life. A hazardous job was a natural progression from his formative years, but the risk element solved only one-half of the equation.

The physical risk was addictive, but using his ample intellect in reasoning and logic was a source of pure joy. The best intelligence field men seldom took the major risks themselves. Early in his career Royce had demonstrated his inherent proficiency for recruiting a network of informants and operatives. He possessed a talent for ascertaining the lure which enticed individuals to his cause: for some it was money, for others duty and nationalism, and for a few, just acceptance. There existed the idealistic contacts, and they were a refreshing addition to any network, but for the informant in Minister Zindar’s office, the enticement was money.

“If you ever get tired of the danger, you know that there’s an analyst position waiting here for you,” Tingley said. “I know you turn it down every time we offer, but we’ll keep holding it out to you.”

“Terrific, but I don’t want out of the field yet,” Royce replied. ‘I’m signing off now Bill - look for my report.’ Jason Royce closed the phone

connection and contemplated Bill Tingley's offer. Interpreting the information supplied by the network was an activity for which Royce was noted within the Agency, but it was the combination of physical risk and mental challenge that made the job attractive. He would not be accepting a desk job in the near future.

Royce mentally surveyed the events that had led to his current uncomfortable position in the sand.

Late this morning, the informant in Zindar's office had learned of the heliport rendezvous, leaving Royce little time to make appropriate arrangements and get into position.

Since the Desert Alliance War, NATO monitored all air traffic in Quari. Medivac flights, although tolerated, exhibited a suspicious quality. As a matter of course, the pilot postponed filing a flight plan until the last minute, but he would file, since the risk to an unidentified flight was a rendezvous with a sidewinder missile. Covering all angles, Royce had transmitted a standby alert to all operatives within the flight range of the two helicopters stationed at the Medivac base, and had requested that a navy Hawkeye electronic surveillance aircraft maintain a high-altitude station. Again his reputation had come through to his benefit when required.

Upon returning to his apartment, Royce had donned clothing suited for obscuring his presence in the desert, and had packed the equipment he needed into a small backpack. Although preferring to work alone, an abandoned automobile along the desert road would appear suspicious and warrant investigation. The solution lay with a local named Suelliman Haffa, recruited to his network several years before. The Arab drove a Bafthra taxi, and had demonstrated his value on previous occasions. Suelliman had also exhibited enormous reliability; his own love of money outweighed any duty he felt toward the corrupt regime governing his country. Still, Royce remained wary whenever cash was the incentive; it was a double-edged blade with the ever-present risk of losing the operative to a higher payer. Some loyalties were very fickle.

Exiting his apartment, Royce spotted Suelliman's waiting cab. He sauntered to the car, ignoring the other cabs, while endeavouring to radiate a lack of purpose. Suelliman, spending his time leaning against the fender, now hurried to open the back door as Royce pitched his backpack and climbed into the seat.

Networks

They accomplished the drive in silence; Suelliman knowing the advantages of his continued ignorance, and Royce desiring security. While still two kilometres from the heliport, Royce detected an outcropping of rock. The Quari desert consists of only a shallow sandy mantle with the supporting bedrock so close to the surface it often breaks through the grainy cover. Even the notorious dunes require a protuberance of the bedrock to harvest the sand in wind-driven drifts.

“Suelliman, pull over by those rocks. I should be able to observe the heliport from here.”

“Yes, I can see it across the sand. There,” Suelliman pointed past the windscreen. “You watch. I shall make preparations in case of unwanted company”. He stopped the car as his passenger was opening the door.

Snatching binoculars from the pack, Royce scrambled up the rock to a sheltered niche where, assuming a prone position, he could observe the heliport while remaining concealed from highway traffic. Suelliman turned the cab back toward the city and lifted the hood, occupying himself by tinkering with the engine as if experiencing difficulties. Should an inquisitive patrol chance by, the knife secluded in his sleeve was poised in readiness to attest to the damaged radiator hose.

Royce’s brown eyes scrutinized the heliport through the binoculars. A tall chain-link fence with only one observable gate encompassed the compound. A lone sentry manned a small booth at the entrance, and although no weapon was in evidence, the CIA agent knew one would present itself when required. No military guards patrolled the perimeter, as such behaviour would negate the status of the terminal as a civilian establishment.

As he watched, two men emerged from the compound building and boarded a maintenance truck. Royce noted the timing as the vehicle completed a slow speed circuit of the fence, stopping for ten seconds for a fleeting conversation with the gate guard, and then returned to the building. The procedure took three minutes and to an indifferent witness it appeared as a component of the regular maintenance routine. This complicated things. Royce knew that as long as Suelliman’s cab sat on the highway, he risked detection. However, determining the elapsed time between the fence inspections now became his primary concern. Resigned to the wait, he focused the binoculars and scanned for additional surprises.

Only one of the two helicopters confirmed stationed here now stood on the tarmac - a Bell Jet Ranger painted in medivac colours. Except for the aircraft, the small building flying a stripped windsock, and the truck, the

compound was bare and flat. Cover was absent inside the fence, making it impossible to get closer than one hundred meters to the building or aircraft. The highway bordered one side of the compound, and Royce noted his double blessing: first, the road rose about three feet above the desert sands, providing a wall to shroud him from the view within the compound; second, the same section of fence faced the prevailing winds, and scraps of desert bushes lodged against the mesh, providing useful concealment. Royce allowed a crooked smirk as his day was again looking up.

Exactly thirty minutes from the start of the previous sweep, the two maintenance men boarded their vehicle and executed an identical journey. It was now a calculated risk, but one Royce was determined to assume. Since the hazards inherent in confirming a pattern in the guards' rounds were too great, he trusted that low priority sentry duty had bred a lack of imagination in the Arab sentries, and so he expected them to remain punctual and undeviating. Boredom makes men indolent and inattentive, and guard duty prompts them to compensate by following their orders to the letter.

Royce restored the binoculars to their protective case; experience having taught him the value of maintaining equipment in top shape - never knowing which piece may save his life. He picked his way down the rock protrusion to the sand deck. Upon returning to the cab he extracted a camera with a telescopic lens from the backpack and ensured it was working before he snapped the lens cap in place. He returned the binoculars to the pack, which he handed to Suelliman.

"Secure this in the trunk. It's not likely that you'll be stopped and searched, but even a routine checkpoint guard may suspect an unattended pack on an empty seat."

"The sons of camels would suspect their fathers if they knew who they were," Suelliman replied as he accepted the bag. "Get in the front. I know how to deliver you to this place."

Suelliman turned the car and headed toward the heliport. Royce crouched on the floor in the front passenger position, clutching the camera. Here, beneath the normal ventilation levels, a myriad of odours assaulted his nostrils with a stench made worse by the day's heat.

The roads encircling Bafthra had seen years of heavy military traffic, and avoiding the resultant potholes was the primary antidote for highway hypnosis in Quari. "Brace yourself," Suelliman said as he chose a vicious candidate beyond the heliport gate and hit it dead centre. The cab gave a tremendous grind and bump as the fender scraped asphalt and the tire

clashed with the wall of the gaping hole. He pulled the cab to the far side of the highway and vaulted out, bellowing obscenities while making an animated spectacle of inspecting the damage to his vehicle. Unseen from within the compound, Royce also exited through the open driver's door and slid into the sand along the edge of the road.

The gate guard, hearing the commotion, peered from the booth and chuckled at a familiar sight. Bad mouthing the government was a national past-time in Quari, indulged in while out of the hearing range of military officers. Suelliman returned to the driver seat, still waving his arms and muttering furiously, and continued his journey. There was a settlement with a market and a few service shops around a well about three kilometres up the road. There he would wait until Royce joined him after dark.

Royce settled into the sand and gravel embankment that rose to meet the above roadway. He squeezed in until satisfied with his concealment from passing traffic. He waited through the remaining ten minutes before the next pass of the maintenance vehicle. Although his clothing matched the colour of the sand to provide camouflage, Royce scanned the sky, praying in silence that the second helicopter based in the compound remained on whatever mission occupied it. The scorching desert sun was overhead, and his place of concealment allowed the blistering rays full access. It was times like these that spies embraced the high-tech surveillance capabilities of electronics and space-based optics. More and more these advances in technology, safe from capture by the enemy, threatened the field agent's usefulness in intelligence gathering.

Upholding its schedule, the maintenance truck thundered to life. Royce grinned, knowing that punctuality and consistency were two signs of men putting structure into a tedious existence that made them sloppy. Military minds are inclined toward a fixed, unvarying schedule under the theory of instilling discipline and attention to duty, which instead made for predictability and ease of circumvention.

Royce listened, picturing the truck throughout the trip, while it made the tour of the perimeter fence. When the engine quit he heard the slamming of the two doors and waited another five minutes before moving, allowing the guards to resume whatever routine occupied them in the building. The next step, crossing the road, embodied more risk.

Conscious of the jeopardy, Royce rose from his concealed position and glanced over the road surface. The compound was silent and absent of movement. The fence lay about twelve feet from the far side of the highway, with a thick concentration of scrub brush against the chain link opposite his

position. Suelliman had chosen a good location. Taking a last deep breath, he sprinted across the road toward the fence. The hard-packed sand near the roadbed made running easy, but as he neared the fence the surface became loose and slowed his progress. His feet fought the powdery substance for sufficient grip to propel him forward, but he accomplished the entire dash in ten seconds.

The bushes hid his form and Royce realized that by burrowing into the surface he would have adequate cover for his surveillance. Looking back he spotted the one remaining problem - his final four paces had left deep furrows in the sand, marking a trail to guide any observer to his point of concealment.

He snapped a branch from the scrub, crawled from his hiding spot, and obliterated the evidence. Returning to the cover of the bushes, he dug into the sand and used the branch to spread the powdery desert over his legs and buttocks. He still retained mobility of his arms, and now checked the camera with a deft precision born from endless repetition, and set it on the sand to his front. He extracted from his jacket the two additional items he had taken from the pack in the taxi. The first was a one-litre, flexible water-container. He would be here for several hours and would require replenishment of the body fluids lost to the searing heat.

The second item was a flat rectangular object about the size of a standard business card and one-half of a centimetre thick. It consisted of a few microcircuits and an extremely sensitive microphone, with about two-thirds of its volume being consumed by three watch-style batteries and an extensive coiled antenna system. The unit was protected by a beige-coloured nylon fabric, used in women's hose, designed to pass sound, but not the sand or dirt which would play havoc with the delicate electronics. Royce slid his finger along one of the long edges and located a slight depression where, with positive pressure, he felt a satisfying click as the switch moved into the on position. The ultra-sensitive microphone in the low-power transmitter was alive and listening. He scooped a handful of sand in front of his face and deposited the transmitter in the hole. He covered the device with a thin layer of sand and graded the area to eliminate all traces of his excavation. Upon his being discovered, chances were the transmitter would remain obscured, giving his reporter cover a fighting chance.

Royce took another surveying glance of the compound and gazed at his watch, pondering the sweep of the second hand. In a low tone, a whisper, he spoke to the air and the empty desert, "Code Oscar Victor Papa Two Five Eight on station and awaiting the start of the game. No players yet on the

field. Sand crab confirm zero five, life sign check every three zero on my--", Royce waited while his watch ticked the last seconds to a new minute, "--Mark." He grinned; he loved his work. It wasn't like the Bond movies he had grown up with. This was the real spy business. Waiting and tedium were the key components of the task. Danger and intrigue were secondary. *But I wouldn't trade it for any other job in the world*, he mused. Reality intruded on his thoughts as it came kicking back with the ferocity of an arctic wind during a January blizzard, or maybe it was just the blistering heat in the still air. The hardest part was now at hand - a long wait in the searing desert sun.

Six kilometres overhead and twenty kilometres southeast of Bafthra, a navy E2C Hawkeye from the carrier USS Georgetown pulled a tight orbit. The pilot fumed at having his crew ordered to perform an extra shift without adequate explanation, but he had followed orders to rendezvous with the KC-10 tanker to top-up fuel, and then found his station; like his crew behind him, he was conditioned to duty. Two F14 Tomcats were also in the vicinity and could be at his side in under a minute if the Hawkeye's multitude of sensors detected any threat.

The Hawkeye is the Navy's scaled-down version of the Airforce AWAC's flying electronic marvel. Designed for carrier operation, the twin prop Hawkeye is similar to the jet-powered AWAC in sporting the twenty-four-foot-diameter, rotating radome on its spine. Folding wings make it ideal for the cramped storage space below decks, and carrier launch and recovery capabilities complete the package. With the Hawkeye cruising at thirty thousand feet, the five-man crew can monitor all air traffic as far as four hundred and fifty miles distant and vector friendly fighters during combat engagements. The APS-125 radar is capable of covering three million cubic miles of sky.

"It seems strange spending so much time over dry land," the pilot remarked to his right-seat companion. "When you're so used to flying high cover for the fleet, it's eerie being five hundred miles from the nearest body of water capable of floating a nuclear carrier like the Georgetown."

"Yeah," the co-pilot replied. "I'm looking forward to seeing the cool waters of the Persian Gulf myself. I hope they let us go home soon."

"Just as soon as Crackers gets to play with his new toys," the pilot said, smiling at his own joke.

In the belly of the plane a crewman powered up the new piece of communications gear which had been installed before the Georgetown had left for the Persian Gulf. Commander Felix "Hotdog" Bolton shunned all

pretence of understanding the workings of the electronic marvels his plane carried, but knew this latest gadget operated on obscure frequencies that even his own flight technicians had quipped seemed beyond radio. He did know that it bore responsibility for the strange looking antenna, which stuck forward from the nose of his aircraft, and for the addition of one crewmember to assist with the additional workload during the new comm gear's operation. This was all that necessity dictated he understand, for the best electronics specialist in the fleet, at least according to Hotdog, Seaman First Class Kenny "Crackers" Greene, manned the panel and was fully trained on the unit.

The intercom crackled to life. "Captain, this is Crackers. We just received our first message on the new A2L comm unit." During flight operations Commander Bolton was captain of the aircraft.

"Hold tight, Crackers. I'm coming back," Commander Bolton said as he glanced to his co-pilot who nodded confirmation after taking control of the plane. He unhooked his seat straps and headed back to the Seaman First's station.

"Let's hear it, Crackers." Bolton indicated the tape unit attached to the A2L.

"It's short, Captain." Crackers handed Bolton a sheet of paper. "Here's the transcription." He reached for and flipped the play switch on the tape recorder.

Hotdog Bolton read the short text as he listened to the taped message, and then re-read it to insure that he had digested it all the first time through. "It doesn't make much sense," he said, passing the paper to the electronics expert. The slight twinkle in the pilot's eyes alerted the Seaman First Class to the test.

"It does if you know the equipment and who is using it, sir," Crackers responded. "OVP258 is the operator's code name. This is the spook network, Captain. The sand crab is the code for the transmitting unit. Confirm zero five means that OVP has preset his transmitter to give a working confirmation pulse every five minutes. That's how we know it's still functioning. He'll observe radio silence unless there's something to report. But he'll let us know he's okay every thirty minutes."

"What about the 'game starting' and 'players on the field'?" the Commander inquired.

"Just a guess, sir. I would think that means that whatever OVP's business is, it hasn't started yet. He's waiting for someone," Crackers said, while adjusting the fine-tune on the console before him.

Hotdog Bolton grinned. He had figured out the scenario himself but found it fun to test Cracker's keen intellect. "Glad you're here to pull it all together for us, Crackers."

The Seaman caught the subtle barb and realized he had just passed the test, but spotting his chance said, "It was all in the technical briefing, Captain." His sky blue eyes betrayed a mischievous twinkle as he returned his attention to the A2L. He seldom had the opportunity to take a shot at Hotdog and his renowned hatred of technical briefings.

"Well, Seaman," Bolton retorted, unwilling to be one-upped by his crewman, "I'll try to stay awake at tech briefings in the future. I insist that you do. One of us has to make me shine in the eyes of the brass." He left the young sailor with one of his most infectious smiles.

"Aye, aye, sir, I'll do my best." Crackers grinned as Bolton turned to retrace his steps to the cockpit. The Commander had little worry about Kenny Greene missing a technical briefing. The rumours on ship said Crackers got horny just thinking about them. He could no more sleep through tech briefings than any other man would sleep through a date with Sharon Stone.

"Captain," Crackers called after his retreating superior. Bolton turned to face the voice. "A2L traffic isn't reported through normal channels, sir. I have to establish a satellite link with Langley. The computer will track the satellite using the gyro, but we are dealing with spooks, sir."

"Diplomatic, Crackers. Why take chances, so hold as steady an orbit as possible. Consider it done," Bolton replied. "I'll make your life easier, and when we return to the carrier, I'll ask the cruise director to reserve the best tennis court for you." He observed the First Class Seaman's grin expand from ear to ear before he turned to the cockpit. The whole crew had tough jobs and performed as a team. Bolton had confidence in each man doing his best and looking out for his crewmates. He took pleasure in a member of his crew making a suggestion to the potential benefit of them all. *At times we all need to be reminded to be careful.*

Royce made his thirty-minute check-ins, trusting in blind faith that the transmitter was working, and that the E2C Hawkeye was on station. The sand crab needed a line of sight transmission shot, even straight up. The heat had been stifling all afternoon, but his conditioning had helped to nurse his water bottle with a meanness that had failed to match the sweat on his back and brow. He held his breath each time the maintenance truck had passed, and had prayed against discovery by an actual maintenance crew deciding

that time was ripe for scrub removal. The unexpected is the worst aspect of the espionage trade. Over the years the good agents proved to be those who stayed wary and never allowed themselves to feel safe. Those who retained a keen edge of caution made the term 'good agent' synonymous with free and alive.

Hours passed and now the sun was a glowing, orange ball setting on the western horizon, and the TCI-31 satellite was descending in the east. Less than one hour earlier the first Mercedes diesel sedan had entered the compound and pulled up before the four-foot roof extension over the building entrance. The long menacing sedan spoke of heavy armour, and the smooth rumble of the German-crafted engine, even at a distance, attested to the impatient power under the hood. Two men had exited the car and entered the building with exaggerated dispatch. They were professional, and although Royce had the camera propped and focused, they yielded no photographic opportunities. Both men had been dressed in the street attire of Quari businessmen - worldwide it was the common uniform of the matching suit and the uncomfortable yet obligatory necktie. Neither man had appeared comfortable in his attire.

Ten minutes later an identical vehicle had arrived. This time the occupant in the rear passenger compartment had lacked caution and risked a glance around the compound before entering the building. The brief instant was enough for Royce to recognize the face through the telescopic lens. He squeezed the shutter release and confirmed the presence of Minister Zindar. The clothing, although not unlike that of the others, seemed to be suited to this wearer.

Both vehicles had departed after depositing their riders, and Royce fulfilled his duty in reporting all arrivals to the sand crab.

"Sorry to play havoc with your satellite link," Captain Bolton spoke over the intercom to Crackers, "but we've finished our big gulp and are returning to station to orbit." The KC-10 tanker retracted its boom and departed the Hawkeye for the second time in one day; the tanker crew had also drawn a long shift. Only the Tomcats had managed to rotate duty with a fresh flight, but handling those flying engines with attached wings was far more exhausting than cruising in what was turning out to be an airborne bus. Even Bolton's technical crew in back still waited for a target to tax their tracking abilities.

"No problems encountered, Captain," Crackers disembodied voice returned through Bolton's headset. "There hasn't been any action on the

ground since the last car arrived. We have been advised of the chopper's flight plan and I expect take-off at any minute."

Well, if you had to track, it would be helpful to know your quarry's flight path. "So, where are we headed, Crackers?" Bolton inquired.

"North, sir," Crackers replied. "About forty minutes at the Bell's best cruise speed. A small desert settlement called Akira. There's a medical clinic with landing pad registered at that location. Check your monitor - I'll bring it up for you." Crackers swung his chair to face a keyboard giving him access to the navigation computer and was typing commands at a furious pace. Within seconds a small cockpit monitor situated between the two pilots displayed a map of the relevant section of Quari. The filed flight-plan of the medivac helicopter showed in red, while the projected track of the Hawkeye from its present station was yellow. Bolton knew that the further north over Quari airspace he strayed, the riskier would be the situation, and it was heartening that the Tomcats were along for the full tour. Since Quari had admitted defeat in the conflict with the United States and its allies, they were no longer in a state of war, and so he was in violation of a sovereign nation's airspace. It was unlikely that the Quari government would take action to defend its airspace, but it was prudent to be wary whenever the cloak-and-dagger cabal embroiled itself in an operation.

The silence was thick enough to feel it pressing on one's shoulders; the tension was enough to drive frail individuals to their knees. Zindar started at the ringing of the outdated rotary telephone on the communications console, cursing under his breath at this latest exhibition of nerves as he observed the composed demeanour of the military officers. Bravery came easily when planning terrorist activities from a fortified shelter, but these events were forcing him to realize the fear that develops from vulnerability.

"Why do we still use this outdated, ancient equipment?" Zindar demanded in an attempt to distract his thoughts. "With billions of dollars in annual oil revenues, we can afford better."

"The Western powers do not like to share their technology, Minister," General Huddiam offered.

"The infidels of the West employ their power and technology to enslave weaker nations and lavish luxuries upon themselves, it is true," Zindar admitted. "But they can usually be relied upon to exchange their moral and political standards for money."

The operator mumbled into the receiver and hung up the phone. He swivelled his chair to face the three guests in his office. "The satellite has

descended below the horizon,” he said. “You may board now. May Allah guide your flight.”

Like a well-programmed machine, General Huddiam took two steps and caught the Minister by the forearm as Colonel Awasi opened the door for all three to pass through. An officer on each side guided Abin Zindar across the tarmac. Ducking low to avoid the spinning rotor blades, they hurried the last paces to the open door of the helicopter. Once they were aboard, Colonel Awasi slid the door shut from the inside. The helo shuddered as the force of the rotors increased with the applied power, accompanied by an equal increase in the noise level, which suggested to the Minister the impracticality of conversation during the flight. Zindar the strategist was not a soldier who had faced his own doom, or even witnessed death inflicted. As the helicopter laboured to hoist itself from the ground to commence this mysterious trip, the purpose and destination having both been withheld from him, even though a powerful man, the new Minister of War and Defence fought his sense of foreboding.

Royce reached full alert as the compound building door opened and two men stepped through in unison. The third party joined them as they hurried toward the waiting helicopter. Since Royce had begun preparing when the Bell Jet ranger had commenced warming its engines, the camera had been at action ready and focused for the past ten minutes. As the aircraft trembled with the lazy blades turning, appearing poised to leap into the air without notice, he spoke for the benefit of the sand crab, knowing that the sound of the helicopter engine masked his voice to anyone inside the fence.

After the E2C Hawkeye resumed its station orbit Hotdog Bolton decided to stretch his legs again; long flights tended toward severe muscle cramps. He left the cockpit and was traversing the sophisticated electronics stations of the aircraft when the A2L unit gave a short but audible ping. It was a sound like the active sonar-return that Hotdog had heard on many occasions on board ship. Navy men everywhere, from pilot to common seaman, recognized that sound. He gave Crackers an inquiring look.

“That’s the sand crab performing a radio check, sir,” Crackers answered the un verbalized question. “It lets us know the transmitter is working.”

Bolton listened a moment to the faint rumble coming from the speaker, then inquired, “What’s that background noise? It sounds like a helicopter on idle.”

Networks

“Yes, sir,” Crackers said. “A Bell Jet Ranger. OVP reported it when it started up several minutes ago. He expects action soon.”

Responding to the cue, the A2L echoed a clear transmission of Royce’s voice as Crackers performed a quick scan, ensuring the integrity of the satellite link with Langley:

“Three men have exited the building toward the chopper. Two on either side seem to be guiding the man in the centre. Taking pictures now... Confirm centre man to be Zindar, and the one on his right is our old foil General Huddiam. The third man looks familiar but I can’t quite place the face. Still enough light for good pictures. All three are wearing knee-length lab coats - a lame attempt at disguise. Everyone on board now... It looks like this show is going on the road. I trust you’re getting this, Bootlegger, he’s all yours now. Don’t lose him in the sand. Good luck, I’m out of here.”

Royce retrieved his sand crab and switched it to the off position. He replaced the cover on his camera lens and checked his watch - only ten more minutes before the next perimeter tour, and just twenty until darkness. Better to wait the twenty and escape under the shelter of the desert night. He hoped someone would be in position to meet the chopper when it landed, since by now its destination must be known. The two most powerful men in Quari other than the President himself had just lifted-off. Something major was happening.

CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, received and recorded the transmissions in real-time. The communications technician ignored the contents of the signals he received from the satellite relay; that was the purview of the analysts and operations personnel hugging the speaker. His prime concern was logging the events into a computer file, as the powers that ruled him considered pen and paper obsolete. Paper lost its purpose as everyone moved towards electronic data-storage. Anyone could get any information he needed from computers, provided he knew where to look and how to get it out. It was surprising that the spy types the technician worked for hadn’t figured that out... yet. No matter, someone else had.

They were elite, they were covert and they were in it for the money and the challenge; and if anyone knew how to get into this closed society they kept the secret. But the technician knew of them and he aspired to join them.

Bruce E. Hubley

One day he would add his name to the ranks of the Tracers. No, use the proper name: *Cyberspace Tracers*.

Chapter 2: Touch-down

“Look sharp everyone,” Hotdog Bolton instructed the Hawkeye crew as he returned to the cockpit. “You heard the man. Pick this guy up and don’t lose him. Someone had the good judgement to give this job to the best crew in the fleet, show ‘em what you can do.”

Bolton strapped himself in and took control of the aircraft as the intercom phones crackled. “Captain, this is Johnston, I have our target on the Lookdown, solid contact and heading on his filed course.” Seaman Allan Johnston had enlisted a few months before and had proven himself another electronics whiz-kid, using the radar to see manifestations missed by a less gifted person. At nineteen years Johnston had joined the navy straight from high school after an astute examiner had predicted the potential of this lanky six-footer’s skills with electronic equipment. His uncluttered mind furnished the ideal bucket to fill with the exacting standards of service training. Although his lack of a university degree would hinder his ability to advance to an officer’s rank, recruiting staff anticipated a lengthy and rewarding career for this recruit.

“Keep him centred, Al,” Bolton said, “and tell me what you need.”

“Just maintain your plotted track, sir,” Johnston replied. “He’s heading zero zero nine degrees and burning one one zero knots. This guy’s in a rush, but MRIR will tag him.”

“You calling the Lookdown a mirror now, Johnston?”

“Yes, sir,” Johnston replied. “Another four letter acronym - Multiple Return Imaging Radar. The non-technical types prefer its nickname - Lookdown.”

The Multiple Return Imaging Radar (MRIR) System detected aircraft attempting to evade standard radar lock-on with low level ground clutter. Although development on the unit continued, its current incarnation surpassed standard radar low-level flight detection by eighty percent. It used the APS-125 Radome unit enhanced by an additional receptor, providing a three dimensional aspect to the radar return. The new receiver further spoiled the Hawkeye’s original profile with a rounded bump on the belly of the plane. The navy air-jockeys thought of the Lookdown as the sister of their water-bound brethren’s side-scan sonar. Its effectiveness excelled over

water, while dry land harboured the disadvantage of having uneven surfaces features to hide behind.

The Hawkeye rolled its wings and departed the familiar orbit, assuming a parallel track to the Bell helicopter.

“We’re going to have to watch our airspeed, Mike,” Bolton said, glancing at his co-pilot.

Mike Greenough nodded at his skipper’s remark. “Right, Captain, our cruise speed is a lot faster than the Bell’s”

“I’d prefer to be in and out as quickly as possible, Mike,” Bolton continued. “The Quaris will get suspicious of an American aircraft tailing one of their own. They might get curious and come up for a closer look.”

“Possible, Captain. But I think that they’ve grown accustomed to being under a watchful eye, and will write it off as another intimidation tactic.”

“Hope so, Mike. You know how the presence of Migs tends to ruin a peaceful flight.”

“Well, you knew the job was dangerous when you took it,” Paul Makim muttered to himself as he adjusted the ultralite for flight. The twenty-eight year old, black-haired and olive-skinned American was born of Turkish parents, but passed for a native at his station in the northern Quari territory. He was fluent in the dialects of the indigenous population, and his last year in the desert had weathered his features and darkened his skin to the point where he appeared native. As a junior field recruit for the Agency, he had feared that he would never receive an assignment while stranded here in the middle of nowhere. Then minutes ago the call had rung through instructing him to undertake the required surveillance of the Akira clinic. Paul knew the area; familiarity he had gained on several previous visits. Sand dunes provided excellent cover within an easy view of the clinic, and the absence of armed sentries in the area negated the need for excessive stealth.

The dangerous part, as Paul saw it, involved getting to Akira in this overgrown excuse for a kite. The ultralite was a hang-glider to which someone had decided to attach an undercarriage, engine, and propeller. He had flown before, but with the sun setting, navigation in the dark would be a bitch at best. There are few enduring landmarks in the open desert to use during daylight visual navigation, and after dark his options narrowed. The ultralite had no navigation aids. He could miss his destination by miles.

It took ten minutes to assemble the aircraft and gather the necessary equipment, leaving less than forty minutes to get into position at Akira; the flight would take twenty-five. Paul strapped on his helmet and started the

engine with the pull cord. He listened as the Briggs and Stratton engine coughed twice, caught life, and began the propeller rotation. Without further delay he jumped into the seat, tightened the restraining belt across his waist, and fixed the shoulder harness in place. He advanced the throttle to full and the plane lurched forward. The ultralite taxied a few metres to take-off speed, then Paul pulled back on the yoke, urging the plane into the sky. As he raced south, sounding like a swarm of furious killer bees, he was awed that someone had the foresight to place an operative in the middle of nowhere.

Being sandwiched between the two army officers provided Zindar with an unimpeded view past the pilot and out the front windscreen. At first the helicopter had attained height and assumed a northerly heading, as indicated by the rosy glow of the sun setting on the western horizon. They headed deeper into the desert wilderness, where a body might lie undiscovered while its bones bleached in the unrelenting sun. Zindar fought to isolate these thoughts as he probed his memories for indications of displeasure with his performance in office. He lacked justification for supposing that he was in any danger - *other than that I have no idea of where I'm going, and the requirement that I be alone* - and struggled to believe that this clandestine journey related to his position as Minister of War and Defence. *After all, the minister reasoned, the President sending a general and a colonel on a mission to dispatch a single man is an impractical solution. And the general has commented on my potential usefulness to the army.* Zindar's mind eased, but another puzzle rose in his mind as the excursion assumed a new and exhilarating character.

After several minutes of flight, the pilot plunged near to the surface such that Zindar feared the skids would impact the sand. The erratic nature of the course increased as the pilot manoeuvred to avoid the high dunes and rocky outcrops, but the northerly bearing held true. Before having time to ponder this dangerous tactic, the Minister was thrust against his restraining straps as the powerful helicopter dumped forward momentum, pointing its nose into the air like a mighty stallion rearing on its hind legs. The aircraft hovered for several seconds, then angled its rotors to resume the madcap-flight north. Several times they gained altitude, evident by the pressure changes in the passengers' ears, only to bleed it off in abrupt dives to the inhospitable sands. Darkness had overtaken the outside world and Zindar lost his ability to monitor the shrinking distance between the helicopter and the terrain. He hoped that someone had bestowed the pilot with better vision than he

possessed. He was unaware that the pilot wore night-vision goggles granting him the most perfect eyes in the dark.

This antic repeated several times as the helicopter braked scant metres above the desert, paused for several seconds, and continued its journey. Zindar's fears of an execution in the Quari desert were replaced by the greater fear of a tragic crash far from assistance. He glanced both right and left, and noted that Awasi and Huddiam appeared unconcerned and relaxed.

The world around him was drifting into insanity. Zindar focused on relaxing his mind - allowing his analytic-self to comprehend the situation. His questions abounded, but the clamour of the huge turbines positioned over his head prevented their asking. Having regained control of his emotions, the Minister turned his mental abilities to understanding the tactics playing out. The erratic flying evaded followers, *but who could be following us? Not following, - tracking! The American devils kept a constant radar watch over Quari airspace. Hugging the ground defeated that radar.* Still the trip raised more questions than his analysis answered. *Why, if hiding from the American radar, did the pilot continue to climb to an altitude where he must be spotted? Why the frequent hovering stops and starts?* Zindar knew that security was Awasi's speciality, and that this insane flying must manifest a plan to elude followers and trackers.

Due to his value as a strategist, Zindar had been forbidden travel during his career in the IFL. He knew of his existence on the death lists of foreign powers, and so avoiding risk situations had been preferable to protecting against them. His direct experience with security had involved large men with automatic pistols and AK-47's, who remained out of his sight, but had materialized at the slightest hint of trouble. Thanks to the diligence of the security forces allotted to protect him, attempts on Zindar's life had failed to inflict even slight injury. Zindar, a delegator, preferred leaving matters in the hands of trade experts, but he resolved to study security measures should he survive this experience.

With an absence of threat-indications on the Hawkeye's warning systems, Bolton flew with minimal running lights. This permitted the F14 Tomcat escort to keep a wary eye on him and avoid after dark air collisions without using radar. He had reasoned that the fewer radar signals bouncing around the sky the better. Still, the further north he intruded into Quari airspace, the more comfort he drew from the presence of the Tomcats.

"Report, Al," he said over the intercom. "How are we doing with the target?"

Networks

“On course, Captain.” Bolton detected the edge of concentration in the crewman’s reply. “He’s been trying to hide in the sand, but I think he underestimates our Lookdown.” There was a hesitation in Johnston’s speech before he continued. “He’s lost us on a few occasions, but we always pick him back up exactly along the flight track filed in his plan. Only one thing that’s odd...”

“Let’s have it, Seaman. If you’ve got a problem with the target, let’s get it out now before it gets worse.” A crease crossed Bolton’s brow. A problem with a Lookdown tracking exercise for which Johnston lacked explanation, was grounds for concern.

“Well, sir, I don’t know if it’s a problem,” Johnston replied. “It’s just that when he disappears, he always reappears at the right place, but the wrong time.”

“Explain.”

“He’s late, sir.” The Seaman hesitated. “Allowing for his airspeed when he disappears and reappears, he seems to be anywhere from four to fifteen seconds late reaching that location. Because his airspeed is constant when in view, it just seems odd. I mean, what’s he doing when he disappears?”

There lay the value of Seaman Allen Johnston. No one else would have looked for this type of idiosyncrasy, and this kid was calculating the time discrepancies in his head. Bolton realized that this was how Johnston followed a radar display. He knew where and when the next blip should appear.

“I’d have to run the tapes through computer analysis for the exact differences,” Johnston continued, “but there’s definitely something there.”

“Could he be landing?” Bolton suggested. “That explains why the Lookdown loses him.”

“Anything’s possible, sir.” Johnston sounded uncertain of this theory. “However, landing’s unlikely - especially in the shorter absences. There’s not enough time, and he’s done it five times now.”

Bolton was at a loss, and resolved to leave this one for the analysts - the heavy hitters at Langley. “Put it in your report, Al,” he said. “As long as we have him in view we’re doing our job.”

“Aye, Aye, sir.”

Bolton relished the intercom’s silence. He hated being mixed up in the affairs of the intelligence community, for if anything went wrong, Hotdog Bolton knew whose ass would be on the line.

The ultralite flight was easier than expected. Low flying and use of a hand-held compass permitted Paul to locate the lighted fires of the two camps he knew existed between his own dwelling and Akira. He gave them a wide berth, and then gained altitude to search for the Akira clinic, thankful that his navigation was unaffected by a wind. A bright moon was due later this night, but without it now, it was impossible to see natural landmarks on the desert surface. Luck prevailed, and Paul, spying the clinic's electric lights in the distance, returned the throttle to idle and hit the engine kill switch. The powered ultralite now functioned as an awkward glider, allowing him to land closer to the clinic than he would dare with an operating engine. Guarding against loose, deep sand, Paul maintained an exaggerated wing-flare as he landed. The dunes segregating the clinic from open desert sheltered him.

Abandoning the plane and his helmet, he seized the night-vision camera with its telescopic lens, and scrambled up the dune. Paul positioned himself to watch over the top of the sand, with his body concealed from the object of his attention. The chosen spot commanded a flawless view of the vacant helicopter pad, and utilizing the camera, he performed a swift survey of the installation. Everything appeared to be in order. He pulled a sand crab transmitter from his pocket and activated the power switch before planting the portable device a few centimetres in front of his face. He covered it with a thin layer of sand that he smoothed over, obliterating all traces of the concealed unit. This finished, he spoke his identification code, settled in, and resigned himself to the wait in the cold desert air. The moon was rising as he had landed. This would aid the return trip, and make his surveillance a piece of cake.

On board the E2C, Crackers logged the receipt of the first message from Akira. As it appeared that the welcoming committee was in place, he anticipated another long, stable station-orbit.

Minister Zindar managed to accept the erratic flying of the medivac helicopter and relaxed as the moon's illumination provided an eerie gleam to the desert. The nimble aircraft appeared to be flying through a sand canyon with high dune walls. Such formations are common in Quari where the bedrock tended to be irregular with running peaks and valleys. Geologists theorized that the desert once comprised the bottom of a large sea, thrown up through great earth upheavals long before the dawn of mankind.

Colonel Awasi tapped Zindar's forearm and nodded toward the right side of the helicopter. Zindar peered through the window, endeavouring to see in the milky luminescence provided by the moon, as a shadow overtook the helicopter. Straining his sight, and with the aid of the moonlight, he discerned the form of an identical helicopter which became lost in the darkness ahead as his own aircraft decelerated. Frustrated, Zindar knew curiosity must wait, as an explanation by Awasi would be lost to the droning engines.

The powerful helicopter descended toward the sand with the ease of a falling snowflake, but the surface remained elusive as the desert opened up to swallow the unsuspecting aircraft. Even the moon disappeared behind a desert wall, and it seemed that the chopper would never halt its endless fall, until it finally bumped the earth.

Colonel Awasi opened the sliding door and jumped outside. He produced a powerful flashlight and illuminated the area below the door while he beckoned the minister to dismount. Zindar leapt to the ground and surveyed his surroundings.

The chamber was excavated out of the desert bedrock. The helicopter occupied about one-third of a stark cavern whose walls soared thirty feet to the desert surface. The sparse moonlight revealed the south wall to be natural rock. The remaining three sides had concrete structures designed to counteract the sand's exceptional affinity for pouring into holes. The moonlight disappeared as the top of the pit was concealed by a tarpaulin rolling on tracks secured near the top of the chamber.

General Huddiam deplaned as the helicopter blades wound to a stop. The quiet was a welcome relief, although the ringing in their ears would persist for several minutes.

"Welcome to Research Station Bhrunda, Minister Zindar," Huddiam said, breaking the silence. "Be patient and an explanation will be provided soon."

They watched the leading edge of the tarpaulin reach the far side of the pit and lock in place with an audible crack. Zindar's instincts reacted to shield his eyes from the dazzling brightness as banks of floodlights illuminated every corner of the excavation. Facilities for maintaining and refuelling several helicopters lined the walls.

"The camouflage is sufficiently dense to prevent light escaping," the General said. "We are invisible from above. I know you have many questions and we will answer them all, but first let us go inside." He conducted the Minister toward the southern rock wall where the floodlights

revealed a door large enough to permit passage of a vehicle. A single elevator car formed a short passage, giving the appearance of a dead-end corridor.

The three men stepped into the car and a steel barrier slid from the wall, securing the elevator from the intruding world. Without further command the lift began a smooth and near silent descent into the earth.

The noise of the approaching helicopter preceded the sight of its running lights, yet Paul wished he had had more advanced warning of its approach. It flew low, and the noise of the rotors had not carried far ahead of the craft. Within seconds of coming into sight the ship's powerful landing light switched on and the Bell Jet Ranger, decorated in medivac colours, sank onto the landing pad. Paul sighted the camera and confirmed the identification lettering on the chopper's side.

"Hotel Sierra November four seven two," he said for the benefit of the sand crab. "The target has landed and is confirmed. Door is opening - three men exiting in long lab coats. I'm taking pictures - Wait a minute - I was told to look for Minister Zindar. I would recognize the son-of-a-bitch, and he isn't here. I can see into the helicopter, and it's empty. One subject is the same size and build as the minister, but it's..."

Paul Makim, intent upon the drama being played on the helicopter pad, failed to notice the figure which crept up the dune behind him; nor did he hear the soft scrape of metal on leather as the nine millimetre automatic pistol drew from the holster; and he could not have detected the muffled pop of the silenced shot which ended his short life. The sensitive electronics in the sand crab heard. It heard the bullet enter the back of his skull through a small entrance wound. Then the hollow point had flattened and expanded so that on exiting it left most of Paul's brain and face scattered in the sand. In the end, it heard a rough voice speak several words in an Arab dialect, and all was silent.

There would be several reports compiled before the night ended. Different people, for many recipients, would prepare them. Some would report the facts, while others would attempt to analyze the situation. All would have one thing in common. They would all exist on some computer's mass storage device somewhere.

Chapter 3: Invisible Death

Crackers stared at the A2L console in shocked disbelief. He knew what he had heard, but didn't want to believe it. It had been fleeting and faint, and would require enhancement before becoming certain - except that Arab voice. Those words had been distinct to anyone comprehending the dialect. The A2L now received only silence. He contemplated talking with Langley across the satellite connection, but clear-cut orders confirmed that he was to stay off the link. Yet this did constitute an exceptional circumstance. He needed the big guns for this decision.

"Captain, you'd better get back here," Crackers said, keying the intercom.

Hotdog Bolton always responded to his crew's needs and requests, knowing from experience that their demands would be justified. So when he heard the anxiety resonating in Crackers' voice, he wasted no time asking why. He was at the Seaman's station in under one minute.

"Captain, I think something's gone bad down below," Crackers said. "That spook is in trouble - maybe even dead. I'd like to talk to Langley - but it violates standing orders, sir."

Bolton realized his crewman was seeking authorization. What he didn't know would spare him making that decision. He was unaware that Langley, listening in real-time to the activity over the satellite link, did have an individual who understood the Arab dialect registered on the transmission. He was also ignorant of the interpreted details of the brief dialogue reporting the elimination of a trespasser spying on the helicopter, and he was unaware that the CIA had established a procedure for just such an emergency.

The speaker wired to the satellite link hummed, "Bootlegger, Bootlegger, this is Clearing House, Clearing House." It gave legitimate identification codes for the Hawkeye's current mission and the CIA communications command centre. "Execute procedure Tango immediate. Repeat. Execute procedure Tango. Authorization Brave Two Lima, over."

Crackers seized a small plastic-bound book and scanned the index for procedure Tango. He was at the correct page in seconds, and following the printed instructions, keyed the command into the A2L console. He flipped the switch uniting his headset with the Langley link and said, "Clearing House, Clearing House, Bootlegger has executed Tango, over."

Six kilometres down the sand crab received the only signal it was designed to detect. The microprocessor in the unit processed the simple command and built a massive electrical charge in the single high-output capacitor. It then released it through the unit, fusing the fragile circuitry into silicon and copper slag.

“Bootlegger, Clearing House, stand-by for further instructions,” the Langley contact said. Crackers sat, his fingers pounding a rapid rhythm on the metal console, while Bolton stared at the speaker mounted on the bulkhead. The speaker droned again. “Bootlegger, can you transmit radar tracking tapes at this time, over?”

Crackers received Bolton’s voiceless consent and responded, “Clearing House, Bootlegger, that is affirmative, over.”

“Bootlegger, Clearing House is ready to receive, over,” the Langley voice instructed.

Al Johnston patched the Lookdown’s tape-system into the satellite link and cued his ready to Crackers.

“Transmitting,” Crackers said, and commenced the digital transmission in high-speed dubbing mode. The forty-minute recording downloaded to Langley in less than two minutes while everyone remained silent. No one wanted to speculate on what was transpiring. Finally the tape unit beeped and halted.

“Clearing House, Bootlegger. Transmission complete,” Crackers said. “Can you confirm copy, over?”

“Bootlegger, Clearing House. Copy is confirmed. Please stand-by,” was the reply.

After several seconds the Langley radio operator returned. “Bootlegger, please copy final instructions,” he said. “You are ordered to immediately erase all tapes relating to this matter, and to destroy any notes or written transcripts. Acknowledge, over.”

Hotdog Bolton stopped Crackers before he could respond and beckoned for his headset. “Clearing House, Bootlegger,” he said into the microphone. “Erase and destroy acknowledged and understood, over.”

“Clearing House out,” was the concluding word from Langley as the satellite connection closed from halfway around the globe.

“Okay, gentlemen. You heard the man. Get on it,” Bolton said. “And no talking about this mission outside of this aircrew.”

“Shit,” Crackers said under his breath, “with the reputation of those assholes at Langley, I don’t even want to take a crap without company.” It

was an out-of-character comment for the Seaman, but he echoed all their thoughts; there were nods all around.

The elevator carrying the Quari officials descended several seconds and came to a smooth halt. When the door opened they faced a short corridor, terminated by a heavy steel door. An illuminated panel sat on top of a waist-high pedestal flanking one side of the steel door. Colonel Awasi hastened from the lift-car and proceeded to the pedestal. He arranged his right hand, fingers spread, on the lighted panel and waited the three seconds while the system validated his palm print identity.

“There are only fifteen seconds to register a security palm print,” the General said to Minister Zindar. “Although this hallway is monitored by closed circuit television, because you appear to be someone recognizable is not sufficient. Faces can be changed. We will register your palm print in the security computer.”

“And if a valid palm print isn’t offered?” Minister Zindar inquired. “I assume there’s some form of - shall we say, a penalty?”

“This passage is protected, Minister,” General Huddiam smiled at the Minister’s manner; his guest was regaining his composure. “Our first choice is to subdue an intruder so that he may survive for interrogation. We would flood the passage with an anaesthetizing gas. If intruders are prepared with gas protective clothing, then automatic weapons are fired from behind the protection of the concrete walls. We prefer to incapacitate by wounding, if possible. As a final defence, the passage is immersed in a lethal dose of microwaves. They tell me it is an unpleasant means of dying.”

“That’s understatement, General,” Zindar said, imagining his own body liquids boiling to the point where they induced his body to explode, and conceding the effectiveness of this technique.

The steel door opened with surprising quiet, secreting itself within the concrete wall. A spacious room housing a console that forged an arc around the single guard positioned to face the entrance was revealed. Upon entering, two additional guards, with weapons ready, were evident on either side of the portal.

“I see only IDSU shoulder patches on the guard uniforms, General,” Zindar commented. “Are there any regular forces personnel stationed here?”

“No, it is an IDSU post, Minister,” Huddiam explained. “Security, of course - they are proficient at keeping secrets.”

The Intelligence Directorate Security Unit (IDSU) trained the finest soldiers in the armed forces - efficient at killing with or without the

automatic weapons they carried. Upon the officers' approach, the two standing guards snapped to attention while the seated man remained at his post and continued scanning the series of six surveillance monitors mounted in his console. Behind him, two sliding metal doors broke the monotony of the stark concrete walls. Without acknowledging the guards, the officers lead the Minister to the right side door, which opened as they advanced. Zindar scrutinized the area to locate the sensor which operated the opening mechanism, then, realizing that the guard at the console had been responsible for this minor magic trick, watched it secure behind them with a hiss and a click of the locking device.

"Minister Zindar," the General said, Colonel Awasi was deferring to the higher rank, "you are on level one of Research Station Bhrunda. We are twenty feet into the bedrock below the surface, and there are three levels beneath this one. This level houses the administration for the installation, as well as security."

They had travelled a corridor and entered an office Zindar judged as exceeding the size and comfort quotient of his Ministry suite. A large oak desk with leather executive chair faced a wall mounted bank of six video monitors displaying the scenes viewed by the guard in the entrance room, while a computer terminal occupied one corner of the desk. Only the earth tones of the thick pile carpet muted the opulent nature of the office.

"This is Colonel Awasi's office," the General continued. "Somewhat decadent he will admit, although he would not give it up I'm sure. However, the design is in the nature of the Germans who designed and built this complex, not that of the Colonel."

The situation was overwhelming Zindar as a thousand questions possessed his mind. Seldom during his life had he been at a loss for words, but now he fumbled for a starting place. "Why have I not been informed of this installation, General? It must have a defence significance, and so fall within my portfolio." Zindar regretted the statement as it passed his lips; he was on the defensive instead of controlling the event.

"No offence intended, Minister, but you are being informed of it now," the General replied. "This is our most secret base, and knowledge of its existence is strictly on a need to know basis." He hesitated before explaining. "The purpose of this complex is research. It is research on the subject of biological weapons, which international law forbids, and should we be discovered we would face world condemnation the likes of which no nation has borne for any terrorist act." He waited as the Minister absorbed these facts.

Zindar eased his defensive stance. "But how could you build this facility in secret?" he asked. "The cost would be astronomical and the number of labourers - how did you prevent leaks and rumours?"

General Huddiam indicated that the Colonel should continue.

"It cost three billion American dollars to complete, and is expensive to run," Awasi said. "The German designers and engineers built many installations for us, including the various command bunkers scattered throughout Quari. Their silence is assured by their money-grabbing, capitalist natures, the prospect of future business, and the need to retain their international reputation. As to the construction force - it was composed of prisoners from the war."

"You would appear to have a talent for economic solutions, Colonel," Zindar stated, "but I seem to recall that the United Nations frowns upon the use of war prisoners in forced hard-labour."

"A matter of little consequence, as there doesn't appear to be anyone complaining," replied Awasi.

"And would it be safe to assume that they are no longer in a condition to lodge a complaint?" Zindar's matter of fact tone betrayed no depth of emotion.

"A matter of expediency, Minister," Awasi said. "We couldn't allow enemy dogs knowledge of this base. It was war."

"Do you agree with this, General?" Zindar asked, regaining control of the situation.

"We all must agree that it be so, but we can also mourn the necessity," the General said, genuine compassion in his voice. "Please, Minister, judge what we have achieved here first."

"Then show me, General," Zindar said, noting that the officer had misinterpreted his question. Although implying a moral issue, he had wished to learn how committed his companions were to the causes of Quari. General Huddiam had a conscience. Such character traits got in the way at inconvenient moments.

"In time. We must unfold it to you properly," the General replied. "First, the Colonel will set-up your palm print for access to secure areas."

During the twenty minutes occupied in completing the process at the security office, Zindar grilled Awasi on the purpose of the erratic helicopter flight. He was gaining considerable respect for the Colonel's genius in security matters, and saw an asset to exploit in the future.

"You have full access to all secure areas, Minister," Colonel Awasi said, "except certain laboratories which only the scientists enter. This is for your

safety. Biological research is dangerous. These areas are labelled 'EXTREME BIO-HAZARD' so you'll know why your palm-print won't work."

Zindar processed the Colonel's words while his mind was engaged with other matters. He realized that he was staring at his palm, and glanced up to find Awasi eyeing his behaviour.

"A common reaction to the printing process, Minister," Awasi said, informing Zindar that he had caught the transient aberration.

"One, I'm certain, you never shared, Colonel." Zindar pivoted and headed for the exit. He didn't have to witness the Colonel's satisfied smirk to know it existed; still he was developing a grudging respect for the officer's abilities and independent nature.

"Ah, there you are," the General said as his companions entered Awasi's office. "Come, let me show you the layout of this remarkable complex before we take a tour." He engaged a concealed switch at the desk, and a wall panel under the monitor bank slid aside unveiling a thirty-four inch screen. Stroking several keys on the terminal keyboard, the General displayed a three-dimensional colour schematic of the subterranean research facility.

"As you can see, the first floor is dedicated to administration and security. All security offices are shown in red, and administration in yellow. Access to all floors is by the single elevator located behind the security desk we passed on entry, and by the surface freight elevator we used for original entry. There is a similar security room on all levels, as you can see from the red patches on all floors. The second floor contains our stores areas displayed in blue, and maintenance shops, which are grey. It also accommodates the well-equipped medical facility - that is the white space. Note the pyramid structure, as each floor is larger in area than the one above. The third floor holds the labs. It is green. This floor is the reason for the installation. The bottom floor holds the living quarters and comfort facilities. Tour them later and you will find that we have included a large cafeteria, gymnasium, and a swimming pool. These amenities are necessary since our workers never get outside of the structure."

"Isn't it dangerous putting the living quarters on the lowest level?" Zindar asked. "What if there's an accident in the lab? How would they get out?"

"Excellent observation, Minister," Awasi said. "But if there's an accident, no one leaves. All the laboratories would be hermetically sealed, as would all access routes between floors, including elevators."

“You don’t anticipate survivors, or you just don’t care?” Zindar’s vocal inflection turned the statement into a question.

“We couldn’t risk having something leave this facility. Survivors could be rescued, but only after we’ve completed decontamination and are certain there’s no risk of contagion. Our scientists haven’t yet discovered a substance which attacks only infidels,” Awasi borrowed a page from the Minister’s sarcastic manual; he decided to push his luck. “Also, with the bulk of our people always on the lower two levels, it makes the job of the security forces easier.”

Zindar was still forming his estimation of the Colonel, and that last remark had revealed an unexpected callousness, but also a fierce dedication to efficiency, which might serve various uses. He would have to ponder the depths of this man, to assess the lengths to which the officer would extend his amoral outlook in his country’s service, and more importantly, in achieving his personal goals. *And just what is your personal agenda, Colonel?*

“Again, Colonel, I’m forced to compliment your economic efficiency,” Zindar said in as cold a tone as he could manage.

“Minister Zindar, I know of your record. You have planned as many deaths as I. The difference is that I have bloodied my hands,” Awasi stated flatly.

Excellent. He’s not ashamed of his actions, nor afraid to speak his mind at the risk of offending superiors.

“No Colonel, like you I’ve used politics to justify the need for death, and will do so again.” Zindar watched for any reaction to his words. “The difference is that I’ve never enjoyed taking a life. It is also Quaris that we could be condemning to death. Not an enemy.”

“Gentlemen, please,” General Huddiam saw the need for intervention. “We are not here to fight amongst ourselves. We are all guilty of actions we would rather forget. Now, Minister, I know of the many demands on your time. Let us not waste any more. We will show you what we have accomplished so that you may help decide how to use it.”

Zindar’s strategist mind toiled at a furious pace. Huddiam’s warrior’s code of honour made him weak. He was willing to die in combat, but had little stomach for terrorist methods. However, Awasi could be a useful tool. He had a strong sense of individuality and could be relied upon when summoned to make field decisions without direction. Align his goals with your own and Awasi would strive to see them fulfilled, but cross him once

and he would be a permanent adversary. One could place confidence and responsibility in such a man, but not trust - never trust.

They returned to the outer security office and rode the elevator to the third level, where the door opened into a room which was a clone of that just left. The effect bestowed the feeling of standing still, and Zindar doubted that the sensation would be any different when travelling between the remaining levels. They entered the complex through the right-hand-side door behind the security console.

“Let me give you the background, Minister,” General Huddiam said. “Three years ago when our biological program was young, two of our gifted scientists, Dr. Shadira and Dr. Madiric, stumbled upon a discovery of incredible value. They produced a virus which was fatal to all humans exposed to it, but which was inert and safe until specifically disseminated. We saw the advantages of a weapon that could be transported anywhere in the world, beyond detection, and without risk to the courier. This facility was constructed to develop that weapon, and now we have succeeded.”

“How long did it take to build Bhrunda?” Zindar asked.

“Twenty-two months,” Colonel Awasi replied, “It could have been done faster, but secrecy was a key issue.”

“So you’ve had fourteen months to improve this virus. There were problems with the prototype,” Zindar reasoned.

“The virus is made active by heat,” General Huddiam explained. He noted to himself that the Minister’s questions were designed to obtain more information than they seemed to ask for. “We worked to make that activation temperature higher, to avoid accidents during transport. Also, the original virus had an incubation period of seven days once in contact with the human host. We worked to reduce this time to just under three minutes.”

“How do you prevent the virus being carried back to us?” the Minister inquired. “I assume it’s airborne, and weather is unpredictable. I know something of this subject, General, having devised plans for the IFL to use biological and chemical substances. Such weapons having an effectiveness that the alarmists feared, didn’t exist then. The extent of the harm inflicted is lessened by the quality and quantity of the public health facilities and services available - the ability of the victim to react to the attack. Delivery was the greatest obstacle. Ingestible organisms placed in food or water risk detection before infecting the target, and once discovered, the authorities can counter by quarantining the source of infection. Human contact viruses are inadequate against the western contagious disease organizations, which have developed skills and procedures in tracing these to the source, who

usually dies before imparting the desired quantity of damage. Airborne biologics are hard to contain, as they spread at an appalling rate. They are also difficult to defend against as governments find it difficult suggesting to citizens that they avoid breathing. However, once the weapon is released, it is capable of attacking the hunter as well as the prey.”

“And there lies the greatest advantage of all,” the General beamed. “The virus, once activated, can survive outside a human host for one-half hour, then it dies. It cannot leave a host’s body, so it is not transferred by physical contact, only upon initial heat activation. So you see, Minister, we have developed the perfect weapon to battle our enemies, and they will be defenceless.”

Zindar had lived long enough to know that every plan had a flaw. He knew an error existed somewhere in the scenario, and he would wait. It would become evident in time. In the meantime, two further matters required pursuing: just how did this virus kill and why was he here now?

“General Huddiam,” Zindar said, as he formulated the question. “How does your miracle weapon take a life? ‘Kill the host’, you said.”

“Minister, I do not possess the technical knowledge to explain the nature of the weapon,” the General replied. “Let us speak to Dr. Shadira, one of the developers of what he calls Experimental Biological Weapon Alpha, or E.B.W.A. His laboratory is ahead.”

The condition of the lab permitted Zindar to infer much about Dr. Shadira. Glistening equipment rested on the stainless benches and bore witness to the meticulous care given to the smallest details. Although the few unattended experiments in progress depicted attention to both function and appearance, the office located in one corner of the lab was the antithesis of the work area. Despite the presence of a suitable cabinet, the file system appeared to consist of the floor and desk top, with the office unseen under papers of various descriptions.

The grey haired individual behind the desk slid the bifocals back on his nose to cover his heavy eyelids, and rose to greet his visitors. The open knee-length lab coat protected his rumpled trousers and shirt, and sported the fresh stains of the day’s laboratory activities. The man’s late-day, facial-hair stubble showed the need for a shave, and the hint of body odour pervading the office suggested the welcome nature of a shower.

“Ah, Dr. Shadira,” the General said, a jovial lilt in his voice. “So good to see you. Let me introduce you to our distinguished visitor. This is Minister Zindar.”

“No need to introduce the Minister,” Dr. Shadira beamed as he scuttled around the desk to shake Zindar’s hand. The doctor’s plump figure suggested that the food at Bhrunda was palatable. “I recognize you from the television news, and I’ve heard the stories of your great successes in the service of Allah’s will.”

“Thank-you, Doctor, but exaggerated, I’m certain.” Zindar said. In truth he shunned personal recognition for what he perceived as necessary duty.

“No, no! You are too modest. Your presence honours my humble lab.”

“Hardly humble, Doctor,” Zindar replied. “I should describe it as most impressive. But I wish to understand your work.”

“Ah! EBWA,” the doctor said it as a proper name instead of an anagram, his eyes taking on the sparkle present when speaking of a beloved progeny. “It is a gift from the prophet himself! I was but the conduit through which he chose to speak.”

“Now who’s being modest, Doctor Shadira?” Zindar phrased the rhetorical question and watched the scientist wave off the query, dismissing the possibility. “But I need to know what you’ve accomplished. Please, if you could explain it in terms a simple man would understand.”

The biologist relished the opportunity to demonstrate his achievements. For a brief instant he was the child and the young man who had struggled to reach that unobtainable accomplishment which would provide the recognition from his most important critic - his father. That approval had been withheld. Every feat had been short of the mark, leaving him with a driving desire for peer approval and recognition of his triumphs. He banished the memories from his mind.

“Of course, of course, Minister,” Doctor Shadira said. “How much do you already know of Allah’s engineering - human biology? Specifically, the respiratory system?”

“I breathe in, I breathe out. I know the hazards of smoking. Other than that, not enough to claim any knowledge, Doctor,” Zindar confessed.

“Then at the risk of offending your intelligence, let me try to explain,” Doctor Shadira said as he slipped into the role of lecturer he had delighted in at the University in Bafthra. An unconscious formality had descended upon the biologist.

“Respiration is the process by which the body exchanges waste carbon dioxide for oxygen,” he began. “The entire process of moving oxygen to, and carbon dioxide from, the tissues and organs of the body, involves both the respiratory and the circulatory systems, as the blood provides the transport mechanism. When we inhale through the nasal passage, or the oral

cavity, we breathe in a gas composed of water vapour, nitrogen, oxygen, and carbon dioxide. This mixture passes our throat, which we call the pharynx, and the voice box, or larynx, and into the trachea, which you know as the windpipe. The trachea branches into the left and right main bronchi leading to the lungs. Now this is where it gets critical, Minister. The bronchi subdivide into increasingly smaller and more numerous branches. After about twenty levels of subdivision they terminate in very small alveolar ducts filled with tiny blood vessels called capillaries. It's estimated that there are between 300,000,000 to 400,000,000 alveoli in the lungs, at the ends of the bronchioles. They form clusters called alveolar sacs, and under microscopic observation would remind you of bunches of grapes. The massive number is required because of the low diffusion rate of oxygen, of course."

The scientist walked to a bookshelf on one wall as he talked and now paused to select a text. Zindar thought this an appropriate time to interrupt. "Forgive me, Doctor, but you will have to explain 'diffusion rate' and its relation to breathing."

"Yes, yes," Shadira continued, his enthusiasm increased and his interest in the text forgotten. "Diffusion is the process by which the body exchanges oxygen and carbon dioxide. It's the name of the process by which the gases dissolve in the blood. Oxygen has a low solubility, so the large surface area of the alveoli - approximately eighty square meters in adult lungs - and the very thin walls of the alveoli, aid the process. The oxygen passes through the walls of the alveoli and dissolves in the blood cells in the capillaries. The haemoglobin transports oxygen throughout the body and returns with carbon dioxide. Upon exhalation, the carbon dioxide expels from the body using the same route in reverse.

"It's the alveoli which our virus attacks. It becomes what we term a respiratory blocker. The operation is simple. The virus enters the lungs with the inhaled air mixture, and coats the thin alveoli walls. At this stage no symptom is apparent as the virus is gas permeable and the diffusion of oxygen and carbon dioxide continues unimpeded. Our research indicates that if the virus survived in the body, it would never harm its host, but it has a very short life span, and it dies taking the host with it."

"I've heard of parasites maintaining a mutually beneficial relationship with their hosts," Zindar said.

"No, no," Shadira corrected him. "There's no symbiotic relationship here. The host receives no benefit from the virus. While it's alive it simply does not interfere with the normal functioning of the human body.

“When the virus dies it solidifies and prevents gas permeation. The alveoli are coated with a solid substance preventing diffusion, and the host suffocates, even in a room full of pure oxygen.”

The room was silent as Zindar digested Shadira’s oration. No one was willing to interrupt his contemplation. After several moments he spoke. “So the host would no longer be able to breathe?” Zindar asked, trying to clarify a last point.

“No, no - Well, that is to say, he would still be able to inhale and exhale, and the lungs would continue to inflate with air, but there would be no exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the blood. Without oxygen reaching the vital organs, the host will die. It will appear to be suffocation.”

“How much suffering will the victim endure,” Zindar inquired, “and will he feel pain?”

Shadira deliberated for a moment before answering. “No pain as we define the term, Minister, but there is something that may be viewed as suffering. The actual death process is reminiscent of carbon monoxide poisoning from, for example, a running automobile engine in a closed room. However, whereas that process is gradual and renders the victim unconscious over time, our virion will strike suddenly, and the body will sense an attack. As the brain attempts to obtain the needed oxygen it taxes the respiratory system’s limits. The victim doesn’t feel the effect, and consciousness ends after a short time, but it’s not pleasant watching.”

Death is never pleasant to watch, but a little suffering by an enemy may be desirable. Zindar changed the subject. “Doctor Shadira, General Huddiam mentioned some characteristics of the virus, or virion as you call it, which limit its dispersion.”

“Ahhh yes, yes indeed,” Shadira jumped in. “You would be speaking of the short life span and high activation temperature. You see, Minister, we can produce the virus, a virion being the term for a mature virus, in large quantities with absolute safety. It remains dormant but replicates at low temperatures, between twenty-five and eighty degrees Celsius, and hibernates at temperatures below twenty-five. In these states it remains in a liquid medium and inhalation is impossible. If ingested it passes through the digestive system and gets excreted with bodily wastes. Activation requires the application of heat, to a minimum level of two hundred and thirty-five degrees Celsius. This is the combustion point of paper. So you see the virus activates in fire situations. It’s resistant to high heat, but that resistance breaks down in time. It requires venting to the air before that breakdown occurs, and the draft from a fire suffices for this purpose.

“Once activated, the virus must find a host within twenty-three minutes and fourteen seconds - we have used precise timing measures and it’s always the same - or it will die in the atmosphere independent of the temperature. Inside the host it coats the alveoli and adheres to the walls, and it cannot be exhaled. It used to live for one week, but we have engineered it to die within three minutes of contact. So you see, Minister, this particular biological lives for the purpose of dying. Thirty minutes after activation stops, it’s safe to enter the infected area without respiratory protection.”

“But, Doctor, you said that the virus kills its host by dying itself. What causes it to die? Starvation?” Zindar contemplated this last puzzle.

Shadira took a moment gathering his thoughts and allowed himself a small smile. He enjoyed explaining biology to the non-initiated; it inflated his sense of authority and achievement. “No, no, Minister, the biological does not need to eat as we think of the process. It will live by consuming the body’s own nutrients, extracted through the alveoli cells without causing damage.

“Once inside the lungs the virus undergoes a genetic change, caused by an enzyme produced by the host’s body cells, which makes it susceptible to the most common chemical compound on the planet - water.”

“Water!” Zindar gasped. “Where does it come from?”

“Water is everywhere, Minister,” Shadira’s excitement showed. “Even the body itself is primarily water, but the water which kills the virus comes not from within, but from the outside.” He paused, observing the confused expression on the government official’s face. “Remember how I began my lecture - I mentioned that we breathe in a mixture of gases; oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and, of course, water vapour. It’s the water in the air which attacks the virus.”

“So the virus’s effectiveness is diminished by our dry desert environment?” Zindar phrased his question as a reasoned conclusion.

“Not so, Minister, not so. Even in the driest desert there is water vapour in the atmosphere. It’s not the quantity, but the presence of the water that results in the subsequent death of the virus. By engineering the resistance of the outermost layer of the virion’s structure to penetration by the vapour, we can control the organism’s life span.”

“It’s so much to comprehend all at once, Doctor,” Zindar rubbed at his temples. He took pride in absorbing voluminous information and processing it ‘on-the-run’ with unerring precision, but this situation embodied an unfamiliar technology. Time would allow him to comprehend the weapon and to develop a befitting plan for its use.

The telephone on Shadira's desk rang and the doctor shuffled a mound of computer printouts to uncover it.

"Colonel Awasi, it's the security office," Shadira said offering the handset to the officer. Awasi raised the unit to his face and spoke. After a brief interlude he muttered words of disapproval and hung up.

"General, there's a matter requiring immediate attention," said Awasi, turning to face his superior. "If the Minister can hold his questioning at this time, perhaps Doctor Shadira will arrange a demonstration for the morning, and we will show Minister Zindar to his quarters. You must be exhausted, Minister."

"I have many questions, Colonel," Zindar said. "But you're right, I'm tired. Perhaps the morning will put things in perspective and help me identify the issues needing clarification."

They bid the Doctor goodnight, receiving assurances of a demonstration in the early morning.

"Well, Colonel, what has occurred which would have you cut our tour short?" asked General Huddiam as he and his intelligence colleague returned to Awasi's office. Minister Zindar had been tucked into prepared visitor quarters, and appearing fatigued, though reflective, he had agreed to the officers taking leave of his company.

"A message from Akira, sir," Awasi replied. "One of our sentries discovered and eliminated an intruder - an infidel American spy - who was watching the clinic and helicopter. There was no identification, and the overzealous idiot shot first and thought too late of interrogation. The body is being disposed of, and his possessions and clothing are being examined. We should have the items and report by first light."

"Excellent, Colonel. The disappearance of the agent will convince the foreign intelligence agencies that something of importance is underway at Akira. It will keep them from looking elsewhere," the General said. "Now, there being no more pressing business, I shall retire myself. I expect a copy of the Akira report to be delivered to my quarters as soon as it arrives. Good-night, Colonel."

Scorn etched Awasi's face as he watched the retreating back of the chief of the Quari military forces.

Jason Royce grimaced as he read the report of the loss of the field agent at Akira. He'd met with Paul Makim a few times, and had developed a liking for the eager young agent. The loss of a colleague was a difficult

situation to face, and when it was one of his operatives, it became personal. *Well Zindar whatever you're hiding at Akira, you just made a critical error, because I won't rest until it's uncovered.*

Matthew Fawson, Deputy Director of Operations, or DDO, for the Central Intelligence Agency, scanned the mid-east section report. Something was fermenting in Quari, but the report cultivated more questions than it answered: *Why had the field agent at Akira reported that the passengers disembarking the helicopter were not those that had been seen boarding? Why had the radar operator on-board the Hawkeye reported irregularities in the medivac flight? Could the missing time during the flight account for an exchange of passengers, and if so, at which of the points along the route where the helicopter vanished from the radar had the switch occurred? Or was the agent at Akira mistaken?*

Operations analysts maintained that the field agent was dead. The acoustics lab analyzed the tape and distinguished, with an eighty percent certainty, that the characteristic sound signature identified a headshot originating from a Sig-Sauer P220 Auto Pistol. Fawson knew the Swiss made 9mm semi-automatic and agreed that it was a fine weapon, but knowing details of the pistol used to kill his agent was not getting him the answers he needed. He tossed the report on his desk and scrutinized the man seated facing him.

"This isn't telling us anything, Bill. What's being hidden over there that's worth killing a man to conceal?" he said.

William Tingley glanced at the DDO and noted the wrinkling around the brown eyes that were at the same time sad and alert, and which could not fail to convey the keen intellect that rested behind them. The Deputy Director was a lawyer and politician who, after a distinguished career in the FBI, had received his appointment from the President. Appointing the Deputy Director from outside the agency had been a sensitive issue at CIA, and Fawson had fought a long, hard battle to garner the respect of the Agency. This he had achieved through competence and initiative. Now, as his boss ran his fingers through the greying hair at his temples, Tingley yearned for the answers, but so far he lacked even guesses.

Tingley, on the other hand, was a career man with the Agency, and had assumed the Mid-East section desk at CIA three months before this present trial by fire. After twenty-three years, and his fair allotment of fieldwork, he had merited the desk posting at Langley. Five years ago he had accepted the Soviet desk, but recent occurrences labelled '*détente*' had proven that his

experience and talent were being wasted there, and the vacancy in the Mid-East section had beckoned. Eighteen years in the field had left him few regrets, except that his sense of honour and fairness had denied him marriage and a family. Tingley attempted to use the CIA to fill this void, and the agents he controlled meant much more to him than names and numbers. He detested the term 'human assets'.

"We don't have any theories yet, Matt," Tingley said, knowing the DDO's preference for informality during closed meetings. He glanced through the window behind the DDO, to the treed landscape visible in the late afternoon sun, then thought better of avoiding eye contact and returned his view to Fawson.

"Jason Royce is our man on site, and one of the best in the Agency. I talked to him this morning and he has no more idea than we do, although he is absolutely certain it was Zindar who boarded that helicopter at Bafthra. He has also positively identified his two travelling companions as General Huddiam and Colonel Anwar Awasi, a nasty little number from Quari intelligence who quietly disappeared from sight about three years ago. We were just beginning to believe that he must be dead, when he shows up here. We'll have Royce's pictures later today for final confirmation."

"What about the airman on the Hawkeye?" Fawson asked. "Is there any credibility to his observation that the helicopter played speed games with his radar tracking?"

"The radar tapes are being analyzed as we speak," Tingley replied. "Our lab is well aware of the navy's report and will be giving the tapes a thorough scrutinizing."

"Good," Fawson said. "In the meantime I want Royce here as fast as possible. Next available flight - military or civilian. Get him to Paris and put him on the Concorde if you have to, but get him here yesterday, if not sooner."

"Right away, Matt." Tingley rose and turned to the door.

"And Bill, anything you get, no matter how trivial it appears - on my desk right away. The president and his National Security Adviser will be on our tails about this one."

"When will you tell them, Matt?"

"That's up to the Director," Fawson said, massaging his temples. "I'd better bring him up-to-date. You know how he hates to lose an agent."

"We all do, Matt. We all do."

General Huddiam studied the Akira report in his private quarters, and then strode to Colonel Awasi's office. The Intelligence Directorate officer had spent the night working at his desk. He glanced up, rubbing his forehead, as the General entered the open door. Awasi's weary frame rose in the presence of his military superior. "Good morning, General," he said.

"You work too hard, Colonel," Huddiam replied. "The body and mind require rest to remain at peak efficiency."

The Colonel bit off his reply. The regular forces failed to appreciate that intelligence work ignored a clock's instructions to sleep or eat. He considered the I.D. to be the elite of the military, not fearful of taking the difficult path, and concealed his disdain for the regular army. Believing, as did many in the Intelligence Directorate, that one of their Majors equated to three regular army generals, Awasi had bred a firm resentment toward Huddiam, whom he considered to be a blundering fool.

"I have read the report," Huddiam said. "It appears that the only items of interest found at the scene were a rather unique aircraft, a fine piece of photographic equipment, and a rather mysterious electronic device. Have you anything to add?"

"What you say is correct, General. The aircraft, referred to as an ultralight, and the camera with its advanced optics, will be additions to our own covert assets - a gift from the Prophet by way of the American pigs. The third device will remain a useless puzzle," the Colonel said, pausing to consider his next words. "Our technicians studied it all night and believe it's a transmitter. They identified an antenna, batteries, and a small but sensitive microphone. The remaining circuitry in the unit is a fused lump, and I am informed that unravelling it is impossible. We assume that it contained some form of self-destruct mechanism.

"We were fortunate in finding the device. It was buried, and only discovered by the squad removing evidence of the kill."

"But the report indicates that the intruder was taken by surprise. He did not have time to use a self-destruct," the General protested.

"Probably initiated from the receiving side when transmission ceased," Awasi said. "The report also states that the infidel was speaking when shot. The imbecile who killed him does not speak English, so we won't learn what was said. We must assume that he was reporting his observations to a listening post."

"But that is excellent, Colonel," General Huddiam said, allowing his enthusiasm to leak past his cool exterior. "He was reporting our safe arrival at Akira, and the illusion is complete. You repeat your successes."

Bruce E. Hubley

“Or, General,” Awasi stated. “He was reporting that three impostors arrived at Akira.”

“Why must intelligence officers assume the worst possible scenario?” the General scoffed.

“Because it is safest to do so,” Awasi replied. “The Americans may be godless and decadent, but they are not stupid.”

“No matter,” Huddiam countered. “We have taken sufficient precautions to keep this base secret.”

“Underestimating the Americans is a mistake,” Awasi repeated the point. “I prefer maintaining all our deceptions, as each level keeps them farther away.”

“Soon we may not have to worry about discovery,” Huddiam said. “Soon we may have the weapon and the plan, and this facility will have served its purpose. Soon no other country will dare to attack Quari.”

Well, at least the fool can dream, Awasi thought.

He argued that spending his time in Quari would yield greater dividends, but when the DDO commands, you go. So Jason Royce boarded the Saudi Airlines 777 for the hop to Paris and then home to Washington. It was morning in Bafthra, and would be evening half way around the world. He hoped somebody somewhere was losing his sleep too. He got his wish.

Zindar experienced a momentary panic when he awoke in strange surroundings, until he recalled the events of the preceding night. The previous evening he had opted for sleep instead of taking the time to investigate the quarters allocated him, and now he was elated to discover that the bathroom was stocked with all the necessary toiletries in his preferred brands. As appealing as this situation was, his mind recognized the sinister implication. Someone had researched his personal life. Since the overnight component of the trip had been unanticipated, he also delighted in finding clean underwear and shirts, in his size, in the bedroom’s small dresser.

General Huddiam had called while Zindar was contemplating the information gleaned from Doctor Shadira, and they had attended breakfast in the common area cafeteria. By unspoken agreement the conversation had remained light and casual through the meal, and then the two men had travelled to the test laboratory on the third level. The General had insisted that Zindar employ his palm print at security access stations - for the

practice he alleged - and the Minister had enjoyed the novelty of this new experience.

They entered through a door labelled 'Test Laboratory' to find themselves in a small enclosure dominated by computer terminals and electronic gauges. The far wall consisted of thick glass windows rising from three feet off the floor and extending to the ceiling. Beyond, another room stood furnished with a single wooden chair.

Dr. Shadira rose from a computer station to greet them, his metal-rimmed eyeglasses held in his hand as he manipulated a tissue to remove an annoying smudge.

"Welcome, welcome," he said, retaining his enthusiasm from the previous evening. Zindar smiled upon noticing that the doctor had taken the time to freshen up and change clothing; he may even have obtained some sleep.

"Let me introduce you to my colleague, Dr. Elvadra Madiric," Shadira motioned to a woman seated at a similar computer console. As she stood to greet them, Zindar pondered the dark, soft eyes sunk into the smooth, olive-tone skin indicative of a noble class in a harsh desert country. Her facial features, framed by long black hair hanging below the shoulders, flowed together in almost perfect harmony. That the head of a goddess sat upon a matching pedestal was evident to the Minister, as her open lab coat revealed a jump suit hugging the contours of a graceful physique.

"It's an honour to meet you, Minister," Dr. Madiric said, not waiting for Zindar to be introduced by Shadira. "I've been looking forward to this pleasure since I learned of your visit."

"The pleasure is mine, Doctor," Zindar returned, grasping the extended hand. "Please forgive this sexist remark for I mean no offence, but it's unusual to find a woman in such a position of learning and prestige in Quari." Zindar's own acceptance of sexual equality was public knowledge, although aides and advisers had cautioned that his championship of women's emancipation in Quari could curtail his political career. Now that he faced a beautiful, intelligent, and resourceful woman - a creation he had despaired of ever meeting in his homeland - he imagined her fingers caressing his own. No, he was right, there was a movement across his hand. This could be a dangerous woman, but with a blending of qualities which may warrant the hazards. The Minister had often thought about such a woman to share his vision of the future, and he did so again as he answered her caress with a pleasant smile.

“Yes, the subservient female syndrome,” Dr. Madiric mused, returning Zindar’s smile with a seductive grin, hinting at pleasures which could be his. Zindar was certain of the seduction. “I was fortunate to have a mother quite liberated in her views.”

“In my experience the male view dominates in Quari,” Zindar retorted.

“My father was wealthy, but died in an automobile accident while I was very young,” Madiric explained. “I don’t remember much about him. He had no other family and left us well provided. Mother used that wealth to send me to Europe for education in private schools, where gender was not an issue.”

“But you returned. Homesick for oppression, no doubt.”

“I love my country, Minister,” Madiric continued, “and wanted to use my knowledge and skills for Quari. It was a battle to be accepted, until one day Dr. Shadira looked beyond the structure of my chromosomes, and gave me a chance to prove my abilities. He has treated me as an equal ever since.”

“I’m pleased by your success,” Zindar said. His eyes conveyed a willingness to return to the subject of their silent conversation at a more appropriate time. The lovely biologist smiled at her own perceived success and concentrated on her computer console as Zindar turned to face Shadira. “And to you Dr. Shadira, my compliments in recognizing ability even when politics makes it inexpedient to do so. It is, I realize, difficult battling ingrained prejudice which has been bred for centuries.”

“Many thanks, Minister, many thanks, but Allah guides my way,” Dr. Shadira beamed at the compliment. Addressing General Huddiam he said, “We are prepared to proceed with the demonstration, General. Will Colonel Awasi be joining us?”

“He is on his way. Last minute security details to attend to, I believe,” The General replied.

“Excellent!” The two scientists returned to their computer consoles and busied themselves with final preparations for the test.

General Huddiam and Zindar approached the glass partition. “My apologies for forgetting to mention that one-half of the original development team was female, Minister,” General Huddiam said.

“A pleasant surprise, General,” Zindar replied. “Although I doubt you forget such details on a regular basis.”

Huddiam gave a brief chuckle. “I admit that I wasn’t sure of your leanings in the area of female equality,” he said, “and I was rather interested in seeing your reaction. It took time for me to warm to the idea, but having seen Dr. Madiric’s work, I have developed more liberal views.”

The lab door opened and Colonel Awasi entered, nodding greetings but offering no explanation for his late arrival. He joined Huddiam and Zindar as the door to the adjoining room opened and two IDSU guards escorted a third man into the chamber, and bound him to the chair.

“I wasn’t expecting this,” Zindar declared. “Dr. Shadira, will we be using a human subject?”

Dr. Shadira looked up from his console, his face displaying concern and confusion. “I’m sorry, Minister,” he said. “I thought you understood. The human respiratory system has many unique properties. Although tests on lab animals provide valuable information, they won’t demonstrate the full impact of the virus on humans.”

“In over a year of development you must have required many test subjects,” Zindar observed, turning to face Awasi. “Can I assume I know the fate of the war-prisoner labour which built the facility?”

“I never counsel anyone to make assumptions, Minister,” Awasi said. “It seemed a convenient and practical solution to two problems.”

The answer, delivered in a flat and unemotional manner, gave Zindar cause to ponder the Colonel’s mental state. *Is it an act, or is he truly a sociopath?* He felt he was imprisoned in a Hollywood script, surrounded by mad doctors and evil villains; but he wasn’t seething in moral indignation. Like everyone in Quari, he had forfeited friends to the war and could not find it within himself to lament enemy deaths. *Perhaps I’m just another guest in the asylum.*

“I wasn’t being critical, Colonel,” Zindar said. “You’d make a fine Minister of the Economy, but if any of this leaks out, we will all face death as criminals.”

“What we have done here has been in the name of science, and in the cause of our nation,” Dr. Shadira protested.

“What we do in the name of science, religion, and politics is often open to interpretation, Doctor,” Zindar said. “History will judge us. If we’re careful and smart, we write it as heroes. If we make a mistake, we will be written about as criminals.” Dr. Shadira had sold his soul for science and fame. It would be too late when he discovered that the price was too high.

“Very well. Proceed,” Zindar said. “Please outline the program for me.”

“There is a vent in the left side wall, Minister Zindar, containing an oven to heat the virus,” Dr. Madiric said. “Once the burning is completed, the virus is vented into the room. Its saturation of the air in this small, enclosed space will be almost instantaneous. It will take three minutes for you to observe the effects on the subject. This clock display here,” she

indicated a digital gauge on her panel, “indicates the total elapsed time after the vent is opened.”

“There is a minor matter, Doctor, for I assume you all loath risking your own lives,” Zindar said. “Where is the antidote?”

“There is no antidote, Minister.” Dr. Madiric said.

Zindar’s face registered shock. “No antidote,” he said, bewildered. “Even I know the first principle of biological weapon research - protect the researchers. You never develop a germ without parallel study into the antidote.”

“True enough, Minister,” Dr. Shadira said. “However, with our limitations on time and the security issues, as well as that we are dealing with such a stable and short lived micro-organism, we opted to research only the one side.”

“What security issues override safety factors, Colonel Awasi?” Zindar demanded.

“The very nature of this complex and its purpose make it essential that its existence be kept secret,” Awasi replied. “This is especially true of infidel foreigners. Quari lacks qualified biologists and we could not recruit outside our borders. Our research staff is small. Further subdivision, while still permitting success in the primary goal, was impractical.”

“We will, of course, address this problem now that we have the virus in its usable form,” Dr. Shadira added. “The nature of the organism, as we explained it to you, indicates minimal damage in the case of an accident.”

“Although limited, the nature of an accident guarantees that the losses are the people we can least afford to lose. Your small stock of qualified death dealers, Colonel.” Zindar paused, regaining his composure before asking, “And so, what is this time factor? Did someone have an appointment?”

“A factor over which we have neither control nor knowledge,” Awasi replied. “No security is perfect. This base must be supplied, and every day a wider knowledge is gained of our existence. Even with the best security, a leak will occur, and this project must succeed before that happens. Have no doubt, we will be shut down, or destroyed, once the Western pigs learn of us.”

“We agree on that point, Colonel,” Zindar said. “However, an unwarranted risk was taken. Because you managed to survive the process does not justify the risk.”

Silence dominated the room. Colonel Awasi decided discretion was the better part of valour and accepted the rebuke as he concentrated on the

prisoner, now connected to a heart monitor, in the adjoining room. Only Dr. Madiric allowed herself a cautious smile.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, the demonstration. Shall we continue?” Shadira asked, breaking the silence. The interchange had rattled the ageing biologist.

“Continue, Doctor,” General Huddiam said, nodding to the scientist.

“Dr. Madiric, what is the oven temperature?” Shadira asked.

“Three hundred and ten degrees Celsius,” she replied after consulting her computer terminal.

“Although the virus is active at two hundred and thirty-five degrees, we’ve found that the higher the temperature the more efficient the process,” Dr. Shadira explained. “However, the time limit for the organism within the heat source is inversely proportional to the rising temperature. At this level of heat we can delay venting the virus from the oven.” He tapped several strokes on his computer keyboard. “Starting burn now,” Shadira said as he pressed the final key sequence.

Dr. Shadira studied the graphical display on his computer screen. After several seconds of silence, which passed like an eternity, he spoke, “We are ready to vent to the test room. Dr. Madiric, please open the system.”

If the poor idiot knew that the hand of death belonged to a woman, he would have begged for a firing squad, thought Zindar as the female scientist keyed an entry into her computer terminal. The digital clock on her console began its count and Zindar returned his attention to the wall vent.

“I don’t see anything. Is it working?” the Minister inquired.

“Yes, yes” Dr. Shadira responded. “The organism is microscopic, far too small to be seen with the naked eye, even in vast quantity. Understand, Minister, that this is a biological weapon, not a chemical like Mustard Gas, which is dense and detected by sight.”

“What of the other senses, Doctor?” Zindar asked, his interest growing as vague plots formed in the back of his mind.

“Excellent question,” Shadira continued. “Analysis of air samples indicates that the organism avoids leaving taste sensations as it passes the mouth, but it produces a sensation of smell. Subjects claimed it smelled of vinegar.”

“Subjects?”

“Yes,” Awasi said. “When the virus was longer lived, there was time for interrogation.”

“Dead men tell no tales, Colonel,” Zindar replied. “Now you have them telling no lies. What’s happening now, Doctor?”

Bruce E. Hubley

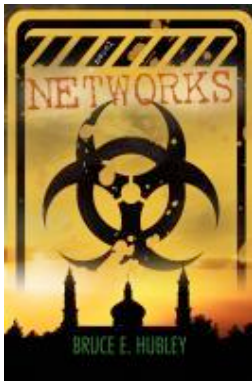
“The virus kills with speed, and with little pain, Minister,” Dr. Madiric took up the narration. “The subject is unknowing of his impending death until the organism dies having coated his alveoli. He will retain the satisfaction of filling his lungs with air, and the sensation of breathing, but no oxygen will reach his vital organs. Carbon dioxide will overcome his system and unconsciousness will occur. Moments later his brain will die, and the heart stop. At this point his skin will have taken on a blue pallor.”

They watched as the subject sat, apprehensive but with no insight into the fatal process progressing in his body. He retained a normal appearance as the digital display on Dr. Madiric’s console approached three minutes.

“Watch closely now,” Colonel Awasi said, noting the time.

Without warning the subject’s chest heaved as his autonomic nervous system fought to inflate his lungs with air, his brain sensing the lack of oxygen and taking frantic action to procure the life sustaining gas. Zindar noted the fingertips changing colour. He imagined the plight of a victim being strangled by an assailant. That victim would know the cause of his suffering and his impending demise. Now the terror on this man’s face came not from a fear of death, but from lack of understanding. It was, for this reason, a particularly cruel death, and one difficult to watch, even for a man who had dealt in such matters for so many years.

The terror in the eyes clouded to a vacant stare. Within seconds the subject’s head lolled to one side and remained stationary, although his chest still tried to suck the oxygen from the air. Moments later this action ceased as the heart monitor displayed a solid, straight line, and Zindar stared at the first blue human he had ever seen.



When the ruling elite of an Islamic nation bent on destruction of the United States obtains a deadly biological weapon, they enlist a terrorist network to disperse the virus. CIA Agent Jason Royce recruits a trio of super-hackers with mastery of the Internet to help unravel the plot. Together they face danger and death as they race to stop a scheme that may annihilate an entire continent, even as the body count grows.

Networks

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