

PER-JINN

By Richard Dawson



The world's most advanced military fights a strategic chess game with the world's most advanced mind.

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Prelude

The midnight black sphere materialized in a vast body of water behind a metal cylinder containing a single creature. Bright lights attached to the cylinder lit up the inky water to an eerie twilight. At the front of the cylinder was a transparent dome through which the occupant could be seen.

With singular purpose, the sphere immediately began scanning within the object to assess the occupant's compatibility. It probed within the flesh and explored the consciousness driving the creature's movements. Before the creature was even aware that something unusual was happening, the sphere had completed the scan and left.

The next time that the sphere materialized, it was in the corner of a small room. The gray walls reflected a harsh artificial light from above, but illumination was of no consequence to the object. What did matter were the four beings in the room. Two of them were making loud exclamations and the room reverberated with their voices. In no time at all, one of them threw back a limb and swung a bulb at it's end full force into the upper part of the next figure. The response was that the other's top part spun around briefly before that one threw a limb back at the first. Droplets of a red liquid flew out and stuck, like a swarm tiny insects, on the metal wall behind them. Soon there were more loud noises from everyone in the room and the vibrations emanating from their heads filled the space. The events had no affect on the object though. It simply scanned and recorded each of the beings and immediately found them to be incompatible. The task completed, the half-meter-sized sphere vanished without anyone knowing it had existed.

The planet spun around it's host star three more times as the sphere materialized in various places and scanned the beings it encountered. Every time the compatibility ratio was too small. One being was 87% compatible, however a metal object traveling at high speed penetrated it's body at a critical location which caused higher functions to cease. It's program continued to bring it within range of many beings with various levels of acuity until at long last there was a compatible being found in a round structure with clay walls. The being was small and moved erratically. It hurried inside the structure, laughing and dripping liquid. A larger being spoke harshly and threw a cloth at the first. Once the smaller being had wiped the cloth over itself, the two made strange noises at each other for a period of time before the smaller being took something outside and began putting plant matter into an opening that appeared along it's front.

Once the smaller life form was alone, the sphere began a more extensive scan, making small adjustments to the being. There was no pain, and little awareness from the life

form. The 'human' would only have felt a mild numbness as the adjustments began to take effect.

Soon however, the numbness wore off and the being returned to putting the plants into it's front opening until there was nothing but an empty clay plate in it's hands. It then ran off and leapt into a body of water where it made the water fly into the air with careless abandon.

Chapter One

"Ummmghh! Urrrnhh!

UMMGGHHRR!"

"Hey. Shut it Safia!"

It wasn't until something struck her on the side of the head that the gigantic cage of metal and glass disappeared. But the terror it had brought was still very much alive. Even sitting on her mattress next to Intisar, it felt as if--- even now the smooth cold walls were closing in on her, ready to crush her fragile body. A lopsided shadow in the corner was an evil monster reaching out and the memory of the thumping sound rumbling along the floor wouldn't leave her mind.

"Mooooommm. Mooooom. It's--"

"Shut it."

"Habiba. What's going on?" There was a pause before the voice turned harsh. "Intisar, don't talk to your sister that way. You go to sleep. I'll take care of this."

The mat shifted slightly as her mother's weight settled next to her, and her mother's scent quickly chased the demons back to the far corners of the room.

"Momma. It was so scary. There were monsters, and big metal things, and a giant crystal palace--"

"Safia. Tell me the whole thing and we will see what it means."

All of the neighbors were aware that momma possessed a strange magic for interpreting the meaning of dreams. Whenever she had a frightening vision at night, momma would sit with her and the fear would evaporate like drops in a cup beneath the desert sun.

Just two days before, a young man came to their house and spoke at length with momma about some vision he had seen when he woke up. It had taken less than a quarter hour before the man had smiled warmly at momma and handed her a loaf of bread as he left.

Her mother stroked her hair and held an arm over her own while she tried to summon the confusing images, but the images were already spreading apart like a dust devil that evaporated in the hot desert air. She only managed to recall a few snippets, which she clung to in her mind in a desperate need to understand.

In one scene she was wandering through a giant hall with clear walls that resembled a spiderweb. Light filtered through from floor to ceiling with only slender black ribbons between them. There were evil people rushing through from every direction and a strange object flew towards her before the palace faded. Next she was in a dark room. The walls seemed to absorb sound, yet she had the sense that everything around was metal, like the inside of an old truck. Even the sound coming from someplace above reminded her of a truck engine. There were dark monsters towering over her and when they spoke, it was like a baboon screaming. She shared everything in hopes that the memories would help momma to transform the frightful visions into something comforting.

It was a long while though, that she clung to her matriarch in silence while the woman stroked her hair and hummed soothingly. Unlike past nightmares, where the gentle caress of momma's hand would still her terrors, this time her stomach remained knotted. Her hands continued their subtle vibration which was reflected in the faint noise in her head as upper and lower teeth ground against each other.

"Safia. Maybe this dream isn't about you. Maybe this place where all the bad people were. It could be a place where infidels go when they die."

This was something she hadn't considered. The moment that momma brought up the idea, her trembling began to lessen. After awhile, she began to breathe more slowly and stopped feeling her mother's hands stroking her. The rest of the night passed by in oblivion before the piercing light of the sun made its way into the house.

Chapter Two

The school that she went to with Intisar was just a regular house with one of its walls removed to form one large room. The room was divided a third of the way by a straight scar across the ceiling where the renovation had been done. The plaster walls held various pictures that ranged from childish squiggles to more sophisticated pencil drawings of dragons or tanks. The narrower wall was dominated by a gigantic green board on which Mrs. Siraj would alternately write lessons or invite one of them to solve a problem.

The short woman with a face the color of sun-burnt clay tugged half-hardheartedly at her hijab while she glanced over them all with her unflinching gaze. "-so when we need to work with more than two numbers, we start with the times and dividing ones before doing our adding and subtracting. Now let's see how many of you can solve this problem." Mrs. Siraj scribbled down nine equations on the board in her clear and simple style. The answers were so easy that it barely required any thinking. She wrote down each answer and then turned her attention to the window where a man had lifted the hood of a truck and began staring into the shadow beneath it.

"Safia"

It took a second for her to shift her attention back to whoever was calling her name. It turned out to be Mrs. Siraj who was looking at her with disappointment.

"Safia, you are supposed to be working on the problems written on the board." The woman meandered slowly down the aisle between desks while every eye in the room shifted up and toward her. Suddenly the classroom doubled and then tripled in size. The other children pierced her with their gaze and a hundred fingers pointed accusingly. What they were accusing her of didn't matter. The one thing that was painfully obvious was that she was different. Ask any child, in any classroom in the world and they will tell you same obvious fact. That to be different is to commit the worst sin on earth.

She watched as the teacher made the two kilometer journey before standing over her desk. Her small frame now towering over her like an Egyptian obelisk casting its afternoon shadow far across the sand. "You solved it already?" The woman spoke as if she had been juggling four hammers while balanced on a post. Yet all that Safia heard was 'solved' and a confusion of words.

She tried to tell the woman that the math problem was easy enough. Her mind commanded her mouth to open, and her lips twitched in an effort to obey. But that was as far as things went. No matter how many times she sent the signal to her lips, they could manage no more than a slight twitch. Instead she found her mind returning to the constellation of eyes piercing her with their gaze.

She no longer heard anything that the teacher said now, and despite her deep aching desire, it was obvious that she couldn't hide her small 11 year old frame beneath the tiny stool on which she sat.

Chapter Three

"Safia Safia ugly smelly Safia."

"El'an Abook!"¹

"Thinks she's better than everyone."

She did her best to ignore the teasing from Muhammad and his friends. They were only jealous of how well she did in class. She didn't know it then, but this was to be only the beginning of her problems. Nobody had told her just how much boys could resent a girl who did better than them in school. They hadn't told her because *there had never been* a girl who learned as quickly as she did. While boys like Muhammad were still learning words like Mihrab, she could read both Farsi and Arabic. She even knew a few of the American words from the TV shows her brother watched.

1 Insult meaning 'may your father be cursed' which is an attack on the breadwinner of the family

Later the same day she was walking with Fatima along the stream towards her friend Khadijah's house. The burning sand that inevitably made its way into her sandals was scraping her feet horribly and it brought her to grimace from the pain. But despite her need to get out of the sun, something brought her to stop in her tracks. Something like the buzzing of a fly at the back of her mind, but there was no way for her to comprehend what had caught her attention. She felt a vague sense of danger grow within her rib cage, and the hair on the back of her neck shifted itself to attention.

She tried her best to peer into the hot sand all around and tease some hint of meaning that could account for her unease, but there was nothing that her conscious mind could tell her about what she was feeling. If it was a scorpion, she could handle that. Momma had taught her about the local threats. But if it was a person, then getting to Khadijah's would be just as dangerous. Especially if they followed her. She stood there transfixed, her heart beating a staccato within her chest as if she were a caged animal.

"What is it Safia?" The other girl looked at her and read the disquiet scribbled across her forehead.

She looked back at Fatima, but couldn't find the words to express something that she didn't herself understand. But soon her thoughts were shattered like the silent morning when the first people started their cars for work. Four boys shot out from the reeds next to the stream and threw themselves on top of her. She could hear Fatima scream, but the cry was sliced off with a hand clamped over the girl's mouth. After that she got only a passing glance of one or another cruel face randomly swimming across her vision. There was pain all over her chest, her legs, her face, and then her back when she tried to pull away and then to ball herself up when her struggles proved futile.

"Damned Huti! Go back where you came from. You're not wanted here!"

"Thinks she's better than us."

She couldn't make conscious images of what she saw, there was only the primitive instinctual will to survive. From the blurred edge of her vision there was the form of a rock along with some calculation of its speed and trajectory. That calculation told her that she might not survive if the stone struck her in the wrong place. Deep within the recesses of her mind was the understanding that this blow could not be allowed to land. But she never remembered afterwards what exactly had been the catalyst for her reaction.

In half the time it would take for an eyelash to flutter, she threw herself to one side and shoved against a blur of skin, shifting the fist so that it landed instead somewhere past her ear. As the arm meandered above her shoulder, it was clear that the boy would be momentarily off balance and again without thinking she swept her leg around to upset his forward leg and knock him into the blazing sand.

"Ya Sharmouta!"²

2 Translates as 'you bitch'

What she did not predict, was how poorly boys reacted to getting bested by a girl. Another boy was immediately on her and wildly throwing his fists in her direction, but without the focus needed to land a blow. She easily kicked his arm aside and used his momentum to both knock him to the ground and lift herself back on her own feet. Several boys nearby on seeing this doubled up on her and a few picked up rocks from the riverbank.

As if she were watching a show on television, she saw two different rocks begin their arc. Instantly calculating the path of the hands gripping them, she knocked one away and dodged the other before the stones could touch her. But conscious thought once again disappeared as the attacks grew more fervent. Her limbs became like water, flowing and deflecting without ever being harmed. For the boys that were out of reach she could only duck away from their projectiles, but for any limbs that were close enough, she knocked off their aim as fast as a fly escapes a swat. The boy who was holding Khadijah finally realized how poorly things were going and shoved the girl aside as he ducked his head and propelled himself directly at her. The fire spouting from his eyes would have intimidated her if there had been time to notice. But instead she was watching his steps and calculating the exact moment to react. The instant that the boy's forward leg came within reach, she spun to the side and used his momentum to launch him over a small bush and into the stream.

Soon not only were her own clothes stained with patches of red, but all four boys were bloody as well. As the seconds ticked by, it became impossible to even see each distinct orbit of hand or fist or rock. Her arms were a tornado of movement and she was completely oblivious to her own pain.

The last boy was now racing at her with his head low to the ground and a small boulder in each hand. He was the largest of them all and she once again focused on which points in his stride had the least stability. She didn't duck to the side this time, but leaped onto his back and down behind, pushing the boy forward so that the rocks in his hand dragged his head to the ground. By now, three boys had blackened eyes, two were walking with a limp, and the last one was moaning on the ground. Yet still one of them came at her. She was shifting her eyes from his feet to his fist and predicting where each would land.

"Hey! What's going on over there!"

The distraction wasn't even long enough to register, but it was enough to shift her eye slightly and the rock that she'd been about to knock off into the dirt fell against her ear bringing with it only blackness.

The next thing that she knew, her mother's face was gazing down at her, but it wasn't with an expression of love or sympathy. The deep lines of fear were written into the woman's features as clearly as the carvings of Hammurabi. The woman's eyes were red and several black locks were plastered against momma's forehead. There was a damp cloth in her hand that she touched alternately to one eye and then another. She went to

reach out to momma and tell her that she shouldn't be worried, but even the slight nudging of her arm brought a bright flash of pain searing through her skull.

"I don't know what happened Habiba, but the boys up the path are saying that you are possessed by a witch. Whatever it is that you've done, it has brought us great danger." Momma paused then and whole paragraphs wrote themselves along the edges of her eyes, telling of hardship and despair. "Safia, I know that you are not a witch, but... I just do not know what we will do now. Your father is doing his best right now to make peace with the family who's boy you attacked."

The boy who SHE attacked?! Was momma really saying such things? How could it be? How could her own mother side with the boys that would have struck her hard enough to kill if she hadn't managed to fend them off. It was the first great betrayal of her life. The woman who had cared for her and nurtured her for as long as she could remember was now acting as if she had single-handedly brought on the attack.

"But MOMMA. *Those boys attacked us first.* All I did was try to keep them from hurting me." The statement had been a great wave pressing against her lips. But once it was uttered, the agony in her skull made her regret the outburst.

A breath of air escaped from the woman's lips and lightly disturbed the hairs on her blanket. "Safia, you have to understand that what you may consider self-defense would be looked at very differently by Muhammad's family." A longer sigh brushed the air between them before her mother continued. "Nobody in the village can understand how you could have done what you did. There are five boys laying on mats in their houses and the best of them can barely manage to stand up with some help." The woman gazed longingly at their one battered copy of the Koran before turning back. Habiba, the insult is looked at as highly inappropriate no matter how justified *you* might think it was."

She wanted to shake momma with her anger and force her to see how unfair this all was. But everything hurt and she was losing the will to even move her mouth to form the words. Whenever she lifted her head, there was an explosion of pain and the room spun in wild circles so that she had to lay back and close her eyes to keep from losing control of her stomach.

Chapter four

The years since that time were very hard for her family. They were forced to move to Al Salman which barely had sufficient water to keep it's people alive, and the few coins that her father earned were barely enough to provide them all with a bowl of barley or wheat berries each day. She had to watch in despair as both her parents toiled relentlessly to give her and her brothers the basics for survival, and before her fourteenth birthday she was pulled out of school to earn extra money doing housework for Semir who was the only man in the tiny hamlet to have enough money to even pay a wage.

Semir was about her mother's age, with lines around his eyes and a hint of gray in his full beard. He had kind eyes and frequently told jokes that brought her to giggle. The man had amassed his moderate wealth by developing low power water pumps that many people used for irrigating the few crops that would grow in their little community. This meant that he was able to command a house large enough to be divided into a sleeping area, eating area and a space for entertaining visitors. It had a large window on the north side which brought in a wonderful amount of light without making it too hot.

It wasn't grandiose by the standards of her old life. In fact it wasn't much larger than the house she'd grown up in. But compared to the houses that she and her neighbors now occupied, it was positively lavish.

He had explained to her that she would be doing the work that was being neglected with the loss of his wife four months before. Her main duties were to wash and fix his clothing, clean the windows, and prepare meals for him. This last was fascinating because he was the only person in the village to have ingredients like yogurt, tomatoes, or fresh scallions. These tasks she accomplished easily as they were no different from what she was doing at home, only on a more elaborate scale.

There was not enough daylight time to study when she got home, (books were impossible to get anyway) and so she did what she could to read through whatever she could find at Semir's house when he was busy with his work. It was a lucky thing that the man took an interest in learning. He had one small bookcase filled with a few dozen volumes. He didn't just have the Quran and the poems of Rumi, but also a number of books on physics and engineering. There were even a few books printed in places like Berlin and Toronto.

After several months of taking care of his chores, she found him mumbling angrily over some strange parts on his heavily scorched workbench. After watching him slam his fist against the wall only to start cursing more, she asked what was the matter.

For half a second his expression actually frightened her in its ferocity. But the instant his eyes found hers, the muscles softened a hair and his expression shifted to mild annoyance.

"Safia? What are you doing here, I need you to finish the laundry!"

"Honorable Semir (She had learned the hard way that whatever a man's *actual* ability, they all *believed* themselves to be superior, and Semir even more than the rest.) I did finish the laundry and it is hanging up on the line. If you would consider sharing your troubles with your servant, perhaps I may help-"

The man's laughter drowned out her final words. His face at first pulled into a smile, as if she had told a hilarious joke. Instantly, instead of the gray-bearded man she saw Muhammad's face staring malevolently back at her. She grudgingly cast her eyes on the floor, but also dug her fingers into her palms as if the man would divide in two and then into four with each angry face commanding fists which gripped sharp rocks.

But in no time the image faded and Semir once again looked back at her, his eyes searching her for some hidden treasure buried somewhere beneath skin and bone. As the microseconds ticked on, she found herself fidgeting uncomfortably under his gaze and wondering if this incident would end badly as well. But then the man spoke in a tone that contrasted sharply with his earlier mood.

"Safia. How much schooling have you received?"

There was no point in lying, the village was small enough that secrets were pointless and more likely to bring shame upon the family. "I have been to school until I was thirteen years honorable Semir."

"And did you learn what electricity is during that time?"

By his expression, she believed that he didn't expect her to know the slightest thing about it. After all their family didn't even have access to electric power. However she described what had been written in one of his books and what little she had seen once on a TV program. None of it would have been taught to her in school of course. But she was coming to realize that the decision to pull her out of school did not mean she could not keep learning new things on her own.

It wasn't clear at first whether the answer pleased the man or not, for he continued staring at her, confusion fixing his head at a slight angle. Once again the gaze brought her to feel uncomfortable and her fingers balled themselves into fists without her consciously willing them. Her feet even began shifting towards the door as if the older man might unleash some unpredictable punishment. But perhaps sensing this, her employer instead brought a second chair over to his workbench and described the various items that he was working with. There were electric motors, tiny bulbs, and lots of wheels with teeth on them that she understood to be gears.

What he was working on was actually very smart. He wanted to use the energy from a falling weight to run a motor backwards so that it would generate electricity to turn on a light. The electricity was working correctly when the motor's spindle was turned. But try as he might, the man couldn't get the weight to pull hard enough to keep the supporting rope from slipping on the drive wheel.

She could see from his tone that he did not think her capable of providing much help. But instead of suggesting an option right away (which would most likely have been wrong), she went over to his bookshelf and found a book she hadn't yet finished. It was about the science of movement and the workings of weights. Flipping through the volume, she found the part that described friction.

"Honorable Semir, perhaps I am wrong but I believe the difficulty here is not about weight but about friction. You want this rope to turn the wheel as it moves, however the rope doesn't have enough grip. I believe that if there was a rope with many small knobs on it, and there was a wheel with matching holes then it would travel over the wheel and turn it."

Looking back at his face she noticed that he was staring at her again, but now it seemed that he had discovered the treasure which had remained so elusive. He pulled her arm and embraced her as if they were family. Then he pulled back to look at her at arm's length. "Wait a minute. That book was written in English. How could you have learned to read this?"

In her desire to show the man that she could be helpful, she had missed a crucial point. Now there was more than just the *suggestion* that she'd stepped over the line, there was a great shouting message. If the house had possessed a hole in the floor, she would've immediately sunk into it for the rest of eternity. Instead, her eyes fell to her feet and she panicked at the thought of having destroyed her family's life once more. Sweat beaded on her forehead and the palms of her hands as she stumbled uselessly to create some kind of explanation.

She shifted her weight and made subtle movements in preparation to run out of the room and never return. It was bad enough that she'd destroyed her family's prosperity once already, at this point there was no place to go if Semir decided that she was overshadowing his ability.

She realized finally that running away was not an option. To leave Semir would mean the loss of her meager income, and this would only make things harder on the family. It would mean that momma and pappa would be forced to work even harder to bring home enough food for the five of them.

What could she do then? Somehow she needed to find some way of blending in with this new society that she was part of and to help them all to understand that she wasn't some kind of threat.

Finally she came upon a way of phrasing the situation as gently as possible in hopes that her employer did not become angry at her as the boys in school had done. "Honorable Semir. I saw one of your books that was in Arabic and you had another of the same kind in English. I simply looked through both of them until I figured out how the words went."

For a long time the man stared back at her. The sound of his tiny wind-up clock ticked off for more than a dozen seconds. Soon enough the metronome fell out of sink with her quickening heartbeat. She didn't know what to say, and as the clock continued to convince her that doom was inevitable, the sound of Semir's voice actually brought her to jump briefly.

"Safia, how is it that your parents did not devote more effort towards getting you books of learning? It is quite clear that you possess a vast ability to understand even the most difficult of concepts."

Instead of looking back at him, her eyes drifted back to the floor. "It is not good for a girl to be smarter than boys. It was my fault that my family got into trouble, causing us to move here. I made a group of boys in school quite angry from being smart."

"Waa faqri!"

The man pounded on the table as if to reinforce the strength of his comment. "I realize we live in a tiny backwater, but that doesn't mean we have to act like this is the fifteenth century. It was Arabia who kept learning alive when the Europeans lived in chaos. It was we who perfected mathematics and astronomy." He looked at her more intensely for a moment. "As difficult as it is to imagine a girl as young as you being smarter than me, I can be mature enough to respect your ability. He grabbed her shoulders and for a split second she almost knocked him to the floor in fear for her safety, but thankfully there was a hint of a smile in his eyes that postponed her movement. "Please do not ever feel ashamed for your talent young woman. You are a gift to our people, not a curse."

Semir got up and walked around the small room, both to burn off some of his energy and to think. But it took very little time for him to reach a conclusion and he turned back to her with a smile. "Safia, I will continue to employ you for doing chores. But I would also like your help with developing this invention. If it works then there will be a great deal of prosperity. We will both benefit."

Chapter Five

There were days that she returned home completely exhausted from the effort both of doing regular chores and from trying to help Semir to make his light work properly. The man had already invested money building a dozen different prototypes. But each construction brought only fresh problems which she assisted him in resolving.

One day she was watching a television program while she folded Semir's shirts and saw a person riding a bicycle. It was only a few seconds, but the way that the metal chain went around gave her an idea. She immediately dropped the laundry and started drawing on some scrap paper. That was what they needed. Something like a gear, but with big enough teeth for some type of chain to go around. It wasn't until the shadows grew long against the wall that she finally discovered a way to make the device work with some kind of small chain.

When she showed the drawing to Semir, he was thrilled. He began furiously scribbling numbers on a piece of paper to expand on what she had shown him. The whole time he was writing, softly spoken words came from his mouth that made little sense. She heard 'dollars' 'gear ratio' 'coefficient of friction' and they seemed to have no relation to each other. But, even more strangely, she found him periodically looking at her sideways the whole time in a way that made her once again wish that she could run away.

It wasn't a look of anger or of jealousy like she remembered from school. His expression reminded her more of the way Fatima had looked when they got their lessons returned from the teacher. But this look was more intense and it brought her hands to fidgeting with discomfort. His gaze seemed to make subtle shifts that were very confusing and long seconds ticked by in the stillness before the words finally ushered forth.

"Safia, I want you to read through this book." He handed her the one she had just put down that told of electricity and wires. "You will study it thoroughly and then you will return and be prepared to summarize it's contents. I will speak with you tomorrow."

Chapter Six

It wasn't long before everyone in the village had one of the falling weight lights. Semir had personally delivered one to Safia's family after he had sold enough to pay his loans. The invention helped with cooking evening meals in the winter, gave her the option to read books at night, and brought a general sense of pride for all of her neighbors. No longer would they be coughing on kerosene fumes just to have enough light to navigate around their hut after sunset. Safia was able to read books that she'd borrowed once momma was finished cleaning up their few dishes and the cookpot. It helped her to understand more about the electrical energy that could be had from harnessing other types of energy like sunlight or falling water.

Since the devices had brought so much prosperity, Semir ordered more books and she soon learned about something called the internet, which was like a global library. At first it was necessary to travel to a library in Samawah to learn about computers and how they worked. Eventually she built an antenna that helped both herself and Semir to use the internet from Al Salman.

The relief she felt when, for the first time she turned on Semir's computer and saw a website called 'askjeeves' was like watching the first rains arrive in the fall. There were articles and instructions on all kinds of things and even chat places where she could ask questions from people much older. With all that she was learning, she eventually built a computer that could be used from her own house from scrounged parts and circuit boards that her brother picked up in town. She had already taken the knowledge gained from the books on electricity and built a wind-powered electricity generator. But that was only one of her many discoveries. This global web of knowledge opened a world more incredible than anything she could have dreamed before. She found that she could learn about all kinds of places like Istanbul, Kuwait City, and Riyadh, even rich cities like Rome and Paris. There was so much out there to explore and she found it difficult to put her learning aside to work on mundane tasks like cleaning the dishes.

Late one November evening she was scrolling through a few pages on lighting and found one that sold Semir's lights. "70,000 dinars!"

The words flew from her mouth like a steam kettle, sadly reaching her mother's ears far too quickly.

"Safia. What is the matter?" The woman had put aside the bulgar she had been working on for the past 40 minutes. This only brought on the guilt of knowing that her aging

mother should be getting more rest than she was able to when she was tasked with feeding three hungry children.

"Momma, the device that I helped Semir to create is selling for 70,000 dinars. That's more than pappa could earn in a week. That man has been selling these lights for three months and the only thing he has offered me for solving his design is a single unit."

Her tone must have expressed more than the words alone, for momma slowly made her way over and put a hand on her shoulder. "Now now Safia, you must understand that Semir is a very powerful person in the village, and you don't want to cause trouble. Besides, hasn't he provided you with a better education than your father and I could?"

She looked at the woman in horror, not noticing her fingers curled into fists. What a cruel betrayal! She thought back to the countless hours that she'd worked to figure out the size of the gears, the aches in her fingers from carving teathed wheels out of wood to test the power ratio. "How could you say that momma?! That man has made a fortune already, and shared only a few grains of sand with me for having made his device work. She felt a building up inside of her that her conscious mind barely registered. There was anger of course, but the flaming blood pumping beneath the skin of her cheeks reminded her of the fingers pointing at her in school. She saw Muhammad sneering at her during the lunch break. She saw Intisar laughing at her when she fell in the stream once on the way to school. It all brought her finger nails to dig into the skin so deep that fine red crescents formed on her palms.

Her feet were only half a meter from the door before momma commanded her to stop and told her that if she wanted to remain a part of the family, she would wait until tomorrow before confronting Semir.

"What the hell is that gonna do?!" Today tomorrow, next month, it didn't make any difference as long as she could force that greedy parasite to give her a decent compensation for her skill. But momma only said something about cooling her head that made no sense at all. She burned through a dozen scenarios for getting momma to see things differently, but as long as pappa was out working for the army, this woman was judge jury and executioner of her tiny world.

Chapter Seven

The wait was excruciating. She sat watching the winter sun pull itself further up until it was fully above the roofs before storming directly to the house of Semir to give him a piece of her mind. Her knock was loud enough to wake a crocodile sleeping beneath the water. Yet when she finally voiced her anger she was stunned to find the man deftly rebutted each one of her arguments. He talked about investors, and loans that had to be repaid. He insisted that the original idea had been his, that he'd been the one who had

gone out and made the sales, he had even connected with someone on the internet to sell in far away cities.

"Yes, the internet that I set up for you!" She had screamed this loudly enough that his closest neighbor had wondered over to see if everything was alright. Then on top of it all, he had suggested that he would be willing to do her the favor (he actually used those words) of marrying her. By the [cloak of Muhammad?], the man was more than twice her age. But even putting that aside, she wouldn't have married him for all the gold in the world.

She was almost angry enough to punch the man. No matter how much she insisted on a portion of the sales, Semir kept insisting that he had given her fair return and she would not get a single dinar more.

Her shouts were only bringing other neighbors to gather outside their houses and finally one of them put his hands on her shoulders as a warning while he tried to shush her. It was Ibrahim who often involved himself in things that did not need his help. She actually did begin raising her arm a hair, intending to give him a violent shove.

Just as her arm began to rise, another movement caught at the edge of her sight. It was Rasheed, her youngest brother, and he was running directly at her. Seeing his eyes, she quickly ignored Ibrahim and even Semir when she realized that her brother was bawling wildly. She pushed past the two men and went to her brother to see what was the matter.

"Safia!" He buried his face in her shirt while mumbling into it with words that made no sense. The boy was trembling with grief and her own limbs grew tense from the worry for her little brother. She quickly led him away from the group to a spot halfway back towards their hut. It took a few minutes of hugging him and giving him soothing noises before she could pull his face away enough to understand what had happened.

"It's pappa. He's, he's dead. Safia Safia, how can he be dead? Allah wouldn't take him away from us. I just know it." The boy's small fists were balled up just as her own had been a few minutes ago with Semir.

All strength left her then. Her arms fell lifeless and her focus plummeted to the point where simply keeping her own legs from buckling underneath her was the most that she could handle.

Chapter Eight

"Thousands of our people were attacked. It was the worst disaster since the war with Iran. Their planes destroyed every single truck--"

Momma was speaking with Ali who lived three houses over. She went straight for the door, little Rasheed held firmly in her grasp now. Momma tried to keep her outside when she got to the curtain of their small shack, but she faced the woman directly and

demanded the full story. She was big enough to know what had happened and not be treated like an infant.

Momma's face looked even worse than her brother's. There were dark circles around her eyes which themselves were bloodshot. Her hand trembled as she held it up to hold her at bay. "Habiba, it's okay. We can talk later but for now I need you to look after Rasheed while I sort this out."

Babysitting?! She was left to babysit the kid while momma got to find out what had happened to her father? It was so insulting!

She turned and gave the other man a withering gaze. "I want to know what happened. Ali you know full well that I have the right. Tell me the full story, NOW."

There was a long pause and the man must have hinted at a deeply sorrowful tale, but momma seemed to find her strength, even in the depths of her sorrow. "Safia please. We don't need your brother here right now. I promise you that we will talk as much as you need... later." The woman paused as if to realize that more was needed. "Habiba, I need you to do this, for me." There were whole poems written within that pause, but the lack of words were enough finally to convince her that it wasn't the time to argue with momma. It wasn't that she was too young to understand. In fact it was the opposite. She was old enough to be expected to put off personal gratification for the sake of her brother. So she picked up the boy (which was getting harder nowadays) and took him down to the stream where they could mourn on their own with what little she knew.

It was an hour or more before she could get Intisar to look after Rasheed long enough to learn what happened. She went from holding and comforting her brother, to later offering the same to momma who's hands were still trembling even now. It took several tries and the woman had to stop a thousand times to blow her nose into an old cloth.

"Well as you know, your father was forced to be a pack mule for the military attack on Kuwait. The man was hurrying to escape back here in the back of a truck when the whole group of vehicles was attacked by a rain of death from above."

"But who would do that momma?"

"Americans!" She spat the words into the air like a flood of bullets. "It was their planes and weapons that killed many hundreds of our people.³ Abu Reiha!"

Her hand flew over her mouth at the shock of hearing such an insult leave her mother's mouth. The woman had never before done such a thing. But instead of rage, she herself felt more and more numbed by the hurt. She didn't know in that moment the worldly implications of what had happened, she only knew that her father's arms would never again wrap themselves around her shoulders. This brought the tears at last to flood her own eyes and carve salty streams down her cheeks. She buried her face in momma's

3 U.S. military forces killed somewhere btwn 500-1000 people on the 'Highway of Death'

shirt and threw her arms around the woman's waist, as if the folds of momma's blouse could hide her from the pain. It was impossible to grasp how or why those pale men from so far away thought it necessary to bring such death to their poor desert land. She had never spent much time learning about governments or what the rich countries sought. But now, a whole new type of learning became necessary. Now it was going to become her mission to understand what drove the pale ones to bring ships and planes halfway around the world just to kill her family.

Over the next few months, she came to learn a great deal about the deadly metal things that were dropped on her people by the armies of America and Europe. There were entire industries devoted to the sole purpose of causing as much death as possible. Their weapons came in so many forms and with such cruel results, it sent her head spinning just from trying to grasp the magnitude of it.

The question was, what could a 16 year old girl do against a multi-national military attack? The westerners had jet fighters, battleships, aircraft carriers, tanks, and missiles which could attack from dozens of kilometers away. She had no answer to this. But she did know one thing. Putting an end to these horrible strikes was going to be her only focus until the death and destruction came to an end.

Chapter Nine

Daley stared out at the gently rolling sea. He was an average looking man, but made up for his lack of physical distinction with an understanding of the human psyche that inspired in his crew a singular degree of respect. He held strong appreciation for the men serving under his command and this brought effective results from the crew serving on their somewhat dated ship.

The U.S.S. Ranger was one of the oldest carriers still in service, but it remained a formidable weapon both at sea and against land-based forces. With nearly 2 hectares of deck supporting eighty different aircraft it was sending a constant wave of pilots on attack or reconnaissance missions over Iraq.

From the bridge high above the carrier deck, the middle-aged man watched with satisfaction as the crew, 4 decks below, performed their tasks with mechanical precision. There were blue vests, red vests, yellow and green ones. Each group maneuvering aircraft and weapons at a feverish pace. Picking up the phone he checked in with the combat information center to see how activity was progressing on the far side of the horizon.

"Sir. We've nearly got the situation mopped up. The third marine aircraft unit says they don't see any further movement and General McCaffrey's apache gunships are just working on the stragglers along highway 8. We should be finished inside of an hour."

Glancing at his watch he was mildly disappointed. The A-10 Warthogs, A-6 Intruders, and AH-64 Apaches had been going at it for nine hours already. But at least it would all be over soon. The operation in Iraq was a complete success. The cluster bombs easily halted the column of vehicles at the front and rear. Of course, that was the easy part. The rest of the time the pilots had to lay down a massive fireworks display to mop up the soldiers trapped on the road or fleeing out into the desert.

It was a grisly job, but the top brass had been worried that the royal guard would come back for their military gear, allowing for further attacks on the oil refineries. It was bad enough that Sadaam had caused as much devastation already to several hundred wells and refineries. But his thoughts were interrupted by the blinking light of the red phone on his console. That phone would only be coming from the commander of the carrier battle group.

He reached down with a pale muscular arm to answer it.

"This is Captain Daley." Obviously his CO would know that.

"Cease operations?! Sir, you can't be serious. We have them on the run." His jaw fell and the crow's feet around his eyes deepened at the thought of such an asinine strategy.

"The UN? They were the ones who authorized us to be here in the first--"

"Yes sir."

"I understand sir." He didn't understand at all of course. The mere idea was ludicrous. But it wasn't for him to understand, only to follow orders. Such was life in the military. Unfortunately for them, a campaign this dramatic couldn't be hidden from the press and it seems that there had been antagonizing pieces in the Times, the Guardian, and a slew of smaller papers. All those pretty boys in their safe castles back home were criticizing the 'use of force' and crying over 'civilian refugees' like these Iraqis were some long-lost family. Sometimes it made him wonder who exactly he was fighting *for*. It certainly didn't feel like the American people appreciated the risks his men were taking in the name of freedom.

He set the phone back with a grimace and called for his pilots to return to base. Chances were they would just let things cool off for awhile before the Commander in Chief could show some spine and his men could go back to finishing the job over there. He turned back to the vast steel deck where an F-18 was being taken below on the starboard aircraft elevator. He put an arm up to shield himself from the glare of the sun lighting up the hot ocean just as one of the ensigns lowered the shades, then he turned to his maps to plan for the inevitable return of standard operations.

Chapter Ten

The world of military strategy was as vast as any other subject that she'd researched on the internet. She learned not only about how guns worked, but about the history of the

airplanes that the attackers were sending over, the politics of oil that brought them to be interested in a place called Iraq, and a whole host of intersecting bits of history that influenced this war.

The Americans, British, and the Australians didn't seem to care the slightest for what was done to her people. The Shia and Sunni were barely a footnote in the news articles. For them the focus was on 'political stability' and 'resources.' The later she came to learn was merely code for oil. The ships, the planes, and the many land vehicles were all fueled by gasoline and their governments would go to any length to maintain control of that obviously valuable resource.

The question then came to her of how a single teenage girl could do anything against jet planes that could fly at the speed of sound and deliver 200 kilogram bombs. The power of those machines that made the sky shatter as they flew overhead brought her to think of herself more like a fly on the surface of a great pond. The idea of doing battle with the vast armada made the run in with Muhammad and his friends look like thumb-wrestling.

It was so unfair!

But then she started reading about other conflicts where smaller forces managed to succeed even when they were outnumbered. There was Ethiopia fighting against Italy, the Zulu tribe who fought off the British, and the Vietcong who fought a successful guerrilla defense against the Americans. The tactics were constantly changing as the weapons became more advanced, but there *were* certain parallels that she could absorb. It was beginning to dawn on her that any strategy used against such a powerful force would have to be extremely clever. She had to carefully uncover any kind of weakness in their machines and figure out how to exploit it if she hoped to succeed against them. It wasn't going to be easy and it was going to be *very* dangerous. But one way or another there was no choice now. She *had* to succeed.

Chapter Twelve

Light streamed through the large bank of bulletproof glass illuminating the narrow steel hallway while two men debated intel from ground-based forces. Daley was in the middle of having an animated strategy discussion with his second in command while they waited for the green light to begin another sortie against Sadaam's forces. The conversation was interrupted by a chestnut-skinned seaman calling in from the comms station.

Making his way to the bridge, he gave a brief salute to the air boss who was just starting his shift.

"Captain. I've got Camp Doha on the horn."

'What the devil do those people want?' The thought entered and left his mind faster than a jet launching from the carrier's deck. He reached to pick up his phone and frowned as the radio static cleared. "This is Daley."

"Captain. We have a situation."

Well, obviously. The kid wouldn't be calling to find out the weather. "Yes, what's going on."

"Sir. We have a drone that's gone quiet over grid delta-54. It wasn't on an attack run, but it did carry a payload of four hellfires."

Damned nintendo pilots. The hell did they have to rely on those flying robots. Every time there was a software glitch, he ended up sending good old-fashioned jets flown by real flesh and blood men to do the job anyway. It was such a waste of his pilots' time pulling double-shifts like that.

"What was it's designation?"

"Sigma-four-zero-niner."

He quickly scratched out the number with a question-mark at the end and had one of the men pass it to the air-guard. A few seconds later the kid came back with the intel that the last heading for that particular drone was south-southwest 20 degrees at 1200 feet.

"Roger that. I'll have my men keep a lookout."

"Send us an updated vector the instant you spot it."

"Will do."

The kid was showing an edge of authority in his voice that was highly inappropriate for someone so far down the ladder. But there was too much occupying his attention at the moment to deal with superficial issues.

"Clemens. Ring up the Topaz and check if anyone there has had a visual on one of our drones in the past... oh ten minutes."

Next he picked up the phone and got in touch with the radar room. "Johnson. Keep an eye out for any UAVs heading out to sea from grid delta-54."

"Yes si- holy shit!"

Barely had the words escaped the kid's mouth before the whole carrier shuddered. He could feel the vibration ripple through the grating beneath his feet. It reminded him of the smaller earthquakes he sometimes felt when he was land-based back in Okinawa.

The board lit up like Ronald Reagan International on approach and five different crewmen began shouting at once.

"All of you! QUIET right now! Clemens, what in the hell was that?"

"Sir... the Topaz. It's been hit. Direct strike along the waterline."

"No airman. I mean what was that vibration in the ship?! Have we been hit too?"

"Ye-yessir. Three direct hits along the bow just a few seconds ago."

His head whipped around faster than a turboprop blade. "Dammit. We need to get some planes in the air. Where's our Hawkeye?" Their radar surveillance aircraft should be scoping the area.

"Sir the Hawkeye was out of the region, they're scanning over grid Bravo-36 at the moment."

He was going to call for the launch of a pair of Intruders. But with three direct hits on the bow, their ship would have to decelerate to full stop. He couldn't take the risk of keeping the ship at speed and forcing water into a possible breach.

"Damn. Alright, get our boys in the air re-routed to Camp Commando and bring the ship to full stop."

"Eye sir. Moving to full stop."

"Now. I want one of you brilliant soldiers to educate me on this. How did one of those cave-dwelling sand-niggers out there manage to score a direct hit on THIS SHIP?! Without *any of our watch noticing?!*"

From the corner of his eye, Admiral Quincy appeared with steam almost visibly rising from his cap. "Daley, we've got a direct hit on the Topaz and on this ship. I'm calling a general red alert for the entire carrier group." The admiral immediately made his way to Primary Flight to speak with the air boss.

As the deeper implications struck him, Daley's stomach sank noticeably lower in his gut. This was a situation unprecedented since the days fighting against Japan. The U.S. wasn't supposed to have its carriers attacked. They were the shaft of the arrow, delivering ordinance wherever it was needed. The navy's carrier strike groups were well-nigh invincible. He picked up the phone again and called down to the radar operator. "Artiz, why didn't we see this on the screen?"

"Sir. I'm sorry sir. The drone must have been flying just above the waterline. The screen's been clear for the past hour."

He pulled up the forward watch and barked orders for a full report. Another young voice responded that there was an alert just moments before the attack, but the countermeasures couldn't be deployed quickly enough.

"Sanders. I want Steiglitz on the line right now."

"Clemens, get our watch doubled immediately."

"O'Keefe, have every single one of our countermines checked out."

"Sanderson I want a dingy in the water with an inspection team out front, A-S-A-P! Make sure they have a seal team keeping an eye out for enemy fire too."

Even with two decades spent in the navy, he flinched when the shipwide warning began sounding. "This is CSG commander Quincy speaking. We are under attack. I am issuing a red-alert shipwide. This is NOT a drill. I want all able-bodied sailors either manning counter-defenses or working on repairs so we can get back to cruising speed. You will get further orders as they come."

Chapter Thirteen

It was terribly difficult to hide her glee at the incredible success. Obviously her family couldn't know that she'd managed to hack into the computer system of an American drone and use it to retaliate against the invaders. Not only would they find it impossible to believe, but it was as clear as the palm trees by their old house that their government would post a bounty the size of an ocean on her head soon enough. The only reason she'd found the courage to make such an attack was because not a single person, Iraqi or American, would believe that a 16 year old girl could possibly manage such a feat.

"Saf-ya! You're in big trouble now. Safya!"

It was only after another yell from Intisar that she brought her attention grudgingly back to the present. She was just in time to see her brother about to toss a handful of sand at her which would have meant an hour of cleaning it out of the keyboard.

"Don't you dare!!" Through trial and error, she'd learned that only the most intimidating language would manage to halt the boy when he was planning something monumentally stupid. Throwing sand at the computer would definitely fall into that category. She didn't care if her brother was angry or why. If he put an end to her secret operations she would...

Well, she didn't know what she would do, but it would be very mean that was for sure.

"Momma told me that you need to get water for dinner, and that I have to go with you to make sure you don't mess it up."

More likely, momma had told Intisar to go with her since he was spending too much time playing pebble games for coins, and losing too many in the process.

The moment their small house was out of sight though, he was gone again. That was fine, she didn't want his company anyway. He was too full of himself for being only a year and a half older than she was. With all her successes, it wasn't likely that anything at the well could pose a real threat. She had the empty buckets set against the edge when the hair on her neck stretched itself out. Something was about to happen.

Only seconds later two boys jumped on her and each one grabbed for a wrist. Her right arm was already in her line of sight and she snatched it away just before Kumad got ahold of it. His friend Jayeer was quicker though. He actually got hold of her arm and tried pulling her in. But this only made things worse as she used her other free arm to deliver a brutal punch and knock the wind out of him. Then she turned back to Kumad who watched her levelly.

"You're just a girl. What makes you think you can attack Jayeer like that? You're gonna pay! I'm gonna have my way with you and leave you in the desert to rot."

Jayeer was a better fighter than Muhammad had been, but she'd already learned so much in the past 2 years that it was little help. The boy came at her and feigned a swinging

punch before instead going for a punch at her chest. But she sidestepped and shifted his momentum out of the way. Then she made a chop with the side of her palm into his neck. The boy dropped to the ground howling in pain. Quickly, she clamped her hand over his mouth remembering what her family had endured the last time she'd defended herself from bullies.

After a minute or so, the kid must have realized that screaming wouldn't help and his voice fell to a whimper. She grabbed his wrist and squeezed at a particular piece of cartilage before whispering slowly in his ear.

"I know who you are Kumad, and I know where you go to collect frogs in the mornings. If you so much as whisper to anyone that this happened, I promise you that you will suffer a whole lot more pain than this." She paused for a second and looked carefully at his eyes. What she saw was not convincing enough and she squeezed once more to make the point more clear. "Now, you don't want that do you?"

This time the eyes held nothing but pure terror. For a split second it brought to her a twinge of guilt, but she had to consciously push that away if she wanted to avoid a repeat of what happened with Muhammad's family.

Letting go, she felt more certain as she watched the boy nod his head. Turning back to her buckets, she prayed to Allah that the boys would be too ashamed at having been beaten by a girl to say anything this time. If they did then her family would definitely be finished.

Chapter fourteen

The map covered walls of the situation room had a claustrophobic air as he waited for the meeting to begin. He looked over the damage report once again with a hardened eye. It was utterly infuriating! How the hell did a bunch of hijabis figure out the most effective way to cripple the world's most powerful navy? The Topaz had been struck in the one minor point of vulnerability just above its propeller, rendering it motionless. Meanwhile his own carrier was useless since they couldn't launch planes unless the ship was going at least 35 knots and they couldn't risk getting up to speed with a three foot wide hole in the bow. Either this foe was a genius at strategy, or the luckiest son-of-a-bitch he'd ever faced on the open sea.

As he stared back and forth between the two reports. Eyes searching for anything that might help the situation, he quickly got distracted when admiral Quincy entered the room.

The carrier strike group commander was followed by Captain Stieglitz of the Topaz. The moment that Quincy sat down he pulled over a speaker phone and introduced Sergeant Ringals over at Camp Dorha which was the base in charge of unmanned aerial vehicles or UAVs

"I want to know what the hell is happening with our ships?! I've just been had my ass chewed out by none other than the Master Chief Petty Officer himself."

It was a regular joke among command that anyone who got a call from the MCPO was in a world of Herdt, a play on the man's name. He was not known for giving out compliments, and most especially not in a time of conflict. This meeting was going to be as tense as the arresting wires laid out to slow incoming aircraft.

"I understand sir. From what our intel shows, at 0520 there was report of a drone missing over--"

The man waved his comment aside with a dismissive arm. "Yes Daley. I know the back story. Sergeant Ringals filled me in the situation. What I want to know is how, when, and why *two separate ships* were disabled in the course of less than two minutes."

"Sir. I can't speak for the Topaz, but it was reported to me that the AMRAAM on the forward deck had failed to reach the threat in time. I have soldiers doing a thorough check on all of our countermeasures."

The admiral actually took a second to actually slap his forehead at the statement, like they were in some two-bit comedy. "And exactly HOW did a bunch of brownies figure out precisely where to strike your ship to eliminate the primary tactical advantage which this carrier provides?"

Turning to the speakerphone he addressed their virtual [meeting attendant]. "Sergeant Ringals have you gotten any new intel since our meeting?"

"Sorry sir, we are still exploring the data. We still have not recovered the drone--"

"You WHAT? You're telling me that one of our most advanced pieces of hardware is sitting unaccounted for, possibly in enemy territory?"

"Sir--"

Daley noticed a vein begin pulsating on the admiral's forehead now. "Sergeant. If I find that you were, in even the slightest way delinquent in this situation. I'll have your balls in a sling so fast you'll be be singin' soprano." The words had barely faded before he stabbed a button and the line went dead.

With eyes breathing fire he shoved the speakerphone device aside. It seemed that Quincy was looking for someone to throw under the bus, and he wasn't particular about who that person was. 'I'm gonna have to watch my ass. With a microscope.' He mumbled under his breath.

"Daley. I want status updates on every single one of this boat's countermeasures and I want one of each type tested before the end of the day." He then pointed to the door with that same accusatory finger. "You are dismissed captain."

Chapter fifteen

It was several days before word finally reached her that the drone that she directed towards a desolate road near Cheekha Dar was safely intercepted. Being near the highest mountain in Iraq, the area (she hoped) would hold little interest to the westerners. But she couldn't entirely release the worry that the attackers might use their technology to locate the machine before it could be safely hidden. It was always possible that one of their computer experts might discover her manipulation of the plane's GPS software.

"Package intercepted. Cargo empty." That was the only news she received from the Ba'athis, but it told her that everything had worked successfully. Her first strike against the imperialists who'd murdered her father had played out as smooth as hummus. The people who sent the message didn't know her, nor of course that she was female. That would have made them impossible to work with. Instead she'd used the alias 'Al-Tarid' and simply let them know that the drone was not a threat. The challenge now was in finding a means of using this device again now that its bombs were gone. She ran strategies in her head along this path for a very long time, but no practical option flourished. Without fuel the drone couldn't be used for attack or surveillance purposes. And getting fuel for an aircraft would be so expensive that it wasn't even worth considering.

There was no means of stealing American bombs from their ships, and using the same virus on another drone would easily get her caught. In the end she decided to leave the now useless hardware in the hands of others and let them try and discover the secrets buried within its electronics.

With the small donation forwarded to her through an anonymous account, she had been able to find a solar panel to run the computer and was now able to research her tactics from a remote spot down the road. This allowed her to continue her work with less distraction. She didn't have to constantly have her focus broken by interruptions from Intisar, or listen to the screeching of his loza practice.

Nevertheless, she still occasionally heard momma wailing over the loss of poppa which brought such tears to her eyes that she finally chose a spot on the other side of a small hill. Mourning over his loss wasn't going to do anything to help her crack into the British military communications. It also would not bring back the man who had tickled and cuddled with her after coming home from his work in the afternoon.

There had to be a way of stalling the pale ones longer. But in learning about their machines of war, she almost began wailing herself at the futility of going against boats so huge that that were measured in hundreds of meters.

It took another two weeks of methodically searching through British and American chatter before she learned of an attack by British ground troops on Baghdad. In looking

at the equipment that was being readied for the offensive, it felt as if the very hand of God was coming down upon them. But ironically it was gossip from one of Sadaam's own army soldiers that finally gave her an idea for retaliation. A man named Isfahar had stolen a grenade launcher and planned to shoot down one of the American helicopters near Mosul.

"The idiot!" She'd learned to keep her voice down, but in this case it was like stopping Intasar from splashing her from the river. How could this man be so foolish? Those invaders had equipment that didn't exist anywhere within 50 kilometers and he was just going to destroy it.

She quickly used a custom program to encrypt and bounce her signal through at least eight servers before reaching the man and told him that 'Al-Tarid' knew how they could eliminate the threat from their aircraft without destroying the helicopter and thus gain the advantage of having their own advanced war machine.

The response that she got was exactly what she expected from a young hotheaded boy. "So what Tarid? Just having a thing like that isn't anything unless someone knows how to use it. Do YOU know how to fly a helicopter? Especially one of their expensive military ones?"

The comment at first brought her to raise a clenched fist in the air before she instead opened her hand and took deep breaths to calm herself. "He doesn't know that I'm a girl or that I'm only sixteen, and he doesn't know anything about fighting tactics. He's just doing the best that he can like the rest of us." She whispered this twice before accepting that he was right. If she wanted to make this effort a success, she'd have to connect with a person who knew how to fly a helicopter. This was a challenge at least as difficult as deciphering the navy radio chatter. She had no idea who in Iraq might know how to operate the British aircraft, at least not anybody who would bother to help a teenage Iraqi girl like her.

Telling the man that he had a valid point got her on his good side and their discussions on tactics began to feel less confrontational. It took much longer though before he agreed to hold off until she could find someone with enough skill to pilot the machine. This of course meant digging through a mountain of research in hopes of finding the single diamond she was looking for.

Chapter Sixteen

"So you're saying that you know ahead of time where and when the American helicopters will be flying overhead?"

The words made it sound like he thought she was claiming to be a witch. This brought her to thinking about Muhammad and the other boys from school. That day and the life-changing destruction to her family would never be far from her mind. But it wasn't like

she had superpowers or anything, all it took was a little time hacking into the communications that they used and finding what places the pale ones thought needed... reconnaissance as they called it. Coupling that with the sharp eyed testimony of boys like the one she'd talked with a few days ago helped her to uncover a pattern in the machines' trips across the sky. Telling the boy about her own ability would likely bring nothing but derision, so instead she focused on the latter.

"Isfahar, it's not that I possess magic. There's a soldier who has watched their machines near Fallujah and he believes that he's found a regular pattern to the day and time of their trips. I hope that if we can take out the soldiers and the pilot without damaging the machine, then we can use the Americans' own technology against them."

"That is a very big 'if' Al-Tarid. And what if you are wrong, or the man's predictions are not accurate? You know that Sadaam would execute me for doing this thing that you suggest?"

How in the world had she gotten herself in so deep? At first it was just an emotional backlash against the invading forces that took away her father. But now she was playing with the lives of her fellow Shi'ites. What if she *was* wrong? What if Amir *was* killed? The self doubt crept in on feet so softly that she didn't notice it was there until it reached throat-strangling proportions. For several minutes she considered just abandoning the whole project.

"Safia! Where is our dinner? You were supposed to be helping mom with the chickpeas."

"Dammit Intisar, I'm busy!" Things were much easier when she could sit outside, but today it was raining, and the solar panel would be next to useless even if she could find some way to protect the electrical system.

"Safia you're too old to be playing with dolls. You have responsibilities to this family."

Is that what her brother thought she was doing? Fantasies of throwing a pot into his nose began to saturate her mind. But she quickly counted to ten and took some deep breaths. Nobody could know about what she was doing, and the neighbors would absolutely tell everyone if they knew she was taking on a role that was reserved for men. There was already a strong American security force searching the larger cities for the one who attacked their ships. With a heavy sigh, she went back to the main room and told her brother that she'd only been engrossed in a book.

"Safia, you shouldn't be reading books. You should be learning how to take care of a husband."

This almost brought her to actually make good on her fantasy. But with a superhuman level of restraint, she merely yelled at him and called him a toad. Then, sitting at the table she went through the monotonous work of mashing the chickpeas so they could be spread on the khubz that Momma was baking. When she was finished, there was time to chop the eggplant and roast it before they all settled down for dinner.

Chapter Seventeen

"Safia." She hurriedly closed her internet browser and pulled open the innocuous program that she kept just for hiding the time she spent on the computer.

Momma drifted into the room on feet that were lighter than they'd been for weeks. Her smile was either very good news, or, a disastrous omen.

"Safia, I have fantastic news to share. Maleek has asked to have you for his wife."

Nope, it was the disastrous one. A husband? She was insanely busy right now. How in the world could she make the time to deal with such silliness. Besides, she was only sixteen. How could she keep learning how to use the flight simulator that she'd found online? How could she work on coordinating the capture of the American helicopter? There was so very much to do. And it was well known that Maleek couldn't hold a secret if he were offered a bucket of jewels for the trouble.

"Momma please. I do not want to be with Maleek."

It was as if she had thrown a pot full of hot tea in her mother's face. The woman's smile faded like their electric light when the weight hit the floor. Her features became rigid and she quickly sat down on a pile of books, frowning at them as she did. "Safia you cannot do this. No other man is likely to ask for you. Not when you sit in here with your books and your computer all day. Who in this valley is going to take care of you? Do you think that I will provide you with meals until your hair turns gray?"

"Momma. I'm too busy..."

"Busy? With what are you so busy Safia. All I see you do is play with that stupid computer program. How are you going to learn to make a good Khubz, or how to properly fold a [x] which you cannot ever do properly. Really habiba, you have to be more grown up."

More grown up?? If her mother knew what she had accomplished in only the past three weeks, she wouldn't even *think* about saying such things.

For a universe of days she cajoled, she pleaded, she even tried devoting more time to her chores. But nothing would dissuade momma from insisting that she needed a man to take care of her. The woman didn't even include her in the preparation (most likely because of her constant protests). It slowly became clear to her that if she ever wanted to have a real life outside of cooking and clothes washing, she was going to need to look elsewhere. She was going to have to abandon the only family she'd ever known in the whole world. It was more terrifying than deflecting the rocks that Muhammad had used to try and kill her. More frightening even than the attack on the American ships. To be wholly and completely alone was something she couldn't even imagine getting used to. Nor did she want to. Just thinking of the grief that it would bring to momma brought a river of tears large enough to drown the Euphrates.

Chapter Eighteen

If it had been difficult to hide her attack on the ships from momma and her brothers, it took a level of skill rivaling Adel Emam to keep her intentions hidden now. Several times Intisar commented on how she kept looking at him weird. Even Rasheed asked her once if there was something messed up about his face. The thought of never seeing her family again was one thing, but having to keep her emotions carefully locked away was almost enough to break her. Every time she hugged momma it felt like she would never be able to let go and by the time she was finished making final preparations, all of them were starting to give her strange looks.

Finally the day came and her feet left ragged furrows in the sand as she made her way south toward the road. She made so many backward glances at the dark shadow of her home, barely visible as an outline in the pre-dawn light, that she had to catch herself from tripping at least three times. Eventually the beloved hovel was lost behind Semir's house as she followed a path east to a remote part of the road wearing loose-fitting pants, a pair of her father's old shoes, and a rag tied tightly across her chest. She said a quick prayer to Allah before shaving her hair to a close stubble and waited at the weathered board stuck in the sand along the side of the road that was the only indication to show that her little town even existed.

As the not-yet-blazing sun began to cast long shadows across the chilly sand, she spotted a single headlight bouncing down the dirt track. The headlight slowed and the early dawn's light revealed a very old pickup truck with as much patchwork as there was original steel. The truck stopped beside her and a very young man with skin a shade darker than her own looked her up and down doubtfully.

"The mercy of Allah is near to the doers of good."⁴

It was the agreed upon greeting which they had made in the last hours of preparation early the previous morning. This confirmed that he was the right man.

"And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided. And remember the favor of Allah upon you – when you were enemies and He brought your hearts together and you became, by His favor, brothers."⁵

She had felt guilty about stealing too much food from her family, and so the little pack was effortlessly lifted over her shoulder as she sidled around to the passenger door and got in beside Al Sadeem (it wasn't his real name, just as Al Tarid was not her own).

The interior of the old truck was no more glamorous than the outside had been and she saw the heavily worn vinyl dash patched with strips of thin metal held on with tiny

4 Surah Anam Ayah 56 (<https://myislam.org/quran-quotes/>)

5 Ayat 103

rusted nails. The seat was covered in something dark that she hoped was clean enough. She took a hesitant sniff and didn't sense anything fowl, and so she hopped in and pulled on the door which protested with a shriek that must have woken at least a few people nearby.

When she was settled, the young man spun the truck around slowly and the two made their way back toward the main road and the Batha region. The thin fabric stretched over ancient squealing springs bounced her remorselessly as they made slow progress on a road that was barely distinguishable from the surrounding desert.

"Is there news of the others Al Sadeem?" Though she knew of the need to speak in generalities, this was her first experience sitting next to one of the freedom fighters in person. She couldn't help but admire the strength and resolve they had in the face of what both Sadaam and the pale ones were capable of.

But the haunted look of the boy took her by surprise. Even in the space of the half second glance that he stole from the road the pain was a stanza in tragedy carved into his forehead.

"It's gone. All gone." That was the only noise to be heard above the groaning engine and the rusty springs beneath her bottom.

The words themselves were bad enough, but the man's white knuckles stretched tightly over the steering wheel and the deadpan tone in his voice brought her to look at him more closely now. It was only on closer inspection that she noticed the lines of age that shouldn't have blossomed on his skin for another decade. The pain was so pervasive across his features that there was no doubting the sincerity.

"What is gone? Did they attack the airport?"

"The airport??" The man laughed, but it was a shriek of such bitterness that her stomach fell a notch within her belly. She wished now that the question had never formed itself on her lips. "Those devils bombed the whole city! Most of Nasiriyah is nothing but rubble. The airport is gone, the train station, the power station, and all three bridges." She'd always known the Americans were dangerous, but this was a whole new level of depravity. That they would cause such massive destruction to a people who wanted nothing but to exist in peace was almost too much for her to bear.

"I can't believe it."

"Believe it Al Tarid. The attack on their ships was most ingenious, but the wrath of the pale ones is quick, and utterly without mercy."

"We must..."

"No!" His words cut her off like the slashing of a sword. "We must do nothing." He took his eyes off the scene ahead for only half a second as he pointed an accusing finger.

"You will speak with Muhammad Al Shad and HE will decide whether you are more deserving of praise, or of death. That is why he has permitted me to bring you to..." The destination dropped off the edge of the sentence like blood falling from an open wound.

This new chapter in her life was beginning to feel less a delivery toward freedom and more a prison march for her. If Al Shad decided that she was to blame for inciting the fury of the pale ones, then it would certainly mean execution. Without her realizing it, the color left her cheeks and her skin took on a hue that could've resembled the attacking foreigners. She found that she suddenly lacked the courage to speak another word for the rest of the trip.

Chapter Nineteen

Daley had been immediately instructed to keep the attack top secret for the sake of national morale, which meant that he couldn't tell Nancy. Being used to such policy didn't make it any easier on him. It meant that his shore leave to visit the family had been delayed another four months while they put all resources towards getting the ship seaworthy enough to make it back to Virginia. Both the Ranger and the Topaz would be replaced by newer ships with stronger hull plating and more sophisticated counter-measures. But in the meantime the crew was all but useless while they spent their days running drills from a ship that still couldn't launch any planes.

As his father would say, he was putting his life on standby. He came closer to reaching for a bottle today than he'd been for the past twenty-five years. Not since the first days of boot-camp was he as depressed as he was now. As a teenager he'd crashed a car so badly after a night of binge-drinking that he'd decapitated an oak tree. Trying to struggle through the withdrawals while being yelled at constantly in RTC Great Lakes was the worst experience of his life. Every day he searched through his drawer for a bottle that he knew wouldn't be there, and every day he had to remind himself that he'd barely avoided being kicked out of High School when he crashed his car against the administration building. The day his father told him that he would either join the military or move out, it was the first time he'd ever thrown a fist at his own father. But the man was half a head taller than him and still sported enough muscle to shove him uselessly into a recliner.

But he'd gotten through that, and he reminded himself that he wasn't just keeping it together for his own sake now. He had a family to think about and he couldn't let a few equipment failures tarnish his now stellar reputation in the Navy. He was *going* to find out who did this and he was *going* make sure that they understood just exactly who they were messing with.

Chapter Twenty

Not surprisingly, she was blindfolded as they left the outskirts of Batha. It was laughable given that she'd never even traveled beyond her own village and knew nothing of the terrain here except the snippets grabbed from an American spy drone. Her world had been shrunk down to the sounds of the bouncing seat, the rumbling of the protesting truck motor, and the oppressive heat bringing sweat to all parts of her body. There were some turns that were gradual, like bends in the road, and others that were sharp and those latter were always to the left. But since she knew nothing of what maps of the area might show, that knowledge was of no value.

It was something less than 30 minutes more before the vehicle slowed dramatically and at last rolled to a stop. One man ordered another to open the door and to pull her out. Shortly thereafter the door opened to slightly fresher air and her eyes were stabbed with light when the bag came off. She squinted and then screwed her face against the harsh rays. It was a credit to the man next to her that he waited for her eyes to adjust before gently telling her to walk forward between the two of them.

In front of her was a humble building made completely of metal. It looked like something industrial, but there was no clue as to what it's original purpose was. The sides had a vertical ribbed pattern to it and there was no ornamentation except a faded wood board over the door that read 'System Resources' whatever that meant. A few broken vehicles sat out front, their axles propped up on large boulders and a pile of sandbags hid most of a metal gun with an impressively large barrel.

Aside from this the yard was empty of life or equipment. It was obvious that this was not a military facility for the group but more likely just a random meeting place. She respected the care that they showed in not allow her to see more than was necessary until she gained their trust.

Chapter Twenty-One

The heat was even more oppressive within the thin sheet metal walls that enclosed a large space mostly bare save for a few pickup trucks, a stack of crates forming a makeshift desk, and some drums that might have held anything from food to fuel oil. Light filtered in through seams in the walls that looked old enough to have predated the Kuwait invasion.

Al Shad watched her carefully. The man who was old enough to be her father might in reality be in his early 30s. One of his eyes had a cloudy look and he seemed to favor the other eye as he gave her a piercing stare. There was a certain conservatism in his posture as he did so. She sensed from this that he would not have approved of her first attack if she had been acting under his command. However the man had not known she even existed until the drone touched down in a remote part of Cheekha Dar.

Now, standing in front of him with her eyes on the floor, she knew that the stakes had risen to grandiose heights. If the pale ones were willing to bring about the destruction of an entire city, then it would be suicide for her people to simply roll over and surrender. This was as plain as day to *her* of course. But would a man like Al Shad feel the same? She knew nothing of the man and so-

"do not have the manpower, even if I *did* consider your plan to be remotely possible." She cursed herself inwardly for letting her attention drift off at this critical moment. She made the point of pinching her fingers to keep focused as the man continued. "I respect your dedication, and the tactics that you employed were sheer genius. But you are only one young boy. Not even the shadow of a beard on you. It will take a great many strong soldiers to have even the chance of striking back on an enemy such as this."

It didn't look as though the man held her responsible for the destruction of Nasiriyah, which dissipated the tension in her muscles a great deal. At the same time he clearly lacked the courage to take the type of bold action that would be necessary for them to stave off a total subjugation of the government (which she'd learned to be the goal of the pale ones). Obviously the man in front of her wouldn't have had the ability to hack into the colonialists' software to learn such things and so she would have to choose her words carefully.

"Al Shad I respect your position and your dedication to the Shi'ite people. I understand that you do not know me or my potential. However I am certain that we have an opportunity here if we can manage to capture one of their fighting machines. I believe Isfahar..."

"Isfahar is a reckless hothead. I would not trust any plan that depended on that buffoon." At last. Something to create common ground. She leapt on this discovery and used it to create a stronger rapport with the man. "You are right Al Shad. He managed to shoot an American helicopter down, which needlessly angered the colonists without bringing any real strategic advantage."

Something seemed to change in the man's eyes. As was becoming common, she couldn't put conscious thought to what she noticed, but somewhere deep inside of her mind, there was a sense that her host might be trustworthy.

"Sir. I only ask for one or two men and if we can re-discover the route which the Americans fly their helicopters through, then I am certain we will capture the craft."

"And how many helicopters have you flown in your life young man?" The spark which she'd seen in his eyes just moments ago was quickly replaced by a smile of amusement. Obviously she couldn't make it known that she was older than she looked, for that would only bring questions about her smooth face. But she knew little of what kind of resources these resistance fighters had access to, and so she could only volunteer herself.

"Al Shad, I have been spending many hours using a computer to practice aircraft flying. I have learned all of the basics, and it is how I was able to steer the American drone plane.."

The man practically lept out of his chair at this. "You were the pilot for that?" He seemed to struggle now to suppress open laughter, and managed to be successful in that battle.

"Listen Al Tarid. It was highly impressive to learn of your victory, and the skill that you showed was more than anyone could have expected from a boy so young. But you must understand that nobody except for Nasir has any personal experience with an aircraft. Trying to use one of their advanced machines would be suicide."

"Then let me take Nasir and Al Sadeem. I believe that we can be successful with these two only."

The resistance leader offered many arguments and was thoroughly convinced that the mission would end in failure.

Since her time working for Semir, she had developed skills in debating which were far superior to what an untrained teenager would normally command. She found that it was becoming a simple matter to help people to see the wisdom of her own point of view, even when this required much discussion. She offered carefully chosen words that displayed compassion, but with a strong will and a brilliant understanding of tactics. It wasn't long before the man at last consented to let her take the two soldiers with her in the 'suicide mission' as he called it.

She could have spent more time impressing upon him the strong chances of success, but that was an unnecessary use of her precious time. Also it might bring him to wonder if she really was as young as she looked. For now she had to accept that just getting permission to make the attempt would have to be enough. Any further support would require more victories to back up her claims.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Her fingers drifted lightly over the keyboard, the staccato rhythm of the keys blending together into a background noise that masked the subtle shifts in the wind outside. Here in the desert, far from any villages, there was nothing to shift her focus away from the passwords and backdoor scripts scrolling down the screen. Hacking into the satellite was a simple matter. But learning the frequencies that the foreigners used to send messages had taken much longer. It was a couple of hours before she found the orders for supply deliveries being made along the edge of Baghdad. If it were timed carefully, she hoped that it would be possible to knock out the pilot before the soldiers' machine took to the air.

It would take Al Sadeem a few days at least to get in contact with Nasir, and so she wrote down information about deliveries to an American base for the next seven or eight days

so they could have flexibility with the schedule. She managed to get the helicopter model, typical supplies, and what type of armament was most often used before the risk of being discovered forced her to break the connection.

Once the most valuable information was taken care of, she spent time on less secure websites where she learned about the types of guns, and tactics that would be valuable against such an advanced enemy. She also looked for information about what their pilots were like, but that proved to be scant so she would have to 'wing it' as they said.

With the morning breeze still keeping the sun's powerful heat at bay, she steered a bicycle that Al Sadeem had loaned her to a small half-collapsed building in an otherwise uninterrupted expanse. The place may have been a house at some early time when more wealth flowed across these sands, but now it's use lay only in being a landmark that could be easily abandoned. This was the best place to share information that needed to be discussed without the risk of prying eyes (electronic or human). Al Sadeem was already there and stood gazing intently at some kind of map.

She entered the room fully confident that her information would be of enormous value and she hoped that it wouldn't be too exhausting to impress upon him that she was not one to be underestimated.

"Salaam Aleychem."

She kept her eyes leveled at him and stared him down until his own eyes shifted. It was a subtle show of power that happened entirely without conscious thought.

"Aleychem al salaam." He offered without any emotion. He brought her wordlessly out to the same antique truck as before. Looking at him now, she noticed a lengthy scar wrapping along the right side of his neck that looked to have come close to ending his life. This clearly was a boy who'd seen far more than his years should have allowed, and yet he still had the courage to join an anti-invasion force. This impressed her, but it also brought a sadness for the heavy weight borne on his slender shoulders.

The two of them traveled once again to an undisclosed place (thankfully without her vision being covered this time) to have another meeting with Al Shad. The trip was shorter this time and entirely without comment.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The building that they stopped at was a smallish mud-brick structure with a mostly intact roof. It was obviously a temporary meeting spot just as her previous quarters had been. This time Al Shad sat behind a table with three men who looked like soldiers and one slender man who did not.

She quickly took charge as she moved into the room and laid down the map that she'd drawn up. She scribbled a few figures along the edge before starting her dialogue.

"Here is what we can expect from their helicopters. Depending on the mission they will likely have three soldiers and a pilot. The aircraft can carry more, but they've been using these models mainly to carry either weapons or supplies, not both. The black hawk typically has a range of 600km and up to 2000km with extra tanks..."

The man who she assumed to be the leader of Shad's forces stood up quickly and threw a hand to interrupt her, his stare told her that any hopes of riding on her reputation were as perdurable as water splashed on a sun baked boulder.

"Now wait just a damned minute. How in the hell do you know all this? You're just a child, there's no way in hell that you could learn so much about their fighting machines." The man stared at her with burning coals in his eyes. At mach speed the distrust had spread over the rest of his features until it radiated from his very eyelashes. He clearly believed that she was either making things up, or worse perhaps, that she was some kind of spy. It was obvious that if she didn't secure his trust, and quickly, he could decide that she was a liability and doom their effort before their strategizing could even get started. Her hopes of bringing independence to her people would die quickly without his support and they both knew it.

Taking a moment to collect herself and to find the right words, she kept her eyes on his waist now so as to avoid looking too arrogant. "Sir, I understand that it might be difficult to imagine. I was completely amazed too when I first started finding this stuff. But with a computer and an internet login, there's a whole world of information that we can explore. I was able to discover what the colonialists are here for, how many of their ships are out in the ocean, and gain a rough understanding of their flying machines. I was also able to find a flying simulator program that helped me learn about planes and helicopters. Planes are easy, but helicopters are much harder."

"Al Tarid, I have several men who know the workings of computers and I can assure you that not a single one of them has discovered what you have." The man paused and looked at her more seriously. "Perhaps you are a spy sent by Sadaam to expose his enemies to the pale ones? It would bring the man great favor with them would it not?"

It had to be a joke. She even started laughing briefly before she was able to stifle it.

"Sent by Sadaam?! Do not insult me! That man brought on this attack to begin with by sending troops into Kuwait. He is the reason my father (may Allah bless his name) is gone. Don't you *dare* accuse me of such a thing or I will take my information elsewhere and you can go back to pointing your toy guns at children."

It was a huge risk, and she carefully hid her fear as the man pulled himself up to his full towering height. It was like watching a mountain form in the span of a few seconds and she wondered if he might try to kill her for such an insult. But as he watched her, the barest smile cracked his lips at last.

"You have an impressive spirit for one so young. There are men twice your age who would not dare speak such words in my presence. Either you are more brazen than

Isfahar, or you are an honest genius.” He took the piece of paper that she’d brought and studied it as if they were full engineering plans.

The man then whispered with Al Shad for several minutes before the two of them seemed to reach an agreement. The later then turned to give her a stare that would have brought lesser men to trembling. “Very well, the three of you will go and see if it is possible to take control one of their fighting helicopters. Know it well that the two mens’ lives are riding on the information you provide. If you succeed, then your name will be sung with reverence. And if you fail...” The words drifted off like the dying wind after sunset. They both knew that there was no need to vocalize them.

Chapter Twenty-four

Sitting in one of the many structures that were barely more than three walls and half a roof, she held a scrap of paper and pondered the days work. There were final preparations to be made, but most of her time would be spent on research. The most difficult part of the mission would be incapacitating the helicopter pilot without alerting the men and women at their forward base which was just 30km outside of Basra. How she would accomplish that was still a mystery, and one that would have to be solved quickly if they expected any chance of survival.

She knew that the three of them lacked the skill to quickly dispense with armed troops using only knives. Guns of course were out of the question. Something else had to be done. She prayed to Allah that some inspiration visited her before the moment of truth came. Or else Al Shad’s unspoken threat would become real all too quickly.

The next day while pondering the idea further, an idea finally blossomed within her mind when the sound of footsteps threw her 10 centimeters into the air. Spinning around with her fingers just brushing a knife, she caught sight of Al Sadeem. His knuckles were just rapping on what remained of the entryway as she slumped back and let her hand move back to her side.

“A little jumpy there, aren’tcha?” He smiled warmly while leading a tall slender man who looked to be ten years older than her. “Al Tarid, this is Nasir. He has flown in several airplanes and is the only person we know to have flown in a Bell helicopter.”

The man held out his hand and she shook it respectfully. It was still highly unusual for her to greet people as if she were a regular man, but her feelings of course had to remain hidden. If her mother knew she was acting in such a ‘scandalous’ manner there would be harsh words, and she might even be slapped for her intransigence.

“Salaam alaychem Nasir. I look forward to having you on the mission.”

After some tea and a few dates, they sat down to discuss what she hoped would happen. She shared with them what she knew about where the helicopters would land, what kind of guns the soldiers might have, and what little she managed to learn about their camp. It was far less information than she would've liked, but the chatter between the commanders and the base had been far too cryptic to give any detailed information.

Facing Nasir, she realized how little time there was to size up his piloting skills, and so she watched his face carefully while discussing the details of the military vehicle. "Now, unlike the Bell helicopters, the Black Hawk has two T700 engines which provide almost 1900 horsepower each. The cruise speed is roughly 170 knots. Standard armament includes an M-134 minigun, which can fire..."

As with Al Shad she was again interrupted by the incredulous man who concluded that it was impossible for someone who appeared as young as her to gain such detailed knowledge. However unlike Al Shad, this man did not hold her future in his hands and so she discarded the cautious powerplay from before.

"Nasir. You are here to be a pilot for this helicopter. You are not required to understand *how* I came upon the knowledge I have. You have only to understand that it is credible and that I am your only chance of striking a blow against the imperialists who would murder thousands of our people simply for the sake of stealing the black tar which has ruined our country."

Al Sadeem's stood taller and his face grew flush. "Ruined?! Al Tarid, you don't know what you're talking about. That black tar has financed half the buildings in Baghdad. It's financed the university and paid for the airport in Nasiriyah..."

She breathed fire at Al Sadeem both for his egotism and for the interruption. "You mean the very airport that was bombed into craters by the Americans? You mean the roads where hundreds of our people were literally burned alive? Al Sadeem, our culture has survived 100 times as long as the Americans and I will not sit by as they murder our people just to get fuel for their luxury cars." Now she turned to address both men together. Both of you are welcome to join in this mission. You will be a valuable contribution if we all work together. However if you second-guess me then we will be caught and either killed or imprisoned by the invaders. Now, are you willing to trust that I know what I'm talking about? That I would not risk ALL of our lives if I was not one-hundred percent certain of this intelligence?"

There was uneasiness in their faces. The men now showed red on their cheeks from the shame of taking orders from what appeared to be a prepubescent boy. The silence stretched out like pita dough until she could make out the rising and falling hum of the sand pattering against the edge of the doorway. That was until a flash of movement brought her to shift a few centimeters to the left just as a knife slashed at the air. Before she knew what she was doing, her right arm slammed into raw meat and her other yanked Al Sadeem's shoulder out of its socket. The wail of pain brought him to try

stomping onto her foot, but a shift of movement knocked him off balance and she let him spill onto the floor where he stared at her in fury.

"That is your final warning Sadeem. If you wish to attack me again, then you will find yourself in much greater pain than you are now. You will also be too badly injured to participate in our attack."

The fire in his eyes slowly dulled as the pain swiftly took hold of his attention and once she saw that he wouldn't be a threat, she instructed Nasir to get Shafala so she could put his shoulder back into its joint.

The man took a few seconds for his slack jaw to return to its rightful place before finally making quick steps out the door.

Chapter Twenty-five

Daley looked over the mission report quizzically. The Topaz was nearly operational again after the USS Hood brought in some much needed parts and equipment. They'd had to install a whole new propeller and add several plates to the rudder so it wouldn't break under stress.

His own ship was another story. With Quincy breathing down his neck, he'd put all available crew to the task of evaluating and patching the hole in their bow. It was no easy job. If he'd lived to be a hundred, he would never grasp how it was possible to penetrate the armor plating of an aircraft carrier. The only possibility is that the metal was fatigued already, which was possible given the carrier was over 35 years old. But the chances of hitting that spot were still as faint as winning the lottery. Whoever it was that struck them, they were one helluva swift motherfucker. But who *was* that motherf-

A knock on the door shifted his focus to other matters. He invited the person to enter and found himself facing a young lieutenant who opened the door hesitantly. The kid wasn't accustomed to speaking with the ship's captain. But he had discipline, and he held himself at attention until told otherwise.

"Sir! Comms got a request from the forward base at Basra for extra munition and 50 pounds of rations."

Already? Those flatfoots were going through bullets like candy. "Lieutenant, as you well know, we are not able to receive transport planes until we can get the ship up to speed. So unless it can be brought in from Riyadh by chopper, we can't provide support. Tell those noodle-heads they just have to use their ammo more carefully."

The man saluted briefly and left as mechanically as he'd arrived. That was the one thing that kept his spirits up after the horrific attack on their ships. His men were disciplined, and trustworthy. Everyone on the ship understood the chain of command and they performed as smoothly as the turbines that ran the propellers 12 decks below.

While it was on his mind, he checked in with Riyadh about having a Sea Dragon deliver much needed supplies to the ship until they were able to receive C-130s again. It wasn't just his own ship that needed material. The Tripoli had been struck by a mine off the coast and they were ripe for the picking. The HMS Gloucester was in the area keeping any looters at bay, but they didn't have the sophisticated equipment needed to watch over the ship at night. He desperately needed more ships out here. The coalition wouldn't be able to hit the coast until they could be sure that the landing area was swept free of mines, and they couldn't do *that* until he got aircraft into the sky.

Filing that frustration away, he searched through another report showing surveillance over the northern territories, close to where the drone disappeared. This did nothing at all to calm him. Quite the opposite, as it brought the concern that his superiors would decide he wasn't up to the job of being ship's captain. "I need to get a damned hawk-eye in the air." But it would be another two days at least of repairs and testing before he could trust the ship to run at launching speed.

Putting aside the reports, he pulled out the small photo of Nancy and their beautiful daughter. She was already heading toward high school graduation in few months. And he would have to spend the day staring motionless at this god-forsaken ocean half a world away instead of helping his own daughter with her homework. On the phone they both said that they understood, but it didn't make the thousands of miles separating them any smaller.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It was horrible timing. But what could she have done? The kid had come after her like the tail of a scorpion. Even by doing her best to only injure him, it wasn't enough. Now she had piss all over her shoes and the cooling body of a man she'd barely gotten more than a passing glance of.

It had been a terrible risk to try and pee outside so close to a town. But they only had 12 hours before the helicopter landed and she'd needed to make a special trip to ensure the operation went smoothly. There was no place sheltered enough and the pressure in her bladder was bringing agony to her whole midsection. She couldn't even use the truck as shelter given the steep terrain in this area. If anymore time went by, the pressure would overwhelm her and the whole truck would smell like piss.

She'd only had a couple of seconds to react while squatting to pee, before the man hurled insults at her for being 'a harlot in man's clothes.' He'd then hurled much more at her which brought her to struggle with staying alive while the pants around her ankles hindered her movements. She suffered more blows than she cared to remember before managing to grab for the door handle and slam it into the man. Once he was off his feet, dealing with him became a simple matter. But he still refused to surrender even as she

knocked him to the sand twice over. Each time he would get back and insist that she needed to be taught a lesson. He alternately threw handfuls of sand at her face and numerous punches to her midsection. Even as she leaned hard against his windpipe (hoping that he would simply pass out) his hands continued to claw at her, leaving deep gauges along her arms and one next to her ear. The attacks didn't stop until the fire of life in his eyes was finally drained from the man's body.

"There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His messenger." The words flowed from her lips like the footsteps of an ant, barely leaving an imprint on the calm evening breeze. "To Allah we belong, and to Him is our return."

She stared down for a long time as waves of emotions struggled for dominance. At first she'd been incapacitated by the horror of what she'd done. Her hands shook uncontrollably and black spots drifted across her vision, dancing across the purple of the darkening sky. But as that finally wore off, the shock was replaced by succeeding waves of guilt, shame, sorrow, and even a little fear. The man's eyes stared at her, two accusing judges continuously reminding her of the grievous sin she'd committed. Now that the deed was done, she found that her arms were useless and her own eyes were held prisoner by the empty stare of those vacant orbs. It was several minutes before her conscious mind once again gained control of her limbs and she reached a trembling hand to grasp the man's wrist even though she knew it would be devoid of any pulse.

Obviously there was a war going on, but even so it might not take much to connect her with the murder especially with the scratches and bruises making themselves painfully obvious on her skin. The man's family might not miss him for hours or they might begin looking for him immediately. A universe of time sped by while she stared with rigid limbs at the corpse lying still at the side of the road. Something had to be done, but her conscience wasn't letting her practical mind function properly. It was one thing to have lightning reflexes and higher than average intelligence, but that didn't change the fact that she was still just a teenage girl struggling with feelings that nobody her age should be forced to untangle.

She tried prostrating herself towards Mecca and saying prayers of remorse to Allah and the prophet. Focusing on the Holy One brought some degree of sense back to her mind, and allowed her emotions to ebb. But the world had grown midnight black before the emotions finally settled, making the task she now faced several times harder.

First thing was first. She had to pile as much sand as she could to hide the body, without the burial looking too intentional. If she could make it look as if he'd only been clumsy and gotten buried by windblown sand then there would be little suspicion. She dragged the moderate weight of the man to an area where the wind-blown sand had piled up and threw dozens of handfuls on top of him. Once the area looked reasonably innocuous she hurried to get out of that place in order to meet up with the others at the edge of the American stronghold in Basra.

She never made it back to their camp that evening. Driving through the moonless black desert lit only by the light of a billion faint stars her eyes were momentarily stabbed by a blinding incandescence. There was a pair of vehicles on the road behind her that were driving too slow and carefully to be locals. Questions flew into and out of her consciousness at a feverish pace. Were they the family of the boy she'd killed looking for the murderer? Could it be American soldiers? Or perhaps Sadaam's men? None of those possibilities were likely, but the thought kept nagging her that they were waiting for the chance to run her off the road and kill her.

It was only now becoming clear that the incident with the boy had struck her harder than she would've imagined. There was no turning back from either the murder or the upcoming mission but neither could she deny the panic growing larger within her stomach.

Something had to be done and she needed to make a decision before she drew too close to the turnoff. Even if the chance were small, she couldn't risk leading anybody to the abandoned goat farm where the three of them would be waiting out until morning. So instead of turning, she parked on the edge of some low hills and watched the cars with a fluttering heart until the slow moving vehicles finally passed on up the road.

But her fears still weren't assuaged. The thought still gnawed at the recesses of her brain that one of those drivers might be looking to see where she was headed to so late in the evening. Giving into her fears, she stuffed a few blankets between the seats and laid her head down to rest in the rapidly cooling vehicle squeezed between the driver door and the bags of supplies. Holding her hand carefully over the lens of a flashlight, she set the little mechanical alarm clock and did her best to escape into sleep. Unfortunately the few excursions into unconsciousness only brought fitful dreams. Sometimes it was those cold hateful eyes which stared unblinking back at her. Other times it was an American vehicle cutting her off while troops held intimidating guns to her head. She shivered all night both from the fear and from the heat rushing out of her body and into the desert air.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Though her alarm had worked fine, the cramped car seats brought her shoulders and back to rage in protest at any movement. Everything was pain and stiffness from her hips to her neck. She nearly had to crawl out of the car before it was possible to get movement in her stiff joints. Then on top of that the effort to maneuver out had opened up one of the gashes she got in that fight with...

Nevermind. Best not to think of that. With some shaking around and a little jumping out in the cold morning air, she was ready to drive out to the lonely hill that was the agreed meetup spot. It shouldn't delay her more than twenty minutes, she hoped.

When she arrived, the other car was already there, and so were two angry soldiers.

"Where the hell were you?! We almost didn't come out here you know." Sadeem was red in the face when she finally got her truck parked along the side of the little dirt track.

It was to be expected. All of them were taking an enormous risk, and obviously she couldn't have warned them about the suspicious vehicles. But she took several minutes to calmly go through the night's events (minus the murder) and impressed on them how important it was to keep things as secret as possible.

"Tarid. What happened to your arms? You're bleeding along your neck."

While Sadeem had managed to overlook her bruises, Nasir was clearly the more observant of the two. Having rehearsed this inevitable conversation the entire way here, she was easily prepared. "I fell on a rockslide while taking a shit. Believe me Nasir, I'm not proud of this. So please keep it to yourself."

She quickly steered the conversation back to her tactics for taking on the Americans. She'd managed to get ahold of a type of medicine that puts people to sleep very quickly. Since there wouldn't be any way of using a needle, she decided that launching a dart would be the next best thing.

"You want us to use some primitive blow dart when I brought these beauties?" Nasir patted a blanket out of which poked the barrels of two impressive-looking rifles.

They were too close to the execution time for a show of power. She couldn't risk having a drawn out conversation or to use fists. So instead she put a hand on the taller man's shoulder and described what little she knew about the base and how many soldiers would be within hearing range of a rifle shot. "Listen, we'll have plenty of opportunity for guns, but if we want this vehicle to be operational without the soldiers at the base to come out and attack, we need to use more stealthy tactics." Just think about it. If the men on the ground hear gunfire then they'll come out shooting at us AND at the helicopter. She held his eyes a second longer to impress on him that she had the situation under control before finally dropping her gaze and giving him time to see her wisdom.

It took longer than she'd hoped, but at last the three of them got the truck parked far off the road next to a cliff and trekked carefully to the makeshift landing spot half an hour before dawn.

The 'base' was much less impressive than the navy chatter had led her to believe. What she saw when they arrived was merely a group of metal huts forming a ring, with piles of sandbags surrounding it and the barrels of guns showing just the slightest contrast against the early dawn.

Soon enough though, her attention was dominated by the increasing racket of something very large coming in over the hills to the south. She listened carefully and understood from the sound that it was running at a normal cruising speed which would have it

landing in about five minutes. She relayed this to the others and told them to wait until the craft was unloaded.

Sadeem's face whipped around toward her at the suggestion and his brows furrowed into a scowl. "That's ridiculous Tarid! I bet we could use that equipment. No doubt they have better guns, maybe they also have food--"

"Yes, no doubt about that Sadeem. But they will also have soldiers at the base ready to help unload those supplies and we have nothing near the amount of people needed to fight trained soldiers if one of them manages to sound an alarm. Plus the people at that base could alert other planes flying nearby. Now, you've already seen that my information is correct so please trust that I know this will work. We can approach from the rear of the helicopter on the opposite side of the tail rotor. There's little chance that the pilot will look behind as their men all have the training to stay away from a helicopter's tail. You should both be careful as well or you could be sliced in half.

Once we get close, we each have a dart which we can use to knock out the pilot. If we can get that done successfully, then Nasir can take off without anyone at the base noticing a problem." She looked both of them over very carefully. "Do we all agree?"

The heads slowly nodded and they all held position as bags of supplies were carried off of the machine by four soldiers. Once the last of them passed the ring of sandbags, she led her fellows back to the right side of the tail and they moved quickly toward the cockpit.

Despite the hours of research that she'd done on these machines, it was a wholly new experience to *actually* stand next to one. The noise was absolutely deafening and any kind of speech with the others was impossible. Even worse though was the wind. It was like nothing she could imagine. The wind driven sand attacked every centimeter of her exposed skin like she was being dragged behind a galloping camel. Her cheeks and hands were burning and it was difficult to see anything while squinting as tightly as she could while still struggling to maintain at least a slit of vision. The assault of the noise and the blast of the rotors were like being smothered by a living creature as the three of them struggled to keep out of sight alongside the machine. Time slowed noticeably as she watched Sadeem throw open the door and kept a wary eye on the surprised pilot. She watched the helmet spin around and the smooth jaw fall a couple of centimeters. She only had one dart and it needed to hit exposed skin which meant the slim bit of space between the uniform and the helmet. In one swift movement she launched her dart which hit squarely into the person's neck. Nasir was quick enough to take out the gunner by himself which impressed her no small amount. Then she watched the two men hold the last man as smoothly as the spinning gears on her family's gravity light. In half a second, she and Nasir had shot darts into the remaining soldier sitting in the cargo compartment. There was a brief flurry of movement before the pilot slumped to the side and she quickly got the helmet onto Nasir who looked confusedly at the controls.

"I..."

Panic gripped her as she watched him move his fingers over the vast rows of buttons and switches. She whispered for Sadeem to pull the pilot into the cargo bay while she moved into the co-pilot seat and held the door handle with white knuckles as she saw intuitively that their 'pilot' was way out of his element.

She knew that there was no time to lose. If they let the chopper sit too long, one of the men was sure to come out and see what the delay was about. She turned up the engine rotation and got them smoothly up in the air just as a head peaked out from one of the huts.

"Everything alright up there Michelle?" The crackling voice startled her, but not as much as the female name that he'd uttered. She risked the briefest glance behind her and was shocked to notice the slight rise from a pair of breasts on the front of the pilot's uniform. The Americans had women flying their aircraft?! It was astounding. She shouted for Sadeem to put a helmet on her head so she could respond over the mike. Thankfully the man had fantastic reflexes and responded quickly enough for her satisfaction.

"Yessir. It is good." She spoke cryptically in hopes that her accent wouldn't show and allowed her voice to float up an octave. Nobody had ever hinted that the Americans would let *a woman* fly one of their vehicles. It took all of her concentration not to let that one monumental fact distract her while so many lives were on the line. They needed to get the helicopter out of range before she could stop and get her bearings. But even her best concentration couldn't hide the tremble in her fingers.

There was a brief hint of laughter before the radio replied. "I am glad it is good, pilot robot."

Not trusting herself to hide her accent with more idle chatter, she just let out a feminine laugh in reply and lifted the helicopter skyward before drifting south until they were a solid five kilometers away. Only then did she finally locate a flat spot among the hills where they could put down and she could rest her white-knuckled hand for a few minutes.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

They practically jumped out of the idling helicopter and gave whoops of victory as soon as the wheels touched on solid ground. She hugged each of them over and over in her immense joy at having stolen the most advanced fighting machine their group had ever seen.

"Alright. Let's go bomb something! I bet we could hit a dozen drilling rigs."

"No, lets take out the oil pipeline that goes out towards Hatay."

The world seemed to be spinning as she struggled to keep from losing focus with all the vast opportunities that were suddenly available. Until this very moment she hadn't put a

moment's thought to what they should do *if* they managed to succeed, her whole focus had been on just keeping the group this far. Now, every direction she looked held a target that the American machine could wipe out in the blink of an eye.

But as she played each one of them in her mind, the consequences were, sadly, easy to predict. Every single one would involve either Sadaam or the colonizers killing them along with their magnificent new weapon. As her thoughts drifted, she felt tossed around by a sandstorm of emotions that seemed to converge on death. Sure, taking out some of the oil facilities would infuriate the pale ones. But in researching what the military ships were doing, she'd heard reports of massive damage to oil fields already. It was likely that Sadaam was doing well enough on that front without their help. Then of course there was the American camp at Basra. They could wipe it out easily with a few missiles. But this was only one small group, and once the helicopter ran out of weapons it would be no more useful than the empty drone. Every aircraft needed that one most critical element, fuel. And where did the Americans get their fuel? Of course! The helicopter had already been destined for the greatest prize anyone could wish for.

A sinister look rose unconsciously in her eyes as she turned to face the two older men. "Hey guys. Sure we could go after something like an oil pipeline." She held a few seconds for dramatic pause, knowing she was gonna absolutely knock them out the sand. "But how much would it be worth to you to get ahold of a whole aircraft carrier?" "What?"

"Tarid you are absolutely insane!"

"No wait. Just hear me out. I can't promise we'll manage to take the whole thing. But I bet that we could make sure the Americans couldn't launch their fighter planes at us ever again. Think about it. With just one drone I was able to keep them from sending out planes over our country for two weeks."

"Oh come on now. You're just making that up. No single person could do that much."

It felt like her entire life would be spent just trying to convince these pig-headed adults that she actually *did* know what she was talking about. She described how difficult it was to get a plane in the air from a carrier and that a ship needed to be traveling at no less than 30 knots and converted that to land speed. She also told them about the type of defenses that carriers had. There was no way to make an impact on something that big unless it was coming from a ship or aircraft that they were already expecting.

"Think about it. Any target that we strike will only cause the invaders to shoot down our helicopter, killing us as well. But before that happens, we have a chance to make our lives count, right here and right now."

She looked back and forth between the two men, gauging their level of susceptibility.

"And if we don't get going fast, we'll have to explain to the people on the ship, *in English*, why the trip back took us so long. We either take this chance now, or this wondrous machine will be assumed missing and we won't get much use out of it."

She watched the two men cautiously. It did feel like a seemingly impossible risk. But it wasn't any worse than the risk she would take if they shot an oil pipeline. There was no way in the world she could survive in the middle of the desert if one of the enemy drones was able to disable her new weapon. She saw the men look from her, then over to their newly acquired machine and back to her. Then finally Sadeem said that it was a cause worth dying for. Nasir only agreed once she talked about picking up a few more soldiers. He was clearly doing his best to appear more brave in front of her than he actually was and she would have to be careful to keep an eye on him when things turned hot.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The giant six rotor MH-53 set down graceful as a tap dancer despite the 13,000 pounds of ammo, and spare parts. As soon as the landing signal operator was finished, a group of men in green vests rushed out in a crouching jog to get the chopper unloaded so the supplies could be stowed in their appropriate places. He knew that Quincy was going to expect good news on the hull repairs within the hour, which was the only reason his equipment request had been granted, and the only reason their heaviest cargo chopper was sent out here to the gulf. Speaking of which, the pilots had requested a break for lunch before making the two hour trip back to NSA Bahrain. He wanted to sit with them as a show of appreciation for the long hours they were spending in that small cockpit. Without being able to receive supplies by plane, the trips to and from their sea operations were slower, more fuel hungry, and harder on the men. Keeping the latter in good spirits was just one of the many skills that helped him to keep the mens' trust, which was an essential element in keeping a city-sized ship running smoothly.

But first he checked in with the radar operator. There was a delay with Captain Spinoza's chopper on her return in from Basra. They didn't have word yet on the helo's location, but a drone flight had seen a chopper on the ground just a few miles south of the base and that was a decidedly asinine move for an experienced pilot to make in enemy territory. He planned to give that rotorhead a serious piece of his mind when she landed. In the meantime he made his way down to the mess for a light snack while Sergio and Clemens loaded up their trays. Sitting in the plastic chair, he stopped watching their progress and focused his attention on satellite images of the coastline.

Chapter Thirty

The dozen or so soldiers looked at her for several minutes. A few of them even laughed quietly to their friends before earning a hard look from the one leading them. A tall man

several shades lighter than her own walnut skin who went by the name Bashir looked carefully at her, then at the helicopter, and back at her. He didn't say anything at first, but he stared into her eyes for a long moment as if trying to read something in a foreign language.

"You're really going to convince me that it was you who orchestrated the capture of this machine AND flew it by yourself?" He crossed his arms over his chest, not even trying to hide the sarcasm in his voice. He turned to her fellow with a look that practically shouted his assumption that the older boy would call out some kind of assinine joke. "Sadeem you would actually back up this ridiculous story? I mean, the boy doesn't have a single hair on his face! How, in all the world can I be expected to believe that he accomplished all this?"

Though he normally came off as overconfident and reckless, Sadeem had clearly learned his place within their little group. His voice was unusually humble in his reply. "Bashir, I would swear in the name of the Prophet that Al Tarid not only figured out where and when we could find this machine, but also knew all about what it could do. He even figured a way to make a blowdart that we used to take out the pilot and soldier without alerting the other Americans at their camp. Believe me sir, I was as surprised as you to see what the boy managed to accomplish. But he is a fierce fighter and not one to be underestimated."

After so many times where Sadeem had acted recklessly and threatened her, this side of him took her by surprise. She watched the eyes of both men gazing at each other with a mixture of suspicion and disbelief. She then caught the slightest movement as a glint of metal flashed briefly before she threw an arm out and grabbed Bashir's wrist, pinching two bones in the wrist until the knife fell harmlessly to the ground.

Smiling for the first time, the older man held both hands up and slowly bent down to retrieve his weapon. "Well now. It seems that perhaps Al Shad is not the fool that I took him for." He put his knife slowly away and pointed a calloused finger her way. "But Al Shad has not convinced me, and neither have you, that a boy with not even the shadow of a beard could lead an attack on the largest ship in the American forces--"

His speech was interrupted by a very old looking truck. It looked to be in similar shape to the one that she'd taken that first day when she had said goodbye to her family forever. Every eye turned to look at the truck and grimaced at the squealing of the seat springs as a slender figure wearing a full hijab stepped out of the vehicle and looked around hesitantly.

"What in the name of the prophet is a woman doing here?!" This was followed by several similarly unkind comments by a few of the other men before she realized that something had to be done, and quickly.

With no small effort she threw out her loudest voice, which meant that she wasn't able to keep the octave as low as she would've liked. But the interruption had the desired effect anyway. "Quiet!" Pointing to the woman who's name she still didn't know, she continued

in the same booming voice. "If you want to get these soldiers onto the deck of the most advanced aircraft carrier in the region, then we need someone to talk to them on the radio with the same voice as the FEMALE pilot. As hard as it was for me to believe, the person originally flying that helicopter was a woman and the people there will immediately get suspicious if a man talks to them. *Especially*, if they have an Arabic accent." She paused for a moment before continuing more quietly. "You've all seen that I can hold my own in a battle, and I guarantee you that--"

"Guarantee?! You?" One of the other men actually laughed directly in her face. "Little boy, there is not a single thing that you can guarantee, except for a futile death for all of us!" This got agreeing murmurs from the whole group and she could see that the whole excursion was on the precipice of failure.

These simple-minded idiots! As much as she hated to show violence without dire need, it was clear that these people needed to be shown who was boss if there was any hope for Iraq. With a long glance at the ground to distract him, she quickly swept her leg behind his and shoved him back and off balance. Then in half the time it took for his head to strike the ground, she had his belt knife pulled out and sat on top of him holding the knife against his throat. Once again she used her loudest voice, this time shouting directly into his face. "If you think that I do not know EXACTLY what I am doing, then you are welcome to walk away right now. But know this before you decide. Sadaam is completely helpless against the full might of the American and NATO forces. Those planes and bombs have already turned towns into dust, and they will not stop until Baghdad is similarly crippled. Now you can either put a stop to them or you can laugh at people and hold on to your prejudices!" She brought her face mere centimeters from the man below her, so much so that she could smell his unpleasant breath. "So what is it going to be, freedom fighter?"

The faintest smile finally broke on the man's face and he gently raised his hands in surrender. She laid the knife on his chest and slowly rose off of it as the man grunted before finally sitting up. Bashir had clearly been watching all of this carefully. "Tarid, you are a cunning soldier. Very well, me and my men will allow you to lead this mission. But know it well that our lives will be in your hands until we land. If I find that you squander them, I will not hesitate to kill you."

She needed no analysis of Bashir's face to know that he was sincere in his threat. Or at least, in the belief that he could carry it out.

chapter Thirty-One

New York had been the most incredible thing she'd ever seen. She remembered taking her first trip to Manhattan from her tiny apartment in Brooklyn and staring wide eyed as she got out of the subway station. The buildings were like nothing she could imagine,

stretching so high that she craned her neck back in a futile attempt to visualize their entirety. The bustle and the traffic noise was no more than a backdrop to the colossal scale of a city that seemed as tall as it was wide.

Over the years of her time in school, she made trips to midtown whenever she could get away from her studies, just to breathe in all the incredible energy of the place. She tasted the many types of food, listened to music from street performers, and walked along the river in all kinds of weather.

But with graduation came the end of her innocence. The days of drifting about the little bubble surrounding her college buildings finally popped and she was left with the reality of applying her degree towards an actual career. Her friend Samantha had made it sound easy. Just send out resumes and talk about her part time job at the school library, her work with the Muslim studies club and her grades.

She spent dozens of nights in the computer lab writing up cover pages, adjusting her resume, and searching for the right contact people to address her resume to. She spent whole evenings sending off resume packets by mail, by fax, and even with the new email formats.

Samantha had made it sound so easy. But even though her own grades had been higher, the other woman was getting at least two or three interviews a week. Meanwhile she barely got even one and that had brought tense looks from the two men that she'd met with.

It wasn't until another two months passed that she happened upon a conversation with Jamal, a boy in her C++ course that she'd tried dating a few times. He talked about how much harder a black fellow had to work in order reach any kind of success. How a dark skinned person had to be 120% better just to get the same job as a white person. It sounded too much like victimization to her, that a culture would deny him a job simply because his skin was that beautiful deep brown. Yet she found that he'd only been able to get work as an entry-level html checker. It was a job far below his ability and nowhere near the kind of pay he deserved. That brought her to talk with more people that shared her skin color and she found that despite American culture espousing concepts like 'freedom' and 'equality,' the fact of the matter was that her own experience mirrored Jamal's far more than Samantha with her blonde hair and slender waist.

After a truck bomb exploded under the world trade center, she found herself being looked at with open hostility not only by employers, but by police as well. It was early one winter evening in temperatures like she'd never imagined possible that she was walking home from the school library. A police car stopped on the street and two officers questioned her about where she was coming from, what she'd been doing that night, and how many terrorists she knew. They weren't the least bit subtle about their assumption that she was some kind of monster. They frisked her twice and looked through her bag as if they expected a bomb in every crevice. When she tried to protest, one of them sprayed her in the eyes with something that brought her screaming in agony. Then they

poked her with something that brought even more agony all over her body and she blacked out.

The next day, after her roommate helped by soaking her eyes with milk, she called mom back in Baghdad. She told momma about the failed interviews, but couldn't get herself to bring up what the policemen had done.

"Naja, you still haven't found a job? Do you have any idea how much your father and I have spent getting you a good American education?"

"But mom I worked hard-"

"Naja excuses do not put food on the table. If you can't earn a salary, and you don't get yourself a husband to support you, then how do you expect to keep a roof over your head?"

"I trie-"

"Trying does not get you success Naja. It is time for you to grow up and face the world. Your father and I can't pay for that expensive apartment of yours any more. Young lady you are a college graduate and you need to apply yourself toward earning an income."

Her apartment was expensive compared to Iraq, but it was on the fourth floor of a building with no elevator. She had gotten so much exercise walking the stairs to get food or do laundry that she was tired most every night. And the conversation with momma didn't help the slightest bit. She got off the phone feeling angry and bitter. There didn't seem to be any way that she could gain independence and keep her bills paid while she lived in such an expensive city.

With her heart cracked in pieces, she'd spent the last of her money on a flight back to Baghdad after learning that an oil company there was interested in 'contractors' to translate their documents from English to Arabic. It seemed the only skill she possessed that any man was willing to pay her for.

Chapter Thirty-Two

They were now carrying 300 kilograms of equipment and nearly a dozen trained men. She considered it an enormous win that Bashir had been willing to trust her with these men's lives. The conversation with Al Shad had been a huge maelstrom as they struggled to assemble a team without leaving so much time for the Americans to grow suspicious of their missing machine. She'd also had to stress that one of them needed to be able to make a passable American accent, and they had to be a female.

The mission had almost failed before it began when Sadeem had relayed this. But there was no doubt that the original pilot had been female and whoever was on the carrier would be expecting as much over the radio. She knew more than any other that the Americans would quickly shoot down an aircraft if there was the slightest reason for suspicion. In the end she was grateful that Sadeem had taken it upon himself to speak to

their leader on her behalf. The man might go off half-cocked sometimes, but he had reputation and influence that would take her a few more years still to acquire.

Thankfully though, he'd finally relented and sitting next to her with a helmet on over her hijab was a woman who seemed only a few years older than she and very scared. Her name was Naja and she had recently lived in the mythical American city of New York. As the autopilot guided the sophisticated helicopter towards the coast, Naja relayed how she came to see the enormous influence the Americans held in the world, and the disregard they felt for people who were not born with light colored skin.

She did what she could to help the woman by describing what she knew of the huge aircraft carriers and what they were likely to expect. She also described the craft they were flying and even gave the woman a basic understanding of the controls. No doubt this brought up some jealousy with Nadir, but it couldn't be helped. There was far too much danger in having a person shift into the copilot's seat while they were airborne and she would need Naja to be in place when they landed. She may have learned the basics for flying a machine as advanced as this, but she didn't at all have the confidence to try anything risky yet. Just get in, take care of the mission, and (hopefully) get back out. That was all she had the courage to focus on for now. Afterwards, IF they survived, she could explore other options.

Chapter Thirty-Three

He'd been forced to cut short his time with the two pilots when Rodriguez informed him that their missing pilot was on her way back. He didn't know what the delay was, but he aimed to be on the bridge when that chopper came in. He was just making his way up from belowdecks when he was accosted by Sergeant O'Neal.

"Sir. Request permission to brief you on a personnel matter later tonight."

He smiled inwardly, but made sure to keep his expression stoic. The man was a rock solid hunk of muscle and he took whatever opportunity could be had to spend a few hours alone with the sergeant. But things being what they were, the condition of the ship, and Admiral Quincy it was all just too much of a risk. If anyone found out about his alternative exploits, it wouldn't matter how effectively he took care of the incident with the rogue drone. He'd be drummed out of his position faster than a tomcat launching off the deck. He could never put Nancy and the kids through a thing like that. No. He had to keep his priorities in order.

"Permission denied sergeant." Seeing the look in the man's eyes, he softened his expression briefly and give a hint of his current burden to reassure the beautiful man that it was nothing personal. "I'm sorry son, but there's just too much to deal with right now in overseeing repairs and making sure that our troops get resupplied. Personal matters will just have to be held off until we have this ship running smoothly again."

The man seemed to understand, though it couldn't be easy. It wasn't for either one of them. He definitely was in the wrong profession to be winking both ways. He gave O'Neal's shoulder an affectionate squeeze before heading over to the stairs that led to the tower. He only got halfway up before everything was plunged into darkness and his stomach fell a notch.

Chapter Thirty-four

"Alright. Just keep a level head, and we'll get through this just fine." She knew that she was lying, and Naja most likely knew this as well, but they both collaborated in the make-believe game nevertheless. "Let me speak through you and if we're lucky the colonizers will be none the wiser." She squeezed the woman's shoulder, ironically mimicking a very different relationship going on just half a kilometer below them.

"This is black hawk two-seven-niner requesting permission to land." Though brief, the woman put on a fantastic show and could easily have passed for one of the actresses in an American movie.

"Captain Spinoza. We were wondering when you'd get that pretty face back on board. What is your fuel situation?"

"Sir. Fuel is at 300 pounds."

"Very good Spinoza. Keep her at 200 feet while we get one of the aircraft shifted over to the elevator."

Her hands immediately tensed on the controls. Could they be suspecting a problem? No. Below her there was a fighter jet inching slowly across the deck past the giant circle with a huge number two at its center. So she kept the huge machine in a steady hover with the altitude reading at two-zero-zero exactly.

A few minutes passed before the voice came on the radio again. "Landing permission granted. Set her down on helipad 2. And captain Daley has ordered you to his briefing room once you've gotten everything buttoned up."

"Aye sir. Understood. I can bet that he's gonna want to chew my ass out."

She'd been sure to advise the woman that military people gave commands that were quick and to the point. Idle chatter would raise eyebrows which they could very much not afford. She gave a glance back at the men behind her and told them to start getting the equipment ready. Timing would be critical here, they had only a couple of minutes before someone on the ship noticed what was really going on.

She started bringing the huge flying machine down towards the deck and her eyes grew wide now that they were able to take in the massive scale of the vessel. Flying the drone was no comparison at all to the experience of looking down on it in real time. It was the largest single construction she had ever seen in her life. Every house in her village could fit on the deck of that ship with plenty of room leftover for chickens and trucks. Despite

having studied everything about this ship she still found her hands trembling as she struggled to bring the ship safely onto the deck. To say it was intimidating would do little justice to the bristling power this enormous mass of steel projected. With her hands trembling more violently, it now fell to Naja to offer her a reassuring shoulder squeeze and a smile. While they still had the advantage of some elevation, she signaled for Sadeem to power up the device. Her little side project had consumed a great deal of time and resources. It had taken enormous risk for a few of Al Shad's men to steal critical components from the army base in Baghdad. Now as the powerful electromagnetic pulse went off, she prayed to Allah that her enormous gamble would pay off.

Instantly the helicopter's systems failed, but she had prepared for this. It took some skill, but it was possible to get a powerless helicopter to the deck safely while the blades were still slowing down. Working carefully with the controls, she managed to bring the helicopter down with a violent jolt on the gently rocking flight deck.

As the whirlwind above them wound down, the men hurriedly got their weapons pointed at any threat that presented itself. Thankfully though, a few critical minutes went by while the flight crew dealt with the mystery of being without any communication. The lights in the tower were dark and so was all signaling equipment. This meant that the ship's radar would be out and there would be no way for them to relay the situation to any other nearby ships.

The next step was to take control of the ship's computer systems below deck where they were shielded from the pulse by the incredibly thick mass of the flight deck. She instructed Naja to stay out of sight in the broken helicopter while she hurried in a terrifying sprint across an open flight deck. She took advantage of the confusion and grabbed for a green colored vest to better blend in. Then she made a quick walk for the far side of the ship's 'island' (that's what the Americans called the one tower sticking above the deck). As confusion turned to fear, she started to hear shouts for defensive positions to be taken up.

Without the above deck electrical system, she had to find a computer port on the far side of the bridge where it had been shielded from the EM pulse. Finding an access hatch that she'd learned about from the ship's schematics, she hacked the computer and then focused on working through the electrical network.

As advanced as they were, the westerners were already becoming dependent on computer technology. It might be impossible to defeat the city-sized boat full of military men directly, but it was not at all difficult to infiltrate one single computer system and bend it to her will. The first step was to get into the system and write the code. Once she took out their ship-wide communication many of the thousands of people (it constantly amazed her to think of a ship that held thousands of people) would remain in blissful ignorance that there was any kind of problem on the flight deck.

Time stretched on agonizingly slow while her fingers flew over the electrical keyboard. The most important thing was to minimize the number of soldiers who were able to reach the flight deck, either for duty or out of curiosity. For that she shut and locked all of the sea doors which separated the giant ship into compartments. The logic was that if one part of the ship became damaged, the whole interior wouldn't fill with water and sink the ship. That was what saved it from her first attack, and now it would help her limit the casualties of the current one. She typed out a message to be forwarded to all compartments so that the men did not know they were under attack then she sent a general communications error to be displayed whenever someone looked into the onboard computer. Once that was done, she peaked around the edge of the tower and flung her head back just as a bullet split the air two centimeters from her head.

chapter Thirty-five

Taking advantage of the confusion on deck, the trained men from Al Shad's camp leapt from the helicopter and glanced about only a second before implementing the mission of taking out as many of the flight deck personnel as possible. Vest colors and combat skill meant nothing. They simply shot whoever was in a uniform. The men didn't have the advanced weapons that their opponent commanded, but they were well trained and passionately focused on staying alive. With each kill, one of them would hurry over and switch for the more advanced American guns. This shifted the odds in their favor more than any American soldier would have admitted. The Americans didn't have the extensive skill that came with using older hardware and they often became more focused on defense to keep from getting taken out themselves.

Peeking once more around the island she spotted a pale soldier laying dead just 4 meters away. Hurrying in a crouching sprint, she pulled him against the side of a missile and checked for what could be used. The man's clothes were large, but with some cinching up she made them work, then she hoisted the gun and looked around for where her skills would be most helpful.

Her first thought was to start taking out the men on deck, just as Bashir's men were doing. She even raised the barrel to face an unsuspecting crewman crouching behind a jet plane. Time froze as her finger inched down in fractions of a millimeter on the trigger. Sweat beaded out on her forehead as she devoted half a second toward destroying this unsuspecting man's life. She cursed herself for the hesitation, then she yelled at herself in her mind to hurry along and just do it. She tried to remind herself that well over 500 people including her own father had been killed by the American planes while they were trapped like chickens on the road leading from Kuwait. The Americans clearly did not suffer the burden of conscience that she herself was wrestling with right now.

But then she thought back to that set of cold and accusing eyes staring up at her from the desert sand. This along with the constant gunfire passing back and forth across the deck brought her stomach to flipping about within her. The empty stare haunting her from those cold eyes would not cease their judgment of her. The thought of putting a bullet into the head of a man she didn't even know was a thing she just couldn't will her body to do, no matter how much she thought that she wanted to.

At last she surrendered that battle and instead focused on getting herself, Naja, and the rest of the group out of harms way and into a hiding place. It would take no time at all for the boys on deck to bring in large scale guns that weren't controlled by computer chips. Obviously there would be no shortage on a ship this huge. Looking around she spotted what looked to be the safest place. It was the largest machine she'd ever laid eyes on. The helicopter was more than 20 meters long and taller than a two-story house. The machine was so huge that its windshield was split in three sections and she felt as small as a dog standing next to it.

Quickly, before anyone caught sight, she went over to Naja and hurried the woman into the giant cargo area and took a brief look at the controls. It was hard to believe, but there didn't seem to be any damage. The advanced electric display panels were nowhere to be seen in the cockpit. Clearly it wasn't a fighting vehicle and there wouldn't be any means of attacking with it. But perhaps... if they could find enough supplies it might be possible. She explained her idea to Naja and begged the woman to keep very still and quiet.

Flying something this big would require a co-pilot, and only one man could be trusted to take that role. Nadir. She had no idea where the man was and the shouting on deck was becoming more organized, a very bad sign. She searched frantically and finally located Mussuf. She made a crouched run over to him, ducking her head quickly as a bullet sped barely one centimeter in front of her, and plastered herself to the back of a plane's landing gear.

"Mussuf. There will be no value in staying here. We can't defeat them with the numbers we have and our cover is now gone. I think that I can get us out alive if you can help find Nadir."

The man, who was easily twice her age, took only hurried glances at her between short bursts of weapon fire. He clearly hadn't registered what she was saying, and as she watched, another of their people lost his life to a well-aimed bullet. Something needed to be done, but firing guns wasn't the answer, at least not for her. Instead, she aimed her acquired weapon at a tank of fuel which had been set up next to one of the British harrier jets. Setting the gun on rapid fire, she put as much as she could into the tank until it exploded. Then she grabbed the man and shouted in his ear for all the men to get into the largest helicopter they saw. It was the same tactic that the Americans used, only give the most relevant information needed to achieve a goal. Meanwhile she took the same route, stopping to grab whatever weapons or supplies could be pulled from the dead soldiers while ducking away from the increasing fog of artillery.

chapter Thirty-Six

While the soldiers got moving, she ran the giant helicopter's winch cable to the nearest small jet plane she could find. It was a something called 'intruder' and it was an old machine by the Americans' standards.

Once the soldiers were on board and Nadir was settled in the copilot's seat, she checked the fuel gauge (saying a quick prayer of thanks to Allah) before starting up the helicopter's engines. In only a few seconds, a spiderweb exploded along the corner of the glass from a stray bullet with more bullets hitting along the cargo door. Looking around, she stared in horror at what looked like a 30 caliber gun pointed at them from above on the ship's island. The people manning it had an uninterrupted view of the whole flight deck and they were clearly focused on making sure that she didn't get off the ship alive. Telling Nadir to get the engines up to speed, she pulled out a gun nearly as large that one of the men had brought on board. Training it at the island but with the door to protect her, she fired a burst along the whole gun barrel and it's mount. The heavy steel was easily able to stand up to her attack, but the ball hinge that gave their gun maneuverability was more delicate and once it was damaged the men could no longer aim.

Once their acquired helicopter was at full power, they began lifting off the deck, with the aircraft drifting hard to the right once the cable pulled taught. But this machine was plenty strong enough and they only needed to lift the plane a short way. As the craft rose, she pulled the hapless jet underneath them and watched it drag toward the edge of the massive flight deck. This also meant that she had an uninterrupted view of a tiny figure caught between the jet and the long drop into the ocean. She tried to shift the controls and cut the sideways drift of the imprisoned plane, but it was sadly too late. Only a second later the figure fell, with an accusatory red spot marring it's face, in a long arc that ended in an evanescent white splash.

"You've got to keep it together, or everyone on this machine will die." She had to say this twice more to herself before the craft rose like an express elevator and she aimed for a spot directly above the ship's bridge. Here she had to pause for the briefest of moments. She wanted to destroy their communications antennae, but not cause so much damage as to kill the people on the bridge. Given that the plane weighed about 13 tons, she figured that 60 meters wouldn't bring the plane crashing through the ceiling of the command deck. Once they reached the spot, she instructed Mussuf to decouple the cargo rope and watched with satisfaction as the soon useless plane fell below them directly onto the antennae array.

Spotting something out of the corner of her eye, she rapidly reduced power to the engines and let the helicopter fall to just a few meters above the destroyed communications mast while a military rocket flew through the air right where they'd been only a second before.

"In the name of the prophet! How did you get us out of the way so quickly?!" Nadir's head spun towards her after watching the stream of fire fly above the giant spinning blades.

She could do nothing but shrug her shoulders at him. There was no way to understand *how* she did these things. They just came naturally.

It was clear that the attackers on the ship had moved to weapons which hadn't been rendered useless by her electric pulse, and so she brought the craft quickly to the front of the ship where the missile launchers were not working and flew only a few meters above the waterline until they were out of range.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

One thing that was easy to predict, was that the 'coalition' forces would not tolerate being snubbed this blatantly. That theory was confirmed when she noticed another fighter jet coming at them fast from the direction of the Saudi peninsula. She'd barely crossed the boundary from ocean to land when the jet began firing large caliber bullets at them.

Several of the men began reciting prayers to the prophet as if they expected to die. Hearing them, she agreed with their sentiment and wished that she could pull away from the controls and do the same.

The situation felt hopeless in a helicopter with no working radar or electronics and only light firepower. Thankfully, with no real payload, the chopper did have one advantage over the jet fighter. It could gain and lose elevation more easily than a plane could. Throwing herself at the controls, she got the machine to lift straight up without any complaint and she outmaneuvered the jets' bullets with only superficial damage. But the plane was coming around quickly for another pass. She could easily see how skilled the pilot was and knew it would be tough to get them all home in one piece.

Taking the slightest glance behind her, she shouted in her loudest voice to the men in the back. "Anyone with a gun, I want you pointing it out the window at the fighter!" The interior was too loud to hear anything quieter than a 50cal firing but when it did she felt satisfied that she had some backup.

Watching the jet fighter's path, she could see where the plane would be under the highest g-forces and swung the helicopter to aim its 12mm guns to catch the nose while the pilot was weakest. She fired a series of rounds and got one into the glass which would undoubtedly affect the pilot's vision. But the jet continued after them and fired a

missile immediately after pulling from the turn. She watched it carefully for a fraction of a second before firing the guns at its rocket motor, causing it to leak fuel and fall below her before exploding on the beach below. She then brought the powerful machine down low over the coastline. The only advantage that she held over the jet, she used as methodically as possible and shot straight up into the air again when the plane's machine guns came to bear. Then she spun around and fired her own guns at whatever critical systems were in range. She avoided fuel tanks since they were self-sealing and would only waste bullets. She focused on control surfaces or the attacking jet's own guns. It took an eternity of stomach-churning maneuvers before she managed to get enough bullets into the plane's rudder that the pilot turned away and flew back west. There would be others though. Despite this aircraft being a wonderful asset, she knew that it was far too easy to spot. So she flew along the main highway past Safwan until finding a truck large enough to hold all of them. They would need to borrow access to the truck and get away from the helicopter before the Americans came back for another attack.

Flying above the vehicle, she spun the craft around until she was nose to nose with the driver and flew in a casual backwards hover while she made hand gestures to the driver that he should pull over and stop. Then she set the huge machine down along the side of the road and went out to meet with the man along with the surviving soldiers.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Shaheed didn't know how the beer had been acquired, but he wasn't going to pass up the chance to celebrate. The ancient church which had been sitting empty for centuries provided the perfect shelter both from the sun's heat and from the silent eyes which crisscrossed the skies above their country.

Al Shad was giving a speech heavy with praise for the young prodigy who'd brought them such an astounding victory. He stood on a wooden crate and lifted his [vessel] several times in the air. If he'd consumed less beer the words might have been considered meaningful, but, with the room dancing gently around him, they offered nothing little more than confusion. The audience though could barely register his words and so the cheers flew like a random explosion of sand grouse.

The celebration was all the more uproarious because none of them had possessed more than the fleeting possibility of living to see another sunrise until the moment they all disembarked from the gigantic helicopter and into the truck owned by a random stranger. For him, their escape from the American aircraft carrier was a miracle to rival the well of Zamzam. For like Ishmael protecting life in the middle of a vast desert, Tarid had found a way to keep them all alive in the face of the unimaginable fury directed by the invaders.

It was a great tragedy that the young prodigy was unable to celebrate with them. Mussuf had been the first to report that Tarid was missing only an hour after their team arrived in Al Huwair. Their whole group had devoted a solid two hours in searching for the boy without any success.

If it had been any other child he might have been worried for the boy's safety, but Tarid would be better able to take care of himself than even the soldiers that Mussuf commanded. If the kid wanted to remain hidden then unfortunately there was nothing that the group of them could do to contradict his wishes. But he sure did miss one hell of a party.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Nothing remained now of the giant helicopter but a hollow blackened shell. The twisted blades were strewn about haphazardly with one sticking like a two-dimensional palm growing out from the desert sand. Several shards from what appeared to be a missile littered the ground next to the melted rubber of the wheels. It was no surprise that they would destroy something like this. The westerners seemed to have infinite resources for blowing up anything that they wished.

Much more surprising, and saddening, was that Yusuf, who she'd coerced into transporting them away from the helicopter had been killed in the explosion. She'd warned him against returning to this spot, as the pale ones thought nothing of killing one or two more Iraqis. It seems that the man had ignored her advice and driven straight to it after giving them a ride into town. Probably hoping to steal supplies.

The number of deaths that weighed on her shoulders were becoming as heavy as the monstrous skeleton that she stood next to. The guilt of seeing the destruction first-hand wrapped her in a vice-like grip, cutting off her oxygen for several seconds. It wasn't until tiny black dots floated at the edge of her vision that she made her hands into fists and forced herself to expand her chest and pull in a long deep breath.

Looking at it now, she wondered if there was any chance for her to have a future now. Obviously the pale ones would be combing the desert in search of her, but thankfully even her own team assumed she was a young boy which meant that a teenage girl would easily be ignored.

But even assuming she wasn't discovered and killed by the foreigners, what options could there be for her among the people of the two rivers? Any serious planning these days was hindered by two forces pulling her in opposite directions. One was the guilt of the men whose lives she'd destroyed (only one of which was killed directly by her own hand). The other was the growing death toll of Shi'ites, Kurds, Sabians and others at the hands of the foreigners. It was a conflict as stark as that between the harsh desert sun and the shadow cast by the blackened skeleton. The idea of bringing about more death,

even upon the colonizers was a crippling weight dragging her to the sand. But so too did the idea of sitting idly by while her people were abused and slaughtered. With her will being pulled by two camels tugging in opposite directions, her passion had no focus save for consuming her own soul. Procrastination slowly transformed into depression and eventually to alcoholism as her own impotence filled her with a self-loathing that further poisoned the last shreds of innocence left within her.

She was too paralyzed to even meditate on a plan these days. She just sat around the alleyways of Safwan, stealing coins which she regularly fed to the black market vodka runners.

Chapter forty

Not willing to sell her body for money, and with too many locals wise to her thievery, she was left with fighting random boys for dinars. It was easy to win and it took very little time before people stopped rooting for her opponent when it became clear that she was more than just capable, she was wholly unbeatable.

The man currently staring her down was one and a half times her height and easily twice her weight. He was new in town and so laughed openly at the idea of fighting against a teenage girl. But the spark of confidence was starting to leave his eyes as the truth of what the men on the street said was finally sinking in. His ribs were already blue with bruises and one eye was swollen but he was not giving up just yet. He circled her carefully, taking more hesitant jabs now which she chose to dodge rather than deflect. At last his expression told her that he was ready for a real attack and he threw a punch for her chin which she immediately used to knock him off balance and kick him into the dust.

As she waited two seconds for him to pull himself up, she saw the sun glint off of something metal in the distance. There was no time for reaction, as she knew without even thinking that this metal object meant the approach of death.

Instantly she ran perpendicular to the trajectory of the object. Shoving the crowd aside or ducking beneath people too stupid to move, she lunged into an alley and vaulted 2 meters over some rubbish before making it past another house and threw herself beneath an old pickup truck.

Her feet barely scurried underneath before the deafening blast caught up with her and the truck's windows exploded all around her. The fireball must have been enormous for there wasn't even a single scream to be heard as the heat expanded outward and finally spent its energy. Underneath the truck, there was little to see beyond the field of glass shimmering like the sea that carried the American navy ships.

Carefully shifting out from the now useless truck, she nevertheless was covered in red by the time she could get far enough to put her feet down. Looking around, the landscape

was completely alien now. The building that she'd sprinted past was missing its top floor and the palm trees that grew between each house were mere wisps peaking through thick gray smoke.

As if releasing a long held breath, the whole block was now filling with screams of pain and cries for help. In every direction she heard people begging for someone to do something. The shock was like an echo of the first explosion, leaving her paralyzed in the street as she struggled to will her body to find *some* way of helping the people around her. But which one? It sounded like more than a dozen people were screaming in agony, and from every direction.

For over a week she spent her days nursing and caring for people who'd been struck by the blast. There were people who lost limbs, others with horrible burns scarring their flesh, and many so badly injured that the medical people didn't want to waste the resources trying to get them to a hospital.

There was no question in her mind that such horrific tragedy had been brought about by goading the invaders. And it was equally certain that the pain and the death would continue unabated unless something more significant was done. And there was no question on who's shoulders the burden of implementing such a hurricane of violence fell.

The only question to ask at this point was, how.

Chapter forty-one

The knock on the door was unexpected. And with only Al Shad and Bashir aware of the location where 'Al Tarid' dwelt, she had to be very careful.

"State your name and your purpose." She kept her voice an octave lower than normal and showed no emotion while moving her eye to the tiny hole between the door and the wall. Looking through, she saw the most beautiful face wrapped in a thin and tattered hijab. The face was familiar, and she let her guard down a notch, but the exact memory refused to breach the surface of her conscious mind.

"I am here seeking Al Tarid, my name is Naja. Please allow me to speak with you, I have no place else to go."

Immediately the flood of memories from 2 years earlier filled her mind. Of course! How could she forget the brave woman who joined the small group of fighters in the attack on the giant ship. She threw open the makeshift door which protested with a loud creaking of boards as she hurriedly invited the woman in.

"But who are you? I was looking to find the brave warrior Al Tarid." The woman looked disoriented now, and fear radiated off of her like the desert air shimmering on the hood of an old truck.

She couldn't yet be sure, so she stalled for a few minutes to assess the woman. "In a moment Naja. First please tell me why you have come here."

Now the woman began to look panic-stricken. "I.. I cannot. I do not know who to trust. There is a price on my head and the Sunnis would joyously hand me over to be tortured by the Americans in exchange for a few thousand dinars. They don't care for our people any more than Sadaam. How can I believe that you wouldn't be one of... of those same people?"

There was no question now. She knew this was Naja and knew that the woman could be trusted. Perhaps even more than Al Shad.

Inviting the woman to sit on a small crate, she sat opposite and gave Naja her most sincere gaze while she described the mission, the helicopter, and how she had sent the electromagnetic pulse to damage the colonialists' electric devices. As she spoke, the woman's jaw sank lower with each sentence until it hung down at its full extension.

"But. But how could *you* do all of that? Your family would have you stoned for pretending to be a boy all this time."

The thought of her family brought even more confused feelings of remorse, anger, and sorrow for all that had happened. Her vision blurred and she scowled in frustration while wiping a dirty sleeve across her face. At first she wasn't sure how safe it was to share anything more, as she hadn't seen Naja in so long. But the look on the woman's face told her that her missing comrade might still run away without further convincing.

Taking a deep breath, she related the story of her father's death, her early morning disappearance, and the work that she'd done to disguise herself as a young man after sneaking away. "But I can't use that deception any longer. It would be far too dangerous. Any of Al Shad's men who knew me back then would expect a beard to cover my face now. I cannot lead a direct attack anymore." She didn't even need to mention the 700,000 dinar bounty for information leading to her capture.

"So does that mean you have given up?" The woman's disappointment was sewn in to every letter that she spoke. "Please say that you have not let the pale ones keep attacking us without mercy."

The pleading of the woman brought back memories of the injured men and women pleading for help back in Ad Diwaniyah. And the wrenching of her emotions had a similar power over her concentration, bringing tears to flood into her own eyes.

chapter forty-Two

After so many years, her exceptional instinct had become a trustworthy ally. She no longer waited several heartbeats second-guessing herself. Only an hour with the woman told her that Naja was an island with no connection at all to solid bedrock. She had nowhere to go and knew not who to trust. It would make her the perfect confidant.

Over several hours time and a sparse meal of chickpea flour mixed with dates and olive oil, she finally told the story of all that she'd done after leaving the group in Al Huwair where Yusuf's truck had delivered them.

"I spent many months trying to work out how I could make for myself a path forward. I was heavily divided between the memory of the men killed in our attack (she couldn't bring herself to mention the man lying dead by the side of the road), and the need to hold the pale ones accountable for their destruction. The indecision was eating away at me like a Tumbu fly." She held a hand up at the woman's questioning look. This wasn't a time that she could allow herself to get distracted. "It wasn't until Al Shad was able to get me another computer and I worked out the parts for an internet connection that I found my purpose again. At first I did no more than I had before, using defensive tactics to make the colonizers' work more difficult. I blurred their satellite images, shifted locations of places they were targeting, and gave false information about Sadaam's hideout. I put so many misdirections into their reports that the Americans finally began resorting to some old 1960s spy planes with chemical film to do their reconnaissance. For awhile this put an end to my strategy. There was no way that I could use computer software to interfere with chemical film and personal eye-witness reports. The bombings returned and so did the destruction." She gave a long sigh at the self-immolation which had taken over her spirit that day.

"So that's why Basrah was so heavily struck last month."

"Yes." A new stream of tears pressed through her eyes and she had to pause to wipe them. "It was a terrible blow. So many of our neighbors killed or crippled." She shook her head in remorse. "And there wasn't a damned thing that I could do to prevent it."

The woman pulled herself up and wrapped soft arms around her neck. "It wasn't YOUR fault Tarid. You did everything that you could. I'm sure you did."

After so many years alone, the closeness of another human being was sending electric shocks across her skin. It wasn't a boy, so she knew that there was no sin to it, just a warm comfort that brought her whole body to sigh gently.

"Thank you Naja." She patted the woman's arm in appreciation. "But I still felt responsible. After all, the colonizers wouldn't have attacked with such overwhelming force if I hadn't been baiting them all this time."

"Tarid, you shouldn't-"

"Naja, you may call me Safia. It is my birth name."

The woman was initially shocked, but recovered with surprising speed. "Thank you. Safia, you cannot support the weight of this entire war on your shoulders. The colonizers are evil. They know nothing of Allah or of compassion for one's neighbor."

"But that's just it Naja. The Americans, the British, the Australians they don't see themselves as evil. I have listened to their communications since I was fifteen. They are deeply misinformed, and it's true that they know little of the Prophet's teachings. But they care very much for each other.

"Bullshit!"

Safia was briefly shocked by the language, but she said nothing as the other woman continued.

"Safia I lived among their people. They might say that they are caring or that 'all men are created equal.' But the Americans have a deep distrust of anyone with darker skin. Whether they are Black, Arabic, or Mexican the treatment is the same. We can't get jobs, we get harassed by their authorities, and we are consistently viewed as stupid or dangerous."

"Naja you have to realize that prejudice isn't something that people are born with. It has to be taught and reinforced over many years. The reality is that their people are brainwashed. The news in the western countries refers to every one of us as 'terrorists' no matter where we come from or how peacefully we live. So their children learn from an early age that people outside of their country are sinister and cruel. It's no different then what we've been taught about the Iranians. This is the reason why I take such careful measures to keep from intentionally killing them."

Naja looked at her doubtfully through the last bit.

"Oh I certainly could. Kill them, I mean. It would be simple enough to convince their sonar that Sadaam's mines were gone, or to change the controls on the nuclear power for their largest ship. But then I would be no different then their leaders 'Bush' or Firage."

"So what can you do to make a difference then?"

She gave the woman a mischievous grin. "I'll let you in on a little secret."

chapter forty-Three

Daley stared morosely in the mirror. Lieutenant. They'd bumped him down to a mere lieutenant. Now instead of his own quarters only steps from the bridge, he was just a single bunk in a room holding thirty men. He barely had a few minutes of private bathroom time if he was lucky and his duties were among the most grisly that could be found on a carrier.

Quincy had been pushing for a court-marshal after the attack and when that failed, tried his absolute best for a dishonorable discharge from the Navy. But there had been too much corroborating evidence from the men on the flight deck, the drone pilots, as well as the testimony from Spinoza and the other soldiers who'd woken up inside their helicopter to confused shouting on the flight deck when the tranquilizer they'd been given had worn off. The judge had said that it was an impossible situation to comprehend and that no single person could have foreseen a turn of events so unprecedented.

In the end, despite Quincy's efforts to scapegoat him, the tribunal had merely demoted him and kept him as an adviser on board his own ship. This hadn't at all been comforting, and Nancy was furious with him, but at least he still had a paycheck.

"Lieutenant Daley to the planning room."

It wasn't his normal shift, which now started at the inconvenient time of 2100 hrs. But orders were orders, so he donned his minimally decorated uniform and made his slow way up to the island.

Captain McCallister was staring eagle-eyed at a series of images displayed on a large electronic screen while the frown on his face shifted from mere disappointment to outright fury. His thick beard moved like a shadow with the drag of his cheeks as he puzzled over something in front of him. But when the man looked up, his face went placid and he gave a halfhearted salute before engaging in conversation.

"What do you think this is Daley?"

Looking at the map it was obvious what he was looking at, but why something so mundane should bring him here was impossible to recognize just yet. "It looks like a power plant sir. If I were to guess, I'd say the one at Ramadi."

The man looked pleased at his answer. "And you'd be right on that. Or so we think." The man paused and pulled over another map. "Thing is, the plane that took this image was flying along the Tigris River. That should put it somewhere north of Baghdad."

Daley knew he hadn't been called to answer trivial questions, so he chose his words carefully. "I assume you confirmed the timestamp on that image with the pilot?"

"Of course we did. This is why I've had the Air Force fly an old U-2 plane over the area and use cold-war era photographic film to document the region. We made several passes and found this." The next image showed a grainier image of a different power plant.

Now, despite his concern for gaining the man's favor he found himself at a loss. "I don't understand."

"No Daley. I don't expect you would. This image is from a power plant at Baqubah. What's more confusing is that the pilot took infrared readings from that plant and found the exhaust stacks to have a reading of eighty-five degrees."

"Well sir, that sounds about right."

"Not 85 degrees Celsius Daley. I mean 85 degrees Fahrenheit. You could literally sit yer ass on the lip of those exhaust stacks and it would be cooler then the desert sand."

"But that's impossible!" He looked from one image to the next, not believing what he was hearing.

"As impossible as a terrorist seizing control of a drone and shooting out the bow of an aircraft carrier?"

"You don't mean-"

The captain folded his hands across his broad chest. "Well, you tell me."

chapter forty-four

Al Shad had received instructions from the infamous Al Tarid that they should not attempt any operations against the pale ones for the time being. He didn't understand why such a directive would be given, but after the magnificent success in striking their gigantic carrier ship, he would never again question that amazing prodigy. Instead he focused the men on protecting nearby villages from the more brazen of Sadaam's soldiers. There had been a few instances of women being snatched up in the night and occasionally a vehicle would deploy half a dozen men who would 'acquire' food stores from Shatrah. Many of the people were too exhausted from the war to put up any serious fight by this point. So he would send his own people to try and chase the vehicles to their home base. This had not yet born fruit, but he remained confident that his people would manage return some semblance of civilization to this decimated land.

The door burst open bringing his hand to quickly fly to his own sidearm before the face of Al Amim poked through the door sporting a joyous grin. "Al Shad. You must come and see this. It is the strangest miracle.

Intrigued, but cautiously optimistic, he relaxed his arm and followed behind the younger man. They made the long path through the main tunnel and out to the blinding desert sun. The tunnel had been dug within a cave both to hide it's location and to allow time for the eyes to adjust for people entering and leaving. The only changes to the cave itself had been some markings designed to look like ancient cave paintings but which declared the number of victories their group had won.

He moved slowly past these and as they got out into the sun, he spotted a camouflage tarp covering a large cube. The younger man excitedly reached up to the top of the cube and pulled out a plastic box with three letters on it, letters written in English. 'MRE' was all that it said.

"Al Shad, the whole thing is a giant store of food!"

At first he was furious. The colonists probably discovered where they were and chose to poison them rather than show enough courage to attack like *real* men. "Bah! You haven't actually eaten this swill, have you?"

I didn't try it myself, but there's a fellow named Intisar who tried it."

He gave a bitter grunt. The kid probably didn't last an hour."

"Well, you can ask him yourself." The kid pointed to an even younger boy who looked thin enough that he wouldn't be blamed for eating his own shoelaces.

Planning to do exactly that, he approached the rail-thin boy and asked when he had eaten the food.

"I tried it the moment that I discovered this store, it is a miracle from Allah."

"A miracle! Boy, do you know what it is you put in your gut? These letters are written in English!" He shook a plastic box furiously. "Those westerners eat all kinds of trash. Not just pork, but I hear they eat dog and raw fish as well. I wouldn't be surprised if some of this food was made from crushed bugs."

"But sir. I showed it to Imri. He's smart enough to know their words. He said there was nothing but chicken and rice with some cabbage in it. There was also a delicious cookie with chocolate." The kid grinned widely at the memory.

Now both troubled and furious, he turned on his heel to look for one of his soldiers who could read English.

Just as the boy had said, the boxes were filled with food and not a single one contained the flesh of a pig. As puzzling as the situation looked, he could no longer see any reason to keep the food away from the men. Any further delay would probably bring a mutiny. So he organized everyone to load the food into the cave. Watching men carry boxes one after the other, he racked his brain trying to come up with a method by which the supplies could have ended up here. The place was inaccessible to a truck, and no dirt bike could haul that much weight. There were no tire tracks anywhere around, only footprints.

"and you're certain that there was nothing in the cave yesterday morning?" He watched the boy closely, but there was no reason to suspect deceit. So instead he turned to Al Amim, who it turns out had been the first to see the strange delivery. "At what time did you start your watch?"

"I took my post just after sunrise Al Shad."

"And you've already told me that the store was not here when you started your watch."

"That's correct sir. I took a short walk outside to check for any vehicles and when I came back into the cave, it was just sitting here. I swear on the sword of Muhammad that it couldn't have been more than 15 minutes."

He shook his head as if the movement could somehow bring sense to the supernatural thoughts he was having. "So you're saying that in less than a quarter hour this massive store of food materialized in a cave so secret that even Sadaam's soldiers haven't discovered it?"

The younger man refused to meet his eyes, but that wasn't unusual. "As strange as it might seem Al Shad, that seems to be the case."

Chapter forty-five

She put a hand on the woman's shoulder to give emphasis to her words. "I have to warn you, the things you will see here are going to be very confusing, and you have to promise me that you won't touch anything." She pulled back a small box of clothes and shoved it out of the way. Then she slipped her thin fingers into cracks too small for a man to utilize and pulled back a massive boulder that would normally appear too heavy for an 18 year old girl to move. After disappearing through this opening, she waved the other woman to follow where they entered a claustrophobic tunnel with just enough room for somebody her size to navigate.

At the far end she shifted a carefully balanced series of rocks in a specific sequence before the door could be opened and she ushered the older woman into a dimly lit room filled with half a dozen computer screens. The walls were bare rock, but cables of various colors snaked along where the rough floor met the walls. The computers were set on precarious looking wooden boxes but in the far corner were three metal tables which had been more carefully placed so that their large surfaces sat perfectly flat. The ceiling was a massive slab of rock suspended not much more than 2 meters from the floor giving the broad space a claustrophobic feel.

"By the shield of the Prophet, this whole space is just hidden in the desert?" Naja looked around awestruck at what would have seemed mundane to the pale men on the giant ocean vessel.

"Yes. I dug the space out of rock with that little tool in the corner. But once I got this equipment running consistently, the excavations were able to be done more quickly."

For the first time since the discovery, she offered the story of how she had watched a British science fiction movie and heard the term 'quantum theory' which for some reason remained stuck in her brain. She started reading about it through the internet and then used funds from Al Shad to purchase more detailed books on the subject. Once she gained a deeper understanding of quantum entanglement, it was clear that she at last might have a means to hamper the attacking forces but without actually killing them all. She told Naja about how much power the testing required and how she had worried that the work would be impossible to hide from the invaders.

"The machine required those three lasers to be set at the precise angle of 31.4173 degrees. There are mirrors at the far end of those tunnels which focus the three lasers on one point which breaks the bonds of an object into q-bits of information while simultaneously reading the quantum state of each one and sending that to a Chinese satellite which reassembles them at a different location. The key is to know the location of the object being sent and the destination in relation to the exact location of the lasers and the satellite."

It took no great facial recognition to see that Naja understood none of this, but that was a trivial matter. The important part is that the project worked. It had taken months of research into different types of power sources and their locations before she found the

one that could fulfill her purpose. She built a new underground home just over fifty meters from the power plant and then worked to improve the equipment at the power plant until it was down to only 2.1% energy loss. She was able to re-calibrate their sensors so that nobody knew that the excess power was being shunted directly to her equipment.

"So that's why you're out here on the far edge of Baqubah."

"Of course. I needed to be close enough to the plant, but far enough from the houses that nobody would notice what I was doing. Anyway, the first few dozen experiments were all failures. I tried various things like rocks, insects, even single cells. But it wasn't until I built the two parascobalites as I call them that the quantum transporter finally bore fruit. I was able to transport a stash of food from a British ship and send it to Al Shad's camp near Cheekha Dar."

"That's incredible! So you just moved an object with magic? Like a Jinn?"

"No Naja. I used science. It's very advanced science and even the pale ones haven't figured out the basics yet. But I believe the technology will become common enough in time."

"Does that mean you could just transport yourself somewhere? Like Sadaam's house, or one of those ships out in the Gulf?"

That question brought her to thinking of the poor mouse. It had been the only living thing that came close to surviving the test. The mouse had shrieked in agony for over a day before finally passing on. She wouldn't wish such a fate on any other being.

"I'm sorry Naja. It doesn't work like that. I can't shift anything that's alive. Living cells invariably die causing whatever I shift to suffer a painful death. I can only shift things like rocks, metal, or other things that aren't alive. Last week I shifted that computer from one of the American ships."

"But you could transport, or 'shift' something like a helicopter couldn't you?"

She thought about it for a bit. The chances were that she'd need more power for something that big. "It's possible. I just don't know yet."

She did some quick scribbling on the back of some paper before realizing that doing something as large as the helicopter she'd stolen would require all of the power that the station used for an hour, and that would undoubtedly expose her secret.

"Naja, I know that we all want to push the colonizers out of our country, but I have to accept that if the people at the power plant, or anybody who is desperate for money were to learn where I am... it would be the end of everything.

The woman's eyes fell to the floor. She looked around with increasing agitation searching for something invisible to both of them. But the silence told her that the woman had given up her search. Finally her eyes widened as some idea broke through.

"But, what if you just transported small weapons, like guns or those flying bombs. We could send them to Al Shad, or even some of the small villages being attacked.

Once again the shocked lifeless eyes rose accusingly in her memory. No matter where she went, or how many years she lived, the deaths that her rash judgment had caused would haunt the shadowy recesses of her mind. Even those who weren't directly killed, like the tiny figure who was thrown overboard when they began lifting the aged fighter jet off the carrier deck. Every single one of them would sit in judgment of her actions. And she refused to add to their population no matter how much inconvenience that brought.

"I just can't do that Naja. I cannot be part of the continued deaths that have resulted from--"

"You can't?!" At last the woman seemed to shake herself out of the demure stupor dulling her eyes. Her face took on a scowling look for the first time since they'd met all those years ago. "Safia, the pale ones are killing our people *by the hundreds!* They shoot at us from the skies, they run children over with their gigantic trucks. And the food, it has all but disappeared." The woman spun around with her arms stretched out. Awe replacing frustration which was itself replaced by anger on her face. "How can you just sit here with this amazing magic and refuse to help! Safia, *we are at war.* It wasn't a war that any of *us* wanted, but it is a war that we are duty-bound to fight, and if needed to die for!"

Despite the woman's very salient point, she found herself once again crushed by the shame of staring impotently at a choice that she simply couldn't wrestle through. Everywhere throughout her country there was death, and she could see no way to stop it. Not without bringing more.

Chapter forty-Six

Batteries. That had turned out to be the key. Her invention required a huge amount of power. But there was only so much that she could quietly siphon from the power plant each day without raising suspicions. Storing that power could allow her to work on larger amounts of food and equipment by taking only a few kilowatts of energy and saving it up over time. If there were enough batteries, she could store nearly infinite power. Or at least that's how it looked.

It had been Naja's idea. But getting there had taken a lot of work. Mainly in convincing the woman that transporting weapons would only bring more heartache.

"This story tells of a man named Basuq, he owned a small flock of sheep on the south end of Baghdad. One of Sadaam's soldiers had been fleeing back from Kuwait and ducked through the man's field. He must have taken a shine to Basuq's wife because he had taken his gun and was forcing her to flee with him. It happened that Basuq had stolen a British rifle which was carefully hidden next to his door. When he saw the soldier holding his wife, he grabbed for the gun and fired at the man's head.

Unfortunately he wasn't experienced with the level of power that the European weapons had and he blew half his wife's face off in the process."

Naja stared at the picture from a hospital of the woman with a huge metal device holding the side of her jaw in place while a man held a cup with a straw to her lips. The tears that splashed down on the keyboard though were not only from Naja. She as well wept each time she saw stories like this.

She'd gone through hours of military communications before finding enough accounts to convince the woman that it was immoral to put the weapons used by the pale ones into the hands of untrained people.

"Naja, whether it's American soldiers accidentally shooting through a wall and killing someone, or one of Sadaam's men shooting one of their fellows, the result is the same. These guns, not to mention the missiles and torpedoes are designed for only one purpose. To destroy. They destroy houses, trucks, and most importantly- they destroy lives." She played several minutes of radio chatter from different airplanes that described the death caused by each side. "There might be some on the attacking side who hate all Iraqis, but most of the deaths are simply the result of having weapons that kill far more quickly than a person is able to register. Sometimes the American soldiers even kill one of their own by accident. If we are to be true adherents to the teachings of Muhammad, then we must be better than the pale ones. We must discover a way to bring victory *without* death."

It was only after a lengthy discussion that Naja began to understand how artificial the divide between their people was. After sharing a meal comprised of food that she'd 'transported' from an Australian ship, their conversation shifted to how they could utilize the transporting device in a way that didn't bring death.

Food was the most obvious issue. It took only a few weeks to strip the food supplies from all the ships launching attacks from the ocean and she knew that with the vast resources of their attackers, new food stocks would be delivered to their people soon enough.

But despite her arguments with Naja, she couldn't deny that more would need to be done. The pale ones would not stop until the land of the two rivers was devoid of life. Or at least that's how it appeared to her. The technology which the pale ones had access to had potential to bring wondrous benefit to her people. But she had to be discrete in her material transfers. At the rate that they were transporting supplies, she had become concerned that the workers at the plant would discover the power being siphoned from their facility and begin searching for the long meters of electrical cable she'd buried beneath the desert sand. So at Naja's suggestion, she began transporting batteries from NATO vehicles instead.

At first she tried car batteries, as that was something which she was familiar with. But they were heavy and did not perform well enough for her needs. Then she tried some wondrous portable computers that were used at the base in Basrah. However she found

that they were too valuable to be dismantled for parts. The computers did calculations even faster than she could and Naja found them useful for drawing circuit diagrams. After several weeks of research, she found information on a new battery technology that used Lithium. There was research in China with batteries using this element to store a large amount of power in a smaller volume than ever before. After even more time experimenting with different materials, she was able to improve it with a lithium titanate cell. This could be recharged infinitely and stored huge amounts of power. It took another month of tests and the transport of other materials before she had even a single working battery. But with that single success she was able to obtain more batteries and build on the work. Now at last, the two of them were ready to have some real fun with the invaders. A sly grin appeared on her face at the thought of mischief she could bring with her new equipment.

Chapter forty-Seven

A short man with a generous amount of silver in his hair picked up the red phone on the ship's bridge.

"This is Captain Brady." He knew that Quincy wouldn't be calling to get a weather report. But even their odd situation with the missing food stocks couldn't be serious enough to warrant an admiral's attention. He listened with growing awe and fear as the man described events that individually just sounded like pranks, but en masse they sounded more like science fiction.

"Yes sir."

"I'll use all available resources sir." Even after decades in the military, he couldn't control the trembling in his wrist as he laid the phone back on its red receiver. He did an abrupt about-face to the radio officer. "Private, get me Captain McCallister on the line." After a brief conversation he turned to the shipwide communications channel. "Daley, O'Malley, and Johnson are to report to conference room 5B on board the U.S.S. Teddy Roosevelt at 1400 hours. That is all."

With that, he left the bridge for a much needed shower and a fresh uniform before embarking on what could predictably be the most confusing strategy meeting of his career.

The spotless sheet metal walls weren't as nice as what he'd seen back in D.C. but it was nicer than any other room on the ship, except his own quarters. The walls were clean enough to eat off of, as was the floor. This was typical of the admiral's section on board a navy carrier.

The table was small, only leaving enough room for 6 seated men and a couple of standing guards if that proved necessary. Today that would be an enormous liability and he'd worked too damned hard to get his captain's stripes for such a display of neglect. As expected, not a single man was late. And if they had been, no question there would be strict words.

Admiral Quincy looked each of them over briefly, but kept his eyes on Daley a second longer. This was something that he'd noticed happening more often whenever he happened to be around the two men. The lieutenant had something important to contribute. He didn't know what yet, as it was tough to separate fact from rumor. But he aimed to find out what was under that man's skin.

After a round of salutes, Quincy invited everyone to take their seats. He then introduced Petty Officer Johnson who had first reported the strange situation. "Johnson. Please relay what you saw and what action you took yesterday morning during your shift in the mess hall."

A young man with plenty of muscle and a standard crew cut addressed him respectfully. "Sir. I entered the mess hall to find our entire stock of canned food missing from the pantry. I immediately reported this to Master Chief Petty Officer Vanhoffe. He ordered me to an interview in his office with Seaman Ronald and Seaman Deblan. The former as you know was in charge of dinner meal prep and the latter was on cleanup duty for the overnight shift."

"And I assume that all three of you pleaded innocent to allegations of theft."

"Yes sir. Both Ronald and I had corroborators to verify our story. Unfortunately Deblan had been assigned to cleanup as a disciplinary action, so he'd been working alone."

"What action has been taken regarding Mr. Deblan?"

The young man looked more uncomfortable now. "I am not aware of that sir. He wasn't at his usual post today."

"Yes well. I will have a word with Seaman Deblan's commanding officer."

After dismissing the lower ranks, he was left seated with Admiral Quincy, the captain of the Robert Bradley, and their most mysterious holdout. The latter of which had become something of a legend, if only for having staved off a seemingly guaranteed court-marshal.

The admiral took a second to make sure that the door was secured before he began his report. "So five different ships have recorded missing supplies. Mainly food stocks, MREs, and a few cooking pots. But there have also been a few computers missing as well." He looked directly at McCallister for a second. "Captain, I don't think that Abrams was responsible for stealing that supply of MREs on Wednesday. I think that we're looking at something a whole lot more sinister."

The other man gave a barely perceptible nod, but otherwise his chiseled face remained stiffly impassive.

Quincy gave a barely perceptible sigh, with no clue as to what lay behind it. He clearly wasn't a man to parade his emotions. "Daley. You have become our resident expert on 'unexplained phenomena' with regards to our current operations. What do you make of this."

Still moderately addled by the story relayed by the crewmember, he didn't know at first what to say. For most of the past three years he'd felt like he was walking on eggshells with his commanders. That he was even still employed in the Navy was a literal miracle that he wasn't about to put at risk. But the man was expecting some kind of answer.

"Sir. I would have to say that this is a whole new pattern compared to the attack on this ship three years ago. In this instance we have no threat to our people, no clear enemy, hell we don't even have proof of foul play. There's no clue of any sort as to the methodology and no means of obtaining evidence. All that we have is--"

McCallister now interrupted, throwing his own queen down on the table. "Your not quite correct Daley. The two hummers reported missing from our position at Abu Ghriab were just discovered with empty fuel tanks sitting along the side of Route 1 north of Batha."

"Why wasn't I informed about this?" Captain O'Malley sported a slight blush, but otherwise kept his anger in check.

The admiral clearly had a soft spot for the captain of the Ranger because he quickly stepped in to calm tensions with the other man. "Captain. I only learned about the situation half an hour ago myself. I assure you that there was no intentional delay in providing all of you with the latest intel."

"Sir. Was anything missing from the vehicles?"

"Good question McCallister. Well there was some communications equipment unaccounted for, but that's all."

A thought struck him that felt critical now. "Admiral. If the hummers were somehow moved using the same technology as the food stocks then we have a unique situation now."

"And what is that Daley."

"Well. In the first instances, the materials disappeared with no evidence of where they ended up. But the hummers reappeared without any apparent damage. This tells us that all of these missing items were not destroyed. Instead they were simply moved to another location. Perhaps we can find some clue from the vehicles as to how this all happened."

He saw McCallister give him an approving nod which spoke volumes about his improving stance on their ship. "A good observation. Alright we should order delivery of those two vehicles over to Riyadh tonight."

Quincy once again took the reigns, clearly not looking to allow too much authority from his subordinate. "Yes. Daley, I want you to go through the duty roster and assemble a

group of technicians to check over those hummers with a fine-tooth comb. I want fingerprints, hair samples, as well as analysis of anything unusual on their surfaces. Any readings that can tell us how they got there will be reported directly to me. Daley, you are excused."

chapter forty-eight

Looking through the communications, she was getting a subtle undercurrent of fear within the command structure of the ships. None of the men in charge would of course speak directly, but she could tell that some captains were very worried. This made her feel powerful. But that power also frightened her. It would take very little for her to become overconfident. And overconfidence consistently led to mistakes. It was recklessness that had brought about the death of men and women who would haunt her memory for the rest of her days. It wasn't just her own life that was at risk now. She had to think about the implications of what would happen if her technology was discovered. Even the slightest misstep might allow the colonialists to take control of the transporter device. *That* would be a disaster of monstrous proportions.

There had been a close call when she found a transmission from one of the ship commanders who had used some kind of thermal imaging and noticed that the power plant where she drew from was giving off virtually no waste heat. If the colonial powers learned where her operations were, she might have to destroy her entire cache of equipment to keep it out of enemy hands. She developed a plan which she dubbed 'operation-zayn' in which she and Naja would dismantle every piece of the transporter until it was impossible to understand how it functioned. They would then have to hide within a separate chamber to keep themselves from being captured.

But that was only a last resort. For now her fingers flew over the keys writing a worm to infiltrate their computer systems and wipe the communications regarding the power plant. That wouldn't erase the memory in their minds, but it would at least destroy any proof if one of them spoke to a commanding officer. The military people rarely took action strictly on somebody's eye-witness report. But she was also realizing that her time of living in this space would need to end as soon as possible. A new and more easily concealed power source had to be developed. She needed something that didn't give off a heat signature, didn't require fuel to be delivered, and didn't require something like a river which would keep her tied to a particular piece of geography. What type of power source fit those requirements however continued to elude her.

By now she had begun a regular pattern, albeit randomized, of charging the batteries and then creating 'magical appearances' of supplies that would either feed the nearby people or give them better resources to survive attack. She transported fuel, steel

plating, electrical devices, and batteries. However she had to be careful. Even though the places that she took equipment *from* were random, she had to scatter the gifts widely to keep the military people from suspecting that innocent Iraqis were the thieves. She had learned this lesson the hard way after a tiny village that she regularly sent food to was attacked by planes flying from Saudi Arabia. It was only after the attack that she found the communication that Saudi troops had noticed food stocks there with an insignia from the American Air Force.

Since then, she made sure that her deliveries were small, easily hidden, and sent sporadically around the country with no means of tracing how they arrived. Over time, the gifts were coming to gain legendary status among the Sunnis and Shia. But there was still suspicion around items with English lettering on them. More than once a person spoke of having destroyed a gift for fear that the Americans or British were trying to poison them. Unfortunately there was nothing she could do that would counteract their distrust without revealing her hand in the situation.

Chapter forty-Nine

Naja was making periodic trips into town for some fresh vegetables, a rare treat that she enjoyed, but that was just the story she told Safia. In reality her whole being screamed for the company of other people. Safia was nice enough, and the most brilliant human being she'd ever met. But there was only so much fulfillment that could be had from the company of a single person. Plus there was the open sky that she missed so much after several weeks of spending most of the day underground.

It was a forty-five minute walk to the edge of town if she timed it well. If she didn't time it well or overslept, the trip would cost her 2 liters of water sweated into her clothes and the whole day would feel sticky and uncomfortable. The stark surroundings of the countryside were a perfect allegory for the empty quiet of the stone walls. The sun would rise and set, the seasons would pass, but there was little sign of it excepting for one skylight shrouded in camouflage fabric. Safia had pointed out that the sun reflecting on glass or plastic would be like a beacon to any passing aircraft, and this was far too much of a risk.

It wasn't until she'd covered three kilometers that there was enough density for her to find cafes, street markets, and people chatting on the sidewalk. The sheer variety of sights and smells coming from Baqubah were like honey on the plain bread of her regular days. She drank in the colors of the various houses, the shouting of the men selling trinkets or snacks, and children playing games (when they weren't busy fetching water). But her favorite was to watch the dozens of card games that the older men played, cursing when they lost what few coins they had to spare.

She sat in the shade of a palm tree watching one particular game and noticed the young man who'd tried chatting with her the week before. Back then she'd been in a hurry to get back to the hideout before the sky grew too dark to see in the desert. But now she watched his face and his hands as the cards were turned over and he threw those strong hands up in the air before gathering a stack of coins in the center. Meanwhile the other men cursed at him.

"Not to worry... small win.." the words drifted across the still air and his voice was like a [sweet alcoholic drink] as they drifted past her ears. Then he must have noticed her and those tree bark eyes turned her way. He had the kind of face that made her want to put her hands to it. She wanted to do more than that, but the warmth on her cheeks made her turn away and walk into one of the markets where she told herself there was a sweater she wanted to pick up. That was one thing they often bought in town since getting clothes of the right size was too difficult to gauge through the computer monitors that Safia used to locate items she intended to transport.

"You're Naja, right?"

That voice! Why would he have followed her? It took a thousand years for her to find the courage to turn around, and when she did it was impossible to look into his eyes. All she could do was make a barely perceptible nod. She cursed herself for being so childish, but it seemed not to have an impact on the man.

"I saw you last week. Do you live in Baqubah?"

"No not really. I live in a small underground cavern with the most brilliant woman in the world and we plot the expulsion of the colonial invaders from all of Arabia."

She didn't say this of course, but she did fantasize about how the man's face might look if she did say it. Instead she made an excuse about being in town to visit her uncle for a few weeks.

If she'd had Safia's skill, she might have seen the gears spinning underneath the surface of the man's face. But as she had little experience in reading the expressions of people, the clue remained hidden.

"Well as long as you're in town, would you care to join me for a coffee?"

Coffee? He was inviting her to join him? Was that a date? Her mind was spinning faster than the blades of the helicopter she'd helped to steal years ago. One side of her thought this was a decidedly bad idea and she remembered arguing with 'Al Tarid' because the woman didn't know who could be trusted to look past the tremendous bounty on their heads. The other side told her that she was acting decidedly paranoid and one glance into his eyes told her that this was the side she would listen to.

His name was Zafer and he was as charming as he was beautiful. She found herself unable to keep from staring at his face even to drink a sip of the coffee. He talked about working on an internet business that was called 'e-commerce' and allowed him to trade with people anywhere in the world [does the internet get cut off to the people here?]

[maybe it does and Jafre speaks of having to now work as a delivery driver between Baqubah and Baghdad.

"What about you Naja? How do you occupy your days in these challenging times?"

She told him that she was studying electrical engineering. Without giving any specifics, she talked about using a laser to excite a small batch of charged particles. But sadly, the web she wove only managed to trap her within it.

"You work with lasers? But how do you power such a thing? Would that not take a very large amount of electricity?"

Struggling to stifle her own panic, she told Zafer that their funding mostly went toward fuel for a diesel generator. But she made sure to mention that it wasn't possible to discuss how that fuel was paid for. Instead she diverted the conversation and mentioned how difficult things had become with the attacks. In this, they at least shared the same feelings. After her careful obliquity she felt more confident in her ability to hide the truth of the operation that countries all over the world would literally kill to acquire.

Chapter fifty

Chief Petty Officer Robert Jeffrey smiled inwardly as he led the fifteen tanker trucks to the exit gate. They all stopped for the guard who gave only superficial attention to his carefully forged papers. He wasn't too concerned by this point. They'd already gotten into the Victory Bulk Fuel Point (or VBFP for short) and loaded each truck with high-grade aviation fuel. Now it was just a formality to give the kid at the gate a feeling of purpose before he and his convoy drove off with \$250,000 of premium grade aircraft fuel.

The soldier showed no expression as he handed the forms back and signaled for the gate to open. When it finally swung wide enough he gently hit the accelerator and found himself surprised by how quickly the 40,000 pound tanker truck responded. He quickly eased off the gas so as not to draw suspicion and the convoy of trucks made their way off down the road.

He'd already made this trip three times before and each time the semi had gobbled up fuel at the rate of 10 gallons per hour traveled which left him almost dry when he met up with Sadiq just shy of the Saudi border. The man would hand him a suitcase full of cash along with a vehicle for him and his men to get back to their base. But on this trip his truck was sipping fuel at only 6 gallons per hour, which combined with the responsiveness of the steering made him decidedly uneasy.

He reached up and pulled the walkie-talkie that each of them kept on the truck's dash for just this purpose. "All trucks. Something's not right here. I'm pulling over to check on my load." He gave another 10 seconds or so for each driver to respond before gradually slowing to a stop along the otherwise empty highway.

The heat struck him like a furnace after the relative comfort of a minimally air-conditioned cab. By their reaction, the other men were dealing with the same thing. Grimacing slightly from the tightness in his knees, he stepped down to the baking sand and walked back to the 50 foot oval tank mounted on his trailer. Smacking the side he noticed a distinct hollow sound which shouldn't come from a container full of liquid. Something was more than a little wrong here, and his stomach dropped a few inches inside his gut. Now the sweat dripping into his hat wasn't just from the heat shimmering off the desert sand.

Completely oblivious of the pain in his knee, he climbed up the ladder to the top of the huge tanker trailer and threw both his arms into turning the release valve. The well-maintained hatch opened up and it was immediately clear that his load was empty. He stared in. He cleared his throat and listened to the echo. There was no mistaking that 9000 gallons of premium fuel was not where it was supposed to be.

Practically leaping back to the ground he bumped full force into Captain Tulstin. The man was shorter but several years younger and he lost no footing from the impact. But he was confused.

"What's going on chief?"

He ignored the other man for the moment and ran as fast as his legs would take him down to the next truck. Leaping up the ladder he made the same motions as before and found that truck empty as well. The same with the next and on down the line. Every questioning remark was ignored as he gasped for breath in the 106 degree heat with a face that looked like he'd just gotten out of a sauna.

As the full weight of the horrible reality sank in, he pulled his service pistol out and made a straight line for Captain Breslau.

"Hey now Jeffrey. What's going on here."

"Were you, or were you not in charge of running the fuel lines and getting each truck loaded?"

"Well yes, but-" He never got to finish the sentence due to a bullet slicing through his nose and destroying the speech center of his brain. He fell to the sand in a gradually widening pool of blood.

Five hundred kilometers to the east, Safia stared at her computer screen where she finished calculations for ensuring that the 165,000 gallons of fuel arrived at a dozen holding tanks used by various medivac flight crews in Syria and Jordan.

Chapter fifty-one

"You told someone, didn't you?"

"Told someone what?" Naja made a heroic attempt at innocence, but the ruse was as flimsy as the card table holding up her recently acquired laptop computer. The woman obviously knew exactly what she was talking about, but lacked the courage to take responsibility. This only made her more angry and she threw back her chair as she stood up to stare down the one human being that she'd *actually* thought she could trust.

"You know *exactly* what I'm talking about Naja. Somebody knows that we're in Baqubah. I just deleted a message from somebody named Zafer..." The moment she said his name, the woman's mouth dropped in shock. She didn't even *try* to hide her guilt now, just stared limp-lipped, like some dead lizard floating down the Tigris river.

"Now. Would you like to tell me who this Zafer character is?"

But Naja seemed to find new strength now and her face grew defiant. "Zafer is a sweet man. He wouldn't betray me. He finds me fascinating."

If she'd still been sitting down she would have slammed her fist into the table. It was fortunate that she wasn't, because the card table would have dumped her precious laptop computer onto the bare stone floor which would have spelled the end of that device. Even so, she had visions in her mind of wrapping her fingers around the woman's neck and squeezing until Naja admitted that she'd very likely destroyed them both. Instead of doing that, she thought back to the lifeless eyes of the man out in the desert and focused the full extent of her mental will towards sitting herself back down where she read from a message she'd managed to intercept between Baqubah and a French cruiser.

"I believe the combatant that your forces are looking for is near to here. I spoke with a woman who may be assisting the man. She said that she was working on some equipment nearby that used lasers. Given that the university was shut down during the last war, there would be no place with the resources to fund such equipment. With another deposit into my account I can follow the woman and get a more accurate picture of where her operations are located."

"No!"

"Naja how could you think that anyone in this land might be trusted! I have a price on my head of well over a million dinars. Our people are barely scratching out a living after the last round of bombings, and of course there's the sanctions on the whole country. Girl, do you really believe someone would show an interest in you with no ulterior motive whatsoever? How the hell can you be so naive?"

With tears pooling at the edges of her eyes, her friend furrowed her eyebrows and balled her fists. "Don't you call me naive!! And don't call me 'girl.' I'm seven years older than you Safia, and I'm not immune to the interests of men."

"Oh pah! How long did it take you to spill your g-"

"Just shut up! [insult] You don't OWN me! I'm a smart and independent woman and I can go and come when I please!" With that her former trustee walked straight toward the exit which required quick action if she were to prevent a complete disaster.

Leaping back to her feet, she threw herself after Naja, slamming into her like the leg of a camel. Somewhere within her mind there was still the desire to keep from hurting the woman now, but she made no effort to be overly delicate. She pinned down the one leg and then the other kicked past her ear. The woman fought as well as some of the soldiers in Sadaam's army. It was a near miracle that she managed to get Naja to the floor without causing any serious injuries to the woman's legs now.

Her former friend of course, had no such reservations. Beating her fists and kicking whichever limb happened to be in view, the woman put up a valiant effort to free herself. She screamed, she wriggled, and even managed to land a set of knuckles into a briefly vulnerable jawbone. Pain pulsed through her teeth and she spat blood onto the floor, it felt like an hour before she finally managed to drag Naja toward a chair and wrapped a chord around the woman's protesting torso.

How had things gotten to be this bad? Now that she could take a deep breath and think, she stared into the glaring hatred radiating from Naja's eyes. The woman, unable to launch physical attacks used words instead and it took a superhuman effort to keep from letting the insults taunt her into violence. Her hands stayed clenched into fists and her knuckles were pale white as she consciously shoved back mental fantasies of what she *wanted* to do.

Instead she took a long series of calming breaths before she could manage to speak. "Naja. I'm so deeply sorry to treat you like this. But I also know how deadly this game is and how easy it would be for either of us to walk out into the desert and attract the attention of those terrorists. I wasn't kidding Naja when I mentioned the price on my head. On your head as well. If the Americans, or the British, or even the Saudis got wind of our location they would not merely kill us. They would steal our equipment, rape us, and torture us into telling them how it worked." She paused then to make sure she was being heard. "If that happened, then a nuclear war would be child's play compared to the destruction that the pale ones could exact with this technology. Do you understand what I'm getting at here?"

"The invaders? Pah! Don't be an [ass] Safia. They might have hugely powerful weapons but they're not nearly as smart as they think. The people at the top of their command chain ignore anyone smarter than them, *especially* if that person is Muslim. There might be a hundred brilliant men and women just sitting around on those warships washing the vegetables because the captains are too stupid to see their potential."

Looking down, she saw that her hands had clenched up again so tightly that her jagged nails were biting into the skin. She took another breath and loosened them before facing Naja once more. "My friend.."

"Don't you 'friend' me ya gazma! Dammit Safia you've gone too far now. I'm tied to a goddamn chair!! Kol khara you bitch!"

The insult struck her like right hook to the jaw. She almost lost her restraint then and there, which would've been the end of any semblance of friendship between them. She

even did move her fist a hair before the anticipation showed in her prisoner's eyes and she halted the movement with no small effort.

"Naja. Please, I only did this to ensure that neither of us did something we would regret. It may seem to you that the Americans and the British are foolish imbeciles. But the fact is that there are some people within their ranks who have enormous skill. Just think how the American leaders managed to convince all of NATO to send international forces here. Then of course there's the ship captains who ordered older spy planes to perform flyovers using chemical film so that we can't manipulate their electronic data. We just..." she lowered herself to her knees and took hold of the woman's hand which were almost snatched away, but which thankfully only flinched slightly. We need to stay vigilant and make no assumptions about the imperialists.

What she saw in the woman's eyes now brought enormous relief to her being. The defiant hate that had pulsed in the woman's features was now replaced by an angry calm as the woman digested what she'd said. At first she'd worried that she might have to come up with some as yet unknown plan if Naja continued to insist on running. Thankfully the woman was clearly smart enough to not let her emotions push her into some suicidal mistake.

She took the chord off and offered a hug to Naja. But the woman's eyebrows remained furrowed as she shook her head. The words dripping from her lips may as well have come from the back of an industrial freezer. "I may understand your point Safia. But don't you dare think that I can forgive you for a thing like this. Don't you ever touch me again."

The next day she cried a river of tears as Naja used the transporter to carve a separate room adjoining their lab and moved her belongings and equipment into it before shifting enough boulders to all but seal it off from the space that they once shared together. The room which two days ago had felt slightly cramped was now a vast and far too empty cavern.

Chapter fifty-Two

Years went by and a tense stalemate had developed. The American forces continued to hold a presence in the Gulf, but the regular attacks at least had ceased. Sadaam remained in power, but that was mainly from his ability to intimidate Kuwait and Saudi Arabia into keeping their distance. The American oil companies swept in like vultures after the war to rebuild the wells and resurrect the flow of black gold from beneath the desert sand. The whole situation was a house of cards, with half a dozen countries carefully watching the region in hopes of finding a way to push out the other military powers.

The politics were too confusing to grasp and the views of the various leaders were so contradictory that there seemed no way to bring about a complete cease-fire. But at least she could take solace in the fact that the regular bombings had stopped and her neighbors were no longer dying on a daily basis. There was money from the various 'gifts' trickling in from more and more diverse sources and she was able to live in safety with Naja who had become her closest (and only) friend.

But no peace can last forever, even when their enemies faced the 'magic' of her technology. A tragedy the likes of which she could never have predicted, in a city thousands of kilometers away, turned her entire world upside down. The initial news flew like a missile to everybody with a television, but the deeper implications wouldn't be understood for months afterward.

chapter fifty-Three

A seeming lifetime swept past before she finally came to feel safe enough to make trips into town again. Like Naja she felt starved for the sound of human voices and the stories of their thankfully ignorant lives. As much as she was grateful for the vast knowledge that could be learned by computer, the simple connection to real-life human beings would never be substituted.

She took the long tunnel past the trap door and into the tiny hut that she used for visitors. Any military spy looking from above would simply assume that the shelter was her home. This made her a puzzling, but seemingly benign non-combatant in the electronic eyes of the autonomous planes that occasionally passed over the region.

Since it was just after dawn and not very hot yet, she took the long way into town and walked slowly toward her favorite alley to browse the racks of dates, olives, and smoked lamb. Thankfully Baqubbah had suffered less than many other cities in the region and thus still had many shops and a street culture largely devoid of violence.

She made conversation with a few of the merchants, and while they talked about their families she would watch their faces and read the subtle pattern of emotions washing over their cheeks and eyes. It constantly fascinated her that so much of who they were could be read in the tiny movements tugging at the muscles beneath their skin and around their eyes.

She spent far longer than expected talking with several women and reminiscing back to the peaceful times. Back before Sadaam had squandered the wealth of Iraq on his attack against Iran and then Kuwait.

The sun had already moved to within a few hands of the horizon when an older woman pulled her by the wrist into a shop. In less than a second she had been ready to quickly pivot her own wrist and wrench her arm away, but seeing the fear etched into the woman's features, she could tell that this was not an act of malice. In no time she was

pushed in front of a small black and white television where an English news feed was showing video of a tall rectangular building gleaming in the sun. But soon an airplane flew into the frame and headed directly into the building before exploding.

Her jaw must have hit the floor more quickly than the smashed windows of the glass tower plummeting to the ground. The newscaster was talking about 'terrorists' and another airplane that was 'hijacked.' Her mind spun furiously as she struggled to digest what this could mean. Even the typically dispassionate voices of the American newscasters were saturated with fear. Despite their attempts, none of them even had the words to describe how terrible an event like this was.

"You know their language, yes? You can tell me what the pale ones are saying?" The older woman's eyes were fixated on her, and she now took in several more people whose eyes bounced between the television and her own. Their faces revealed a mixture of shock, concern, and confusion as they silently pleaded for her to make sense out of it all.

"The news people are saying that there was a terrorist group that took over two large airplanes and crashed them into those buildings. They say that many people in the buildings are trapped and that the city is on alert. They are talking about the fire crews trying to get in so they can pull the people out from the lower floors of the buildings." There was more talk and she had to tell the murmuring voices to be quiet.

"Wait. Now the newscasters are saying that two more planes have been taken over. There is some telephone conversation with one person on a plane somewhere in a place called Pennsylvania and another plane in the American capital. They say that the government is on alert."

"Who would do such a thing?"

"It's unbelievable."

"Looks like someone is doing to the Americans what they have done to us."

She spun around to see who had spoken that and looked into the eyes of a man who looked slightly younger than her. Seeing her gaze only made the boy more brazen.

"You know it is true. They bomb our people by the thousands and call it a success, but when *they* are attacked then it is 'terrorism.' They speak two things from either side of their mouth."

As much as she understood how the boy felt, she also knew how wrong this all was. This whole day felt very very wrong. It took her only few seconds of processing to glean an intrinsic recognition of what had caused her to spend so many years mourning over that one sad pair of eyes staring lifelessly up from the desert sand. It wasn't just the guilt of murder or how it made *her* feel. She realized that killing was a virus that seeped in and drained the compassion from friends, relatives, and whole communities of people. One death inevitably led to more, and often escalated to whole communities. Intentionally causing death was something that ran contrary to everything that her being told her was honorable.

"My friend. I hope that you can see that the people trapped in those buildings did not themselves drop the bombs on Basra. They are only doing what we are doing, trying to make a living to feed their families--"

"How can you speak such lies! Do they not have a 'democracy?' Do they not talk on and on for hours about how their government 'follows the will of the people?' Do they not shout out to the world about their '*freedom*?' They are not deserving of our compassion. They deserve, exactly that." He threw an accusatory finger straight at the newscast.

Despite her many debates with Samir and then Al Shad, she was at a loss to offer a response this time. It was now clear that she had made a grave error when she ignored the politics of the pale ones' leaders. The young man was right. The American news always talked about how theirs was a country with a unique government that followed the will of the people. So it should stand that if their military attacked Shi'ite villages, then the people should be in support of that. Instantly a thought flashed into her mind. There *was* a way that she might learn what was actually going on in the minds of the pale ones. It was a long shot for sure, but it couldn't hurt to try.

Chapter fifty-four

She ran breathlessly back to the tiny shack which hid the tunnel entrance all the while running through dozens of calculations and praying to Allah that she might succeed in the [crazy] plan. Moving as fast as her limbs would carry her, she scurried through the tunnel and into the main workspace. It wasn't clear how much time she might have, and the sense of urgency drove her on without mercy. It wasn't until she was confronted with Naja's confused expression that she allowed herself a second to take a breath. She told the woman about her idea, and saw immediately that she was furious.

"Use the transporter to save the pale ones? Have you lost your mind?!" The woman's eyebrows fell to a deep 'V.' Naja looked furious enough to actually throw a punch, though they both knew that would never happen. "You would actually allow their people see the creation that you've put so much effort towards keeping hidden all these years?" A small vein pulsed just below the her hairline and her face was shifting to higher shades of crimson like the sky at sunset.

It was obvious that she would have to calm the woman down, but there was just so little time. One image that was burned into her memory from that old television was of a man leaping from a broken window hundreds of meters in the air. Every second right now was critical. Her conscience would not let her sit by while this catastrophe unfolded. Not if her equipment might save even a single life from ending prematurely. She briefly told Naja that if she was able to successfully transport a living person, that she would ensure they never left Iraq. She also emphasized that no living thing had yet survived the device, so the chance of success was actually quite low.

It took only a few seconds to get the exact coordinates of the buildings and to extrapolate the relative position of one man who she saw on a security video standing next to an open window. She quickly plugged in the coordinates and they both watched in breathless anticipation (though for different reasons). The first few seconds looked promising. There was a short man, fully clothed in a suit, standing next to the wall near the electrical transformers. She began feeling hopeful when the man solidified, his clothing, hair, and even his portable phone becoming fully formed in front of their eyes. But the moment the process completed itself, he fell in a crumpled heap to the floor. His body was fully there, but she could see no spark of life in his eyes. The man was nothing more than a shell, devoid of a soul. It seemed that while she could transport physical things, the *rūh* which Allah grants to each person upon birth was not able to be transported along with it.

The good news though, was that she succeeded in materializing the man's phone which held information about what happened and who the man had spoken to.

She looked over at Naja dejectedly, but saw no sympathy in the woman. Instead what she read in her friend's features was a relief and a quiet satisfaction. This frightened her almost as much as the images from the American news stations. She resolved to spend serious time with her friend working to help the woman feel more compassion for the people of the world, even those who acted malevolently.

If Naja did not feel a respect for all living beings, then it could lead to dangerous choices that would compromise her ability to trust the woman. It was easy to predict what somebody with so much anger could do with access to her transporter. There was little difference between Naja and one of the American soldiers in that regard.

Chapter fifty-five

The announcement rang for him to expect a private status update which was becoming more puzzling as the frequency increased. It wasn't just once a month that he was getting these strange communiques.

"Daley here."

"Sargeant. This is General McCaffrey. I'm sure that you heard about the attack by now."

"Yes sir." It was literally the only thing that anybody was talking about obviously. But why would a general be talking to *him* about it? He had no authority to speak of, not any more at least. He had no command, no men to shape and mold, nothing at all which might put him on the general's radar.

"I want to know, right now, if you think this attack could've been perpetrated by the same evil terrorists who attacked our ships back in 92."

Of course. His most shameful moment, and it would clearly haunt him for the remainder of his career (assuming he continued to have one). If Quincy had wanted to intentionally

ruin his life by scapegoating him for the attack, he got more than a court-marshal ever could have accomplished. The general got to taunt him continuously for years afterward for that outrageous shortcoming.

"Daley. I'm meeting with the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in an hour and I need to know which of those brownies we can pin this on."

For precious seconds that fateful day came roaring back at him. The turning away of the one man he'd been able to share his feelings with, then the lights going black as he made his way up to the island, and then the explosion as the full weight of an A-6 Intruder slammed into the antenna array.

His hands balled into fists and his nails dug in as he fought to control those emotions and think carefully about the two fateful events. One that crippled his ship, and the other that put an end to his command.

"Sir. I can't give you anything for certain yet. But my impression is that this attack shows different tactics. The attack on the Ranger was focused on preventing us from launching planes. First they ensured that the ship couldn't get up to operational speed, and then they took out the radar mast. Both times there was significant damage to equipment but minimal casualties. Even the blurring of our satellite recon was obviously for defensive purposes. However the attack on the World Trade Center was clearly planned to cause maximum deaths and maximum impact on the psyche of the American people."

"Very good Daley. I've gotten similar accounts from Commander Winters and Captain DeSantis. That will be all."

The line went dead and he was left wondering if the general might have just given him the faintest shadow of a compliment. But it was no matter. The way Quincy had gone after him it would take the defeat of Germany to put him back in the good graces of people like General McCaffrey or General Powell.

Meanwhile Nancy was barely on speaking terms with him and the months that he was stuck out at sea made his efforts to patch things up with her a mere dinghy in a mid-Atlantic storm. He took a private moment to pull out a picture of her with the kids and he wondered whether any of them would even consider him family anymore. The picture grew blurry and he hurriedly put it away before a tear could fall on it. He might not get another picture from them again.

Chapter fifty-Six

Miguel couldn't hold the tears back as he quietly put the phone down. The kitchen around him grew blurry and he wrung the towel he'd been holding as if it were soaking wet as he fought with the pain and the hurt. He'd been so proud of dad being a receptionist for Tolko Insurance. The family was finally paid up on the rent and they even had a nice car parked out front. The company was on the 82nd floor and he'd gotten to

see pictures of what Manhattan looked like from 900 feet in the air. Dad was still new, so he hadn't been able to bring his son up there to enjoy the view, but the pictures his father brought back were awesome enough.

The phone had interrupted his breakfast and for a few seconds he was annoyed that he might be late for school. That was until his father told him that a plane had struck the twin towers just two stories below him. Now his dad was trapped, with a whole floor burning underneath him. Nobody knew if they might ever be able to rescue people because of all the smoke. The news reports talked about a terrorist attack and that there were other planes being taken over. It was like the whole world was going mad.

The worst part was when his dad started telling him that computers and desks were beginning to just disappear into thin air. He talked about it like it was really happening too. It was heartbreaking. To not only wonder if your father would survive, but to also realize that he was having some kind of mental breakdown too. It was all so hard to bear. After a few minutes, he'd had to make up an excuse and put the phone down. He just didn't want to imagine that his last words from his father might be of some mental delusion.

Instead, he sat on the bed and watched the tears fall and break apart on the skin of his balled fists, like the bodies of the people he would later see on the news.

Chapter fifty-Seven

In a remote hillside just beyond the farmlands of Buhriz, there was a large underground cavity in the rock that she'd created. It had been planned as a future home of operations while she developed a more easily concealed power source. But those plans would have to be put on hold. She soon filled that cave with all manner of items from the doomed tower. She transported computers, refrigerators full of food, chairs, equipment, and anything else whose location could be deciphered from the hacked security cameras. Once the first tower had collapsed, it was likely that the other would as well and if she could not save the people, then she might as well focus on saving the many items that would be of great value to her Shi'ite and Sunni neighbors.

The whole time she mulled over the implications of what that boy had said back in town. There was no doubt anymore that she was hampering her success by ignoring the politics of the colonialists and the ties between Sadaam's regime and the Americans.

But for the time being she was too busy running the transporter and sending items into their temporary home before at last both towers collapsed and the whole area was pulverized to dust. She'd watched every security camera in the building blink out before switching to a news station and watching video of the second building collapse with surprising efficiency straight down on itself. She didn't know much about large towers,

but the speed with which it happened caught at something in the far recesses of her brain.

Over the next week, she periodically sent the equipment that she'd stockpiled not only to poor towns in Iraq, but also to those in need beyond their borders into Syria and Jordan. It brought her only a small bit of consolation to know that the excesses of the colonial powers would now be shared with those who had so much less.

In between this work, she began looking into the history of the colonialists and her own homeland. There were dozens of web sites examining politics and major events, but many of them were biased in favor of the Europeans.

Al Jazeera was the most logical source of information. It was locally produced, the reporting was in Arabic, and she didn't have to devote so much energy toward reading between the lines. But she occasionally looked at the American and British news as well. All of them had stories that were becoming more and more horrifying as the weeks and months passed. The American leader, named George Bush was clearly not up to the task of understanding the subtleties of global politics, and the British leader showed not the slightest willingness to embrace policy at odds with the American dialogue.

The Americans declared that Osama Bin Laden was the mastermind and that any country which harbored him would suffer attack. She later found a confidential document from the Taliban saying that they would actually hand over Bin Laden to the Americans if the government could prove that he had committed the attack. But she never found a response from any American leader. What she *did* find however, was a directive from somebody named Rumsfeld to plan military operations against not only Afghanistan, but Iraq as well.

Her muscles went limp and her arms fell to her side as she stared unblinking at the confidential document displayed on a computer screen which had once sat on the 90th floor of a New York skyscraper. The shock was too much to absorb, even for her fantastically quick mind. She sent one fist slamming into the top of the perfectly smooth desk and actually yelped in surprise at the agony flashing back at her when her conscious mind registered the pain.

But the seeds of a plan were being slowly planted in the deepest recesses of her mind. It would take a great deal of time and the work would be dangerous, but perhaps her equipment could be used to counteract this monumentally stupid show of aggression.

Chapter fifty-Eight

The man walking resolutely towards the office of the Secretary of Defense was easily recognizable from dozens of news appearances. Curly silver hair capped a broad face with deeply weathered ochre skin. The general's uniform shimmered with medals from

operations as diverse as Vietnam and Nicaragua. Colin Powell's steady stride and dispassionate gaze showed an outward calm that was only a thin veneer for the deeper worry dominating his every waking thought.

The whole nation was reeling from the airplane attacks and there was, as yet, no clear indication as to who the perpetrator was. The American public needed some direction towards which to focus their fury and he wanted it to be the right one. Going into Afghanistan would be a horrific mistake, one that the Russians had made with tragic results. But they couldn't go after Saudi Arabia, even though they'd actually funded the attack. The president's close relationship with Prince Bandar as well as the close ties that half a dozen petroleum executives enjoyed with their leadership made this impossible. He could only hope that Mr. Rumsfeld would have some useful intel to a deeply troubling situation.

The receptionist gave him a sympathetic look and offered him a seat while she let her boss know that he had arrived. Men of officer ranks were rarely kept waiting and so the 10 minutes that he spent flipping through magazines with suburban kitchens was decidedly out of character in the general's routine. But despite the Secretary's obvious disdain for him, there was no question that he stood higher on the pecking order and in this instance there would be no value in launching a protest.

Eventually he was told to go in and entered the office facing a white man with nearly a full head of silver hair despite his seventy years. The man pointed him towards a seat before getting straight to the point. "General, I want to know why you've spoken out to the public against deployment of ground forces into Iraq."

This inquiry he had expected. It was well known in command circles that Rumsfeld and Cheney were pushing hard to steer public opinion and global military forces towards a more aggressive stance in the Middle East. But they needed to focus instead on retaliation for the terrorist attack. Why did Rumsfeld feel the need to distract the nation toward Iraq? Obviously it was about regarding control of the resources there, but he doubted that men who had never personally fought in a war could grasp the intricacies of front-line operations. In his typical steady baritone voice he did what he could to shift the targeting site away from his own forehead. "Mister Secretary as you know we have General Moseley sending in air strikes and as far as the public is concerned, the only operations in the region is enforcement of a no-fly zone."

The Secretary's face became flush and his eyebrows furrowed in anger. "Dammit General I'm not a teenager. I've spoken several times with the man. What I want to know is why *you* feel that the destruction of Sadaam's communications infrastructure is sufficient to ensure American sovereignty in the region."

Thinking furiously of a response which would be credible without further drawing the man's wrath, he finally brought up the one issue which struck fear into the hearts of even the most hardened generals (though none would admit as much out loud). "Mister Secretary, several of the Navy's top brass have impressed on me that there is a secret

faction within Sadaam's forces which has shown itself to be highly effective at hindering our operations throughout the region there."

"You're talking about Al Tarid." The man sighed slightly at the general's raised eyebrow. "Yes we know the name. One of our counter-insurgency spooks was able to intercept a communication with one of his men. We may not know where his forces are located or how many he commands, but we do know that he has the respect and admiration of the Iraqi resistance."

Though it was foolhardy he couldn't remain silent and allow these pencil-pushers to continue putting his military forces in danger. "Then you must also know that we believe him to be responsible for the two attacks on the U.S.S. Ranger."

"General Powell. I am not impressed by a few arab terrorists flying around in a stolen helicopter. We have the largest military forces in the world six times over. I have no doubt that we can take on a few resistance fighters. Now, the president wants us in Iraq, Prince Bandar wants it, and so does Mr. Cheney. So that is exactly what we're going to do." The man paused and gave him a look that said he would accept no further disagreement. "Now here are your orders. Cheney wants Congress and the UN on board with the story that Sadaam poses a direct and immediate threat to the world. You are to make this case to the UN as a military expert. You are then to prepare for a full invasion as soon as international support is secured. Do I make myself clear?"

There was obviously no answer to offer but yes. Which only exaggerated his misgivings about the chances of success with coming operations. He didn't notice how tightly he held the doorknob as he left until the door closed and he had to make a conscious effort to release his grip.

Chapter fifty-Nine

It was a long and rough flight from Dammam back to Washington. The C-135 that ferried supplies and junior ranks wasn't laid out for comfort, it was built for practicality. After all, if you were in the military and you weren't an officer, then you weren't expecting the red carpet treatment. What was worse for Daley was that he HAD held rank before. There were many mission briefings that he'd flown to in accommodations that were unlikely to ever again come his way in the tattered remains of his career.

So his eyes grew wide as the plane's hatch came down and he spotted, not a camouflaged hummer, but a civilian-style Chevy Silverado parked next to the plane and a driver wearing a suit rather than combat fatigues. Picking up a lightweight kit bag, he made his way over and saluted the young petty officer.

"Sir. I'm to escort you immediately. If you will." The man motioned him to the passenger seat and offered only cryptic details on their destination, which happened to be the Pentagon. It was still difficult to get used to a seat that didn't shift slightly below him as

he watched the vast ribbon of green that lined the beltway. After 2 years of surroundings that were either gray steel or gray-blue ocean the kaleidoscope filling his senses brought his mind to sigh inwardly.

As the SUV meandered through traffic, he wracked his brain in a fruitless attempt to grasp what his superiors would want with a junior officer who'd overseen the worst attack on a US Navy ship since the second world war. But as they left Route 395 and meandered through the vast sea of parking toward the immense complex, he was no closer to an answer than he'd been the day his travel orders had arrived.

The driver left him at the entrance with instructions to make his way to conference room 2043B. Entering the gargantuan building through an entrance that would befit a turn of the century rail station, he gave casual salutes to the few men he recognized. He quickly navigated through the metal detectors and gave a similar greeting to the ensigns manning them. The long corridor beyond ended in a conference room the likes of which he hadn't seen in years. The room was nicer than any that he'd been seated at since taking command of the Ranger. The table was a long ellipse of polished oak, the chairs were well upholstered, there was a nickel-plated coffee urn, and the lights were brass instead of the cheaper recessed cans.

It took another fifteen minutes for a man that he didn't know to enter the room and introduce himself as Chief Petty Officer Schiffen. He was followed by Quincy and a man who needed no introduction, General Richard Meyers. Walking with a determined gait and sporting shoulders like oak blocks, Meyers was the most well known military commander of [x] and commanded respect from everybody he met. The man's tall frame and broad shoulders would have looked equally at home in a mine or a wrestling ring despite his forty years in the service.

Quincy by contrast looked almost puny with his 5 foot nine height and muscular but slender frame. Nevertheless, Daley knew better than to make assumptions about his CO and showed the same respect that he would to any officer under whose command he operated. It was no small surprise then to see Quincy pause in front of him to lay down a pair of Navy badges with an eagle and three arrows right in front of him. Commander! The man was promoting him back to senior officer status! Under his breath though, the man grumbled, "don't make me regret this boy." It wasn't the four stripes of a captain, but it was damn close, and he sure wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

The door closed and the man in charge was clearly Meyers, because he called the meeting to order without even a questioning glance. "Gentleman, you are called here because we need to work out how the United States is going to deal with Iraq in light of the current political climate. Mr. Rumsfeld has informed me in no uncertain terms, that we are to provide information as quickly as possible on the practicality of sending a strike force there and removing Sadaam Hussein from power once and for all."

"General, I've spoken with several of the captains, and I believe that if we release superficial information on the 93 attack in the Gulf, that a case would be possible."

The man was clearly not impressed and made no attempt to hide his feelings. "Schiffen, we are **not**, under any circumstances, going to allow the American people to learn that a group of hajjis were able to infiltrate the most powerful ships in our Navy. Do I make myself clear?"

A subdued 'yessir' was the only response to this.

Raising his hand, he offered a modest "sir, if I may?"

"Go ahead." From the general's tone, it seemed that he was expecting similarly impractical advice.

"Sir. The American people are undoubtedly going to want a face to put on this attack. The president and Mr. Rumsfeld have already used Osama Bin Ladden as that face. We would have little difficulty getting the American people behind an attack on Afghanistan. But with Iraq there is no evidence, not that the population is aware of, to link Sadaam with any offensive attack on American interests."

"Well then Mr. Daley, we will simply have to create one."

A seed of concern that had lain dormant in his gut immediately sprouted a robust stalk. It was one thing for them to retaliate against Sadaam for his attack on Kuwait and the destruction of the essential oil infrastructure there. It was quite another to create an entirely false story to justify military action. Sadaam's people might be cunning, and the attack on the U.S.S. Ranger certainly proved that. But he saw no evidence of a threat to their interests coming from Sadaam's administration. In fact there were those working within military intel who believed the Iraqi freedom fighters had attacked Sadaam's own guards as well as the coalition forces.

He didn't like to think of himself as a man capable of fear, but the idea of poking a stick at the cobra who could obfuscate their own electronic surveillance, transport supplies off their ships without a trace, and infiltrate the most heavily armed fighting vehicles in the navy was a decidedly poor strategy.

Obviously he wasn't in a position to contrast the authority of Meyers or Rumsfeld, especially with their fragile new trust in him, so he would simply have to watch how the winds blew and do his best to avoid getting buried in the sandstorm. The whole situation was beginning to look nearly as dangerous as the freedom fighters themselves.

Chapter Sixty

Through the fall of that year, a whole group of countries including America, Australia, Britain, Germany, and Italy worked together on attacks against Al Queda. She knew very little of that organization except that they maintained their control over a largely defenseless population with a combination of old soviet weapons and religious

extremism. Knowing what she did of the pale ones' military, it was unlikely that they would withstand an attack and she lost no sleep over their losses.

What DID bother her a great deal was a top secret document she found outlining the American government's continued search for an excuse to send their military forces against Iraq. Could it be that she had pushed them too far? Was the innocent theft of supplies enough to bring the colonialists to focus their horrible weapons against a small and poor country like Iraq?

They couldn't be afraid of Sadaam, he'd barely managed to hold off Iran which was a hundred times less powerful. It didn't seem to be purely about oil, since the Americans already controlled that industry.

It was several more days before she found another document titled "Foreign Suitors For Iraqi Oilfield Contracts." So it *was* about oil. But not merely the resource itself, this attack was about gaining power. She found that meetings discussing control of her country's oil fields had in fact been going on for *years*. Long before the attack in New York had even been considered. This meant either that all of the airplane attacks on America were caused by it's own government, or that the government allowed it to happen as a rationale to take another stab at her country. Even with what she knew about the cruelty of their leaders, the former did not seem possible. This meant that a misinformation campaign would likely be made in order to shift their peoples' outrage over the attacks in the direction of her own people.

Something had to be done, and fast. Grabbing a sheet from a large stack of paper she began making notes of the most powerful groups involved, their leaders, and the type of action those people had used before. She included not only presidents like Bush and Putin, but Senators, Members of Parliament, and military leaders like Colin Powell and Brian Burridge. She spent hours researching each official and finding the area that they were passionate about. Then she worked on setting up a number of fake identities and made contact with key government officers. Finally she tied their political career with the impact that an unprovoked war might have on them personally. With the Americans, she made it clear that the public would not support an attack (this was based on what she read in their internet discussions) and that the attempt to start an unprovoked war would undoubtedly backfire.

Her tactic wouldn't hold things off for long, but it worked for several months. The rumblings that she got from hacking into their communications told her that they were unsure of sufficient public support. This meant that she was able to devote less time to the pale ones and more time toward plans for transitioning to a more comfortable shelter.

But all good things come to an end eventually. Despite the extensive time she'd put into it, the cease-fire was called off far sooner than she would have liked. Poking through American documents, she found something called 'National Intelligence Estimate' where the foreigners talked about deadly chemical weapons that Sadaam was manufacturing.

Obviously this was a propaganda campaign and it brought her to laugh at the thought of a whole country's population falling for such obvious lies. But the western news stations were relentless in their drive to maintain the story that Sadaam was an impending threat. They discussed it on the news, on morning talk shows, and in speeches given by national leaders. There was even video of the American general standing in front of the UN and talking about aluminum tubes which could be used for weapons.

New hints that a propaganda campaign was being created by the most evil people in the world began to trickle in from various news agencies not only in America but in Europe as well. The term 'weapons of mass destruction' came to be aired so frequently that she soon lost track of the daily count. Reporters constantly made reference to Sadaam's horrific chemical attacks of 1988 and hinted that he posed a similar threat to Europe in the future. They even used the aluminum tubes to suggest that Sadaam had credible nuclear ambitions. It was all based on lies, but there was a noticeable shift in the chatter that she read on American chat rooms. Their people seemed to be unusually vulnerable to the influence of what was delivered to them through television. The reason for this eluded her, but the direction that things were heading in brought her to feel the most intense dread since the day she stood on the deck of an aircraft carrier all those years ago. If the subtle nudging of various generals wasn't enough, then she would have to take a more risky approach. And may Allah judge her with mercy.

Chapter Sixty-One

Zafer had struck out on his one chance at wealth. After three months hanging out in Baqubah there had been little more than a hint of the man with a king's ransom on his head. Since the day he'd charmed those few tidbits of information from the girl Naja, there hadn't been the slightest clue on how to find him.

In frustration he made his way to Baghdad where it was said that a man could find work at some of the government buildings. He'd managed to get through an interview at the Dar Es Salaam bank where they saw fit to give him a position as a night security guard. It was better money than he'd made since going to Baqubah and he wasn't going to concern himself with the details of the job as long as it gave him enough to keep food in his belly.

Barely a month after settling into an apartment adjoining the Mohamed Al-Qasim Expressway, the bombs started to fall. At first it was only in the distant airport or the bases that Sadaam used for his army. But it wasn't long before bombs began to fall in the city proper. The army was disbanded, eliminating any protection they once provided. Which left only the coalition forces to keep Iraq from descending into complete anarchy.

Eventually his luck ran out when a wayward bomb exploded next to the bank. Looters flooded in to grab anything that wasn't nailed down and the bank's director was killed in the process. Sitting in the shelter of a gas station which now held nothing but empty shelves and broken trucks he spotted three American humvees making their way into the city. Thrilled to finally meet the forces which had removed Sadaam from power, he pulled himself up on weary legs. It had been a day or more since he'd found water to drink and he wasn't feeling as strong. Nevertheless he waved joyously to the patrol in hopes that they would take him along in gratitude for his earlier collaboration.

The lead truck slowed down just a bit and one of the soldiers threw a bottle that was clearly aimed at him. It struck his ear hard enough to knock him to the ground and he heard the barest hint of laughter above the loud droning of the humvees' engines. When he finally did find his feet, he peered into the bottle, still hoping there might have been some kind of mistake. But when he got the cap off, there was only the fowl stench of urine.

He threw the bottle on the ground and threw a library of curses at the disappearing Americans as their vehicles sped around a bend in the road, honking at people walking across.

So this was the thanks he got for helping them to locate the most dangerous man in all of Iraq? This was his recompense for risking his life to get valuable information to the Americans?

"Yakhsaf allah bih al'ard" he yelled after the vehicle which was now barely a speck of dust in the distance

Chapter Sixty-Two

It was such a relief to finally get a few days off after the endless meetings and strategy sessions back in [Damam]. He sat in a small building made of concrete and enjoyed a sandwich with real slices of ham. It was the first properly cooked meal he'd enjoyed since returning from his meeting in D.C. late last year. The cafeteria was an officers mess, which meant proper cutlery and a cushion on the seats which had been sorely missed by his 52 year old posterior.

Turning his head, he watched an Apache take off from the base from his spot near the window. The big choppers were a beautiful sight. Twin turboshaft engines, M230 chain gun, and on this one a pair of winglets carrying an impressive assortment of tomahawk missiles. The very windows rattled from the raw power echoing from that \$95 million attack helicopter.

Looking back at his sandwich, his jaw dropped three inches on seeing a small tape recorder sitting between the crumb-strewn plate and his beer where the table had been otherwise empty moments before.

"Excuse me." He called over the young ensign who was serving food in the half-occupied cafeteria. "Son, did you see anybody approach this table in the past 2 minutes?"

"No sir." The bronze-skinned man looked mildly concerned, but obviously had nothing to contribute on the matter.

Standing up then, he shouted in a commanding voice. "Everyone! This is Lieutenant Commander Daley. I need everyone in this room to remain exactly where you are until told otherwise!"

He picked up his blackberry and tapped a message to the nearest MP and then a similar message to Commander Hackinson who was in charge of security for the base.

Fifteen minutes later the recorder had been bagged and sent to a lab. His table had been checked for prints and every single man and woman in the cafeteria had been interviewed. Not a single one of them had seen anybody enter, nor had anybody noticed anything unusual at his table. Daley could only hope that Hackinson didn't consider him to be collaborating with some unknown enemy, or his new uniform wouldn't be useful for anything other than a Hollywood prop.

Chapter Sixty-Three

A rail-thin figure carefully slung down from the cargo bed of an ancient Soviet truck. His hair was lank and his clothes were barely enough to keep him from getting sunburned. Lugal thanked the man for giving him a lift and hefted a large clothes bag out of the truck's bed. The truck had been carrying car parts and he'd felt every bump in the road all the way to Basra. But the risk would be worth it if the tipoff proved true.

He watched the old truck pick up speed as it continued down the road. Meanwhile he wrapped the [x] tighter around his head and cut a diagonal towards a house where he'd heard that a room could be rented. The field that he crossed had once been a house, but now there was nothing but broken chunks of concrete and the shell of a car laying on it's roof. He made sure that his shoes were laced, as the ground was still littered with glass and there were bits of sharp wood poking the air in the place where windows had once been. The rubble brought him back to that horrible day in Amiriya when he'd been knocked out of a sound sleep by what felt like the end of the world. In a sense it *had* been the end of his world. His mother had been killed and his father became, more monster than man from that day on. With his family as shattered as the walls of the shelter had become, he'd been forced to spend his days hauling broken blocks of concrete just to earn enough for a meal each day. Meanwhile his father managed only to earn enough to get himself drunk.

The depression fractured slightly as he crossed the dirt road and wandered into a flat parking lot while gazing up at the pale glow shining from windows that were

miraculously unbroken. The box-shaped building was as flamboyant as a boulder, but it was a reasonably safe place to have a conversation with men who were part of the most powerful military in the world.

His room was no more than a smaller box within the larger cubic mass. A bare wall, a bed, and a few wooden crates to put clothes into. The motel had an internet connection, but he was sure to bounce his email through a couple of servers before allowing it to reach his contact. Once that was taken care of, there was nothing to do but wait. He'd spent most of his dinars just to get here and only had enough left for the room and a couple of meals. If this lead didn't bring results, he'd either turn to stealing or he'd be killed. And at this point, he barely cared which path his life took.

The knock on the door surprised him enough to lay a hand on the metal blade that he'd sharpened from an old piece of steel taken from a bombed pickup. He kept his hand on it while he asked who it was.

"I am called Shalman."

Lugal's hand loosened on the blade, but didn't entirely relax. With his other hand, he opened the door on a dark-skinned man with smooth features and curly black hair. He was surprised at how young the man looked given how much talk there was of his group. But despite the smoothness of his features, the boy wore his clothes well and stood with confidence.

"Before I enter, you must show me both of your hands."

Cursing inwardly, Lugal let go of the blade in its pocket and showed his visitor two empty hands. Then he invited the young man to come in.

"So I hear that you are interested in joining us in the fight for a free and independent Iraq." The voice sounded nonchalant, but there was a strong undercurrent of tension rippling through the stream of words.

The story that Lugal told had been practiced for so many months that it started to feel almost true. "Yes I would. I lost both of my parents in the war with Iran and I've been getting by as a grunt, making bricks at a factory in a suburb of Baghdad. I came to hear the speeches made by Moktada al-Sadr and it impressed upon me the need to purge our land of both Sadaam Husein as well as the American attackers. It has been said that your group has been the only one to actually make successful attacks against both of them.

The visitor looked wistfully up at the ceiling and his emotions sounded genuine. "All of us who dream of a free Iraq have sung praise to Allah for the miracles performed against the great fighting machines that steal the lives of our families away."

"As have I. But how in all the world have your people been able to bring supplies to magically appear. If the stories are true that is."

The young man looked at him directly now, and the serenity faded noticeably. "Lugal, since we do not know enough about you yet, there are only a few things that I can share with you. I can tell you that it is not any of the people I know who have been able to bring these miracles. The great success that we have had is the work of a small group that only our leader knows of. But rumor has it that the leader of this group is some kind of jjin.⁶"

"What?!" His eyes grew two sizes at such a revelation. "You're saying that a single man was able to defeat that entire aircraft carrying ship? Shalman I find that impossible to believe."

No Lugal. There was a group of trained soldiers who participated in that mission. The soldiers did much damage to the people on the deck of the ship. But it was our ally who knew how to get past the ship's defenses and who was able to get all but three of the men back home safely."

He'd heard stories of course. But they had all sounded too fantastical. People said that a group of men had blown up over a dozen American planes and nearly sunk their gigantic warship. Obviously there had been some exaggeration, but this meeting was the closest he'd gotten so far to getting some real information on the person who was known only as 'agent number one.'

"So is this ally the same one who is said to make supplies magically appear to those who need them?"

For a brief moment, the man looked uncomfortable, but he quickly recovered and gazed back squarely. "To be honest, nobody knows for sure who does it or how. Many of us believe that to be true, but there is no way to find out. Our leader received information about the first delivery of food taken from a British ship almost a year ago. Whatever he knows is kept well guarded for obvious reasons."

"Well of course. Someone who has had that much success must carry a price on their head amounting to hundreds of thousands of dinars."

"Try eighty million."

Lugal barely kept the thrill out of his eyes on hearing that. Eighty million dinars?! With that much he could pay his way to a country that wasn't a bombed out nightmare. It was almost too much to hope for.

He put on an expression of admiration and whispered "if Allah is kind, perhaps I will meet this wondrous ally someday."

"Oh that is not at all likely." The boy seemed more at ease now. "Only one or two of the men have even the slightest clue as to where the ally lives and they have been sworn to silence by the leader of our group."

He was slightly flustered to hear this, but recovered quickly enough. "Of course. It is good enough to know that a miracle-worker such as this is on our side."

6 Magical spirit

When the meeting was over, he led the man to the door and sat in the darkening room for two hours dreaming of what could be done with eighty million dinars. Only when he was sure that his visitor would have been long gone, did he turn on the small computer and send a message bounced across four servers that he had made contact and learned that the one threatening the American forces might be one single individual.

The response to this was immediate. The bank account that was set up for him now contained 5,000 dinars, enough to pay for several weeks of housing and all the food he could eat. There was also a message. "If you can find any information that would lead to a location for this lone freedom fighter then there will be a new car in it for you."

A whistle of awe broke through his lips on seeing this.

Chapter Sixty-four

A meeting with Admiral Schmidt might mean anything, but Daley's money was that it had to do with the mysterious recorder. Not surprisingly he remained in the dark as to what was on it and he didn't expect to find out anytime soon. Since it required a special trip back out here only six hours before the end of his time off, the prospects were not looking good for his recently acquired credentials. He worried even more now what Nancy would think if he went down to a lieutenant's salary once again. She might decide that she could do better on her own.

His driver already knew where to drop him off, so the conversation was cryptic as they slowed before the admin building for [Camp Adder]. He saluted a thank you to the driver and walked swiftly into the relief of an air conditioned building where an attractive petty officer gave him directions to Schmidt's office. From there it was another five minute walk through bland corridors that could've been any office building in Langley or Andrews AFB.

After a brief knock he was invited in and gave a salute to a gray-haired man with only the barest paunch pressing against his uniform. The man waved him to a chair with one hand while the other sat on top of the infamous recorder. The admiral wasted no time on pleasantries and immediately went over procedure from the previous afternoon. "Daley, as you already know, we swept both the table and the recorder for explosives, fingerprints, or anything else that could be weaponized. Nothing malicious was found which isn't too surprising. What *was* surprising was how clean the device was. No fingerprints, no smudges or bits of dust that might clue us in to where it came from. That thing was cleaner than my ex wife's washing machine."

He cracked the slightest hint of a smile at that, but quickly let his features fall back to neutral.

"Everyone involved in this case is burning to discover how the thing came to be in the officer's mess. The security camera makes a sweep of the whole room every 90 seconds and unless our man was sitting in there with you there's no way that they could've found a way to place this thing without being caught on camera."

"Unless our mystery person had some kind of radio control machine, like a toy car. Sir."

"Yes, Hackinson suggested that possibility. Anyway, I'm sure you have some interest in what the purpose of this little device was." The man now pulled the small recorder from a plastic bag with one gloved hand."

Feeling slightly bothered that the security chief had already thought of his idea first, he decided to bring up another idea. "Sir. Do we know if this device was stolen from any of our camps or if it was purchased in Baghdad?"

Thankfully, the older man seemed impressed. "Good question son. We checked the serial number and found that it had gone missing from a Circuit City store in Houston. Thing is, after checking airline manifests we found not a single passenger who traveled between Texas and Iraq in the past week. Even military personnel have been coming through Virginia before flying over and the last deployment was 12 days ago."

"That's quite a mystery sir."

"It certainly is. We have our best minds working on the problem at the moment. But what I personally find more puzzling is the contents of the recording that we found on this device." The man pushed play on the recorder and a highly distorted voice filled the room.

"Lieutenant Commander Daley. I am speaking as a representative of Al Tarid. Your presence is requested at the following coordinates at nineteen hundred hours on Friday the ninth. It is hoped that a cease-fire can be reached before the loss of life escalates further. If you agree, then leave a message in the exact same location within 24 hours."

"That sounds like a veiled threat."

"Our thoughts exactly."

"I'm assuming that you want me to take him up on this meeting."

"Yes son. In fact the orders came all the way from the defense secretary himself. This Al Tarid fella has become the most wanted man in Iraq. Rumsfeld and Shelton think he's a more valuable asset than Sadaam."

"Understood sir. I'm happy to do my service." He wasn't just happy. He was nearly ecstatic at the chance of seeing one of Al Tarid's men and hopefully taking out a few of them. Though he had to assume that their leader was smart enough to plan for a great number of possible strategies.

Chapter Sixty-five

Private Carter wandered through the depressingly dim hallways looking in at the brownies in their cages. Knowing how many terrorists they had locked up here gave her a sense of satisfaction. With each body added to the prison here, there was less chance that one of them would shout some Arabic shit before blowing himself up along with a bunch of American soldiers.

Finally arriving at cell 542, she rolled her baton against the bars to make sure the guy in there was sufficiently intimidated. Given that this guy outweighed her by 30 pounds, she wasn't about to let one of these hajis get her in a compromising position. And just to be sure, she kept Private Stevenson with her. He was a mildly handsome man a year younger and half a foot taller than her.

But today the guy in the cell barely looked at her. After giving a cautious nod to Stevenson, she unlocked the door and made a motion for him to get up. The smell of him brought her to keep her distance, but eventually she had to grimace and go lead him by the arm as he seemed too stupid to understand basic commands.

The guy was unusually ugly. Not only did he smell bad, but the dark circles under his eyes gave him the look of a villain from some old-timey movie. His orange prison suit was stained and his bare feet shuffled along the concrete floor.

With Stevenson behind, she brought him into the interrogation room, a bare concrete space with a single table and two chairs bolted to the floor. A camera in the ceiling and a microphone were the only other items of note in the bare cube. Two men in suits were already there. One pale man sat at the chair while another brownie in a suit stood behind him. Once the guy was shoved inside, she stood at attention next to the door, paying no mind to the conversation that took place.

"Your name is Isfahar, is that right?"

The brownie standing behind translated the statement into Arabic and from the corner of her eye, she saw the prisoner nod.

"Very good. Now you were part of the guerrilla army working with a man named Al Shad is that right?"

This time the brownie made no movement and a tense stalemate ensued for a dozen heartbeats before the pale man continued. "Now Isfahar. You already spent two weeks in isolation. Do you want to go back to that little hole, shitting on yourself and eating roaches? Do you want Stevenson to drill another hole in your calf?"

The brownie slowly shook his head no. He then mumbled something under his breath.

"I'm sorry but we cannot hear you. Can you repeat that?"

The prisoner repeated himself, but only a little louder. This time with just enough volume that the brownie they used as a translator was able to hear the statement. "He said that he knew Al Shad."

The pale man put on a wider grin. "You see? Now we are making progress. Now we are *all* friends here. So, Isfahar I want to know everything you can tell me about Al Shad and his relationship with the one known as Al Tarid."

She caught a note of genuine hatred in the prisoner's eyes now, but she was well trained and kept her thoughts to herself.

"Now now. You do understand that we have numerous ways of getting the information that we need Isfahar. There's no reason to make this difficult on yourself." The man paused for emphasis. "If you help me out, then I can help you. Maybe give you some time outside, give you a chance to see the sky for a change."

The prisoner's eyes watched the pale man levelly but otherwise there was no movement. She was feeling bored, and briefly hoped the guy would try to start something if only to give her an excuse to get in some action.

"Is Al Tarid located in Baqubah? What machinery does he have hidden there? How many soldiers does he command?"

For several minutes she zoned out. This place was as exciting as watching the desert sand shift past the perimeter fence at Riyadh. She found herself thinking back to some of the pranks she was planning with Lynndie when Captain Sarkowski went off shift.⁷

"Al Tarid can no sooner be captured than the tides or the evening winds be imprisoned."

That statement shook her out of the thoughts she was having. Even through the translation, the force of the words were quite at odds with the dominating power that the coalition forces possessed. What kind of threat did this sand-nigger think that anyone out here in the desert could pose against an armada of ships, aircraft carriers, fighter jets, and tanks? She decided to have some extra fun with this fella to help remind him of the proper order of things at Abu Ghraib.

Chapter Sixty-Six

A whole team of surveillance experts were already on the scene with infrared scopes trained on the cave's only entrance. The place wasn't very deep and there were no hiding spots, so the mission was considered low-risk. Any approaching vehicles would stand out against the cooling desert plain like a lump of coal in a snowfield, and a team had already swept the area earlier that day for IEDs and electronic weapons. Admiral Schmidt had even ordered a spyplane to circle overhead for an hour while they checked on movement in the area. Still, his fingers tapped restlessly on his lap as the three hummers crawled along the empty land making for a cliff face along who's edge sat a row of snipers watching carefully.

⁷ -Lynndie England became synonymous with human rights abuses at Abu Ghraib when pictures of her dragging prisoners along the floor surfaced.

The vehicles slowed and he instructed the soldiers to keep their infrared scopes scanning the surroundings at all times. Then he strode purposefully into the cave only to find it empty. He turned up the gain on his night-vision scope and scanned the whole interior to no avail. He was on time, he'd reached the spot alone, and Tarid supposedly knew that he would be here. So what was going on?

Despite the heavy backup, a faint chill managed to creep along the base of his spine. So he nearly jumped out of his socks when a computerized voice called out his name. After looking more carefully, he found a small microphone and speaker half the size of his blackberry sitting on a rocky shelf. Both were connected by a wire to a small circuit board and that led to another wire sticking right out of the cave's wall. Baffled by how the tech functioned, he made a conscious point of setting mere curiosity aside and asked who was speaking with.

"You may call me John." The low-pitched voice responded immediately. "I have contacted you to insist that your forces cease your campaign of death against the Iraqi people immediately."

The statement would have sounded hilarious if not for the aura of mystique that was now connected with the forces of Al Tarid. "Or else..." He purposefully said as little as possible in hopes that the stranger would slip up and reveal something that could lead them to the man's whereabouts.

"*Or else*, you and your allies will find yourselves in a precarious situation that will be difficult to explain to the citizens of your countries."

"You say countries, plural."

"Yes. Your 'coalition' may be *led* by United States. But with British, Australian, Spanish, Italian, and Polish forces supporting the attack. We also know about the clandestine Canadian troops stationed here."

Daley hadn't been given information on this, but there had obviously not been a need to know. It did however certify the extent of Al Tarid's intel which was unquestionably top notch.

"Our demands are simple Daley. The attacks will cease and the troops stationed around the oil fields of Iraq will be pulled back to the coast."

Knowing that his superiors would be reviewing this conversation, he knew that one line had to be emphasized with utmost strength. "If your intel is as broad as you infer, then you already know that we do not negotiate with terrorists."

"Terrorists?!" The cynical laughter sounding through the strange filter brought the hairs on the back of his neck to rise unconsciously once again. "If terrorism is 'the calculated use of violence to create a climate of fear in a population' then you should know full-well that this would not accurately describe our tactics. It does however describe precisely what your governments have been doing within Iraq. And it must end, immediately."

"You're saying that you have not used violence John? What about the troop convoy that was attacked last week. Or the--"

"Those were caused by the Iraqi people! Tarid may be cunning, but there are many others working to expel the infidel from this land. Our people have been bombed, shot at, run down, and even tortured--"

"That's ridiculous." He actually spat the words. "We do not torture people. The United States is a defender freedom and an adversary of tyranny."

"Oh you believe so? Then how do you explain the treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib? Do you think something that horrible could be committed without your government's knowledge?"

He was not aware of what happened at the prison in Abu Ghraib. The only thing that he knew was that only the most dangerous criminals were brought there in hopes of discovering any fiendish attacks that the inmates might be aware of. He didn't say this of course to the disembodied voice. He simply repeated that his country did not commit atrocities like using poison gas on it's own people.

"So you are saying that you're not aware of the torture memos which were written by your own leaders? They argue that the Geneva conventions do not apply out here beyond the U.S. borders."

"That is patently ridiculous. The American leadership is only interested in removing a deadly menace from power."

Perhaps *you* have been brainwashed by your leaders, but *I* have not. I can guarantee that all of what I just said can be verified by Mister Rumsfeld, Mr. Powell, or Ms. Rice."

There was a short pause and the faintest static could be heard before the conversation continued.

"Now, if I do not see an immediate end to attacks on our soil then the first action taken will be to publish images from the prison and the torture being committed there to Amnesty International. If you wish to test our patience beyond that, then you can expect further embarrassing information to be leaked to the American people."

"So it's blackmail that you're using then."

"Blackmail?" Despite the filter, he detected a hint of femininity within the bitter laugh thrown out by the speaker. "If exposing crimes against humanity is considered blackmail, then absolutely you can charge me guilty of it. Now, let us stop ya khara. Will your forces be ceasing their attacks, or not?"

He was a smart enough man to know that making any commitment in the place of his superiors would bring a swift end to his career and might even put him in prison. Tarid would know this too, so the purpose of the question for the moment eluded him. "I would have to discuss this with my superiors and most likely with General Powell."

"Of course you must. My question was not actually intended for you alone. But know this. All of you who will listen to this recording. Exposure of the atrocities in Abu Ghraib

is only one of the many options that our forces can unleash. If the attacks do not cease within three days you can expect very damaging retaliations on our part. And" the voice paused for several heartbeats. "you can be certain that it will be difficult for your leadership to retain power if we utilize the full extent of our resources."

He couldn't fathom what Tarid meant by that or what fiendish tactics might be used but there was not the slightest doubt in his mind that the voice on the other end of the line could *and would* carry out the threat without hesitation.

"Should my men be afraid for their lives then?"

Now the voice held a tone which reminded him of his first days in the Navy when he would crash in the flight simulator. "Oh Daley. You're a smarter man than that. As you yourself brought up to your superiors, the forces of Al Tarid follow a different pattern. The attack against your carrier was a retaliation against the murder of Iraqi people along Highway 80. Since that day there have been no deaths caused by our forces."

"You're serious? You really expect me to believe that not a single one of the IEDs that have struck our troops were planted by your people. Not a single soldier was murdered by one of your snipers."

"Lieutenant-Commander, the forces of Al Tarid have a weapon far more powerful than guns and more effective than 'regime change.' We have... the truth."

"Truth?" He had to make a conscious effort to keep from laughing at such an absurdity.

"You hide behind a microphone, with your voice scrambled and you talk about truth. You sir, know nothing of real truth."

"Would you deny the snipers waiting above you or the soldiers with their guns drawn around your Humvee? Would you pretend that I do not know about the spyplane circling above this area for the past 35 minutes? Any teenager would understand the need for me to remain hidden. Now cut the childish comments, they undermine your credibility."

Clearly he was not dealing with an amateur here. He made a mental note to play his hand more carefully. "Very well, John. So *if* the coalition forces cease any further attacks as you request. What does that mean from you?"

"Lieutenant-commander, we have no personal malice toward you or your soldiers. Most of you have been brainwashed by your government to believe that you are fighting for some esoteric value like 'freedom,' or 'democracy.' You wouldn't be in the military if you understood that your forces are merely a mercenary group for America's oil companies. Therefore if the attacks cease then the theft of supplies from your ships and military bases will also come to an end. Thefts such as Officer Nichols' night-vision goggles will no longer bring confusion among your military captains. You can all simply go home to your families and live out your lives in peace."

He'd heard about Amy Nichols from a casual conversation with one of his friends operating out of Camp Commando. The woman had been a tank commander during the first push into Nasiriyah. She'd received an official retribution for the loss of equipment. At the time it was suspected that some insurgent had snuck up on the group and stolen

it, but based on what 'John' had to say, perhaps a more dangerous weapon had been used against her group.

He spent a few precious seconds thinking carefully over the course of the conversation so far. Something about this conversation didn't add up. If this 'John' character was telling the truth (which he very much doubted) then the most powerful military force he had ever confronted was offering to simply cease aggression if the coalition forces simply pulled out of Iraq. This type of strategy had been used by politicians since the cold war and the chances that a cease-fire would *actually* be honored were close to zero. But something else nagged at him. As he thought about the suggestion that the military forces were nothing but a mercenary group for oil companies, it remained stuck in his mind. A stark obelisk sending its shadow like an accusatory finger pointing into the sand. It did seem strange that so many battalions were being stationed at oil refineries even as SCUD missile sites were sometimes ignored. It was no secret that the president and vice-president had both been oil men in their day..

"Lieutenant-commander?"

He had to remember that this whole conversation would be analyzed not only by General Meyers but most likely by the Secretary of the Navy to boot. He subconsciously shook his head and focused once more on this terrorist. "John you have to know that the American leadership will not look kindly on threats. You must also know that the American military is a thousand times as powerful as anything your leader Sadaam possesses."

"Sadaam is a worm! He is as much of a threat to the Shi'ite people as your soldiers are!"

Aha! Finally he managed to tease out some useful information. Now they knew that the forces of Al Tarid were not tied to the political leadership in Iraq. That should win him some points with the higher-ups.

"I apologize for that assumption. Very well John. I will bring everything that you have said to my superiors. Is there anything further that you have to share?"

"Only this Daley. It would be worth your while to examine which governments your country has attacked and ask yourself what those governments represent. You may learn a thing or two."

Well, the insurgent definitely showed himself off as an educated man, but it was gonna be a cold day in hell before he took the word of some Muslim extremist over that of his own government.

"I will think that over John. I hope that the next time we speak it will be on better terms."

"As do I Lieutenant-commander, and" there was brief pause before the voice continued.

"I apologize if our actions caused you to be demoted."

Chapter Sixty-Seven

"Do you think their people will accept your offer?" The woman showed the first sign of hope in her eyes in weeks and she wished that the sentiment could be shared. But she had little belief that any of the man's leaders would be intimidated so easily.

"My friend, unfortunately I have as much faith in the colonizers leaving us alone as I do of Sadaam giving equal rights to the Sunnis."

"But Safia. You actually apologized to that guy who was the captain of the ship that attacked your father."

In her years of researching the foreigners, she had come to learn that the European saying that the pen was mightier than the sword often rang true. "Naja of course I don't really feel sorry. Their ship captains earn more in one month than most of our neighbors get in a year. But it did two things. One it gained major points with a man in power who has just the faintest of misgivings about how the military power is applied. Two it demonstrates my ability to know anything I wish to find out about their military operations. Remember that their soldiers are taught to view us all as crazed and fanatical terrorists. By humanizing the relationship I have hopefully taken them by surprise.

Looking over at one of the hacked satellite feeds, she watched two fighter planes take off from a ship called 'Abraham Lincoln.' Searching through the order manifest, she found that they were each carrying 200 pound bombs. This was all the information she needed to know that her effort had been as futile as cleaning sand from her clothes. She immediately uploaded the heart-breaking images from the American prison through a series of email servers to a director with Amnesty International. It was unlikely that even this would shake the colonialists' resolve. But it would at least prove to them that she wasn't bluffing.

What they needed more urgently, was a strike that was both very public and VERY embarrassing. She thought long and hard about what could be done to properly embarrass the colonialists. Unfortunately though her emotions were too convoluted. She felt trapped between hate for the people who ordered the bombs dropped on her people and sadness for the victims living in Baghdad and Basra. For the time being the best she could do was distract herself by instead focusing on creating more of the lithium titanate batteries to increase the available surge power. This would be useful for when they finally did figure out the proper target.

She was just in the middle of writing calculations to have the computer solve when Naja pointed out reports of bombs falling on Kahtaniya, with several dozen people feared dead. This of course did nothing to help her concentration and she gripped the computer mouse so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

Once again her finger itched to simply transport the architects of death out here just so she could watch them die. She actually had to use her right hand to physically hold her other hand and reinforce in her mind that she would not allow herself to be a murderer. She would not give in to rage or vengeance. And if she ever did feel overtly tempted, she needed only to think back in her mind of the boy who's cold body must still lay in a shallow grave out in the the middle of an otherwise empty desert.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

General Powell walked calmly into the room showing only his trademark stoicism as he glanced at the other generals. Being a black man in a position of power meant having to constantly hold his emotions in check so as to keep the others from seeing him as a security threat.

He briefly acknowledged the six other men in a meeting that would have seemed unfathomable only three months before. The men, their medals glinting beneath the overhead florescent lights, were all seasoned strategists themselves, each with extensive experience fighting in various conflicts. But nothing would prepare them for the type of enemy they would now be facing.

"Men, I have called you in here to inform you that we are now facing a threat more terrible than Osama Bin Laden and Adolf Hitler put together." With the deep timbre of his voice still reverberating, general Powell gave a brief pause, allowing his colleagues to absorb the monumental gravity of that claim.

"It is clear based on our intelligence that not only is there a source in Iraq who is aware of our intention to take control of the resources over there, but that they are willing to take whatever steps are necessary in order to undermine the American people's confidence in our leadership."

"That's impossible. Sadaam doesn't have anywhere near the resources to threaten us." A slightly younger general with a distinct Kentucky twang in his voice looked at the African-American with disbelief. "That's just crazy."

Powell lost none of his composure as he gazed calmly back at the man. "Gentlemen, I do not expect any of you to believe the scale of this threat without sufficient proof. That proof comes in the form of a video that was passed to me through General Quincy here." He nodded briefly at the younger man. "If you will turn down the lights Mr. Johnson, we can begin."

Two wooden doors had been pulled aside to show an entertainment center that any one of the men could only dream of keeping in their basement. The television screen came to life, but all that it showed was a darkened room with a light dimly shining on a lone figure. The image was grainy, with little color and no detail in the background. The figure was wearing a deformed mask from an unfamiliar horror movie. The lighting, the

contrast, the elongated mouth, and the hollow black eyes gave even hardened military shoulders a slight shudder.

The voice spoke in English, but with a heavy Arabic accent. "I am addressing you as military leaders of the American armed forces. Your intention to wrest even greater control of the black tar laying beneath the sands of our country through the use of soldiers and bombs will not be tolerated. You may know me as the person who has prevented your satellites from giving you accurate pictures of Iraqi terrain. You may also remember me as the person who brought about two attacks on your carrier ship CV-61. If you are familiar with these events then you know that we have far more skill and ability than you would normally expect from a foreigner."

The image of the eerie person faded to black and the screen now showed a heavily damaged city in some Middle-Eastern province. The first scene showed a U.S. helicopter hovering above and to the side of a building that was clearly a hospital. The helicopter fired hundreds of rounds of ammunition, releasing a massive hailstorm of glass shards to rain down on the street below. The massive thunder from the machine guns could be heard even above the whine of the helicopter's engine, but as the craft moved to the far side of the building, a chorus of agonizing wails began to supersede the fading aircraft's chatter. Then the screen briefly went black before again showing the same hospital sometime later. A row of military figures on the roof of the hospital were shooting at small figures on the ground struggling to escape across a shimmering sea littering the street. People fell randomly and one person who went to check on a fallen body was themselves riddled with bullets. The screen again went dark before showing a different scene at street level. There were people huddling in the shadows of buildings and a few figures in the street calling for help. One man lay in the street with his leg covered in a pool of blood.

A regular creaking sound grew in volume until the right side of the screen was populated by two U.S. army tanks slowly moving across the pavement. Each tank sported a soldier watching the street cautiously from behind a machine gun. As the men in the room watched, the injured person laying in the street saw the tanks and when his voice grew hoarse from screaming he struggled to drag his body out of the path of the oncoming vehicles. But he must have lost too much blood because the effort was futile as the tank treads finally crushed his midsection and he grew silent.

As the screen faded to black again, every jaw in the room hung low and every eye was bulging from the shock of what they saw. Colin Powell was the only person displaying any calm, having already seen the video earlier that day.

"If you do not comply with our demands for an end to the attacks then I will include this video in one of your national newscasts--"

"This is an outrage!" General McCaffrey was the first to break out of his shock. His hands were white-knuckled on the table and his eyes were spitting fire. "They couldn't possibly do that!"

With eerie timing, the digitally adjusted voice seemed almost to respond directly to the outburst. "In case you do not believe us capable of infiltrating your news programs, you are welcome to examine footage from the NBC interview of Stu Cohen from last week."

There was a brief bit of static before the voice continued. "You have until the 28th of this month to remove all mentions of Sadaam Husein as a threat in your broadcasts to the international community."

"This is ridiculous! How could a bunch of sand-nigge"

"Sir you will mind your tone."

General Moseley's cheeks morphed through several shades of auburn as he continued.

"Yes sir. With all due respect. How could a group of terrorists living in a lifeless desert claim to have this level of sophistication?!"

"The answer is that they can't. There's no way on earth that anyone in Iraq has access to technology so advanced."

"Has anyone looked into that claim regarding the NBC interview?"

General Powell responded immediately. "Yes Mr. Johnson. We've had several technicians go through the interview from start to finish and there are over a dozen increments within the first four minutes where the video of Mr. Cohen's face was superimposed with that of a human skull. Keep in mind that this switch was very brief, about 0.004 seconds and so it would not have been obvious to viewers. It was clearly intended as a warning to those of us with video analysis software." The general paused briefly while he pulled up a piece of paper. "Now I've been in contact with the head of NBC as well as some of the staff working on the night in question. They all claim that there was no way that anyone in their studio would have reason to manipulate the footage in such a way.

However, the interview was not aired live, and so the digital version could have been accessed from their servers long before it was aired. There would have been plenty of time for an outside attacker to pull the video, make changes, and then upload it back to their server. In fact were it not for the claim by our Iraqi friend, this could have ended the careers of several upstanding news technicians over at NBC."

"This is impossible!"

"So it would seem, was the idea that a group of Iraqi terrorists could land themselves on the deck of one of our aircraft carriers." The look that General Powell cast on Quincy told of a loosening of blame regarding that incident. "And if this group does in fact have the capability of hacking into our satellite feed then we should assume that emails and sat-phone communications can be hijacked as well. Because of this I am re-instituting the zero electronic signature protocol used at the end of Desert Storm."

"But what can our forces do to neutralize this threat?"

Not a single eye met Johnson's gaze for the span of a dozen heartbeats. Finally Powell's deep baritone cut through the murmur. "We have several dozen spies scattered around

the major population centers of Iraq. The price for information leading to this group's location is higher even than the bounty for Bin Laden. The moment that we have a set of coordinates I can guarantee you there will be swift and overwhelming retaliation. This Tarid character will not stay alive 30 seconds further if I have anything to say about it."

Chapter Sixty-Nine

The seeds were planted. But she held little confidence that the pale ones would listen to reason. Despite her wish that reasonable conversation could be used to calm their differences, it seemed that Naja had been right all along about the pale ones. So they both began laying the ground work for a more advanced incursion on the American news media. By now Naja had learned a great deal about software and viruses. She wasn't yet able to crack into government computers, but with a little help she was able to make some inroads into the network servers at a company called CBS.

Naja was most of the way through with a virus that would allow them to insert content when a rumble vibrated through the walls and a loud beeping began just a few seconds after. Both heads whipped around in shock to see the power supply backup sounding its alarm that the trickling power feeding her battery bank was down to zero.

"Back up everything on the spare drives right now!" They still had a few hours of battery life since the power wall was continuously trickle-charged over the course of an entire day. But there was a huge amount of data on her seven computers and if they ran out of power completely, then she wouldn't be able to read their drives. While Naja jumped over to another seat and began the process of moving files, she focused on turning off all non-essential items. In the time since the attack on the towers, she'd become lax on her power use. There was so much equipment that would have been destroyed in that American glass tower that she'd decided to keep many of the lights, a music player with high quality speakers, and two electric cooktops. She turned off the hot water that was nearly ready for tea and unplugged the music and speakers. The lights were next to go until they were left with a single florescent bulb. That would do since the computer screens put out their own light.

With all of that accomplished, she searched through the few chat rooms that local Iraqis used to communicate with each other.

"There was an explosion."

"What? How far away?"

"I don't know. Pretty far, but I could hear it from up here on the hill."

She typed a nondescript message of her own to keep the conversation flowing. "I was on the phone with my sister in Baqubah and she has no power."

It was several tense minutes before someone finally replied that they heard a news report that an American plane had destroyed the power plant.

"Abu Reiha!"

Naja looked over in her direction, but in the dim light her expression was muted.

"Safia, if they destroyed the power plant, then they must know where you are.

That's exactly what made her so furious. Perhaps the pale ones had known where she was all along, but they didn't act until she threatened their media. It seemed that keeping the American people in the dark was even more important than keeping a stranglehold on the oil supply. This knowledge was both a blessing and a curse. It meant that she'd undoubtedly hit upon a sore spot but she was also poking at the most deadly cobra ever to rear its head over their land.

"And we haven't developed a long term solution for electric power. So we're dead in the water." She barely glanced at Naja before slamming her fist against the desk with enough force to knock one of the monitors over.

What on earth would they do? Without electricity there was nothing she could do to prevent the world's largest military from running roughshod over the whole of Arabia.

With the computer work finished, she went over and attacked her punching bag in hopes of releasing the pent-up energy before she ended up destroying more of her stolen equipment. After all, it might not be able to replace a computer monitor from now on.

Chapter Seventy

"Salam alaychem." The man sitting out front of the market greeted her with a smile and a wink. The men knew that a wink was as much suggestion as was permitted. A year ago she had gone into town to get cloth and a man about her age had put a hand over her mouth and dragged her into an empty alley. He'd managed to get half her clothes off before someone thankfully passed by and yelled for him to stop. The other man threw a rock at her attacker and helped her into his shop where she was able to repair her modesty.

The incident had shaken her so much that she'd gone straight back to Safia empty handed. The girl had demanded to know what happened, and though she tried to hide the shameful experience, her friend possessed an uncanny skill at learning the truth.

A few months later when she was in town again, the boy had been walking on crutches and refused to even look in her direction. The sight had made her furious, and she'd raised her voice for the first in months with Safia. But the lesson had been learned and nobody ever mistreated her again.

She wandered into the market and gazed longingly at the containers of dates, tahinni, and tinned lamb. Looking down with one dusty hand she stared at the little money that they had available to buy some barley and dried tomatoes. With no power to run the transporter, they began running low on many essentials like food and hardware. The

little money they had would have to stretch longer than either of them would have liked now.

A strange touch startled her and a piece of paper was thrust into her hand. But as she spun around there was nobody with whom she might connect with the subtle movement. Opening the paper, she only saw a few words.

Can't reach Al Tarid

Please meet me next to the canal in 20 minutes

It had to be one of Al Shad's men, but she worried that perhaps one of Sadaam's soldiers knew that the infamous Al Tarid was here, and, sought the enormous price on her head. In the span of a heartbeat the market was transformed. Every face became sinister. Every glance was filled with hidden malice.

After the horrible battle with Safia last year, she came to realize (not with a little shame) that the woman was right. They simply couldn't afford to trust strangers when the people of Iraq were so desperately poor. Any one of these men within reach could be an Iranian spy, an American in disguise, or even just a desperate bounty hunter.

Unable to put the items she'd selected into a bag, she watched frozen as the man behind the counter did it for her, eyeing her as if she were a simpleton. Everything was a confused mess before she finally had the supplies in her bag and was able to make it out of the store.

The canal was easily 300 meters in the wrong direction and she was ready to blow off the man's attempt and make her way back to the shelter. But then a disturbing thought broke the surface of her consciousness. How much worse could things really get? As it was they were living in a cave with little access to the blue sky, and with no power it would be impossible to get electrical parts not to mention more valuable necessities like food and water. Despite the increasing heat she wavered along the side of the road for a good quarter hour. Curiosity and desperation tugged her to the left while common sense and safety tugged her in the other direction.

It wasn't until an American hummer sped by fast enough to send her into a coughing fit that she decided to take the chance. Fuck the Americans. Without Safia standing beside her, the risk now was entirely her own. She decided that she didn't like the feeling of being that woman's pawn. She spun around one last time and with a more determined stride, headed in the direction of the canal.

Her jupeh was nearly soaked and her face was red by the time she was most of the way to her destination. The random trucks roaring past on the road made things worse with their streams of dust streaming out to envelop her. If this hadn't been her only human contact in the better part of a month, she might have abandoned the exercise altogether. But as things were, the need for fresh conversation was nearly as pressing as the need for food these days.

She carefully crossed the street and hid among the reeds while she waited to see who would show up. Now on top of the noise from traffic, she also had to deal with the smell

of the brackish water moving at a snail's pace towards the culvert that went under the road. She held the jupeh up against her mouth and nose to make the experience slightly more tolerable. As the seconds ticked by, her determination began to ebb and the doubt crept in so quietly that she barely noticed until her hands began trembling.

"You assist Al Tarid, do you not?"

The sudden voice behind her brought her to jump half a meter in the air. She came within a hairsbreadth of falling headfirst into the disgusting water before grabbing for a branch and steadying herself.

"Would you like a hand?" A man of about her father's age, with a speckling of gray in his plentiful beard looked at her wearing an expression of concern.

Touching a stranger's hand would be highly frowned upon if anybody were watching and that single offer confirmed that this man did not work for Sadaam. Her expression must have given her away because the man held up both hands and kept his voice calm.

I promise that I mean you no harm. I offered to assist Al Shad because I live in Baqubah. Or what's left of it. Those of us who wish for freedom from the double-bladed sword of oppression have been more than happy to offer help to anyone who fights to protect our safety.

Even though Safia was the brains behind their operation, a slight blush grew on her cheeks at the compliment. After all, she had learned a great deal about electrical things and Safia had entrusted her to install the powerwall that expanded the range of the transporter. But if the man noticed, he held a respectful silence.

Having learned a great deal from her friend, she made a point not to offer information too quickly. Instead she asked the man what he wanted. She watched his face for any clues, but in the skill of reading people she was much less capable than her associate.

"Al Shad has become very concerned since there has been no contact since the bombing last week. He was worried that something terrible may have happened."

Finally she found her voice and her strength after shifting to more stable footing. "And what may I call you?"

"You may call me simply Kazim." The man offered nothing more.

Still worried that she might be giving information to a man whose sincerity she could not gauge, she nevertheless took the risk and told Kazim about their reliance on the power plant to run the computers and other equipment. She stressed that it would be too dangerous to use a power source that would expose them to the enemy planes flying overhead.

For a split second she worried that Kazim would run away with the valuable information. But instead the man sounded relieved and the sincerity showed through in his eyes.

"Thank you for trusting me with this. I will share the information with Al Shad and we will see what help can be offered."

He wished her a good day and she walked silently back toward the empty shack that hid the entrance to her only home. The whole way back she worried whether the decision to tell Kazim had been a wise one.

And she was right to be worried.

Chapter Seventy-One

Rick gazed morosely at the computer monitor. His seat creaked with the 220 pounds of flesh rocking gently back and forth on it. Despite escaping jail, it had been made clear to him in no uncertain terms that his continued freedom was closely tied to how useful he could be to Mr. Montila. The man had been the first person to meet him when he was brought to the blank room and he'd been the most frequent visitor since then. Montila had black hair that was cut almost to military length and he always sported an unwrinkled navy blue suit. The man had this look in his eyes that made him feel like his very soul was being cracked open and laid bare. He gave Rick the feeling that he could easily have been a stand-in for one of those 'Mr. Smith' characters from *The Matrix*.

Montila had told him several times how impressive their people (he never disclosed who those 'people' were) found his skills to be. But he also hinted, with just the perfect degree of subtlety, that things would look very bad for Rick if there wasn't complete cooperation with those 'people.' So in the end he'd described in vivid detail the various techniques he used in cracking several internet security algorithms. If Montila himself was impressed, there was not the slightest spark of it in his eyes. But at the very least he seemed to have passed some kind of test because the jail sentence was thrown out in favor of community service and employment with the FBI.

The first job he'd been given after he was released from the holding room was to look into the cellphone records of a man who was said to be running cocaine into Florida. Montila had told him that they couldn't nail down whether the man was doing it by air or by boat. That's what they had recruited him for.

It hadn't been difficult to crack the man's phone records once he was given access to an incredible GenTech machine with a dual-core processor. He found out the man's trip plans and who the man would be meeting in Fort Lauderdale.

That was all years ago and while his security clearance and salary had gone up since that first bust, so had the difficulty of the work. His current assignment was the most difficult case he'd ever come across. Three months ago Montila had told him that he was being sub-contracted out to the pentagon and they flew him to D.C. First class no less. It had been the most luxurious trip he'd ever taken and he'd basked in the comfort, and the complementary wine.

A military fellow named Sergeant McAllister had met him at a plain looking government building in a well-furnished, oak paneled room. The man had towered over him in height

but only outweighed him by a few pounds. Of course this man's bulk was pure muscle and there was no question who would win in a wrestling match.

He invited Rick to have a seat in one of the leather chairs before sliding a piece of paper across the varnished oak table between them. Without being given a hint of information, he was told to sign a non-disclosure agreement. Looking over the paper it was clear this wasn't just one of those 'we can pursue legal action if you talk' kind of deals. This one explicitly stated that revealing information on what was to be disclosed would implicate him as an enemy of the state and he could face life in prison. There was not even the hint given to the possibility of refusal here. The man simply waited in a chair with a blank expression until Rick hesitantly signed his name at the bottom.

The Sergeant then told him that he would be working on a matter of national security with the U.S. Navy. No information was given on the background of his target except that the man they were tracking was considered more important than even Osama Bin Laden. This alone was impressive enough that he threw aside his earlier misgivings and took to the project with gusto as soon as they showed him to his workstation.

Apparently somebody had hacked into the servers at NBC and inserted subliminal messages during an interview with someone named Stu Cohen. McAllister had tasked him with discovering how this terrorist had gotten into the studio servers and to see what information could be found on the terrorist.

He was confused as to what a computer hacker infiltrating a news station's server had to do with the Navy, but obviously that information wouldn't be divulged. He was undeniably caught up in the net that he'd let himself fall into the minute he'd started hacking Chase Manhattan's computers.

As he looked through the server records, he was amazed at the quality of the hack. Whoever this guy was, there was no doubt that he was *very* advanced. It was no wonder that the government was worried. He searched for any of the signatures that were often left by hackers to verify their involvement and skill. As he looked deeper into the code, it was clear that the guy had used nearly a dozen anonymous servers to bounce the signal. And there was not even the hint of a signature. For a week he traced the code from a server in China to one in Amsterdam, and another in Melbourne. The trail seemed to grow cold three times over until he momentarily considered defeat.

The Sergeant was happy enough that he'd been able to isolate the back-door malware code which allowed the person to alter the video footage at NBC. But Rick still wasn't satisfied. He didn't like playing second-fiddle when it came to computer hacking, especially to some terrorist who posed a threat to the sovereignty of the United States. One way or another he was going to find out who this man was.

Chapter Seventy-Two

"You did WHAT?"

Naja's face immediately flushed and her hands balled themselves into fists that would obviously have been useless against her friend. Within her stomach, anger and fear fought a battle for dominance over her mouth, with the latter finally gaining the upper hand.

"I-I'm sorry Safia. I only gave the most cryptic information." Her eyes seemed to grow in proportion to the rest of her which looked like it wanted to squeeze itself into her blouse.

The woman's posture did nothing to ease her fury. "But you let someone know that the Americans struck the right target." It took every scrap of self-control in her possession to keep from slapping the woman. Of all the intransigence! She'd given Naja a place to stay, trusted the woman with her secrets, even continued to let her stay with her after the last screw up. Now it was all just being thrown away, for nothing. "Naja, how could you do such a thing? Again! Even if we were to pick up and leave right this minute, the Americans would most likely destroy Baqubah, just to be certain. What made you think that some random stranger in town could be trusted like this?!"

The room grew cloudy as tears of fury worked their way to the surface and she wiped a frustrated hand across her face. There could be no showing weakness right now.

"I did not think that--"

"Of course you did not think Naja! You didn't think last time, and you didn't think today. *You just can't seem to recognize that actions have consequences!*" Before she did something that she would regret, she threw her fist instead at one of the monitors, gazing in horror as it flew from the table and smashed against the floor. "Ya Ibn el Sharmouta!"⁸

Naja flinched at her words. But that still wasn't good enough. They needed to be prepared in case this hidden room was discovered.

"Our work is finished. I'm instituting operation Zayn. Immediately."

Naja's hands flew up to cover her mouth which was already hanging slack. "You're serious Safia? But it was only one man--"

"One man who will undoubtedly tell others." She grabbed a socket wrench and began unbolting the driver plate on the main transformer. "I want this equipment in unrecognizable pieces by morning."

She didn't see the streams of tears that spilled relentlessly along Naja's smooth face. But she did hear them, and the hurt only built up her anger into a mountainous cauldron.

With no time to waste on the punching bag, she could only focus her acrimony on the hardware connecting the various lasers to their mounting plates. The whole time she

8 Son of a bitch

worried over how long it would take for the information that her 'friend' had leaked to spread from the one man to a military general before it led to orders for an attack on their location. The lives that would be destroyed could dwarf all the destruction that she'd been reading about over the past few months. It brought her to once again wipe tears angrily from her eyes as she continued to concentrate on her work.

Chapter Seventy-Three

Intisar watched the landscape carefully. Although they rarely saw activity out here along the deserted suburb, it would only take a single IED, left by some angry villager, to destroy his hard-won and valuable prize. Nasir guided the truck along the road, also keeping a close eye for anything dangerous. But he had his hands full just keeping the ancient truck from stalling. Finding a vehicle at all these days was difficult enough. Finding fuel for it was another matter on top of it. If they got noticed by an American pilot at this point it would be the end for all of them.

He'd impressed his commander no small amount when he managed to snag a two-kilowatt diesel generator from a burned out hospital in Masul. It was a prize that every freedom fighter in Iraq would kill for. And they all knew it.

But this particular item was also the most sought-after equipment within Al Shad's ragtag army. Why the man would be so focused on such a thing was not revealed to the men. All that was known was that Al Shad would give a week's rations to the man who brought one back to his base.

A short burst of gunshots sent his eyes to pirouette towards the only landmark nearby. Moving to shield his eyes, a burst of pain halted his arm and he gritted his teeth while aiming careful shots at the distant crop of boulders.

Though his shots swung wide, Al Amim's gun found the soldiers and Nasir pulled them to a halt at the closest point. Gripping his shoulder with the other hand he was forced to watch as Sarif carefully made his way over to the point where the shots came from.

Five minutes later the man returned triumphantly with two British rifles and a handgun. He leaped into the truck bed and urged Nasir to move out before somebody else noticed them. Thankfully the rest of the trip was uneventful, as he clearly wouldn't be able to properly aim the fancy new rifles with his shoulder spurting blood with every pothole. Instead he focused on gritting his teeth and keeping from yelling when the pain grew intolerable.

Once they got to the base he let the others unload the equipment while he went to see Abrim about bandaging up his bullet wound. But before he left, Al Shad's right hand man stood in his way. "Intisar I want to thank you for helping to acquire this. The mission was

incredibly dangerous, but Nasir tells me that you showed a heroism unlike he'd seen since the days of fighting with Al Tarid. You have my respect young man."

While he had hoped that their leader would appreciate the risks the three of them had taken, this was more than he would've expected. For a second he was at a loss for words. But then he shifted slightly and a grimace surfaced on his face.

"Don't worry about it for the moment. Go see what Abrim can do for that and we can talk later." The man patted him gently on his good shoulder before walking back to help check on their new prize.

Chapter Seventy-four

There was no obvious indication, but somehow she knew that it was night. All around her the landscape had a muted tone. Yet despite the poor visibility, she somehow sensed that there was movement nearby. She was laying down against a slight mound in the sand when she noticed the ground beneath her shifting. On either side new depressions formed and soon enough there were fingers, human fingers reaching up through the sand.

"Nggngggngggngg." Was felt more than heard and as she looked down, there were a pair of cold, lifeless eyes staring directly into hers. All the while, that strange moan could be felt vibrating beneath her. Then the cold hands began to wrap themselves around her throat.

It took only a few more seconds to see the faint outlines of her sleeping mat and the shadow of Naja just two meters away. The thin strip of light-emitting diodes showed no movement and the woman's breathing was slow and even. But something had roused her out of the dream. Then it was there again. 'Nggngggngggg.' A vibration so faint that she barely recognized it even when she cocked her head toward the door.

Leaping out of the chair she'd fallen into, she shook Naja's arm. "Someone is coming, grab a weapon and be ready."

They had discussed this possibility at long length and she'd gone over several dozen scenarios with her friend. Every week she made sure that Naja practiced a different response to possible attack. But that didn't stop her from second-guessing herself as she finally chose an Australian sniper rifle with laser sight.

Listening to the sound, it was clear that the noise wasn't coming from the air, so it wasn't likely to be the imperialists. It was possible that Sadaam's presidential guard had found her, but since she had been the one to attack the American ship, it wasn't likely that he would consider her a target anymore. What did worry her though, was a sneak attack by some colonial elite forces soldiers. *This* would be the most difficult group to take down and she'd instructed Naja to follow her lead, but not fire until instructed. Until then, she

sat with her one closest friend at an unknown tunnel entrance staring out into the nearly pitch black emptiness.

Chapter Seventy-five

Captain Jacob Doonsly set down the troop roster he'd been looking through when private Kristoff informed him that his guests had arrived. Setting the report back in its folder on the plywood desk, he gave a casual salute to Daley and Johanson. The latter handed him the latest from an attack on a possible location for target #1.

Looking over at the report he saw with satisfaction that the satellite images showed the Baqubah power plant littered with craters. "So you think we got them?" He'd invited their only expert on 'Al Tarid' (as the strange magician was known) out to Riyadh which was now the head of operations for the area. Quincy had made it clear that he wasn't looking to risk another carrier attack, and so they were forced to try an airstrike from the slightly more distant base at Dammam. Using a human pilot and carefully studied maps it had been hoped that the pilot would have no more trouble hitting the plant than a drone would. Thankfully for both of them, the pilot had done his job perfectly.

Daley took his time to answer, thinking back to the deeply disturbing conversation back at the cave with the disembodied voice of a master strategist. "Sir, whoever it is we're dealing with is one slippery motherfucker. If we're lucky, we may have taken out his power source, but I won't bet on total victory until we have a few months of clear recon from our satellites."

Daley was looking more at home in his commanders stripes and his new grey-speckled mustache, but the caution in his tone was one that Doonsly could sympathize with. The stories surrounding the attack years ago still ricocheted around in conversations among the senior ranks. What had once been thought of as willful neglect on Daley's part was now seen as a far more frightening breach of Naval might. This was why all eye-witnesses had been ordered to secrecy and any reports mentioning the incident labeled 'top secret.'

He turned from the report to face the man in charge of local operations within Basrah. Captain Johanson was a tall and gallant man who'd earned three medals fighting on the ground during Desert Shield. He'd taken out no less than three of Sadaam's tanks during the battle of Khafji. The two of them occasionally played cards after lunch when his schedule allowed. But this was neither the time nor the place for casual banter.

This morning Johanson commanded no less than fifty-two tanks and all of them had to be kept clear of sand and in fighting shape for the moment their commander in chief gave the green light for an offensive.

He turned from Daley to face his old friend. "Johanson, what's your assessment of the situation in Baqubah?"

The captain's face was brimming with a confidence that contrasted sharply with his fellow. "Sir, I can have two dozen tanks and forty hummers set up in a perimeter around the city within 10 hours. There won't be so much as a cockroach getting in or out of that dump. I can guarantee it."

Doonsly ran a hand through his graying crew cut as if in memory of the thick hair that he used to sport. There would have been time to drink half a beer waiting for his answer, but as he was the senior officer nobody was in a position to rush him.

Finally, that answer came in a voice more somber than Johanson normally expected from his friend. "Well we did manage to get a few satellite photos of grids 43-delta, 58-bravo, and 27-alpha without interference. Daley. What's your thoughts on this?"

"Sir. I would give any serious incursion a little more time until we can be certain that their trophy soldier has really been taken out."

"You're that worried?"

"Sir. A number of men are quite unsettled by the strange happenings on the USS Virginia."

At this captain Johanson looked at him like he'd just gone AWOL. "Sirs, with all due respect, this is a military operation. We have the entire might of the U.S. Army poised to take this region down. Does it really make sense to hold back and give their forces time to re-group?"

Doonsly's eyes were a gun turret pivoting away from Daley until they had Johanson in their sights. He wished that he could tell the man about the hummers which had just vanished and re-appeared dozens of miles away but with no fuel and no battery. As it was though, this was classified.

"Captain there is information that you are not aware of which has strong relevance to the current situation. I have been informed by General Moseley himself that Commander Daley's opinion is to be taken with the utmost seriousness."

Johanson's smooth face grew crimson as the blood rose to the surface. "Damn it sir, we're not sitting around a campfire telling ghost stories. We have a ships, satellites, assault vehicles, tomohawk missiles, and thousands of soldiers poised to take this country down. Are you really suggesting that our forces should let a group of hajis sitting in a cave prevent us from taking what steps are necessary to ensure American sovereignty in the region?"

This brought the normally even-toned captain to stand up and raise his voice for the first time that day. "Captain Johanson you are excused."

Johanson's reaction would've been comical in any other place. He stared straight ahead for the span of two breaths and his mouth fell open. Then he closed it and opened again like a fish laying helpless on the sand. Then at last seeing no expression of support on either man's face, he tightened his jaw, got up, and walked out of the room.

Now that they were alone, Doonsly gave him a look that would've melted your average recruit. "Daley, that man is the best damned tactician that I've encountered from army personnel. So you'd better know that your reputation is on the line here. You may have dodged a court-martial once, but you can be sure that if this shit goes south I won't hesitate to throw you under the bus, head first."

Knowing that he had the support of someone like Moseley gave him the confidence to stand his ground now with the captain. "Sir while I may not be at liberty to reveal specifics, I will say that the forces that we are up against are like nothing the U.S. armed forces have confronted in our entire history. I believe in my opinion 100 percent."

Chapter Seventy-Six

As always, her instinct was as dependable as the flow of the Euphrates. Safia watched intently as two pairs of headlights turned off the road and halted by the empty shelter where Naja had emerged from only two days before. She watched through her night-vision scope for only a couple of seconds as one man exited the vehicle and walked purposefully toward the empty shack. Dialing up the brightness on the scope taken from an Australian Navy ship, she saw the rifle casually slung over the man's back and watched two other men stand at casual attention next to their vehicle. That's when she fired a single bullet one centimeter over the lead man's head.

Instantly the man fell to one knee and futilely covered his scalp with both hands. "Please do not shoot. We are friends. No guns, no guns." He spoke perfect Arabic, but that did not guarantee that wasn't enough to guarantee he was on her side. The man was clearly lying about his intent if he was implying that his own men were unarmed.

Looking again through her scope she clearly saw four men searching the area with rifle-mounted lights. Two were using the nearest truck as protection, another scanned from the second truck while the fourth was on his belly near the front bumper. The precaution was futile of course and if they had known that, nobody would have brought weapons of any kind.

Speaking softly into a recorder, she tossed it four meters away where it sat for three more seconds before the timer wound down. "If you do not want to be killed, tell the three men with you to lay their rifles on the ground and all of you line up in front of your vehicles."

It hadn't been necessary to use much volume on the recorder, as her shelter was half a kilometer from the nearest house and even the gunfire wasn't likely to attract any serious attention with the kind of antics that the coalition were often engaged in. Out here the only sounds were the highly infrequent trucks dumping random garbage.

The only concern she had right now was the threat of gunfire from the men standing out against the cold desert air. Watching the men carefully, she kept track of each one as

they lined up in front of the nearest truck with a small pile of weapons lying on the ground in front of them. Thankfully, it looked like she wouldn't have to engage in further intimidation with this group. At least, she sorely hoped so.

The recorder was out of reach now, but it didn't seem like it would be necessary anymore. So now she revealed her position by calling out to them to state the purpose of their visit.

"We are here to assist the one known as Al Tarid who's victories against the oppressors have brought much celebration to the Shi'ite people. It has been said that the power generation system for the operation here was destroyed by the invaders. Therefore we have brought a large generator and 350 liters of fuel. It is hoped that Tarid will be able to mask the exhaust enough to use this generator until a more permanent power source can be acquired."

As necessary as her caution was, the shame of having fired on one of Al Shad's trusted soldiers brought a crimson color to her cheeks that was thankfully invisible beneath the waning crescent moon. She stared at the man who'd spoken and the words that she tried to utter lay instead caught somewhere in her throat. What could she say to this? She'd insulted Naja, fired a bullet at the nameless freedom fighter, and brought distrust to very people who were the sole force keeping the invaders [at bay].

The tension was thicker than the tiny hill of sand that she'd chosen as vantage point. What would this man think of her for showing such cruelty and suspicion? How could their movement survive if they couldn't even trust each other? It wasn't until she felt Naja's questioning eyes drilling into the back of her head that she managed to find her voice at last.

"Brave soldiers. I am sorry for the-" What could she call it. 'Misunderstanding?' That sounded like something a group of politicians would say. "Sorry for the lack of trust. We had no idea that anybody would be visiting today."

There was tension in the man's voice too when he responded, but the words were sensible enough. "It is understandable. There was no way to give you notice that we were coming. Hopefully this gift will prevent any further... misunderstandings."

She almost chuckled inside on hearing that. Instead though she instructed Naja to meet the men and show them where to place the generator. It would be far too suspicious if one of them saw her own face, even under the ephemeral light from their rifle lamps. Instead she told them that she would relay their kindness to Al Tarid.

There was no way to imagine how she might recover her good name after doing something so enormously stupid and the guilt of it would plague her for days afterward. But at least now she had the means to run a few computers and hopefully interfere with the invaders' satellites again. All she had to do was dig out enough space for the generator and make a hole to mask the heat of its exhaust.

Chapter Seventy-Seven

He was in a nicer room this time, but even here the sun shone through a jagged hole where some kind of artillery had blasted through. Lugal had gained some level of trust from Al Shad's forces, but he had to stay careful. Anyone with real money these days was suspected of working with the invaders and blowing his cover would mean that he'd never get that nice car that the man in the email had promised him.

In thinking about it, he was beginning to feel that any money would be better spent on a bullet-proof vest given how much fighting was going on. It wasn't just Sadaam's men or the soldiers now. Many of his own people were desperate enough to get food with the help of a knife or gun. There was no way to tell if the guns being pointed by random groups of men had bullets or not. A man would have to be crazy to take the chance of finding out.

He reached under his bed for the old valise that he packed with dirty clothes. Once he pulled it out, he opened the faded leather bottom and reached underneath to get the fancy laptop computer the Americans had delivered to him. Along with the computer was some kind of antennae which allowed him to send internet messages in secret.

"Have infiltrated Al Shad's compound and learned of the delivery of fuel to someone named Al Tarid. Have not yet heard a location, but one of the men spoke of a long trip near Al Ghalibiyah which sits between the Tigris and Sirwan rivers. There is a good chance that the people you are looking for are located in that area. On a separate day I asked one of the men about the 'miracle-worker' and the army he led. All the man told me was that I would be very surprised if I knew. That is as much information as I have been able to obtain."

But it must have been enough because once again there was a generous donation to his online account which would allow him to purchase a gun and a bullet-proof vest, as long as he kept them well hidden.

Chapter Seventy-Eight

She squinted at her most efficacious computer screen. This one had been stolen from an American base in Dammam and it used the newer LEDs rather than the fluorescent tubes in her other monitors. Even with the generator, getting enough power for the computers meant half an hour of calculations to be sure that every watt was put to the best use.

There would be no more tea now, no more music playing in the background. She only used the one computer and the internet router. The difference between the energy she'd commanded before and the dribble flowing in from the generator was like a cloudy night sky after a summer afternoon. She trickle charged her bank of batteries and periodically

transported only the most essential equipment and food. Sometimes she would transport something hugely expensive like a gold coin to trade for supplies.

In the meantime she spent frantic hours studying the problem and mulling over alternative ways to acquire more power. Hacking into military computers wasn't a problem as that took far less energy than the transporter did. But it also produced diminishing results with most American and British leaders wise to her tactics. As long as there was fuel for the generator though it was the best that she could do to provide passive defense against the imperialist satellites. She didn't know how long the fuel would last, and this question plagued her thinking day and night.

Naja had once suggested using the transporter to get fuel from one of the invader's vehicles, but that was futile. The transporter gobbled far more power than the fuel contained, so it was a zero-sum game. She needed something new. Something that neither of them were able to manifest yet.

Any time not spent eating or sleeping now was spent discussing the various ways of generating electricity, a resource nearly as valuable as food itself. She'd already eliminated anything that showed a reflection or was visible above-ground. Tidal energy required her to be closer to the coast and wind power would be obvious to anyone flying overhead.

The two of them brainstormed for a week before she at last came upon the solution. Since they were living underground, why not use the power that already existed in the earth- geothermal. It wouldn't be soon and it wouldn't be a huge improvement, but if she could find enough copper wire to build a steam generator then a small power facility could be built.

But her joy at finally solving this puzzle short lived. Naja soon brought her over to the monitor she'd been staring at without mentioning anything till now. With her eyes speaking more than her mouth was able to, the woman demonstrated that she had learned enough to be able to hack into the American army computer and it showed orders for a bombing run on the town of Baqubah.

"[Holy shit]" was all she managed to get out as she wondered if this would spell the end for them finally.

Chapter Seventy-Nine

Sweat beaded on the general's oak-tinted forehead. He was in better shape than the prince, but he was only ahead by two points and that wasn't nearly good enough for him. Watching the ball, his head jerked 20 degrees before wafting the racquet full force into its path. There was only 4 more points to be gained, but the slightest glance at the prince told him that the game wasn't over yet.

Bandar was not nearly as well muscled, but the man still had excellent reflexes and an impressive eye for strategy. This showed in his highly efficient movement, substituting physical strength with his aggressive aim.

But in the end it wasn't enough. Powell got the final 15 points and the two took a few minutes to rest on the bench. Both men knew that the game itself was only a pretext for a much more dangerous competition, that of political manipulation and the domination of resources in the oil-rich states.

"Collin as you know, our public image in the United States is not what it was under the elder Bush and this has caused concern both for myself and King Abdullah. I have worked tirelessly to maintain our 'special relationship' when President Clinton came to power as well as with the current President."

He knew of course that the prince didn't work nearly as hard as he often claimed, but nevertheless their two opposing cultures were tied with a bond more powerful than money or even religion. That bond was oil. The navy ships relied on it, the fighter jets depended on it, and without the regular flow of the kingdom's black gold the U.S. economy would grind to a halt. Not only did he know that, but so did every senator and congressman on Capitol Hill.

"Bandar as you know, our media has done everything possible to downplay the origin of the 9/11 hijackers with the public. But unfortunately this effort has not been as successful as either you or I would like. We've managed to sell the public on a war with Sadaam which will eliminate that threat to you, but we can only manipulate the American public so much. A certain percentage just refuses to follow the storyline laid out by the President and the news correspondents."

Raising a finger, the prince signaled his response. "That is largely the reason that I invited you here Collin. You have not been informed of this yet, but we have received a particularly disturbing letter from an unknown source within Iraq. The letter describes, in detail, funds transferred from high ranking officials within the kingdom to WAMY and the IIRO, the Saudi Bin Laden Group, as well as Omar al-Bayoumi and Osama Brassnan. The source is demanding two hundred million Iraqi dinars in order to keep this information private. I don't have to remind you that revealing such intelligence would crush whatever remaining goodwill exists in America. Because of this, the Chief of the National Guard has authorized me to relay to you Saudi Arabia's shift towards supporting the coalition in removing Sadaam and his rogue army."

"I appreciate that and I'm sure that Mr. Bush and Mr. Rumsfeld will be happy to hear it. But you should know that the CIA does not believe these threats to originate from Sadaam. We believe that there is an autonomous group within Iraq which does not pay allegiance to the dictator. We have several operatives working within a group headed by a man going by the alias 'Al Shad.'"

With a frowning of his brows, the prince made not the slightest attempt to hide his frustration. "This is an outrage Colin. When were you going to share such valuable information with me?!"

Despite the outburst, Colin Powell maintained his outward calm. It was just part of playing the political game, which he'd been doing for several decades already. "The Saudi kingdom had not offered to be a part of the coalition forces thus far. Because of this we did not think the organization would take aggressive action against your country."

"That's beside the point. Your economy is built on oil and we have the world's largest reserves. Your country and mine, we need each other. Don't forget the close personal relationship that Bush senior and I enjoyed before that democrat" he all but spat the word, "took office."

"Prince Bandar, I apologize for the error in judgment. With your inclusion in operations you can be assured of having access to the same information that we have."

The man's face showed only the barest slackening as he quickly brought up a new idea. "You can solidify this greater trust by sharing the whereabouts of this man Al Shad. I can have soldiers in Iraq by the end of the day to take care of him."

At this Powell could not hide his shock at the sheer audacity of the man. He had to spend a second or two composing himself before he said something insulting to the president's personal friend. "Bandar, that would not be in the best interests of the Saudi Kingdom." At the prince's questioning look, he found his hand now forced in revealing highly secret intelligence which had come at the cost of several men's lives. "We believe that Al Shad's force is merely a front for another more secret group. This group seems to have no name, no location that we can discover, hell we don't even know how many men are involved. All that we know is that the group has been successful in hacking numerous military satellites to hamper our bombing campaigns over Baghdad and several other key facilities near the coast. I think that if we get to the leader of this group then we will have the source for these threats against you. However if we allow Al Shad to be killed, then all hopes of locating this more insidious group will vanish."

The prince made a point of considering this information for several minutes before finally agreeing. "You make a valid point Colin. Very well, I will take no action for the moment. But I expect in the future that you will be more forthcoming with information on Al Shad and this other secret group. If you keep up your end then you can expect the Kingdom's full support in crushing their soldiers into the lifeless desert sand."

Chapter Eighty

The first attacks were a disaster for her people. The casualties for Baqubah leapt up into the hundreds with the first day's reports. Even with her interference in the

'reconnaissance' reports, the rain of death was nothing short of horrific. The artillery fell all night long with seemingly random ferocity. The next morning she found the internet chatter noticeably quiet as there were fewer people within Iraq who could even find working equipment to report on the carnage. For the moment, Al Jazeera was the only group capable of transmitting news coverage on their tragic situation.

She was left reading websites from American or European sources which all described the 'heroic effort' of the military and how 'Sadaam's evil regime would cease to be a threat to freedom.' It all left her feeling angry, bitter and impotent.

"Naja, I need the superconductors over along the far wall. Don't waste time on those outdated capacitors. I already told you this yesterday."

Her eyes fell to the floor when she saw the woman jump at her criticism. As tense as their situation was, it helped no one to take out her stress on the only person who had stood by her through the past seven years. It wasn't as if her partner was blind to the haphazard reports published by the few brave souls still remaining in Baghdad. And adding to Naja's stress would only worsen their situation.

She made a conscious effort to take several deep breaths and slowly made her way over to her friend. She gripped one hand inside another and knelt down in front of the woman. Although she had already apologized after delivery of the generator, it felt still that the simple words were insufficient. "Naja, I'm sorry. I was wrong to misjudge you in connecting with Al Shad's men. You've done an amazing job under truly horrendous conditions. I'm so incredibly proud of all that you've learned and all the contributions you've made to the work that we do here."

Instead of a reply, the woman watched her levelly, showing an expression she herself had used that day years ago when she first met Al Shad. The stoic eyes holding barely a glimmer of warmth shamed her more than even the bullet she'd fired towards Al Shad's delivery men. A single tear pulled free of her eye and slowly tracked a path along her cheek. But instead of falling to her jaw, a calloused finger caught it like a winter raindrop.

"So you are capable of feeling."

That one sentence spoken by anyone else would have brought a fierce retort spouting from her lips. But from Naja it struck her dumb. Her mouth was filled with sand and any attempt at forming words was utterly futile. She could only stare back with the pain of how she'd treated the woman who was now cutting her heart from beneath her ribs. Now there wasn't just a single tear, but a great waterfall spilling from her eyes and carving channels through the dust on her unwashed cheeks.

If only there were some way to impress on the woman how much she depended on Naja. Not only in their battle against the colonialists, but on a personal level too. There was no longer a power reactor to build, no battle damage to read about, not anything in her world but the woman standing in front of her. A woman who had struck her down more

effectively then a thousand American bullets. Here in this moment right now she could find the strength only to speak with her eyes. And what she said was a story of pain.

At last the woman's expression softened and a flush of red blossomed on her round cheeks. "I'm sorry Safia. That was cruel of me. I know that you're under a great deal of stress and trying to keep up with all the work here as well as you can." Naja took one of her hands up and held it against her cheek. The touch was more than comforting. It brought a strange thrill within her stomach. This confused her because she'd only felt it once before with one of Al Shad's men who she'd wanted to kiss more than anything, but stifled the desire as too dangerous to their group. So she was utterly shocked when Naja brought her own face close to hers. Soon they were only 2 centimeters apart and there was a slight pause as if the woman was afraid of her. But then she found the woman's lips touching hers and the touch was the most tender she'd felt since laying in her mother's lap as a child.

But this was forbidden. It was shunned by any Imam who had the slightest influence in Iraq. She pulled her face away while eyes the size of planets stared at the beautiful woman who'd been her only company since the day they left the giant helicopter sitting in the desert.

"Did you not like it?" Naja's eyes searched, but seemed not to find what they were looking for. The hurt seemed to spring up once more, threatening to build a new wall of rock between them. But really all she felt was confused. Had it felt good? Well. Yes. But she couldn't be... g a y. Could she? I mean, wasn't being a badass soldier and contradicting every accepted gender role in Islam bad enough? But then, it would've also been said that the attack on the American carrier was 'wrong.' In the span of only a few seconds the tattered remains of her confidence were strewn across the floor. She was more confused than she'd been years ago when Muhammad and his friends had attacked her.

No. She couldn't let this happen. It was Fahisha, a sin against Allah.

"Naja. I'm sorry. You know that I care about you. At least as much as my own family. But. Well..."

"Safia. I'm not gay. I don't know why I did that. It just. I don't know. It felt exciting. I mean.."

Her words trailed off without either of them figuring out what had happened. They stared at each other for a pregnant moment without either being able to say a word. Suddenly even being in the same room felt uncomfortable.

"Why don't you take some time off and rest." With all the stress she was feeling, that was the only thing she could utter before making a straight line for the punching bag at the far corner. Letting off a little steam was critical for her in these dangerous times and she slammed her fists into the bag until her shirt was soaked. She threw jabs, hooks, and punches into the bag for so long that every muscle in her arms screamed in protest. One

more hard punch and the bag leapt up on slack chains before gravity pulled it back toward the floor.

Finally, her frustration spent, she rested her palms on her thighs while she struggled to think through the mental task list that never seemed to get shorter despite the 12 hour days she put in. But conscious planning was completely impossible right now. Every time she tried to bring her thoughts back to the future, it always revolved back to Naja's pretty face and the strange feelings she was having. It was as if her entire world was a fishing boat being tossed across the sea.

Chapter Eighty-One

"Ya Ibn el Sharmouta." Though the comment was whispered, Naja gave her a withering stare.

Looking back at her friend, she tried to explain herself. "Al Shad has a spy in his midst." "You're serious?" Naja's expression shifted from angry to concerned as the implications sank in.

She showed Naja the text that she'd intercepted from an email that came from somewhere in Baghdad. Unfortunately the message had been sent two days ago, so while she could and did scrub it from their computer, the chances were high that the information had already been printed and filed by one of the military people.

"Good thing Al Shad is careful with the information he shares among his soldiers."

"Yes, but this will only confirm with the military that the attack on the powerplant was a success at halting our operations. Naja, we need to have a more secure base of operations."

"Of course we do. But unfortunately the new location is even worse for geothermal power than this place is. Before we can move someplace, we have to be able to provide power to the transporter and the computers."

"Yes of course." The woman didn't generally have a habit of stating the obvious, so the woman's comment surprised her. But we don't have the energy to carve out a cavern in a different place." This time she managed to restrain her fist before it could fall on the fragile table. "If we don't find some way of making the new location work then we may be done for when the Americans discover us. And I'm beginning to think that this is only a matter of time now."

She didn't need to look over at Naja to see the grim expression that her comment would have brought. The precarious situation that they both found themselves in now was teetering on the edge of collapse and it would take a miracle to prevent it.

Chapter Eighty-Two

Sadaam's army was in shambles. Al Shad's forces were faring no better. Buildings were destroyed, and the Museum in Baghdad was being looted by thieves. But Baqubah fared much worse. Clearly the military knew that 'Al Tarid' was in the area and they'd done everything possible to destroy whatever facility would allow her operations to continue. The Iraqi people were lifting a massive communal voice of bitter anger and grief to anybody that cared to listen.

Sadly few ears were doing so.

While she'd been somewhat successful in diverting the worst of the attacks on the dense neighborhoods, there'd been too many distractions for her to block all of the satellite feeds and once the colonialists had taken over Sadaam's military bases it looked as if defeat was certain. The foreigners were relying more and more on old spy planes using chemical film and unless the information was relayed over email networks or radio transmissions then she was sadly ignorant of their plans for attack. Fuel was becoming difficult to find and several power stations were working for only a few hours each day, for those who were lucky enough to have even that much.

Safia was torn. She literally felt ripped in half. On one hand she longed to use what little power she had to transport food and medicine to her people. On the other she needed to finish the tunnel and the steam generator in order to provide a more stable power source. If she thought there was a chance in the universe, she would contact Al Shad to see if another generator could be found. But obviously that was hopeless. Even if there was one that hadn't been blown up, the fuel would be impossible to come by. The only gasoline that could be found was in the tanks and military trucks being driven through Baghdad as the imperialists ran roughshod over her land. It made her wish that she could transport their leader straight into the bunker and beat him herself. Many times in fact her finger had crept towards the computer to find his location. But that would only make her a murderer as well and despite the incredible temptation, her conscience wouldn't allow her such a primitive satisfaction. Even if she was cold-hearted enough to do it, there wouldn't be enough power to perform such a task anyway.

It took several weeks of pulling her hair out as she heard new and more horrible stories each day before at last the boring hole was deep enough that she could use the heat differential for power.

The weeks of slamming her fists into the punching bag in a futile effort to expend the hateful energy burning in her gut was finally over. Now she could actually DO something about the imperialists' cruel attacks. She quickly began transporting a few dozen liters of seawater into the hole and watched on the infrared camera as it flashed into steam. Naja had spent hours dismantling the unit that Al Shad's men had delivered so that the generator parts could be fixed in place above the bore hole. A week more of sore muscles and finally her operation was once again self-sufficient.

With Naja watching behind her, she finally flipped the circuit causing power to flow into the batteries from her own steam generator. Turning to face her friend, she embraced Naja for so long that her arms started going numb from reaching over the tall woman's shoulders. She even gave the woman a light kiss on the cheek, though she was still too embarrassed by their last encounter to see how that small act affected the woman.

Both of them watched the meter on her powerwall with baited breath until the system reached full charge before she fired up the transporter and shifted a group of bombs destined to be loaded onto a fighter jet in Riyadh. She then transported food and medicine to the most devastated communities. It was never certain how many people besides Al Shad actually knew about her connection to these miraculous gifts, but that was of little consequence. The important thing was that they were back in business, and she would soon have the pale ones on the run.

Or at least she hoped so.

Chapter Eighty-Three

Ari Fleischer actually came close to smiling as he faced over three dozen reporters for the second time that week. The crowded room was nearly filled to capacity as microphones jostled with each other in the hands of the various men and women in the audience.

"Operation Iraqi Freedom is a complete success. The coalition forces have eliminated the threat that Sadaam's evil regime poses to world. With his defeat, we have taken a significant step towards the destruction of Al Queda. I want to extend my personal thanks to the many nations which have shared their support in this operation to make the world safe again for Democracy. I will now turn the podium over to General Colin Powell."

The balding man stepped aside and left space for the somber general to take his place before the cameras. "The coalition forces have eliminated key threats from locations in Baghdad, Fallujah, Basra, and Bashur. The Iraqi military forces are no longer in a position to pose a threat to Kuwait and we have Sadaam's imperial guard on the run. We have set up two military bases outside Baghdad and along coast to provide secure staging points for future operations. Our forces will now focus on the task of rebuilding the nation and providing aid to the Iraqi people."

The general stepped aside and gave the podium back to Ari Fleischer who then made time for questions from the reporters in the room. His balding head nodded up and down at several of the men and women he knew from CNN, NBC, and Reuters. Finally he called on Margaret Lensing from Fox news.

"With such ringing success, what would you say to those leftist stooges claiming that going into Iraq was a mistake?"

Without missing a beat the press secretary replied in a calm, confident voice. "There will always be those who wish to stand in the way of our continued march toward freedom. However the U.S. government will always stand strong as a beacon of Democracy."

Pointing to a different reporter he seemed to be riding the high of the moment. "Mr. Secretary what do you say to reports of bombs falling on civilian targets?"

Like a streetlight going out at dawn, the glint in the man's eye disappeared. But the man's calm demeanor went unphased. "The sites targeted by coalition artillery were chosen because they had strategic value. Not all targets were military, some locations housed disinformation operations and others were havens for covert terrorist groups looking to escape detection. That will be all the questions that we have time for at the moment." With a sweeping gesture he left the podium and disappeared behind the curtain like a mole disappearing into its den.

Chapter Eighty-four

McCaffrey put the phone down and looked carefully at the printout. He then looked up at a young sergeant whom he would've barely noticed a year ago. But now... well, now things were very different and it had been impressed on him that they would all be wise to put more faith in gut instinct and rely less on the new electronic surveillance. The air conditioner's endless humming forced him to speak louder than he normally did in the regular offices. But this room faced south, straight into the hellish desert sun of Mesopotamia.

"And you're certain that the image on the screen matched this printout exactly?"

"Yessir." The man stood unflinching with nary a crease in his uniform.

A nervous tapping distracted him momentarily before he realized that it was his own finger ricocheting off the fake wood surface of the desk. He looked back and forth between the paper in his hand and the computer screen several times before making his decision.

"Daley, I want you prepared for a video call in thirty minutes." He tapped the words out with the blackberry stylus that was constantly getting lost. Then, setting down the device, he dismissed the sergeant.

The now infamous commander whose claim to fame was simply that of being the first victim to an increasingly enigmatic terrorist was showing the stress of time. He must've been on a helicopter mere minutes after the message went out and McCaffrey regretted setting such a stringent timeline.

The conference room was in the center of the base and as such lit only by the fluorescent tube lights above. Around the woodgrain painted table he was joined by Colonel Stanton and Commander Daley with Admiral Schmidt joining on a video call.

The faces around him were all hard stares while the men looked over the images from the reconnaissance satellite alongside the physical printout that he'd sent to each of them. Daley had developed a nearly supernatural awe for the mysterious group of insurgents that commanded a most peculiar talent for uncovering even the most carefully encrypted strategies. Not that he could blame the man. Even with a 1400 digit encryption code, their satellite intel was constantly being either blurred or falsified enough that it was no longer considered reliable.

"Men, if what you say is true, then we have to assume that the difference in these two images represents something worthy of investigation." Colonel Stanton's weathered face looked several years older on the video screen, but the force of his tone was not the slightest bit diminished. Even through the camera, his stare was enough to make even a hardened man like McCaffrey lower his eyes.

"Colonel, I want you to send a recon mission. Paper trail only. Four snipers and a platoon of grunts to investigate this discrepancy. We may have come upon Sadaam's hideout finally. Or at least the hideout of his most dangerous soldiers."

"Sir. With all due respect. We're in the middle of a war. Do you really think something this obscure is worth committing valuable resources to?"

The man's hardened gaze was as steely as the hull of the frigate he was stationed on.

"McCaffrey, call it a hunch. But if someone considered this important enough to go through the trouble of tampering with our satellite intel, then I consider it worthy of investigation. That is all gentleman."

Chapter Eighty-five

She wanted to get the equipment moved to their new space, but there was no point in doing so until there was a power source to run it with. Finding enough energy to run the dozens of different computers, lasers, and motors was becoming as much of a chore as tracking the various military attacks which the computers told them about. And with something as hungry as the transporter, the flow of power had to be large, but it also had to be carefully regulated through a series of transformers. If her plan worked, the time would be thoroughly worth it. She and Naja would have unlimited power and there would be no end to the mischief they could cause these invaders. The question was of course was, could it do what she thought it would. If this plan failed, then her chances of success would most likely collapse. Failing was simply not an option now. She was in far too deep.

She'd tried to explain her idea to Naja, but the woman couldn't seem to grasp the subtleties. It seemed that ever since they had kissed, a new tension stood between them like the wall of rock she was carving at in the new space. But unlike the transporter technology, this kind of emotional haze was completely baffling to her. She'd tried to be

kind, and she'd tried to give the woman her space but no strategy proved able to cut through the tension. It was like they were two strangers living in the same house.

"Naja, we need to talk."

By the woman's expression she understood that this was more than just a strategy or technical meeting. "What is it Safia?"

Now that the moment had come, she felt real fear for the first time since childhood. It was confusing. How could a platoon full of soldiers be like a walk along the river while the woman whom she'd trusted for years was tying her stomach in knots.

Balling her hands into fists, she finally managed to steel herself into a strong enough state to just come out with it. "Naja. We kissed. It happened. But ever since that moment, we've been like strangers. Something has changed. I want to go back. I want things to be like they were last year when the only thing I had to worry about was an American or British soldier discovering our location.

She noticed the slight tremble in the woman's lips even before the first tear made its way hesitantly down her cheek before it was followed by a continuous stream. "Oh Safia. Me too. I love you. You're my sister from another Mister."

She chuckled a little at that. She also felt the urge to run in and embrace her other half. But the chiming of an alarm broke her concentration and soon all the blood that had swelled to her cheeks drained back out.

"The proximity alarm!"

"Shit!"

Chapter Eighty-Six

Her mind was running at fifty meters a second as she raced to the perimeter map. Thank Allah the alarm wasn't for their current base. It was for the cavern she was building to house the new power system and updated equipment. For the moment it was just an empty cavern about 65% as large as it would need to be. But the vehicles were undoubtedly heading directly for it. There was nothing else of any consequence in that area.

Running to the transporter control, she used a precious amount of power to locate the lead hummer and drain its remaining fuel which she then transferred into the storage tank for her generator. She then gently turned to one of the cameras mounted next to one of the sinkholes above the new base. In the distance, three of their huge hummer vehicles were parked in the empty desert searching the landscape all around them. The eighteen men were set up in a four-part perimeter which showed that their leader was a

competent soldier. Meanwhile, she breathed a sigh of relief that there was a little more lead time for developing some type of counter-strategy.

Looking over at Naja she explained the situation and her pride swelled as the woman immediately sat in front of her own computer and began hacking at the keyboard.

While the other woman worked, she kept an eye on the soldiers and hooked into their communication. The commander was confused, but smart enough to realize that his vehicle wouldn't just break down randomly. All he could tell for sure was that something highly unorthodox was going on. Any further action was likely to convince him that the peoples' suspicions were correct, which would mean further visits, which would inevitably force her to abandon this site for a new location. They didn't have time for such delays. So she decided for the time being that the best strategy was to give those men nothing to shoot at and hope that they assumed the place to be a dead-end.

In the meantime she joined Naja in searching for the reason those soldiers decided to visit. But her friend got the answer first. A link popped up on their local network and it sent her to a video conference the day before. One rear admiral, one captain, and another name she recognized as the former captain of the aircraft carrier. They mentioned a printed copy of a spy plane image which showed her skylight openings while the digital satellite feed showed none.

"Damn. I got sloppy."

Naja glanced up at her, but said nothing.

She would have to consume the last of the day's power to more carefully hide those openings. The skylights would look far too artificial if those men got close enough. Zooming the camera in to see where the men were looking, she caught a moment when all of them were focused on their commander and instantly materialized a boulder on top of the opening closest to the men. Then she did the same with the other openings and brought a few head-sized rocks to surround each boulder so that it looked just like any other piece of desert. It took at least an hour of careful placement before she was satisfied that the hill looked completely innocuous from the outside. By the time she was finished, all the computers had to be shut off along with all the LED lamps in their space.

She was left to sit with Naja in the darkness while they anxiously waited to see if her alarm went off again. There was no power for any further action if it did.

For the first time since she was a little girl, she offered prayers to Allah that they be delivered from the hands of her enemies.

Chapter Eighty-Seven

Captain Jamal Wilson was no longer so annoyed by this little excursion. He stared at the empty desert with a mixture of confusion, frustration, and (though he would never

openly admit it) a little fear. The kevlar helmet didn't have enough of a brim to help shade his chocolate-brown eyes from the blinding sand stretching in every direction and the glare a knife stabbing at his retinas. The idea of something like this happening again before their mission was finished would bring consequences that he didn't even want to think about much less discuss with the men.

It was one thing to get hit by an IED out in the desert or get shot at by insurgents. That was something that each of them was trained and equipped for. But it was quite another to have a hummer, only a single one for that matter, run bone-dry on fuel without a single enemy combatant in sight of their convoy.

They still had enough to get to the target, scope it out, and return to base but there would be no margin for error now. If he had to call his commander and order a refueling delivery, there was no question his ass would be chewed out three ways from Saturday. Better to get the men back and let Olmstead think he'd just taken a more indirect route. A black man in the army was still a black man in the army, and he sure as hell wasn't taking unnecessary chances with Sergeant Childrik.

He watched the surrounding desert uneasily. Despite the lack of obvious weaponry, the hair on his neck refused to lay in its rightful place. Something was definitely out of the ordinary here. It wasn't anything that could be recorded or cataloged with their equipment, but it was haunting the whole group of them without a single word being said. It was a piece of lead shot tucked against his spine, just barely tickling at the nerves.

But what was it that bothered him so? The whole expanse for a hundred yards was just empty desert expanse. No people, no buildings, and no features for an insurgent to hide behind. So why did he continue to feel uneasy? None of them would have been able to offer anything if asked. After fifteen minutes of carefully scoping out the area, he had to accept that he'd been mistaken. There was nothing to do but to transfer some fuel to the lead hummer and keep moving.

When they finally reached the target, it looked different from the rest of the landscape only in height. The men wondered over the whole rise; carefully at first but with increasing disdain. They checked it out with an infrared scanner, a radiation meter, even an old metal detector. The boys hauled everything he could think of from the trunk, but there was-

"Sir. Think I found something."

Private Reynolds was not the sharpest tool in the chest, but the kid had an excellent knack for spotting things that others tended to overlook. Jamal had come to respect the kid's discoveries the way many cops would respect a drug-sniffing dog's sense of smell. Wandering over he saw that what Duane was pointing at. The kid had come across a camera with a camouflaged hood. But there was no light or other indication of power on the device. It sat tucked into the shadow of a rock with a couple of old bootprints making a casual line toward the road.

"Looks like one of ours sir."

"Or it could be one of our allies. At any rate we better take it with us. Good work spotting this soldier."

There was no way yet to know how it got to be laying out in the middle of the desert, but Jamal was not high enough in rank to be informed of the likes of Al Tarid and so he thought little of the find.

Chapter Eighty-Eight

General Ingral opened the door with a confused expression, but subconsciously slackened to a poker face as he walked in. He did not sit down nor was he invited to as he faced General Kocklin who was in the unenviable position of second-in-command to Colin Powell.

"Ingral, I'll get right to the point. We're in a real bucket o' shit over there in Iraq. On one hand there's this mysterious organization that knows exactly which buttons to push and seems to be able to do so anywhere they please. On the other hand I've just had my ass handed to me by none other than Cheney and Rumsfeld who both want the resources of Iraq under U.S. control, pronto."

"I can see the difficulty sir."

His calm tone brought Kocklin's own voice down half a notch, which he took as a compliment. "Ingral, in your opinion, just how big of a threat is this 'Tarid' character?" On this he had to think back to a whole set of folders, each kept at the highest level of secrecy and listing various assaults such as the damage to the Ranger, the Virginia, the Tripoli, the blurred satellite feeds, and incidents of missing supplies from seemingly random locations. For him, it was difficult to imagine that any group of humans could exert that much damage without the world's most advanced supercomputers. Even if somebody *did* have the resources to pull that off, it would take the world's greatest genius to set in motion such a panoply of devastation on their forces.

"Sir. We're talking about a population that's been bombed, poisoned, and starved for over a decade. I fail to see that it's possible for someone over there to gain this much influence without us knowing where they are and how they operate." He paused a moment as a new thought came to him. "Has anyone investigated the possibility that this could be coming from *outside* of Iraq, by some rogue terrorist cell who simply *claims* to be from there?"

The man's eyes lit up at this. "That's a good theory Ingral, but I think very unlikely. Whoever this Tarid group is, they've intercepted local communication signals between ship and shore which wouldn't be possible to access from a more distant location."

"And I assume you've tried spy planes."

"Of course. The U2 spy planes have been crisscrossing the whole damn country. But there's nothing on the surface or below that looks like it could house over a dozen men and a bank of computers. Besides an operation like that would need plenty of electricity. If they're using gas generators, then they're paying millions on the black market because there's precious little of it for the general population thanks to the embargo."

"Sir, I have to say that the whole thing feels more like a myth than an actual story. I'll admit that I'm not over there on the ground, but it's impossible for me to believe that some unschooled Arabs working with 20 year old Russian equipment could exert this level of damage over such a broad area."

"You're right Ingral. It IS difficult to believe. The problem is--"

He paused and ruffled through some pages in a drawer before pulling out a three inch bound sheaf that his assistant had put together an hour ago. "we've gotten testimony from no fewer than sixty-five sailors describing events that range from the strange to the utterly preposterous."

Ingral gave a superficial look at the prodigious stack of files without letting his attention get too sidetracked. "Well sir, stories are all well and good, but do you have any hard evidence? Surveillance footage, digital images, anything like that?"

Amazingly, Kocklin actually gave a look of genuine defeat which a less sharp-eyed individual might have missed. "Unfortunately no. It seems that in the few cases where a security camera was available, the footage was too blurry or the view was blocked by a vehicle. If you ask me it's damned uncanny luck. I don't have to remind you that if we don't find a way to take out this menace quickly, the word is going to make it's way to the public one way or another. You know as well as anyone what a PR disaster that would be."

He spent a minute or two pretending to browse through the sheaf of pages while doing his best to come up with something useful to his Cee-oh. "Sir, I think we both know that the leadership won't be open to a more dramatic show of force unless we can provide significant proof of Tarid's location. However if we do manage to locate this group, then a good ol' bunker-buster should do the trick."

"Yes, that was my view as well. Very good Ingral. I appreciate your candor. That will be all."

He gave a thorough salute and turned for the door, all while wondering just exactly what the real game was over there in Iraq. The thought kept nagging him the whole way back to his office. How could it be possible for a group of people to interrupt their operations, leave no footage on security cameras, and know most of their moves before the soldiers even knew them? His guess was that this 'Tarid' business was being used as an easy scapegoat for soldiers who were slacking in their duties.

Chapter Eighty-Nine

She made sure to wait until the camera was stowed in the back of one of the vehicles before sending one last command to the infrared antenna that would short-circuit the electronics and destroy any means of identifying where the camera had been transmitting to. The little guy had done it's job at any rate and she hoped that there would be no future visits to a location which might become her permanent home if the Americans couldn't be intimidated into abandoning this selfish land-grab.

But she had every intention of making sure that they did leave.

The Americans and their lapdogs would be convinced, by some as yet unknown means, that Iraq was not worth the trouble. She just needed something intimidating enough. Something that the people who pulled the strings over there couldn't possibly deny. What that something was, and how to go about making it happen though was shrouded within the murky waters of the nearby Sirwan River.

Construction of a new power source along with any further work on their future home would have to be put off until she could be absolutely sure that there would be no further interruption. She especially couldn't be having men with Geiger counters roaming around the area once construction began.

But how could she put a stop to their efforts when she had barely enough power to run her computers and transport small items when the batteries were finally charged up? It felt as if she were trapped between an ocean and the Dead Sea, with precious few people to consult with and no answers blossoming from the barren sand.

With the attacks on Baqubah paused for the time being, she decided to re-examine the horrific video of the hospital attack. After the profound cruelties unleashed by the invaders, she felt that revealing it was the least she could do in retaliation for the Americans' cruelty.

Running her hackware again she delved into the security code at the news station's servers. It shouldn't take long to cut out a section from the video files and upload her own video into the evening newscast.

What she got instead was a surprise. Somebody else had been working on the same computer server. They had seen her work, which was to be expected. But what she didn't expect was a blip on her virus scrubber. It had detected a worm, but the software was too slow and the worm was already busy uploading her files to some external source.

"Naja! Shut down the main internet connection, right now!" Her voice rose two octaves as it was laced with an emotion that her friend rarely witnessed... fear. She physically smacked herself on the head for having become complacent. Just because she had an independent power source and a secure location didn't mean she was completely impenetrable.

“Okay Safia, we’re completely disconnected.” Her friend now moved to her side, worry saturating her expression. “What’s going on?”

With haunted eyes she turned to face the woman. “Naja, we’ve been hacked.”

“What?! That’s impossible Sa-”

“Naja it’s *always* been possible, and this person is GOOD. Somehow they fooled the antivirus software just long enough to infiltrate the backup drive. It’ll take me awhile to find out if they got anything of value but for the time being we’re gonna have to stay dark.”

“Damn. I just found a great website describing new developments in room-temperature superconductors.”

“Well if this person managed to get anything incriminating then lack of web access is going to be the *least* of our worries. We could be looking at operation zayn all over again.” This brought her to thinking back to the incident with Al Shad’s men when she’d nearly dismantled the equipment in vain.

Chapter Ninety

Rick stared at the monitor in shock. It actually worked! Whoever it was that Sergeant McAllister was after had to be the best hacker in the world yet he’d managed to infiltrate their hard drive just long enough to start a download of the least accessed files. He’d hoped that looking through older data wouldn’t be quickly noticed and he could get a few gigs of data, but in that he was mistaken. Inside of three minutes the worm had been discovered and the upload quit. He gave a resigned sigh and transferred the hacked files onto a secure backup drive.

After the files were separated into completed uploads and partials he got down to the real work. There would be time later to try reconstructing the partial files once he’d cataloged his booty. In the meantime he browsed through [files that are easy to grasp to the lizard brain], image and text files. Within the latter folder were a long list of files that gave strings of numbers that he immediately recognized as GPS coordinates. Going down the list, he found that one of them corresponded with a spot in a U.S. base called Riyadh. The second was a diesel storage facility in Egypt. The list went on to include dozens of random rooms at places that were either known or classified coalition bases. This was highly disturbing and he immediately passed an encrypted zip file to Captain Carver (who’d been his contact here in Virginia). Another file showed hacked code that would allow anyone with a computer to access the security camera at a place that was clearly a military storage facility. From the feed it wasn’t clear where the place was, but there were American and British tanks along with over a dozen soldiers visible in real time. The implications were obvious that whoever used this code would be able to spy on a coalition base at any time day or night. Damn this terrorist was GOOD.

These files alone made it clear that he was dealing with an extremely dangerous person and he wondered just how someone could have gained such intimate knowledge into the world's most powerful military without being *in* the armed forces (unless perhaps they *had* been). But this all fell into the background when he opened one folder of images that brought him to sit up straight and stare into the monitor with his jaw hanging low. The first image showed a pair of hands soldering a circuit board with a thin trail of smoke rising lazily up toward the top. The second showed a series of steel boxes painted camouflage-brown with tiny red lights shining out from them. They looked like laser range-finders of a type that he wasn't familiar with. But the last image was the *pièce de résistance*. It was a young woman smiling back at him with a dim light shining from the side. The shadows were heavy, but they did little to diminish the woman's smooth cinnamon skin. Her beautiful eyes, and that smile practically begged him to fly himself straight into that room.

Despite strict orders that all contents remain confidential, he copied the file to a cloud account and erased all record of his theft. That file would be for his personal viewing after he finished his shift.

Chapter Ninety-One

"Yādī el-nīlah!!" She slammed her fist into the table hard enough to knock the mug of water onto the floor, shattering it and spilling the few drops that were left onto the unyielding stone.

"Safia, what's wrong?" With surprising speed, Naja was at her side, a caring palm resting delicately on her shoulder.

Less than a second later the hand fell as her friend saw a mirror reflection displayed on the monitor. "That's me. Is that the picture you took when you were testing out the portable electronic camera?"

Her mouth was now stuffed with sand. Trying to speak was an effort in futility as she turned haunted eyes onto her friend. A woman who would never be able to show her face in public again.

There was only one person to blame here. It wasn't the Americans, or the British. It wasn't Sadaam who'd allowed this to leak out. It was her fault and hers alone. The silence stretched out like the bubble gum she'd once seen a soldier playing with. Every attempt at speech collapsed before it began and she begged the woman with pleading eyes to forgive what she didn't even know about yet.

"Safia, please talk to me. What is it?" The hands returned to both shoulders now, lightly rubbing the muscle beneath with an intimacy that she wasn't accustomed to. It was making her raging emotions even more jumbled and she shrugged the woman's hands off before the words she finally formed ended up being ones she would regret.

It was several seconds before at last her brain was able to make a conscious connection to her mouth, and even then it felt like pulling raw dough apart. "Naja. This. This picture." She paused again knowing that her friend might never speak to her again after such a gargantuan fuck up. "It was uploaded by that hacker. The Americans have it." With the words finally out, tears began to spill from her eyes and Naja's reaction became blurred by the liquid pouring from her eyes. But she did see two hands go to her face as the woman stepped back in shock.

"They. They know what I look like?!"

The self-loathing built up to gargantuan proportions for the absolute catastrophe she'd caused. She turned her head to look at the woman, wondering if there would ever be a warmth there again. She half expected Naja to curse or even to slap her. She wouldn't have turned to dodge the act if it came.

But neither of those things happened. Instead with eerie silence, the woman opened her arms and she fell into the embrace. She held her friend close as both women's tears merged together in a stream that soaked their shirts in liquid pain.

Chapter Ninety-Two

General Peter Pace looked doubtfully at the plain manila envelope sitting on his desk. These reports arrived at least half a dozen times each day and the he was beginning to think that with all the new computer hardware that the Pentagon had, it would be more practical to just send them through email. But that brought him to thinking of their target #1 and how some Middle-Eastern terrorist was managing to infiltrate their communications almost as soon as they created new encryption techniques. It was like he was living back on the days of the cold war, trying to keep the Ruskies from decrypting intelligence reports with ever more sophisticated codes.

Opening the envelope though, chased any tangential thoughts immediately from his mind. Enclosed was the analysis he'd requested only four hours earlier. Captain Carver must have strapped a rocket engine to whoever was given the task of researching this. The sheaf of pages held a whole series of images showing several circuit boards. Each one had been enlarged, sharpened, and color corrected. After the image editors had finished, a team of electronics specialists had managed to pull the spec numbers from each board and locate the make and model for all but one of them.

The first one had come from IBM, which didn't surprise him. What did surprise him was the combination of equipment that each circuit board had been pulled from. Not only was there a brand new board from an IBM supercomputer, but there were also laser rangefinders from a Navy destroyer and a power management board that was supposed to have been installed on a NASA satellite. Some of the batteries and supercapacitors even looked to be from CIA equipment. Despite the hatred he felt for this 'Tarid' group,

he couldn't help but be impressed by the level of sophistication used to combine these random pieces together. Whatever was being built in Iraq would easily win a full time scholarship to Stanford, or even Oxford. If it wasn't being done by a terrorist he reminded himself.

But then he found the most valuable prize of all. It was a picture of a uniquely beautiful woman with distinctly Arab features smiling back at him. The woman was poorly lit, but the pools of her eyes seemed to shine with their own brilliance as if to compensate for the surrounding shadows. He found himself entranced even as his military training pushed him to see what could be gleaned from the image. It took him a few seconds of staring at the woman before he recovered. Immediately he called his Cee-oh, while at the same time sending the general an email with the woman's picture as well as the circuit boards visible in the background. Then he hastily picked up the receiver with trembling fingers.

"This is General McCaffrey, what is it Peter." The voice sounded distant, and he guessed that the man was distracted by his other duties.

"Sir. I have incredible news. We have an image of our enemy combatant #1."

"Tarid?!" All semblance of distraction was gone and he knew that he had the man's undivided attention now. "That's magnificent news captain. So who's our man?"

"Well sir, that's just it. Our 'man' is a girl."

The line was quiet enough that he could hear the second hand on the wall clock tick three times before the voice resumed. "You're shittin me."

"No sir. Our best network hacker managed to pull a series of files from a computer at Tarid's base of operations which included such incriminating evidence as GPS coordinates from several military bases, security camera footage, and... an image of an Iraqi girl who looks to be less than 30 years old. I sent you an electronic copy."

"Stay on the line Richard. I'm checking now."

He paused and put the phone on speaker while he turned back to the image, looking at it now with a more critical eye. It seemed as if the dim lighting would either be from a building with few windows (not unusual in the desert) or an underground space. The latter would be more likely-

"Peter, there's nothing here. When did you send the files?"

It took him half a second to shift his attention back and another half second to digest the comment. "Sir. I just sent the images to you two minutes ago- Tarid!"

"Hmm. Our man, I mean girl, is fiendishly clever." There was a pause on the line and the sound of papers being shuffled. "Peter, I want that image passed on to every branch of the military. Paper only. We are *going* to take down Tarid once and for all. I will settle for nothing less."

The two of them didn't agree on everything, but in this instance Peter couldn't wait to make the General's orders a reality. With any hope they'd manage to take this Tarid

character alive and have the pleasure of watching her rot in a solitary cage until her spirit was thoroughly broken. Nothing would make him happier.

Chapter Ninety-Three

Rick sat in his brand new ergonomic chair and focused on the dual-monitors mounted on the wall behind his computer desk. The CIA had shown it's appreciation for the information he'd discovered with a very generous bonus check which had immediately been put towards some deluxe hardware. Things were looking up for him at last after that terrifying day sitting in a police holding cell.

Now that the most valuable intel had been passed up the chain, he decided to look into the partial files uploaded from the terrorist cell, starting with the ones that were the most complete. There were a few that were just strings of numbers (probably more GPS locations), but then he got to a video file that was 80% intact. Using a new piece of software developed by the air force, he was able to reconstruct the missing pieces and now watched in anticipation as the video file at last started to play.

With his jaw sagging as if from a rapid spike in gravity, he watched a military helicopter fly overhead and then settle into a hover in front of a building that was clearly a hospital. From the jet flew hundreds of bullets which were barely audible over the scream of the helicopter's engine. As hundreds of bullets flew, the glass windows exploded into constellations of shimmering stars that seemed to hang motionless for a fraction of a second before cascading down upon the street just below the camera's view. The video went on to show other horrors like injured people being crushed by American tanks or killed outright in the street by snipers.

He replayed the video once more watching for any clue of CGI or digital manipulation. But aside from a few frames where the reconstruction had been spotty, the image to his amateur eyes looked unmistakably genuine. While lacking in experience with video analysis, he lacked nothing when it came to computer data analysis. This file would have to be scrutinized with a fine tooth comb.

Copying the file to a cloud storage as he had last time, he went back to working on several other files, but it felt like he'd just swallowed three shots of bourbon. The image of that injured man as the tank approached was clouding his focus and battling his conscious brain for attention.

The commute home was no easier. Crawling through traffic he wondered to himself what kind of disconnect would bring American soldiers to fire down on injured people laying in the street. The video was taken from the hard drive of the most wanted terrorist in the world (at least as far as his boss was concerned). A terrorist who managed to sink his (or her he reminded himself) electronic fingers into the security cameras and corporate servers at military bases all over the Middle East. Even if the video didn't look

manipulated to *him*, could somebody that brilliant conjure such a thing out of thin air? It seemed at least plausible. He wouldn't know for sure until he devoted serious time into analyzing the file's code with a fine-toothed comb.

If an Iraqi terrorist could convince the American public that the military was doing such things then it would crush support for the occupation. The strategy was brilliant. They wouldn't need superior firepower, they just needed to erode public support. And if this terrorist had intended to hack into one of the servers at CBS then it was no doubt that all hell would've broken loose. Thank God he'd been there to prevent such a tragedy.

Chapter Ninety-four

"But we can erase their computer files, can't we Safia?"

She sighed dejectedly as the pain in her friend's eyes ate into her very soul. "Naja. The imperialists are not nearly so naive. You've already seen how they started switching to human-piloted spy planes and chemical film once it became clear that we could manipulate their satellite reconnaissance. Even with the digital information destroyed, I have no doubt that the picture of you is being duplicated on paper even as we speak."

Her normally soft-spoken friend aged several years, and she now spoke with a hardness normally brought on only after decades of pain and sorrow. "Safia I think that you've been too light-handed with these imperialists. It's clear now more than ever that we need to take a more aggressive approach. I simply refuse to spend the rest of my life underground and living in fear so long as we have the ability to do something about them." The woman's voice continued to rise in both pitch and volume until Safia had to put a hand up and gently shush her.

"Naja, it's my fault. If there's anyone that you should be angry with, it's me. I'm the one who was lax with the computer, and I didn't react quickly enough."

"Oh shut up Safia!" The words struck her like a punch in the face. "You weren't the one who wrote that worm. You weren't the one who hacked into our network, and you didn't print out my picture for every American or British general to see. There's no question that the fault lies squarely on the 'coalition.'" She spat the word.

"Please, just wait--"

But Naja refused to be subdued that easily and swiped the hand away like a fruit fly.

"Safia listen. We have that video of their attack on the hospital in Falujah. Why don't we just follow up on your threat? I mean, we have to do something."

Pulling her friend into an embrace and laying both hands on the woman's back, she spoke as gently as she could, willing her voice to be as calming as possible. "Naja, my dear friend. I did already try that. Just this morning I tried to get back into their news server, but somebody had built a much more robust firewall. I think that whoever pulled the data from my computer was the same person who discovered the back door that I

used to hack into NBC. There's no doubt that we will continue to search for a way to convince their people that we should not be threatened. But we have to do so without further compromising the safety of the Iraqi people, especially the two of us."

"And until then what?? We just sit here?"

"I-" She tried to come up with a response, but her feelings for Naja had shattered her normally extensive library of rebuttals. She was a frog baking on the desert sand and struggling to get back in the water.

Chapter Ninety-five

"Naja I'm so impressed that you were able to find that video conference over the skylights at our new base. You really showed that you can work under pressure and I'm grateful to know it.

The woman smiled warmly at the compliment, and looking at her face with a lamp gracing the woman's cheeks, she felt a lump in her throat. What was that? She'd known Naja for years. What was causing her to look at the woman differently now?

"Safia? Was there something else?" Naja tilted her head slightly and the question brought her back to more pressing issues.

"Of course. Sorry, I was distracted." This was a shallow excuse, as she never got distracted when issues of strategy came up, but the woman showed no indication of inquiring. "Naja, you were right before. We need to send a stronger message to the colonizers. Something as powerful as the attack on the carrier-

The woman's pert mouth grew into a large O. "But Safia-

"No, don't worry I won't ask you to put yourself at risk like that. I just mean we need to hit them in a way that can't be ignored. It can't just be about stealing fuel from a truck or a computer from one of their ships. We need something big."

"What about stealing critical pieces from their nuclear weapons so they can't be launched?"

"No. Please Naja. We need to hit them in a way that's public. *Very public*. The American military has already labeled the attack that we did on their aircraft ship as top secret. We need something that captures the attention of their people, something that can't be put into a secure vault."

"Safia. I've got it!"

The woman laid out a plan so brilliant and so fiendish that she was almost jealous. Her friend had undoubtedly grown to be a magnificent strategist. Thinking over the idea, she was amazed at how simple it was.

Nobody would be hurt, and the power required would be nominal. Now they just had to figure a way to make it clear who was causing the damage. She wanted the colonizers to understand without a doubt just who they were messing with.

Chapter Ninety-Six

Cjenram stood with his arms hugging his sides against the chilly air blowing in off the water as he waited at the dock. The cold made the wait seem like years before he could finally distinguish that one of the faint lights on the water was indeed moving closer to him. As the engine noise grew louder, he watched the dim outline of the ferry boat bounce along on the waves, hoisting his thick backpack onto his shoulder. The pack contained his usual kit as well as a thermos full of hot coffee, a heavy jacket, gloves, and scarf. He felt again for the bulge of the coffee to reassure himself as the water ahead grew more choppy from the boat's approach. The Times had pegged tonight's low at just above 5 degrees and he was going to be breathing cold salty air for the next nine hours. It would be the coldest night of his life.

But as he climbed aboard and made his way beneath the kindly gaze of lady liberty, he knew it was all worth it. That statue was a grandiose symbol of his enormous gratitude at having been given a new start in life after leaving Sarajevo.

Even now, after being a security guard for nearly five years, he still gazed up at the silent woman as she held her now black torch up against the late night sky. Seeing the torch unlit was no surprise. There were frequent maintenance checks on the statue's lighting, especially over these last few weeks. In fact the parks department was planning to have an enormous scaffolding delivered next Tuesday and they were going to store it in the base between work shifts.

Once he reached the island, he strolled up to a small panel next to the main entrance and got out his walkie-talkie so he could check in. His fingers were painfully cold while he fiddled with the dial and he hurried to give Romero the all-clear so he could then get his gloves back on.

"Hi there Romero. I just arrived, so you can head out."

The radio crackled for a few heartbeats before the man's voice finally came on. "Oh thank god. My brown skin isn't made for this kind of terrible cold."

"You should have stayed in.." he had to think to remember the name "Arizona then."

"Yeah, I wish. No jobs there."

"Oh hey. Do you know how long the torch is going to be out tonight? I always like to be down on the ground where I can see it go back on when they finish their testing."

"What? There's no testing tonight. It should be running normally."

"No testing? But it's dark right now."

"Hold up. I'm heading over to you."

The radio went dead and he shivered with more than just the cold now as he meandered towards the entrance. All the other lights were fine. The orange lights shining out from the base, and the floodlights that bathed the lady's robe were as warm and comforting as ever. But at the very top of her arm, there was only blackness.

He must have jumped half a meter in the air as the door slammed open and Romero stumbled breathlessly out. He ignored Cjenram completely and looked immediately up at the top of the statue. "Dios mio!"

"Romero." He waited a second and then put a hand on the other's shoulder. "Romero! When did you last get a look at the torch?"

The man stood rigidly silent for several seconds before apparently registering the other man's hand.

"I... whu?"

"Romero. When did you last see the torch lit?"

It took yet another second, but finally the man seemed to grasp the question. "Well, I typically walk up to the crown twice each night, so probably two hours ago."

Looking up at the distant arm, he finally noticed that a star was visible where the flame should have blocked his view of it. That meant the torch wasn't merely unlit... it was gone!

Chapter Ninety-Seven

Kathleen looked over the news feed, but she still didn't believe it. She brushed a few blonde hairs away from her face while looking over the story and trying to convince herself that Joshua wouldn't be so depraved as to play a joke with her live on air. He'd be fired for such a thing. They'd sent a camera crew speeding to the outerbridge crossing as soon as the story came in. But even as she read over the report, she shook her head at the sheer scale of it. Even the warmth of the studio lights weren't enough to chase away the shiver that rolled up her spine like a tesla coil. Gripping her hands together underneath the table, she slackened her face as the crewman signaled that the cameras would be rolling in three, two, one. And she was on.

"Today brought a world-changing experience to the people of Staten Island when one resident spotted something unique in Conference House Park this morning. We have Larry Bishops live on the scene. Larry, what can you tell us?"

The feed switched over to their reporter on location at the park and she listened in on her ear-piece. "Well Kathleen, the police have cordoned off the entire park, but we do have Stan Morris who was out walking his dog along the beach when he spotted what

looked like the torch of the Statue of Liberty just sitting in the sand. "Stan. Can you tell us what happened?"

The microphone was pushed over to a pale man in his 50s who looked not at all comfortable being in front of a camera. "Well. To be honest. I just couldn't believe what I was seeing. I take Rumbles here to walk on the beach every morning. But today there was this giant glass and metal torch just sitting there in the sand, about five feet up from the high tide line."

"And what did you do then?"

"Well, I called the police of course. I also called the park ranger, Ralph and I have chatted out here lots of times. I also brought my son out to see it. Figured it wasn't something the kid wasn't ever going to forget."

Despite her best efforts, the shock of learning that the massive torch, the star lighting up the emblem of democracy had been somehow stolen and deposited in a park in Staten Island was difficult to believe. She only half paid attention to some hollow words that she read off the teleprompter before switching to their 'eye in the sky' Matt Simpson.

"Well Kathleen, the police are refusing to let air traffic approach the statue while the investigation continues, but from here it looks as if the entire glass assembly of the torch was somehow sheered off. From this distance it's impossible to learn what might have been used to cause such damage. All that we can be sure is that whoever did this wasn't interested in stealing it, only in causing even more fear among an already beleaguered population. If this is somebody's idea of a practical joke, Mayor Guliani is not laughing."

Chapter Ninety-Eight

"This is the most ridiculous embarrassment! I want answers gentlemen, and I want them yesterday!"

General Kochlin leveled a cold stare over the eyes of every single person in the room. His 230 pound frame towered menacingly over the lower ranking officers staring back with silent fear. Most of the time this wasn't intentional, but today he used his mass to greatest effect.

"Sir, do we know exactly what time period we're talking about here?" Sergeant Billings began shuffling through a set of pages highlighting the precious little information that they *did* have.

"Thankfully yes. The guards on Liberty Island change shift at 9:00pm each day except weekends and there was a Mr...a.. Jenram or something, who came on shift. He was the first person to notice something wrong."

"And what about the previous guard?"

"Some Mexican kid, he says that he was inside the base for the last hour of his shift. Swears on Mother Mary and Jesus himself that he saw the torch lit a couple hours before finishing his shift."

"We have any cameras to prove that?"

"Sadly we haven't located any footage at the exact time in question as yet."

"Well doesn't that just fuckin cap it!"

"Exactly. Now we have both men at the local police station and we're questioning them thoroughly."

"Sir, there is absolutely no way that any terrorist group could manage to get up to the torch, remove it, and haul it twenty-two miles down the river to the south end of Staten Island."

"Which means. We are dealing with an enemy of unique skill, ability... and malice."

"Has anything come of the analysis from the remaining structure where the damage was done?"

First Sargeant Markam leafed through a few pages before addressing the question. "Sirs, the report is only preliminary, but despite the oblong shape of the torch it seems to have been sheared off in an exactly straight line. There was no evidence of burning, no explosive residue, and no scarring of the remaining metal--"

The door opened briefly and a guard's face poked in briefly. "Sirs. There is a high priority call from a Leitenant-Commander Daley."

Kochlin's face turned beat-red and he nearly shouted at the guard. "This is a private meeting soldier. We are not to be--"

"Sir. I'm sorry sir. Mr. Daley said that it was a code-red communique."

Using his finger like a sword that he intended to impale Sadaam himself, Kochlin stabbed at the room's intercom while he listened to Daley's voice arguing with an unknown secretary. "Daley! If you're not calling to tell me that you have an Iraqi nuclear warhead in your--"

"General Kochlin. Thank God. You need to hear this. I just received an encrypted email from our #1 terrorist over here. The email only contained a single line of text, 'you and all the people in America will by now have received my message.'"

"Tarid!"

"Al Tarid!"

"Sirs. What's happened? We haven't had any unusual activity over here."

"Daley, you might as well get the story straight from the horse's mouth. Sometime late last night the torch from Lady Liberty went missing. We did our best to keep things quiet, but the missing torch was discovered by a jogger early this morning at the south end of Staten Island."

"Good God." The comment was barely a whisper, but it held the collective weight of all the men's feelings in only those two words."

"Men. I want you all to communicate to your teams that Al Tarid has now been labeled an enemy of the highest order. Priority to bring in him and his team now supersedes finding Bin Laden as well as Sadaam Husein.

"Sir, it looks to me like this Tarid character has actually done the U.S. military a favor."

Kingston turned to the man and showed the barest whisper of a smile. Good point Simpson. Now I think we can get the President to speak out publicly about Tarid as an Iraqi terrorist of the vilest sort. The fact that he's now attacked American soil will turn the tide of international opinion back in our favor. It should be a simple matter to justify stronger measures in the field over there. The American people will condone any action, no matter how questionable, as long as it brings these terrorists to justice."

Kochlin practically rubbed his palms together in anticipation.

Chapter Ninety-Nine

General Peter Pace stood facing his superior, but this time with a great deal more tension in the room. His pasty skin seemed to have aged several years in the brief period since Operation Iraqi Freedom had been launched. But he had faith in Donald Rumsfeld. The man was a brilliant strategist and he was sure to bring the armed forces to flawless victory.

"Peter, I want to know everything there is about this Tarid character, how he... or *she* managed to remove the torch from Lady Liberty, and what kind of leverage you can find to remove this terrorist."

This comment took him by surprise. It was one thing to work on strategy for going after a target with jets and missiles. But the forces at work to create something as deadly and powerful as Tarid had become, well it was definitely the stuff of myth and mystery.

The idea of some magical goblin within the Iraqi resistance had seemed amusing in the early days of the war, when he expected that nothing could stop them. U.S. Navy and Air Force jets bombed targets at whim anytime the secretary or General Powell deemed Sadaam's forces to pose a threat. Now however, things were decidedly more complicated. The idea that an enemy could have so much of an impact on troop morale was humbling to say the least. For the first time since Vietnam he was actually unsure if their armed forces could extract a complete victory now.

But the secretary was expecting something. So he pulled open the folder tucked under his arm and summarized the analysis written by a man named Daley. "Mister Secretary, the attack on Liberty Island matches with the pattern of other attacks by the forces of Al Tarid. They mainly involve embarrassing disappearances of critical elements, but with little or no loss of life. However unlike previous attacks which hindered our military, this

one was clearly aimed at targeting American morale. The incident was *very* public and required a great deal more cunning in order to shift the official story."

"Well I assume you've taken care of the two nightwatchmen and the news crews."

Rumsfeld's tone implied that if he was wrong in that statement, things would not look good.

"Of course we have sir. The nightwatchmen were both immigrants so that was easy. We simply threatened them with deportation if they opened their mouths. The news folks weren't much different, as they're used to switching to whatever official story we give them."

"Very good. So then our next steps are clear. We have to make finding the base of operations for this terrorist cell our top priority."

"Mister secretary, may I suggest that our best course of action is to carpet bomb the area surrounding Baqubah. My intelligence experts all agree that the most likely location for Tarid is the vicinity of the old power plant there. The incidents of disappearing supplies took a noticeable dive when we destroyed their generating station."

Rumsfeld watched him levelly. But he knew that he had the defense secretary's trust. In return he showed his gratitude to the man by putting his best effort into fulfilling the secretary's orders without question. Rumsfeld was a man who knew when to take action and didn't shy away from getting his hands dirty. Peter had been especially impressed by the way he'd managed to work with Cheney to steer national concern over the damage to lady liberty into a sense of outrage toward Iraqi terrorists. Funding for the war was now higher than it was in 2002 and international sympathy had similarly improved.

"Peter, that sounds like an excellent course of action. You have my support to go ahead. But." Rumsfeld paused to add emphasis to his words. "There will be no electronic footprint of this attack. Every communication regarding Baqubah must be through printed documentation or direct communication only. This terrorist that we're dealing with. They sure are one slippery motherfucker."

"You're right about that sir. Whoever this Tarid character is, they've upset a lot of the command brass." He paused momentarily, the barest hint of apprehension floating in like a piece of tissue paper at a child's birthday party. "Sir. Do you think that we'll be successful?"

"What?" Rumsfeld sounded genuinely surprised at any semblance of doubt. "Of course we will. We got the public to believe that Sadaam possessed chemical weapons, and that involved manipulating *international* opinion. Here we only have to deal with a few New Yorkers. It'll be a piece of cake. I'll get the president to issue a statement and make sure that Colin Powell does *his* job."

"Very good sir. In the meantime though may I suggest a hold on attacks throughout the rest of Iraq? It would give Tarid a false sense of security. She might let some clue leak out that will help us narrow the scope of the attack."

Rumsfeld offered a smile as a precursor to his approval. "Peter, I like your thinking. You have my blessing."

chapter One Hundred

"It works. It works!" She was shouting even from halfway through the tunnel. Her fingers were caked with dirt as she saw Naja's meter-wide smile fill the opening. Her euphoria was slightly marred from having to wait until now to share the news that they could finally move on to the new location and be free of the constraints on their power use.

Her partner-in-crime had been too nervous to risk being near the fusion reactor when it was first turned on. But after dumping every bit of power that she'd stored over the course of a month, the unit managed to build up a stable charge and finally put out more energy out than it consumed. The dream was *finally* realized.

She didn't even wipe her hands before throwing her arms around Naja and lifting the woman off the floor.

They spun around for almost a minute before she started getting dizzy and they both collapsed, giggling like children.

But Naja, being the more cautious one still needed reassurance. "You're completely sure Safia? You've tested that it's safe? You've tested the radiation all throughout the cavern?"

Kissing her friend on the cheek she confirmed that yes, she had checked and re-checked every system and made sure that the magnetic fields were stable and the radiation was fully shielded. This thing wasn't going to go out of control without a very serious upset. Though a bunker-buster would do that she thought silently.

Now however, the smile spread even wider on Naja's face as she finally digested the implications. "We won't need the geothermal system anymore."

Grinning wider than she had since before her father had been killed, she readily agreed. "Not just that my friend. We could transport unlimited supplies anywhere in the world." She breathed the statement with the reverence of an Imam. "We could finally bring a level of equality that will match the theft committed by these colonizers."

Naja threw her arms around her again and they held each other in pure unadulterated joy.

Chapter One Hundred One

Lugal was out of money again. The deposit put into his account had been enough to pay for a bulletproof vest, and meals for over two weeks. But then he'd found the bottle of vodka in a trash can outside the military base and it had opened up all the cravings he'd managed to hold off for the past month. The horrible stinging as it went down was thoroughly worth the numbing of his senses and the distraction from memories of watching his mother's bloody kaftan sticking out from beneath a pile of broken concrete chunks.

The ground was moving around wildly, but it had nothing to do with bombs this time. The sky was silent, but the scuffing of his feet as he struggled to stay upright brought a constant scraping sound. At last giving up he collapsed in the shade of a broken storefront without even noticing the scab of glass and dust concealing the wound of a once vibrant street.

Shanpi was an inquisitive child who constantly got her hands into all manner of trouble back when her family still had a house. Things had been much worse when they moved into the church basement along with three other families and every exploration was quickly followed by a scolding and a slap. It got so that she worried about even getting chickpeas for dinner would bring someone to yell at her. People yelled constantly and all she wanted to do was get away.

Today being the first time she'd been allowed to leave their little room in weeks, she was covering ground like a dragonfly skimming the surface of the Euphrates. There were so many fascinating sights to drink in, from the empty hole that used to be a drug store to the one remaining apartment building with its spattering of unbroken windows shining brightly in the sun. It had taken an eternity of begging her parents to finally let her go outside, and after more than a week without the noise of explosions they must've been tired enough of her that they allowed it. Now that she was finally free, Shanpi was going to find all the places where she might find stuff that could be useful.

Seeing the bad-smelling man lying in front of the store was scary at first. He looked like someone who could be dangerous. But there was something intriguing about him as well. His shirt bulged in a weird way and he clutched onto an old suitcase the way she used to cling to her little doll. She sat and watched the man for a while, but that soon bored her. He didn't do anything but make a disgusting snoring sound.

At last she built up the courage to pull away the suitcase, which brought only a murmur before the arms went slack again. She pulled open the latches and at first was disappointed to see nothing but stained clothes. But there was a hard thing on the bottom and she played around with it some more. Finally what she thought was the bottom moved a little and she realized there was a little space beneath that. Inside she found a computer small enough that it could lay flat on her chest. It had a little battery charger next to it, but when she opened the computer the screen lit up.

"Wow, what a find!"

For a second she thought about how this could actually be seen as stealing. But then she remembered pappa talking about how they needed to use whatever items they could find in order to survive. 'Allah will forgive us' he'd said. So she scurried off with the computer and ran several blocks until she reached an old clothing shop that figured was otherwise useless.

Turning on the computer she spent a few minutes playing with different options before figuring out how to get past the login password. Then she pulled open the last thing that was used on it and found a bunch of words that talked about someone named Al Shad and someone with an American name that she didn't recognize. But later on was a far more important name. Al Tarid. She put a hand over her mouth as if she'd eaten meat from a pig. This was the famous jinn who was said to have stopped the explosions and who brought medicine to the people who were sick.

This was big. It was *adult* big. But what adult could be trusted with something like this? She had to think about that for awhile. Obviously her parents would be of no help. All they did was yell at her and complain about how they couldn't live in their old house. The other families were no better. They all acted scared of the soldiers and talked about staying away from windows.

But there was one adult who might be able to help. He wasn't as old as her parents and he'd mentioned having met Al Tarid to another boy. She didn't know if he would be able to understand the things on the computer, but at least he wouldn't yell at her.

She made a point to carefully hide the machine before going out to look for stuff that would be of more immediate use like candles or cans of food.

Chapter One Hundred Two

The bombings didn't entirely stop, but when she compared the footage on American and British news stations with the actual military flyovers it was clear that there was a discrepancy. The news stations for BBC, CNN, and even Al Jazeera still showed attacks and video of military generals praising various successful intrusions, but she came to realize that this was simple obfuscation. The leadership was obviously confused about how to deal with her. So the generals gave strategic footage to the news stations while dropping bombs only on sites which had already been destroyed.

Up until now she hadn't realized how delicate the situation was with the coalition leadership. There had been so many months of propaganda by Colin Powell, Tony Blair, and George Bush that the public had gotten itself worked up into a frenzy. If the forces were to instantly cease operations then the enraged public would expect to know why. Which obviously none of their leaders were going to admit. So in order to keep from

alienating their people, the leaders must have decided to modify the news until a long term plan could be developed.

At least for the time being their militaries wouldn't be a threat to her people. She took a deep breath and sighed. She could focus her time on more domestic issues without constantly worrying who might be killed. But then Fox News posted an interview with Donald Rumsfeld in which he described a new terrorist cell collaborating with Osama Bin Laden which had claimed responsibility for damaging the statue of liberty. He talked about all that Bin Laden had learned during the previous attack and how his group of fiendish men led by Al Tarid had infiltrated a boat in New Jersey which they used to steal the torch. He called on the American people to support the president in rooting out these vile terrorists hiding out in Iraq. The idea was simply absurd. That a group of men with a boat could get up to the statue and cut off the torch wouldn't stand up to even the most casual scrutiny. But the story was soon picked up and copied by several other stations and it reminded her of the earlier demonization of Sadaam who the Europeans had barely heard of before 1995. Now they were looking to do the same to her.

For the first time since she'd captured the military helicopter, she was at a loss for how to proceed. It was one thing to gain access to the invaders' satellites or to steal supplies. But contradicting a misinformation campaign was for more difficult. She would need to gain access to multiple news agencies, not just one. The fingers lightly resting on the computer mouse now trembled slightly bringing a faint vibration in the piece of wood that she used as a desk.

Chapter One Hundred Three

"Naja could you hand me.." her words fell to the floor when she realized that her partner was at the new space setting up one test computer and installing several dozen meters of electrical wiring. So she was forced to brace herself against the table and lift herself on protesting legs to go grab the socket set. Her arms were boulders hanging at her sides while she worked to get the transporter into small enough pieces that it could be hauled across the desert by two very tired women. Obviously they couldn't use the equipment to transport itself, and there was no way that a vehicle would stay hidden for long out in the empty expanse surrounding her new base. Which meant relying on good old muscle power. The two women had been making the trip over a dozen times and only once had Naja succeeded in getting the use of a camel to take the weight.

A clang brought her to look down and see the socket driver laying less than a centimeter from her toe. "Damn. I'm pushing things too hard. It's not like an extra twelve hours are going to make a difference in getting the equipment set up."

With one last cry of protest from her aching thighs, she let herself sink into a chair and went to scroll through any recent updates on the 'coalition.' With all the time the two of

them had been spending these days on physical work, she worried that some critical piece of information might slip past her.

The anonymous email with the tagline, 'remember the favor of Allah upon you – He brought your hearts together and you became, by His favor, brothers.' caught her attention. It was an obvious callback to that day years ago when Al Sadeem had helped her to escape the tiny hamlet of her childhood and engage in the greatest victory ever won against the invaders.

Opening the message she found a brief summary describing a little girl who had found a laptop computer (an incredibly rare find during the war) and on digging into it's contents came to information relating to Al Tarid. The boy, Al Sadeem (she assumed it was him sending the message) had looked through and found conversations between a spy named Lugal and a CIA operative in Israel.

"So there's another spy helping the invaders." There really was no grounds for her to be surprised. It was common practice in war, but she felt disappointed nonetheless. How could a few dinars be enough to tempt a boy to threaten his own people in order to help an enemy that thought nothing of bombing or shooting Iraqis of every type. Thinking over the situation, she decided that this could be used to her advantage.

Thank you for making me aware of this. I will make plans to take possession of the computer and I will make certain that the girl who found this prize is rewarded for her contribution. You both have my gratitude.

After sending the message, she went to work on some stretching before making the long journey to the new cavern with three of the transporter's lasers.

Chapter One Hundred four

Admiral Schmidt looked over the reports with a critical eye. The tone seemed just a hair different, but it was difficult to confirm that from just a few lines of correspondence.

What really piqued his interest is that it sounded as if their man Lugal had managed to learn something useful about their most diabolical nemesis.

"Have managed to gain the trust of Al Shad's number three man and he shared with me stories of having visited Al Tarid. He said that the man maintains control over his small army through a combination of bribery and intimidation. The group has a hideout within an abandoned factory outside of Basra. But the network of tunnels that the men there have created ensures that even total destruction of the main building would not hurt them. The man talked about an operation where Tarid's forces stole several fuel trucks leaving from a place called VBFP and this provides fuel for their generators."

Schmidt thought over this information carefully. The stolen fuel meshed with reports he'd seen of unauthorized removals from the Victory Bulk Fuel Point. Then there was the

fact that satellite coverage of Basra was corrupted in a similar way to the footage of Baqubah and it would be a great deal easier to run vehicles in and out of a factory then to drive them to a smaller town where they would be more easily noticed.

Pulling up his computer he searched through the latest footage taken only the day before from a plane flying near the location in question. Near the very edge of the town was a factory and parked next to a storage building was a tanker truck which his trained eye recognized as one of the American models.

Picking up the phone which they now used to relay orders over analog systems he contacted Quincy. "Hold off on orders to attack Baqubah for the moment. We have some new intelligence from one of our double agents within Al Shad's forces."

Chapter One Hundred five

Rick went through the video with a fine-toothed comb. It had obviously been pieced together from longer stretches of footage, but there wasn't any indication that the video was manipulated. If in fact the events displayed were true, and if it was on the terrorist's computer but not on the TV networks then this spoke paragraphs about what the Army and Navy forces were doing over in Iraq.

Without enough evidence of some type of manipulation, he decided to risk sending a few tiny segments to an FBI analyst. He made sure that the pieces of video were non-controversial parts so he wouldn't get flagged. He asked only one question of the analyst. Was this video authentic or was it tampered with in some way.

The man must have been bored because he got an answer inside of twenty minutes.

"Thanks for sharing this with me, but to the best of my ability I don't see evidence of CGI or video manipulation on this footage. It looks like just straight film."

This brought him to think about the news reports that the torch from the statue of liberty had been stolen and left on an island nearby. There was something in the farthest recesses of his mind that sensed a peculiarity, but for the moment it was just a hunch. So he looked through the list of incomplete files and found another video that was more than 80% complete. Once again he ran through a series of programs to clean up and repair as much of the file as possible before opening it up in a media player.

This time he saw a nondescript commercial kitchen with several refrigerators, a massive stainless steel island with cutting boards on top, and various sandwich fixings laid casually about. Seeing an empty kitchen with food sitting out was an immediate red flag. He'd worked in a restaurant in high school and if anyone had left with food on the counter after leaving, they would've been fired without a second thought.

The scene panned back and forth every 90 seconds and he watched carefully to see what had made this video important enough for a terrorist to be keeping. He couldn't seem to get over the lack of people. The kitchen had obviously been used recently, as there was

a knife with a piece of tomato stuck to it. Then the incredible happened. A commercial refrigerator at the far corner began to de-materialize in the space of just under two seconds. Now he adjusted the video speed until it crawled along and he watched the appliance slowly fade from the outside inward. The shell disappeared and he briefly saw insulation and then the inner panels vanish. After that the inside shelves packed with lunch meat, vegetables, and drinks. Frame by frame everything slowly faded until there was nothing but a cavity between a tall pantry and a dishwasher.

Now he played the scene back once again at half speed and watched for anything else. Then he saw it. He had to zoom in with the media player to the maximum resolution to spot the sandwich label. It looked to his untrained eye like 'wer 1' but that was the best that he could do. So he took a still frame and imported that into Photoshop where he enhanced and sharpened the label. Finally it became clear what the label said. It was 'WTC Tower 1 kitchen.' This footage was from the twin towers. Did that mean that he was dealing with one of the people who attacked New York? That didn't make sense. The news had already released names and pictures for each of the attackers. All of them were men who followed Osama Bin Laden, not beautiful young women. But maybe this was one part of the puzzle that Ari Fleischer had not disclosed to the public.

His first instinct was to send this directly to McAllister, but something held him back. He thought long and hard about the refrigerator, and then the story of Lady Liberty's torch came to mind and it finally became clear that this could be no terrorist in the normal sense. This was something straight out of science fiction. He didn't even notice the sweat that began dampening his shirt collar. But he did notice that the room where he worked began to feel much smaller and claustrophobic than it had just 10 minutes earlier.

Chapter One Hundred Six

Looking through her email wondering if there was any news from the forces of Al Shad, she found a strange piece of code. The complexity was intriguing and she moved it to a virtual machine in case it was some kind of computer worm.

Digging in to the code took a solid hour and she began to wonder if it wasn't just a waste of time. But finally she unraveled a single message, 'Tarid, how did you make a refrigerator in the World Trade Center disappear?' Below that was an encrypted email address from a site that she also used to send messages without the invaders seeing them.

Whoever had sent this message was an incredibly skilled computer hacker and somebody who knew how to keep themselves hidden. What she didn't know is whether the person was a part of the forces attacking Iraq, a part of the Iraqi resistance, or just some random curious person.

For the moment she simply stated that she'd received the message without revealing anything of value.

So it was another day or so before she received the message that the person's boss considered her to be a higher priority target than Osama Bin Laden. This obviously wasn't new information, but it did tell her that the sender worked for the invaders and was interested in a dialogue. So now the question became, what should she do with that information? She stared at the words on the screen for a long time, puzzling over whether to allow dialogue between them or to just wipe everything.

Her finger drifted a centimeter towards the keystrokes that would've eliminated the code, but she couldn't quite get herself to do it. She had a feeling about this message. And her feelings were never wrong.

In the end she decided that she would simply play this hand carefully and see if there was an ace in the deck somewhere.

Chapter One Hundred Seven

Rick was almost giddy with excitement. This would be his second major success in dealing with the strange enigma who'd captured the attention of the CIA. But finding the person was one thing, figuring out how to draw the woman out was quite another. How could he convince Tarid to reveal something of value when the woman had probably figured out that he worked for the government? He started by sharing information that the woman would already know but which would humanize him, such as Rumsfeld connecting the Liberty Statue incident with Osama Bin Laden and the rewriting of the computer security algorithms at CBS and NBC.

"Your name is Rick Sezninski and you work for the CIA. What reason do I have to believe that you are worth the risk of sharing a conversation?"

Daaamn. This woman was *good*. She couldn't have gotten that information from him of course. But there were records with his fingerprints inside the FBI. Most likely Tarid had gleaned the information from the government servers, which took more skill than he could admit to having.

The woman had him up against the wall now. It was easy enough to get the message hidden between the lines that this conversation would end permanently if he didn't offer something of value to the terrorist.

It was time to drop his ace. "I watched the footage from Fallujah that you planned to upload to the news servers. It was so shocking that I had to check with a video expert to find out if it was some kind of manipulation."

He must have played the right card, because ten minutes later he got another response. "That footage was completely accurate. Hundreds of my people were murdered⁹ and more than one thousand were injured in the American attack on Fallujah. There were no military people in the hospital except for two soldiers being treated for burns."

He didn't know what to say to this. CNN had claimed that the attack on the hospital in Fallujah was a response to intelligence asserting the presence of weapons being hidden in the building. But everything about the conflict there was garbled. It was difficult to separate American politics from stories told by the people fighting on the ground. He said this to the woman on the other end of the line and received an internet link in return. Opening the link he found a site from Amnesty International. The story showed images of American soldiers posing with prisoners at a place called Abu Ghriab. The pictures were so grotesque that he had to look away at first. Some pictures showed men being led around like dogs on a leash while others showed electric shock equipment and there were more stories of unprintable abuse like sodomy. The website described numerous accounts of soldiers performing unsanctioned acts of abuse on the prisoners there.

Though he wasn't normally one to escape into a bottle, he went into the kitchen now and with shaking hands pulled down a pint of Jack Daniels. He didn't even bother with a glass, but tilted it up and drank three long swallows. It didn't completely stop the trembling, but at least it dulled the pain a little.

The fact that this wasn't front page news on every network did not escape his attention. Obviously General Powell and Ari Fleischer would hope to keep a human-rights disaster like this relegated to the back pages of the news. It didn't take a military strategist to recognize what this kind of footage would do for public support.

He took a few more swallows while he paced the room meditating on what he'd seen. On one hand there was a strange magician who held the power to make a commercial fridge and possibly the torch from the Statue of Liberty vanish into thin air. On the other hand there was the federal government who fought violence and oppression in places like Nicaragua and Kosovo where terrorist factions threatened democracy. This brought him to consider that if Tarid was capable of magical acts like what he'd seen, she could easily create a website with falsified reports. So he dug back into the website and looked through the html code. He found the account of Jeremy Sivits who had been stationed at the prison. He then looked into military records and confirmed multiple accounts of the story along with an independent U.S. Army investigation. All of this required several more pulls on the bottle until it was half-empty. He then looked through other reports within CIA records of something called waterboarding which was used at an American base in Cuba.

⁹ Over seven hundred were killed according to Rafie al-Issawi, the head of the hospital in Falujjah

By now he'd completely emptied the bottle and stared at the screen wondering just how much trouble he would get himself into with his next message. "Tarid. I have a confession to make to you. I was the one who found your picture among the uploaded files and shared it with my boss. I'm the reason that they know what you look like."

Would some military drone kill him from the skies? No. That would be too public here in the U.S. But it was entirely possible that a prison sentence would be facing him in the very near future.

Chapter One Hundred Eight

She stared at the screen for a long minute, trying to intuit greater meaning than the mere words in an email could provide. It sounded almost like this American was reconsidering his allegiance. Such a thing was at least possible. There had been hundreds of protests against the war in more heavily populated cities like New York and San Francisco.

The internet was rife with people who actually did read about human-rights violations and spoke out against the atrocities being committed on her people. But this man was in Virginia, and he'd never been to a city larger than Atlanta in his life. He had no known history of left-leaning views (probably why their government had recruited him), and he was about as noteworthy as Peter Pace who advised one of their high-level officials.

She subconsciously rubbed at her chin while staring once again over the words in the message. Not yet willing to give anything valuable away, she decided that she could use this as an opportunity without actually showing her own cards.

"Rick, that picture was not of me. I was the one who was behind the camera that day. I was testing out a new type of camera that didn't use film. The person in the picture was just a woman that I hired to do some electrical work."

She didn't know if the man would believe her, but at the very least it would sow more doubt among their people and regardless of whether they accepted it, this would still be valuable.

"Send me some kind of proof that I can show my superiors and I will pass it on. This would do two things. It would tell them that they don't in fact have a picture of you and it might save the life of the woman in the picture since her face is currently on an international most wanted list."

Now she was more convinced that this computer hacker was open to using his skills for good so she gave him a carefully doctored death certificate for someone about the same age superimposed with a more plain picture of Naja next to it. Unless their people had experts even better than she, it would convince them that her dear friend was dead and she could once again be safe. As a sign of good faith, she also alerted Rick that his digging within the CIA database had not been as clean as it should have been. She wiped the record of his search so that he wouldn't get in trouble.

She realized now that for him to get caught would likely compromise her own operations if their government found out about the transporter. The torture techniques that they employed were well known throughout the world and she had no reservations about this Rick character withstanding them.

Chapter One Hundred Nine

Donald and Dick Cheney sat in the war room surrounded by five of their best generals as they watched footage delivered hours earlier from a spyplane circling above. He saw the huge bomb fall towards the earth and utterly destroy the factory. Despite the lack of sound, his mind unconsciously filled in the trembling of the ground as a massive hole opened up bringing the walls to collapse and fall in upon themselves. The size of the explosion made the tanker truck in the parking lot seem like a rowboat bobbing in a great Northeastern storm.

The room erupted in cheers all around and the men smiled or slapped each other on the back. Even the normally sullen Vice President turned up one side of his mouth into just a hint of a smile.

Rumsfeld turned to General Meyers and offered the man a hearty handshake. "I expect that we won't hear any frustrating reports from Al Tarid now. Let your pilots know that they've earned a healthy bonus in their paychecks and a weekend off. I'll have Fleischer put out the announcement that Iraq's most insidious threat has been eliminated."

The men spent another 20 minutes discussing tactics for installing a more sympathetic government and adjusting troop deployment to protect the petroleum assets in key regions. Then the Defense Secretary excused himself and whistled as he casually walked back to his office. On the way he dialed up the President and let him know that the military had taken back control of the region. The somewhat feeble-minded man took his words at face value and celebrated with him.

Chapter One Hundred Ten

"At 4:30 hours local time our forces took out a stronghold believed to house the infamous Al Tarid. Our intel had placed the terrorist in an abandoned factory outside of Basra where he ran his operation from an underground complex. The terrorist who struck at the very heart of liberty when he desecrated the very symbol of Liberty will no longer be--"

Turning off the television Rick looked carefully at the timestamp on his messages. The conversation with the Iraqi national had been yesterday evening, only nine hours before the bombing. With all the impressive success that this group had displayed, he was hard-

pressed to believe that an attack like this could happen without Tarid knowing about it beforehand. Nevertheless he sent out a message to check on whether the military people had in fact killed her.

"Thank you for your concern Rick. But I am fine. My people fed the military false information by pretending to be an Iraqi spy. The factory that was bombed had been sitting empty for two years. None of the people searching for me have any clue as to where I am. Even Al Shad does not know the location of my new base of operations."

He was actually surprised by the relief he felt on hearing that. It brought him to think harder about where his true sympathies lay. On one hand the news had all labeled Tarid as a terrorist and a murderer. There was even footage showing the burned out shell of a gigantic helicopter sitting in the desert and it had been claimed that Tarid was the cause. But the few snippets of conversation that he'd gotten did not impress him as coming from somebody full of malice and hatred. This didn't mean that Tarid wasn't a terrorist. He knew full-well that his skills at reading people were elementary at best. He rarely even talked to people in person since having graduated High School.

Ever since he'd been hired by the FBI, he'd enjoyed the thrill of going after the bad guys and infiltrating computer systems owned by criminals. But the video from Falujjah had shaken him more than he'd realized at the time. If the United States actually was a beacon of democracy, then why did so many countries cower under the heel of dictators? Why did they have troops in Afghanistan and Iraq but not Saudi Arabia (which some of the leftists spoke of having ties to the 9/11 attacks).

The reports that he came across ranged from the strange to the completely outlandish. There were stories about thermite being planted in the World Trade Center buildings, Saudi princes walking arm in arm with President Bush, and falsified evidence being used against Sadaam. However the difference here was that he knew how to weed through the various sites and learn which source the info came from. The first was an editorial from the New York Times in which a diplomat with the unassuming name of Joseph Wilson stated that there was no evidence at all of nuclear material being sought by Sadaam.¹⁰ Information like this was quickly debunked by Ari Fleischer and many anchors on the evening news. Digging deeper he found that Wilson's wife was a CIA agent and there was an article by a journalist named Novak who published her identity. It was said that her safety was at risk with the leak of her name and he couldn't ignore the connection between the two. Unfortunately he couldn't locate where the journalist had gotten this information as yet. But it was definitely from somebody in the government. An ice cube formed in a pit beneath his stomach as he considered the implications of America's own government betraying a CIA agent, especially given that he was working for the those very same people. How unlikely would it be for him to be similarly thrown to the wolves?

10 'What I Didn't Find in Africa' New York Times July 6, 2003

His fingers sparked with irony as he shared his concerns with a wanted terrorist halfway across the globe and tapped the desk nervously while he waited for a reply.

Chapter One Hundred Eleven

She decided to test out the transporter's connection with the fusion reactor very carefully. The reactor put out an incredible amount of energy and it could easily get both of them killed with the terawatts of power flowing through the thick copper cables. Just to be safe, she used three zero gauge wires drilled into the bedrock as a ground in case something went wrong.

"I've got the coordinates that Al Shad sent you Safia."

Naja was at the input terminal working through the calculations but she kept a close eye on every step of the process hoping that two heads really were better than one. Safia watched as she input coordinates for a glacier high up on a slope in Nepal, setting the device to lock onto a one meter circle that was 30cm thick. It would be enough to make a noticeable increase in the water tank that the men were relying on. Naja then input the coordinates for the tank and without even a hiccup the mass was sent to the hidden base where it would keep Al Shad's soldiers nourished.

Her friend's eyes were misted over as she threw herself in the air and the two twirled each other around. She relished the woman's joy with her own relief in knowing that they could once again help the impoverished people in the region while also keeping the invaders from ever again terrorizing her people.

At last she sat down on another terminal and saw the email from their... she didn't really have a word for what Rick was to them. He wasn't an enemy, at least not in her mind. But he wasn't a friend by any stretch of the imagination. The only term she could think of was, sympathetic employee. She read through the email and became interested enough to read through it again. Then she pulled Naja over to show her what the man had written.

"That's very interesting Safia, but what use is another imperialist to us? We have the technology to take care of our own needs. We have no use for one more American."

"Naja." She threw the woman a disappointing look. "That is horribly cruel thinking. We can't allow ourselves to lose our compassion just because *their* leaders have."

The woman folded her arms across her breast and narrowed her eyes. "Cruel? Safia they bombed our people, starved us with sanctions, and this man sent my picture to the CIA. What would you do, invite him down here for coffee?" Naja threw an accusing finger to the west as if she held a 2000km long sword. "I lived with those people Safia. I saw how they treat the poor, how they treat brown people, how they treat people who don't have any rights. They treat us like garbage Safia. Their police beat us and their media make us

out to be criminals. I don't know about you, but personally I couldn't give a [rat's ass] about their people!"

Sadly her efforts to reign in the woman's anger had not brought about enough success and she worried again over how Naja might use the power of the transporter if there was nobody to watch the equipment. As much as it filled her with shame, the woman clearly needed a [x] of her conscience. She still could not bear to relate the experience of killing a man in cold blood back before they stole the helicopter, but she did share with her friend the memory of seeing a small figure getting dragged off the edge of the aircraft carrier as she lifted them off and how the memory of causing someone's death had haunted her every single night.

"Naja. I can't ever take back what I've done. Hell I can't even help that person's family because I could find no record of who was killed. All I can do is keep that person in my heart every day and remember how I feel knowing that I've caused someone's death, and to use that guilt as a crutch to keep me from lashing out against other innocent people--" She saw Naja straining to interrupt her but she pushed on. "Yes, these people are innocent in that they are not the ones ordering the bombings and killing of our people. Believe me Naja, it's one-thousand times more difficult for me to keep from murdering the likes of Cheney or Firage or General Quincy than some random computer hacker in Virginia." She paused and used the softest tone she could find. "Please Naja. If not for yourself then, do it for me. Think carefully about how you would feel if you had to live with the memory of knowing that you could do so much good for humanity but instead chose to focus your energy on revenge."

The fury on the woman's face slackened, but the muscles never completely relaxed. "I can't--"

"Please, just think about it my friend. That's all I ask."

The woman's arms stayed folded defiantly across her chest and she found herself similarly unable to let go of her unease regarding the woman who was her only family now.

Chapter One Hundred Twelve

It was difficult to tell, but he felt as if the sun had traversed a full arc across the sky before a reply came from the carefully routed server string. It contained not only sympathy for his concerns, but information proving that Scooter Libby and Dick Cheney had been the ones to leak the CIA agent's identity to the newspapers. Tarid also said that she (it still seemed right to use 'she' even though the person never revealed their gender) was sending the information to Al Jazeera in order to expose the truth of the petty actions that America's leaders were engaging in.

He then asked the question which had been bouncing endlessly within the cells of his brain for weeks. "If you really are concerned for the well being of people like me, then why did you move the torch from the statue of liberty? Someone as smart as you should have realized that this would only invite further attacks by our military."

This time the response took only a few minutes and he looked first at the attachment which displayed a document marked 'Top Secret' at the highest level.

"Holy shit!" The words flew from his lips in a whisper that echoed subtly through his basement work area. He quickly shifted the document to a thumbdrive and deleted the email.

The document he was looking at was only available to the Secretary of Defense and the highest ranking generals. It gave a detailed account of a group from Iraq who took control of an Apache helicopter, landed it on a U.S. Carrier and attacked the crew on deck. Then the attackers stole a different helicopter and escaped.

"All of my previous attacks had been buried in top secret red tape. I chose the statue because I wanted to shame America and prove that all of us fighting for our lives would not be silenced. There were people killed in that attack which will sit on my conscience for the rest of my life. I had hoped this time to make a statement which would harm nothing but the pride of your country. Unfortunately I underestimated your defense secretary's ability to manipulate public opinion. I'm afraid the whole affair blew up in my face."

The raw power and brilliance that he'd seen from Tarid contrasted sharply with this admission of fallibility. The mere idea that someone who managed to sneak onto an American aircraft carrier could make a mistake were difficult for him to wrap his brain around. But the admission also humanized Tarid in a way that he could never have thought possible. Up until now he'd [held onto] the image of some evil genius like he saw in those old James Bond movies. 'Remember, thou art mortal.' He commented out loud.

Thinking about all the various issues that the people of Iraq had been dealing with, from the torture in that prison called Abu Grab-something to the sanctions, and then to the attack on a hospital brought him to see this person more as someone desperate to keep her people safe and less as a malignant terrorist bent on destruction.

But why would the government attack innocent people who were thousands of miles away? "Because of the oil." He interrupted his own thoughts. It was well published that Sadaam had been destroying oil facilities in that area and some environmental group had claimed that it resulted in the largest oil spill ever recorded. This had to be upsetting to the people who owned Exxon or Texaco.

Chapter One Hundred Thirteen

Getting the note from Al Shad that their people now had enough water for at least a week and how refreshingly cool it was brought her to hug Safia when the woman showed her the message. It was one thing to have an electronic indication that it worked, but quite another to see the gratitude from people who fought for so much yet had so little. She spent a solid half hour brainstorming with Safia all the many ways that a tool like this could be used to reduce the inequality that brought so much suffering to people all over the region. The idea of just transporting money made no sense as governments like America and Britain simply printed more when the rich people wanted it. What made more sense to her was to focus on delivering essential needs like water or medicine to the hospitals and aid groups.

Safia had gone to sleep and she watched the woman's form snoring gently on her mat at the far side of the space. Their new cavern never ceased to bring her to marvel at the woman's imagination. Each wall was like a rounded square with curved walls morphing seamlessly into half domes which themselves melded into a great dome above her. All throughout were artistic reliefs of the moon, planets, trees, and even a whale closer to the ceiling. Without any need for paint or plaster, the subtle coloration of the rock shone out with an almost supernatural majesty.

It was like having a permanent pass within the world's most splendid Mosque. And with no men to insist that they couldn't be inside. She smiled to herself thinking of how joyous it was to be free of both the racism that America clung to and the misogyny of her own people. This brought her back to thinking of the attack that the two of them had instigated all those years ago. As much as she sometimes fought with Safia, she couldn't deny the fact that this was the best place for her to remain as long as prejudice continued to rule among the men of the outside world.

Chapter One Hundred fourteen

"Safia I have the most wonderful idea for taking action against the imperialists." Her friend was just finishing a cup of coffee, the one luxury that she allowed herself, as she glanced up at the comment.

"What if we just up and transported all the jail doors in Abu Ghriab to someplace public like Trafalgar Square? It wouldn't hurt anyone in the prison and it would make denying their abuses much more difficult. It would also highlight Farage's toxic marriage with the Americans."

But only a second told her that Safia didn't like the idea. "Naja, I like that you're still thinking of options, but this would likely have the same effect as our last attack. Their

leaders have incredible skill at manipulating the public. Besides, with their people thinking that I'm dead, I don't think that it's wise to start poking lions, not without a very good reason anyway. For now I think we can have a positive impact by just continuing with the theft of food from the colonialists. There are far too many people going hungry in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine. This transporter gives us--"

"But Safia. We'll never end this war if we just keep tiptoeing around the invaders! These people shoot innocent people, bomb mosques, and destroy hospitals."

She must've struck a nerve because her friend's eyes breathed fire. "Don't you tell me about what they have done. Those people murdered my father. *Murdered*. I know full well how little they care about us. But I also know how much power they command. We are only two people, while they have a military larger than the next six nations combined. Even with the resources here I couldn't possibly stop them if they were to unleash their power on this base." The woman must have seen the look of hurt on her face because she lowered her tone before continuing. "Naja, if we reveal ourselves again, it has to be strategic. We have to know that whatever we do will strike them brutally enough that they won't be capable of firing their sadistic weapons on our people ever again."

Chapter One Hundred fifteen

A convoy of fifteen humvees raced down Highway 12 as the rising sun was already turning the desert sand to a sea of blinding white. A wake of dust clouds followed each vehicle down the long ribbon of asphalt, a pale shadow endlessly chasing its prey. Meanwhile the engine noise droned its gentle vibration through every man in the group. Hadatha was still an hour away at least and the effort to remain on high alert while surrounded by emptiness on all sides was making this trip a grueling one. Cautious eyes strained against cruel brightness as each of them scanned the area for any movement. Rumors of a covert enemy had spread from the U.S. navy to the British ground forces, then to the air force and on to Polish and Italian soldiers. Everyone talked about the mythical army that struck without a face and without leaving the slightest clue.

Despite the best efforts of the command personnel to keep a tight lid on the seemingly random attacks, stories of 'magical disappearances' had leaked out in the lower ranks. Soldiers used different names for him; Czernobog, Poludnitsa, Balor. The only thing everyone agreed on was that whatever had been playing tricks on the occupation forces was both sinister and thoroughly unpredictable.

Captain Renald stared at the desert from his position in the second hummer, occasionally rubbing his tired eyes. The damn landscape here was like the blank screen at the end of an old-time projector movie. Just sand and sky everywhere you looked.

His thoughts drifted to the mission and their destination at the Haditha oil field. He mentally repeated the whole stream of events to keep out dangerous worries of some magical demon hiding in the empty desert, as that would bring him to risk a deadly lapse in focus.

He was tasked with leading this group of soldiers at top speed in the direction of Haditha to ensure that Sadaam's guard couldn't utilize the resources of the oil fields there. The men were to keep a secure perimeter around the facility until further notice. Supplies would be delivered as needed but otherwise the group would be on their own at the oil refinery.

Unfortunately the lull of the emptiness around him did manage to sap his focus and he was shocked half out of his seat when an explosion went off right alongside the lead vehicle. He watched with his jaw hanging for one tenth of a second as the right-rear tire seemed to hang in midair and then everything slowed to a crawl as the tire flew directly toward him. Fire leapt from its edges like some weapon out of a marvel comic. But before his body had time to react, gravity took over and the spinning fireball struck the grill dead on before being deflected off to the opposite side.

"All stop! Everyone! Engines to stop." He shouted it into the radio out of habit to be sure that everyone got the message together. It was an instinct that didn't even require conscious thought after his year and a half of leading the [small group of soldiers].

"I want eyes and weapons trained in a full perimeter. Keep your scopes ready and report anything unusual."

Each man in the group scanned the empty horizon tensely, fingers caressing triggers in an almost sensual movement. One shot pierced the air and all eyes instantly shifted that way before the radio crackled with an apology. The boy said it was just a piece of tail light he'd seen glinting in the sun.

"Keep your eyes sharp men, but hands off those triggers unless you see movement." Seconds drifted into minutes with nothing but windblown sand and occasional boot scrapes to reach his ears.

'Maybe the men were right. Maybe there really is a gremlin out here.'

He consciously shook his head to dispel such a crazy sentiment. No, he couldn't let paranoia supersede his training. The men were depending on him to keep everyone alive and he intended to do exactly that.

"Sir, how long do you want to keep watch out here?" The kid had tension in his voice, but none of them could be sure what-

"Sir! I see movement at three o'clock."

He swung his rifle scope in that direction and spotted just the faintest trail of dust racing east along a dirt road that led towards the Euphrates.

Chapter One Hundred Sixteen

Safia was exhausted. She and Naja had been fighting yesterday and it was clear that she needed a way for the two of them to have some time apart without risking either of their lives. The new space was too far from any town to easily walk there, which was a decision she'd made to protect her fellow people, but now that choice had come back to haunt her in the form of social isolation.

Craving something to take her mind off the troubles at home, she meandered through the local chatter online. Thankfully this had increased somewhat with the equipment she transported from European utilities to the base of Al Shad. But when she peaked into one local group in northern Iraq, she found a horrifying conversation.

"Help! Somebody please spread the word. The Americans are here and they're just shooting people at random! Anybody who can help, please get the word out to Al Shad, Al Tarid, anybody."

She had to search through the feed in order to find out where the plea was coming from. With a little digging, she found that the attack had started an hour ago in Hawijah Aloos, a tiny hamlet built mainly on an island in the Euphrates.

Enraged as much for her inability to stop these horrors as she was at the events that were happening, she scanned through the military communications. That took even more time because there was precious little radio chatter. There was a report from one unit that a humvee had been damaged by an IED, which the locals had started using in a desperate attempt to fend off the imperialists. The commander of that group reported seeing a vehicle fleeing towards Hawijah Aloos and the remaining soldiers took off in pursuit of the rogue vehicle. A commander back on one of the battleships had gotten news of the attack, but relayed to his superior that it would be best to not take action. The man's thinking was that they could use this to judge the response from 'terrorist forces' within Iraq. If anyone started poking blame, they could just claim that the officer had never been given explicit permission to leave the main road.

She slammed her exhausted fist against the desk with enough force to knock the computer mouse off to dangle from its cord. Looking at the mouse, she imagined one of the American commanders hanging from the end of that cord. She considered it with a glee that frightened her more than anything had in recent days.

But for now there was nothing she could do to help those people. Sabotaging their equipment wouldn't stop the men with their guns and there were no security cameras or military drones showing enough detail of the area for her to get an exact location. So she took her anger out on a cracked pot instead, watching it fly into a spray of clay shards against the bare rock wall. The satisfaction was like a drop of water falling on a sunburn and she yearned for something that would boost her mood, or at least distract her.

Chapter One Hundred Seventeen

"Any word from that group near Hadatha?"

"Yessir." The sergeant on duty shuffled through some paperwork before taking up the one he was looking for. Keeping tabs on reports now that they were ordered to keep away from digital footprints made operations far less efficient. It irked him to no end.

"Sanchez reported in that the group had gone through the nearby town with a fine comb and found nothing explosive and only a few old soviet guns. Nothing serious enough to be a threat."

Colonel McGuire stared past the man's ear for a long moment before realizing that this would be better discussed with someone who possessed a higher security clearance.

"Thank you son. That'll be all."

His back was a straight oak board, reminiscent of his years of training as he made the trip to his ready room and rang up General Gibson. "What is it McGuire?" The voice sounded more tired than usual and he realized it was 5:30 in the morning back home.

"Sorry to disturb you sir. I just thought you should know that security force Delta encountered no resistance and we've seen no sign of communication between any of the local terrorist cells."

"How long ago was their little side trip?"

He looked at his watch and did a quick calculation. "About two hours ago by my estimate."

"That's too soon. We could easily expect an attack to take several hours to prepare and execute. Those hajis are whipped, but don't assume for a minute that they're helpless."

"Yes sir. We still have stashes of German and Russian weapons in the basement at Dammam that were confiscated from Sadaam's men and we are prepared to use them as a leveraging tool against the countries that supplied them should the need arise."

"That's good thinking. Keep your soldiers watching their screens and keep me updated on any changes."

"Of course sir."

Chapter One Hundred Eighteen

Corporal Jim Descar was up at 5am and doing his morning regimen when a fast wrap on his door interrupted his count. Gritting his teeth briefly, he shouted that he'd be on-call in 30 minutes.

"Sir, sorry sir. This is considered high priority."

What the hell was so important that it couldn't wait 30 damn minutes for him to finish his situps? Throwing a towel over one muscular shoulder, he opened the door to see captain

Estevez looking back wide-eyed at him. The man barely took a breath before he started rambling about vehicles being stolen and as he spoke, Jim became aware of alarms ringing outside the building.

Well at least this interruption seemed justified. He immediately moved to calm the boy down so he could get a better take on the situation. "Alright, alright son. Take a deep breath." He paused and used his words like a metronome to help the kid slow down.

"Now what's this about vehicles?"

"Sir. Private Dennison sounded the alert fifteen minutes ago that all of the humvees are missing."

He chuckled briefly as this would have to be one of Dennison's signature pranks. The kid was truly a genius when it came to getting the men all riled up. The man was probably sitting in the back seat of a humvee just waiting to see him running around the base in nothing but undershorts and a towel. "So you're saying that you sounded the whole perimeter alarm just to join Private Dennison in one of his practical jokes?" He was only half chiding. The pranks were a big help with base moral, but this was a little over the top.

The kid's mouth fell open as if someone had just offered him a date with Beyonce. "No. Sir, I mean, we all checked the situation. There isn't a single hummer left on base."

Now the half-registered smile disappeared like shrapnel from the tower of a mosque.

"This is no joke Estevez?"

The haunting look in the kid's eyes finally registered and he swept past with barely a second to close the door. Both of them made fast steps out to the vehicle yard where an eerie calm replaced the usual sound of engines being overhauled or fueled up. Looking around, he saw not a scratch on the perimeter gate, and yet Estevez was right. Their entire base's stock of hummers was missing. His stomach sank three inches lower in his gut as he looked over the yard.

"Montoya! Over here!" He called over a young Cuban fellow that he'd found to be the best in their company in tracking enemy targets. The kid was one step ahead because the words were spilling out of his mouth before his feet even stopped.

"Sir. I already checked a dozen spots. There are no fresh tire tracks to be seen. The only tire treads are from when the vehicles arrived. Nobody turned them around and nobody drove them out through the gate."

Jim looked down at the rectangular depressions in the dirt. He checked the depth of the tire tracks and the indentations where parked vehicles had been sitting. In the end he had to agree with the young man. No sign of the vehicles having been turned around were visible anywhere in the yard. They seemed to have simply gotten up and disappeared.

He thought back to the rumors ripping through the armed forces like a virus, of a malevolent entity stealing equipment and food from all branches of the coalition forces. Up till now it had been just a scattering of items, a mere speck in the \$400 trillion budget

for the war effort. But he'd never seen or heard reports of 34 humvees just disappearing overnight.

He also thought back to Ari Fleischer's announcement that their number one threat had been killed last week. The announcement had claimed that an old factory was taken out with a bunker buster. But that meant there would be no body and no actual confirmation. This brought his stomach to sink even lower and a chill to make it's way along his spine despite the air marching quickly into the 90s.

"I want men stationed around the entire perimeter. Anyone who comes within twenty yards of the wall is to be shot without warning."

"Estevez. I want you to get together four men and erect signs at twenty yards out with a skull and crossbones. Nobody should be approaching this base today."

"Dennison. I want two pairs of eyes going through camera surveillance from the past 12 hours. Anything, and I mean *anything* that even *hints* at an intrusion is to be reported to me immediately. Is that understood?"

Two pairs of 'yessirs' responded almost in chorus.

Leaving the men to their duties, he went straight to his office to check with Admiral Grenderson and report on the incident. Immediately after his computer booted up, there was a message alert. It contained only one line. 'Iraq will not be conquered.'

The desk shuddered as his fist slammed into it. A second later the mark was obscured by blood spurting from the two bones that he'd broken in the self-inflicted attack. "Looks like Fleischer was overeager in his victory announcement.

Chapter One Hundred Nineteen

"Dammit, I will not be made to look like a fool! We've already announced that Tarid is dead."

"I don't give a rat's ass." The general's face had distorted itself into such a grimace of hate that if he'd been able to see himself in that exact moment, even he would've been scared. "Military equipment disappears all the time. It gets blown up, or stolen, or just quietly delivered to one of the SWAT teams stateside. This isn't something that I'm going to let people repeat to their gossipy wives back home. You are to keep this incident quiet. Make sure the men over there understand what we can do to them if this leaks out.

Slamming the phone down, General Hugh Shelton took another antacid and a long drink of water. The burger he'd eaten for lunch was having it's revenge in seeming collaboration with that team of sand niggers hitting Bashur. It was a hell of a pickle. How do you strike back at an enemy that rips off military equipment without the slightest clue as to where they are or how they did it?

Picking up the phone again, he called up Master Chief Petty Officer Herdt. It stood to reason that a man in charge of the entire U.S. Navy would have better ideas than the kids running the show on site. Waiting on the line, he fantasized about just sending two squadrons of F-14s over Baghdad and carpet-bombing the whole damn city.

"This is Herdt."

"Yes, master chief. This is General Shelton, I wanted to get your input on this situation with Al Tarid." He laid out the incident in Bashur and his belief that the strike on Basra had failed to take him out. He also made it clear that Rumsfeld would not appreciate any non-secret action which contradicted Fleischer's report that Tarid had been eliminated.

"Peter, are you a fan of crime dramas?"

He was momentarily taken aback by the seemingly unrelated comment. But Herdt was clearly not interested in a response because he barely even paused. "There are dozens of movies where the bad guy realizes that he can't win by attacking the protagonist directly. So instead he threatens to kill the man's loved ones." The voice paused once more before going on "Tarid perceives herself as a 'good guy' given what we've seen of the casualty reports. Now we can't locate the woman directly, but what we CAN do is threaten a random city in Iraq with a storm of death if the attacks don't cease."

Shelton liked the man's thinking. The strategy was simple and direct. It should work just as easily as any hostage situation, and it was one in which his people held all the cards.

"We should start with some small location that won't make it on the five-o'clock news."

"Hawijah Aloos." The two men came to the same conclusion almost simultaneously.

"And if we have to go after more populated targets, we'll just use the same story that we did with Falujjah."

"That's the spirit son. You've definitely got potential. Just make sure that the target is not relayed through any computer networks that our man over there can subvert."

Chapter One Hundred Twenty

She didn't think that she'd ever get used to the wondrous echoes that sounded within their new space and she relished Naja's smile each day as they giggled like schoolgirls each morning waking up to the wondrous basilica. That was at least until she checked her computer. Today there was a new message from Rick the American. She had come to appreciate his intelligence and willingness to face the uncomfortable reality of his government's actions. While he regularly spoke about the struggle to accept the level of cruelty enacted by the military leaders, he was mature enough to decide that he was more valuable within the system than outside of it.

"Tarid. A man named General Kootre has disclosed to me that the CIA knows that I've been able to get messages to you. I'm pretty sure they don't know the full extent of our

discussions, but I believe he has doubts as to my faith in the American intelligence system.

But that's beside the point. He told me to relay to you the following threat. If any further action is taken against any branch of the U.S. armed forces by your men, the Navy is prepared to carpet bomb a random Iraqi city in retribution.

Tarid, they're absolutely not bluffing. You saw how Rumsfeld and Fleischer managed to turn the attack in New York into an increase in funding for the war effort. I think that you should take their advice. I don't want to see your people needlessly killed."

"Loud curse!!" She threw a wail at the ceiling powerful enough to wake the dead, if there had been any nearby. This was followed by the sound of her shirt ripping as she took out her frustrations on the first thing her hand fell on.

Despite their previous argument, Naja immediately looked up and asked what was wrong. But the haunted eyes that she turned on her associate were like nothing the woman had ever seen before. Words were a dandelion seed in a hurricane as Safia silently pointed at the computer screen.

Naja made her way over and gazed at the message silently. Time stopped as the two kept their eyes glued to the screen and the horrible words etched into it's surface. A thousand nefarious attacks played themselves out in her mind like a movie marathon that she and Naja occasionally enjoyed. But every one of them would clearly be tied to her and that would bring about the deaths of untold thousands of innocent people. She needed something new, some action that would make it clear beyond the shadow of a doubt that her people were not pawns to be used in the colonialists' grand chess game. Restless feet projected her out of the chair and she walked a full circuit, throwing ideas like a child flinging water in a stream. "With the fusion reactor we should have enough power to transport the whole liberty statue this time." Naja threw a first idea out with wild abandon.

"No. Their government would just label this as another attack on 'democracy' or some other bullshit."

"What if we just shifted all of the bombs from the bases within range?"

"No. That wouldn't work either. The Americans have missiles with enough range to travel hundreds of kilometers. And it would take several days to get GPS coordinates on each one of them. By that time their people could wipe out a quarter of the population."

Naja paused and gave her a look that brought a hint of fear to her breast. "Honestly I wouldn't put that past the likes of that man Rumsfeld."

"Look, we need something sudden, dramatic, and so undeniably superior that they wouldn't dare confront us. Something that they couldn't lie to their people about. Damn. If only things were as easy as when we took the helicopter over to that carrier ship."

Immediately her face lit up and she ran over to Naja grabbing the woman by the shoulders. "That's it Naja!"

The woman gazed back without grasping the thought process. "Naja, how long do you think it would take once they learned of an attack for the Americans to strike a city?"

Both of them ran over to the map of Iraq which she'd stolen from a British government agency. There were pins set in wherever a military base had been located and several new places were added as the 'coalition' took greater control of the region.

"Given the time it takes to get a full bomb assortment loaded onto a plane, get it in the air and travel to a target that would require something between 35-50 minutes depending on which spot they chose."

"Alright. I think that would be enough time."

The woman gave her a confused expression. "So what are you thinking?"

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-One

Captain Thomas wandered down the executive corridor after a meeting with the CAG commander. There had been hand-delivered orders for a possible strike to be undertaken with no electronic signature. The codename was 'fountainhead' and the location had been pulled from a sealed envelope by Admiral Whinsley. But since the go ahead wasn't expected immediately, he decided to make a trip to his quarters for a power nap. There wasn't likely to be another opportunity for sleep till the end of the day and he was expected to stay sharp no matter where the sun was in the sky. Such was the life being captain of an aircraft carrier.

Wandering along the blue painted corridors he reached the small room and found a note laying just below the pillow. That was intriguing because anybody who needed to reach him would just use the ship's intercom. But as he looked at the words on the page, his jaw involuntarily dropped an inch.

"Captain Richard Thomas of the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln. Your ship will be eliminated in exactly 35 minutes. You have that much time to get your personnel off the ship and onto the other ships in your armada. Anyone who remains after that time will not survive."

He swung an arm around with the speed of a rapier and stabbed the executive line.

"Admiral Whinsley did-"

"Richard is this some twisted sick joke?!"

"Sir?"

"Richard were you or were you not aware of a threat declared against this ship?"

Now the sweat began to bubble through his pores as he stared again at the piece of paper. "Admiral I just now saw a note left in my private quarters."

"And this note states that the Abraham Lincoln is about to be destroyed?"

"Sir, my note used the term 'eliminated.'"

"Captain I don't give a fuck if they said it would be hurled into the sun. This is the U.S. Navy and we do not respond well to threats."

Whatever the admiral had been about to say next was interrupted by the red alert beacon. "All hands to emergency stations. This is not a drill. All hands--"

"Who the hell sounded the red alert dammit!"

Once again he was interrupted by pounding on his door. "Not now. I'm busy!"

"Captain I'm afraid this is urgent. I've just received a personal note stating that this ship will be attacked in just over half an hour. We need to take precautions."

Despite having a superior officer on the line, the phone dropped from his hand as if it was a flower petal absentmindedly falling to the dirt. Opening the door he saw not only his second in command, but also Commander Daley and a young officer on security duty. He looked each one of them over and saw something that made his blood boil. Fear.

"Wait a minute. Which one of you received this note?"

"Captain, we all received a note. Every single sailor that I've spoken with found a personal note advising them to get off this ship."

His mind raced through half a dozen scenarios and options. This wasn't a set of orders which could be filtered through the chain of command. Whoever did this knew exactly how to strike them to subvert the chain of command, and with almost no time for him the CAG group to retaliate. This was a catastrophe of nuclear proportions. "All right men, give me two minutes." He all but closed the door in their faces as he scrambled for the phone once again.

"Admiral, are you there?"

"Captain. I have been ordered to implement Operation Fountainhead. You are to get a strike group in the air immediately."

"But sir. Were you aware that every sailor on this ship received the same note as I did?"

There was silence on the line for the span of time that an F-18 Hornet would need to take off. "Are you saying that every single one of the 5600 souls on board this ship have the same information?"

"Yes Admiral. At least that's what two of my senior officers just relayed to me."

"Very well. I will make an announcement myself. The operation continues as ordered."

Less than a minute later there was a shipwide announcement from the CAG commander to all stations. "Men and women of the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln. It has come to my attention that a particularly clever terrorist has played a highly dangerous game with our ship. Everyone onboard knows the phenomenal power that this carrier group holds. You all know that not a single United States carrier has been destroyed by a foreign power since the second world war. I therefore remind you of your duties to this ship and your oath to the United States Navy. I swear to you on my life that none of you are in any danger onboard this ship. You will continue your duties as before, that is all."

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Two

"That aint no haji doing this." Seaman Ernesto made his way over to Esteban who normally ran the signal lights for returning aircraft. "What you think bro? This shit fer real?"

"Dude, that aint no man doin this, `is Anayo."

"The hell do you mean? Like the old myths from the island?"

"Think about it conyo. These little nymphs go after people who don't believe. And what do they inflict on their victims? Insanity. Now what's more insane then a single group of A-rabs 50 miles away being able to deliver the same message to each and every person on this ship?"

"So you sayin we all lost our marbles?"

"Can't think of anything else bro."

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Three

It had to be Tarid. There was no way to be sure, but that trick on the Statue of Liberty couldn't have been done by people in a boat. No way. And a helicopter would've been heard by everyone nearby in Jersey. So the question became. What should he do about it. The admiral and the captain both ordered that they move forward with an attack mission. But when he saw the target, it confirmed the last of his lingering concern. That the Navy would send it's million dollar fighters on an attack run against a tiny hamlet dozens of miles from Baghdad was pure lunacy. So why would they go after such a place? Even if by some chance they knew it was Tarid's secret hideout, the Navy had already bombed two different targets in hopes of catching him and were left no better off then they were a year ago.

He did a few minutes of quick calculations in his head. The message showed up on top of his desk at 0320 hours. Which meant the attack was expected to happen at 0355 hours. It would take at least twenty-five minutes for the pilots to be prepared, the jets' fuel tanks to be topped off, armament loaded, and for the crew to complete final checkup. And it was 0330 now. So Tarid knew all of this and planned the timing to ensure that they didn't have time to get attack fighters in the air. Then he subtracted the time it would take if there was no armament and reasoned that half of their aircraft could be launched before the time was up.

His decision made, Daley moved as fast as his feet would take him toward the flight deck. There wouldn't be much time.

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-four

"Do you think they will listen to you?" Naja's voice said that she already knew the answer, but sometimes it helped to hear things spoken out loud.

"I wish to the bottom of my heart that they would. But it's enormously doubtful. We can try one more time though."

Try as she might, she'd hoped that a plan could've been set in motion which wouldn't endanger any more lives. But this idea was too perfect to pass up. It would be public, it would strike at their military, and it would make it clear to the whole international community that Mesopotamia was a sovereign region.

This time she sent a similar note to the entire crew of the massive ship with the simple message that there was only 25 minutes left to escape. It was impossible to imagine the panic which the second set of messages would induce, but that was unavoidable. The Navy's insistence on preparing for an attack meant that she couldn't give them as much time as she would've wanted. If she'd given their people another half hour, the fighter jets would be dropping bombs on some random city before she could do anything to stop them.

She'd done everything she could to reduce the loss of life, the rest of was in the hands of Allah. Praise His name.

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-five

On the flight deck it was complete chaos. One man was flat on the deck bleeding out and a member of the security personnel was standing over him. Half a minute later, a shot rang out and the security guard fell over with a fountain of blood shooting from his neck. A hurricane of wind brought his head spinning round to watch an intruder launch off the deck before the fueling hose was even disconnected.

"I want to make this crystal clear to every one of you. Those who desert this ship without the express permission of the CAG boss will be considered deserters and will be court marshalled. I will not allow this mutiny to continue!"

He spotted a Seahawk spinning up it's engines while chopping an unfortunate crewman in half. Running towards the aircraft he saw one man pointing a gun at him from the cargo door as the tornado above it grew to full throttle. Running sideways he went to another helo. This one had been tagged for maintenance because of a fuel leak. But it would at least hold enough fuel to get onto one of the destroyers. He went over to a fuel line and a woman wearing a purple vest met him halfway. He looked at her cautiously and then pointed to the mostly functional aircraft.

"I think that one will keep in the air long enough to get off the ship!" It was quickly becoming impossible to communicate with the scatter of aircraft departures and weapon discharges on deck. He breathed a quick sigh of relief when the woman nodded yes and helped him run the fuel line over to the chopper.

It seemed to take another 20 minutes before they were fueled up but at last the woman gave a thumbs up and they jumped on board. As he began to run up the engines, men and women who hadn't been able to make it to a ship or boat funneled in his direction. He lost count at twenty and did some quick figuring based on the max payload they could carry. Then he looked over at the woman sitting in the co-pilot's seat and told her to go unbolt anything that could be removed within 5 minutes.

Soon the rear bay was swelling with people and some began using their fists to ensure a spot. He had to do something to dispel the abject panic. So he wound down the engines and watched as every eye shifted towards him. When it was possible to hear again, he shouted that he could get every one of them on board and there was to be no violence on board his chopper. Once that was done, he ran up the engines again and watched as the woman working outside threw herself into unbolting one of the gattling guns.

A spiderweb shattered the glass as he spotted a gun pointed at them from the CAG boss himself sitting in the tower. He wasn't normally a man who succumbed to fear, but in this case there was nowhere to take shelter and he couldn't leave the aircraft if he wanted to save the men and women onboard. Soon enough though the decision was taken out of his hands when several shots rang out from the crowd and one of them struck the Admiral in the shoulder.

Two seconds later the woman was back in the co-pilot's seat with a look of abject terror in her eyes. "Sir, we're at 0352. If we're going to do this, it's got to be now!"

The woman didn't need to say it twice. He ran up the engines as quickly as possible and lifted off the deck just as his watch beeped 0354.

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Six

"Safia I-"

"Naja please not now." Her spine was piano wire taut as she hunched over the computer interface. Everything had to be calculated precisely. The profile of the ship was factored in, the mass, and the power needed would consume every single watt that she had available. At the same time she wanted to remove a volume of sand equal to the ship's displacement so that it would materialize half-buried in the sand. With this single act, she hoped that the coalition forces would finally see that their attacks on the people of Iraq were as adjuvant as a missile in the hands of a madman. If this single action did not put a halt to their terrorism, then she couldn't think of anything that would.

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Seven

Nobody knew what kind of weapon was going to be deployed, but if it was expected to take out an aircraft carrier then it would have to be nothing short of nuclear. That meant the only safe place to go would be the back side of a rather large ship. The best option would be the U.S.S. Arctic which was the fast supply ship for their carrier group. It had a large profile and was sitting high in the water after having delivered most of the aircraft fuel the day before.

As he made his way in her direction the woman next to him yelled at him that the carrier was gone. A quick glance was all he could manage with a severely overloaded helo that was leaking fuel. But risking the quickest glance he immediately saw that there was nothing left of his former ship except a small maelstrom of waves flooding in to fill the void left by a 100,000 ton ship which was simply... gone.

He almost lost control of the craft, and he was lucky that the woman next to him had some degree of training because she kept them from dipping too low and the two of them got the craft back up to a safe altitude. Then he pulled up the radio and sent a mayday to the rest of the carrier group.

"This is the U.S.S. Cape St. George you are clear to land on the helipad at your convenience."

He breathed another sigh of relief as he brought the aircraft toward the deck and set her down to a rousing chorus of cheers from everyone behind him. As the wheels touched down the woman next to him put a hand on his shoulder and yelled in the mike that he probably saved the lives of thirty people today.

The comment turned up the corners of his mouth a little, but the sight that he'd seen while they were in the air was something that would haunt him till the day he died. What had happened to the ship, and how it could've been lost without any ordinance and no visible damage brought the trembling back to his hands, which were thankfully no longer needed on the controls.

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Eight

"So where the hell is my ship then?!" Vice Admiral John Nathman was practically screaming into the phone. "What the hell do you mean you don't know?! How does a 100,000 ton aircraft carrier just up and disappear right out of the ocean?"

"I don't care how many eye-witness reports there are. What I want is the exact location for where that ship went. And if it was sunk, then I want to know who did it and how!"

He paused for half a second while he listened to the response.

"Well, put Captain Burke on the horn then." His heart was acting up (no surprise with all this stress) and he popped an extra one of his pills while doing his damndest to slow the hurricane being worked by his lungs, but that proved all but impossible under the circumstances.

"Vice Admiral. I've got a commander Daley and Petty Officer Shirkright with me. Both of them were on the last aircraft to depart from the carrier. The latter claimed specifically that she watched from above as the entire ship simply vanished, leaving a gaping hole in the ocean. Commander Daley confirmed Shirkright's observation though he was more occupied with keeping the craft under control."

"Now that's bullshit and you know it! What you're talking about is utterly preposterous."

"Sir. With all due respect, it's no more preposterous than the torch of the Statue of Liberty disappearing or the humvees--"

"Damnit! I know all about this Tarid business. But we're not talking about a single humvee. We're talking about a ship the size of a skyscraper. How the hell does a damned sand-nigger pull off that kinda shit?!"

"Sir. I seriously wish I knew. All I can report to you is what the survivors from the CAG group have told me."

He set the phone down with shaking hands and mute lips. If this had come from anybody other than two separate ship captains he would've made sure that they were drummed out of the navy in the span of an hour. But there was no response from the Roosevelt on any frequency and the entire carrier group confirmed that it was unable to make a visual confirmation. Whatever weapon had been used, it was something unlike anything the U.S. military was aware of. This brought up a level of terror within his soul unlike anything he'd experienced in his 52 years in the Navy.

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Nine

Airman Reynolds had only launched from a carrier twice, but he knew how to get an aircraft off the ship and he was determined to do exactly that come hell or high water. The last man who'd tried to stop him got a bullet in his leg for the trouble and he confirmed with the sky boss (who thankfully wasn't going to listen to the goddamn CAG boss). He'd said that it was his moral duty to save the lives of his fellow shipmates and that was what he intended to do.

After an enormously hurried systems check he looked at the time and cursed. 03:54:34. He wasn't sure if there would be time to get off the deck, but he'd been too busy to disconnect the armament so he'd have to go full throttle and pray to God, Jesus, and the New England Patriots that he escaped whatever crazy weapon was capable of singling out every one of the people on the ship.

Finally he got permission from the flight boss and felt the acceleration as 500 pounds of g-forces pressed him against his seat. The last thought he had was how crazy it was that the sky could change from bright afternoon to late dawn in a fraction of a second.

The F-14 that airman Reynolds had been piloting lacked the momentum to get airborne when the ship that it was launching from went from 30 knots to a dead stop in less than half a second. Instead the jet fighter careened off the deck and into the loose sand of the Sahara desert, with Reynold's lifeless body strapped tightly within the crumpled cockpit.

The End

Chapter

"I want to know what's happened to Al Tarid!" Shad's voice echoed through the room as if to compensate for the man's depreciated stature after [bomb took out his leg]. [guy who wants to betray Safia] is looking for her.

The tone in the room became more relaxed after that and the discussion shifted to the now infamous 'Al Tarid.'

"Sadly we know precious little about the man. We assume from his success that there must be a team of at least a dozen people with him, but we don't have any specifics on that. The attack on the Roosevelt was an incredible defeat given that only seven men and two women were counted among the group. Now last year, Colonel Rojas' men were able to capture an insurgent who was matched to the location where the attackers of the Roosevelt fled to. After several weeks of interrogation, we learned of the name 'Al Shad' who is believe to be a minor leader within the insurgent movement. However we don't know that there are any ties between the two men. Nothing about Al Tarid was learned from the prisoner and he was eventually tossed in solitary."

"Sir. If I may change the subject. Were we able to get anything from the recording of Daley's meeting on Monday?"

Patreous pointed a finger at the man as his eyes lit up. "Yes. Thank you General Billings. Now this is where the story gets more peculiar. After intense analysis of the recording, our tech was able to isolate one sentence which he thought matched the original voice. When he played it back there was indeed the distinct accent of someone from near the Euphrates. But the voice was that of a young woman, probably not older than 25. What makes this strange is that the person who Daley spoke with possessed exceptionally quick wit and an in-depth comprehension of tactical matters. So the first theory; that Al Tarid used a [person to speak for him] wouldn't fly. So our current theory is that a more complex method of speech synthesis was used. And-" the man paused for a second to ensure that he had the whole room "we now know what 'further action' our enemy combatant was referring to.

With a warning for Naja to buckle up, she hurried over to a dead soldier and snatched his weapon. Then she started the engine and hurried to get the huge bird into the air. It was far more sluggish than the attack helicopter and it moved like a mountain. But once the machine lifted off the deck, she directed it to fly directly above the ship's bridge. With Naja in the back wearing a helmet and mic (thank the prophet she'd thought of that) she directed the woman to hook the helicopter's retractable winch to the first antenna that came in reach.

It didn't take long for some of their personnel to see her plan and several started firing high powered guns at them, bringing Naja to shriek in fear. But of course she'd planned this tactic carefully before even starting the engines. She quickly dialed the helicopter's radio and flipped through until she got a radio that was still working.

"-be fired upon. There will be no second chance."

She was going to hurl insults directly, but then thought better of it. Her skills with the American language were trivial enough that she couldn't trust herself to be clear. So instead she did her best to help Naja speak calmly enough to sound like she was in control of the situation and then she gave the woman the words to say.

"This is the independent people's air force and you are commanded to stop shooting immediately."

"You up there! Who the hell are you?! If you don't get that machine back on the deck this instant you will be blasted out of the sky."

"Once again. You are commanded to cease fire. If this helicopter is struck, you can be certain that it will fall directly onto the bridge and cause immense damage to your communication equipment. This is your final warning."

While the tension built up in the soldiers below, she gave Naja instructions on how to

This machine may be advanced, but how much can we do before running out of weapons? This helicopter wasn't going out for an attack. It was bringing supplies which means it only carried four missiles in case something unexpected happened (as if Sadaam had the weapons to shoot down multiple helicopters)

As a woman she can't safely travel and start a new life by herself. She tells high-ups that a delicate piece of computer hardware needs transport to (Baghdad?), to avoid overheating it must be delivered at night. She puts herself inside a crate for delivery. But along the route, the driver becomes curious and opens the crate. He discovers her and says he will keep it secret, in exchange for 'a little favor.' She's forced to kill him as he attempts to take advantage of her.

She uses an EM pulse to wipe the electronics on the carrier which disables systems like radar. Does she get in contact with Sadaam? No, she doesn't like him but might consider a temporary alliance.

Maybe she eventually reaches out to Rachel Corrie in Palestine.

Two techniques that she uses against the military- a large-winged drone with an ion engine

a mini-sub that creeps along the ocean floor and releases a boyant explosive

she uses a suit which has cameras that project the scene behind her, making her invisible while doing research she learns about the desertification of Iraq in ancient times and makes connections between Mesopotamia and modern America/Europe

Chapter

Nishad stared at her father. How he'd found out was still a mystery. But she knew before he even said a word that her father wouldnt approve.

"How can you live a life with a boy like that?? His eyes were burning embers.

"Whst do you mean? We love each other."

"Listen Rishala. He doesnt have a future. His family never amounted to anything. Not for five generations-"

"That's because nobody gave him a chance. People like you talk horrible things about him behind his back. No wonder the family can't gain respect. But I am helping him. You'll see.

"I forbid you to marry that boy Rishala.

What does the protagonist want badly?

To kick the American/British military out of the country. This changes as she learns about the larger ramifications of the war

Is it something readers can identify with?

As long as I explain it.

Who is in protagonist's way?

In general, the US military. But more specifically- admiral Quincy

Safia (Al Tarid) protagonist. She was born 1977. Her entire world was the village until the drone wakes up her abilities. After her father is killed on the 'highway of death' when she's 12, a rage starts against the Americans. She's medium height. Black hair. Medium-brown skin. She develops a strong sense of rage for the Americans and comes to realize that it stems from the futility of not being able to protect her father. To compensate, she puts everything into helping protect her people, and eventually the living biosphere. She's devoted to her family and finds discrete ways to send money back to help them.

Semir -- Wealthiest man in Al Salman. He's 40 with just a touch of gray. Like everyone in the village, he's slender, but he has enough money for some imported food.

Quincy-- went into the military bc his father fought in WW2, a war in which he KNEW that the enemy was a bad guy. Quincy grew up hearing battle stories and signed up after High School. He participated in Operation Ranch Hand, spraying Agent Orange over the 'enemy' fields in order to stop the communists. He fell into fear during the Clinton years when it was announced that the military would be scaled back given the end of the Cold War. He'd married a school teacher that he'd met after being injured by shrapnel in the shoulder while he was recovering in a US school that got converted to a hospital.

Naja-- deep brown skin, starts out as early 20s. Not nearly as brave as Safia. Once it became clear that she couldn't get employment after all the money spent on college, her family became very hostile. Not quite disowning, but cruel nonetheless. Her black hair is shoulder-length and very curly

Muhammad Al Shad. Leader of the freedom fighters. He's a conservative man. He'd tried to hold back Sadaam when it became clear how evil the man was. He lost then, and he's become afraid of losing more young men to the battle against an even stronger enemy. But he still holds influence and remains committed to doing what he considers to be

possible to impede the colonialists. He's above average height almost 1.8m with a graying beard and a slight paunch.

Al Sadeem. One of Al Shad's main soldiers. He has a lot of fire and holds enormous hatred for the imperialists. He not only lost his father, but his mother and two sisters in the same attack (death road). Sadly, his whole life is focused on revenge and causing harm, which blinds him to other matters. He's shorter than Al Shad and only five yrs older than Safia.

Commander Daley. A 5-11" man in his late 40s. Had a problem with drinking in High School and his dad told him to sign up with the military or he wouldn't have a home. Drank the kool-aid of US imperialism and truly believed that the US was 'keeping the world safe.' He made sure to stay in top physical shape and kept up his flying credentials which was why he requested to be posted to the USS Theodore Roosevelt. He had a girlfriend in Memphis, but he'd also had carefully hidden affairs with men and secretly fears that he isn't masculine enough because of his bi-sexuality.

Naja- A twenty-four year old woman who'd gone to university in New York for nursing. Nobody would hire a brown-skinned muslim woman and she was at risk of being deported when she finally accepted her fate and returned to Iraq. She's taller than average at 59in but her skin is dark brown. She has tightly curled hair that stays short against her head. When she went to school, it was with a desire to help people. But the anger shown towards her there and the attacks by Americans after she returned had a sobering effect on her nievette.

Uday Hussein- son of Sadaam. He killed one of Sadaam's bodyguards in 2000. despite many rumors of rape and murder he was appointed head of the Iraq football association where he often tortured athletes who were considered to be underachieving.