munir

Christian Sorensen

This book is dedicated to the victims of war.
Special thanks to Molluska.

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Chapter One

"Deer balak! Heads up!" Munir yelled, just in time for Majid to dive out of the way as three beasts barreled down the side street. His deflated football flopped in the motorcade’s dusty wake, like a Tigris shabbout convulsing on the bank.

“Damn, car tagged my hip,” Majid groaned, rubbing his left side vigorously. Munir, between coughs, helped Majid to his feet with a steady hand and mischievous smile.

Both cerebral and handsome, the duo had been friends since birth.

“Another CIA clown car,” grumbled Munir as he kicked their popped pastime. The ball skipped awkwardly, grudgingly accepting its fate.

“It’s like Garth... Car! Game on!” Munir joked.

Majid, who usually appreciated Munir’s penchant for U.S. cinema, disagreed. “It’s nothing like that scene. You watch too many damn movies,” Majid scolded, limping toward the afternoon sun.

“Where are we going?” Munir asked, grabbing his skateboard, resting it over his bony shoulders, and delicately placing his feet in sync with Majid’s.

Majid ignored Munir’s question; even though Majid was only a couple weeks older than Munir, he often acted like the big brother. “Isn’t CIA supposed to be covert?” Majid asked, a little too peppy considering his sullen mood.

“Not here, not these days. They just toss money around. Their spycraft is shit,” Munir responded.

“What are they doing in Al-Bataween anyway?” Majid wondered aloud.

Refusing to think about it, Munir continued to walk in silence, orienting his ears upwards, hoping to catch the squeak of old shanashil floorboards and put it to potent paper whenever he dug up the time and inclination.

“I don’t know, but shit that startled me,” Majid continued, content answering his own question.
“Like that time your host mom burst in on you,” Munir snorted cheerfully.

“Exactly,” Majid replied. They often joked about Majid's year studying abroad. “I'll never understand how she confused Umm Kulthum, live in Paris, for pornography.”

“Dumbass Americans,” Munir beamed, completely fine stereotyping the Occupiers. Taking a poke at the globe’s bully provided him with fleeting relief, which he readily acknowledged and welcomed.

“Not all of them,” Majid corrected.

Having earlier clothed the city in hot, grey wool, Mother Nature now decided to ease up a bit, actually letting in a few graceful breezes. One danced a dabke around Munir’s ankles, and he was grateful. He hiked up his sweatpants a little more. Majid sniffed quietly at the irony: *Almost run over by a foreign militant driving a vehicle running on petroleum that was taken from under our soil.*

Munir began humming a Rashid Hussein poem. He reached for Majid’s hand along the crowded sidewalk. “Men, women... the most beautiful baby and the most beautiful child, they all wash my blood, the Arab fatigued by humiliation...”

They turned the corner together.

Greyriver Six allowed himself to enjoy the serene air-conditioned climate inside the third SUV. Mentally, Greyriver Six preferred comfort to hardship. Physically, he enjoyed both. He unwound an olive green kufiyya from his neck and draped it over his knee. As the second shooter in the follow car on this CIA protection detail, Greyriver Six didn’t have much to focus on, so he decided to let his guard down. His mind swam among capitalist talking points – though he didn’t recognize them as such – that had been ladled to him via the corporate media channel playing in the dining facility at breakfast.

“Heyyy-ohhh!” The driver’s gleeful release caused Greyriver Six to refocus briefly on the mission at hand. He turned his head in time to see two young Iraqi men
lying in the dust. He thought nothing of it. He had seen much worse during his month and a half in country.

“How about that Senator Reed, eh? You guys seen him yet?” the driver beamed, flashing the car’s occupants a thumbs-up.

“No politics,” the stoic shift leader, sitting in the front passenger seat, reminded them without blinking. Greyriver Six’s attention dipped below the surface once more as he broke another rule by patting the canine seated next to him. These dogs took a beating in the city’s heat. They could work for about twenty-five minutes before they tired out and lost their mojo. Six’s forearm tattoo – a prominent *USMC recon*, complete with skull and daggers – came to rest gently on the animal’s withers. Six smiled past the juxtaposition: one animal’s hubristic body art next to another animal’s mellow coat. He admired his hulking muscles. Six weeks in ‘the sandbox,’ as ilk referred to Iraq, had given Greyriver Six enough experience to reflect on the team’s dynamics. 

*Some of my teammates make upwards of one thousand bucks a day, but I’m only making eight hundred,* he complained. Despite his concern with money, he never considered the profitable nature of war. It never occurred to him that corporations might use the Pentagon to pave the way for business. Or that war itself was business. Off limits were notions of an invasion waged to benefit weapons manufacturers and to sustain oil flows upon which U.S. economic hegemony depended. Like squirrels running along an electrical wire suspended meters off the ground, Greyriver Six’s thoughts executed routine, dexterous poise.

Sweat painted an intricate butterfly onto Majid’s back. Even an hour or two after the sun’s peak, the high temperatures didn’t rest. His mind, hard at work, tuned out the cruel heat.

Munir laughed, knowing well that Majid hadn’t left his apartment in weeks.
“I like my books,” Majid finally offered, after an interval.

Munir replied with a tender squeeze, accepting his excuse kindly, reluctantly.

They both noticed they had wandered quite a ways from Al-Bataween, but said nothing. They knew they’d eventually have to loop back and head their separate ways.

Munir laughed at the struggle of walking in this part of town. At one moment the sidewalk would overflow with pedestrians, so Munir and Majid had a difficult time getting through. In the next moment, the sidewalk cleared out, leaving the best friends with plenty of room to stretch out and swing, arm in arm.

A grey garage gate passed to Majid’s right. He let the fingers on his right hand loll lazily along the drab bars, tapping each. Pulled along by Munir’s momentum, Majid quickly peered inside, beyond the grey bars, but all he saw was a limp fog.

Munir discerned a crowd up ahead, mostly elderly men, gathered around some sort of animal carcass along the sidewalk. A few flies adorned her face, freshly-deceased.

“... bandicoot rat,” one white-whiskered man proclaimed as Majid and Munir approached, patting his ample karsh and grinning broadly.
“I thought they were extinct,” his shorter colleague affirmed.

A young woman, disgruntled with the large crowd obstructing the sidewalk, scolded the men as she was forced to walk around them, “Are you buffoons going to stand there all day?”

Munir laughed. Majid forced a smile. Baghdad still has some sass left. They walked on.

Majid looked up, hoping to catch sign of the late afternoon sun. All he could see was a hazy sky and a never-ending bramble of wires and cables suspended above the street, linking apartment to apartment.
A tin overhang dripped a few hellos on Majid’s shoulder. He did his best to ignore it. Recognizing his anger was the first step. And he was working on that.

Munir asked, “You okay?”

Majid nodded simply.

As a great friend, Munir knew not to push. Majid would share whenever he was ready.

They crossed the busy intersection, weaving around cars, and approached a café. Men, mostly elderly, lounged outside under the café’s canopy. The informality of it all flushed away some of the grimy rage, which built up daily inside Majid. He thought of his sister, Seneen, and her book of meditation. *Maybe I’ll give it a shot*, he conceded.

Munir hadn’t seen this type of rest and relaxation in a long time. *Just living*, he admired. *Blatant resistance.*

“Be right back,” Munir said, ducking inside the shop for a treat.

The men lounged lazily on couches arranged around a humming television, which most of the men ignored. Instead, they watched tendrils and curls of *argileh* smoke mingle intricately. One man spent his hours feeling the shifting breezes and guessing how they would affect the smoke. Another man paced his smoke intake with judicious sips of sugary tea. Puff, sip, sip, pause. Puff, sip, sip, pause.

“Synchronized sitting.”

“Huh?” Majid spun to face the voice.

A man in a wheelchair hovered like a hummingbird. He was twitching his wheels rapidly back and forth, back and forth, centimeters from Majid’s legs. A knotted cane rested across the man’s waist, tucked snugly behind a tray of tiny tea glasses, each painted a different pastel.

“Synchronized sitting. It’s a luxury these days. You gotta admire these men for not letting the chaos ruin their afternoon, am I right?” The man in the wheelchair chuckled. His grin hit Majid as genuine and peaceful.

Majid laughed kindly.

“Can I give you a hand?” Majid said, gesturing to the handles of the man’s wheelchair.
The man declined loudly. Majid stepped back. He looked around to soak in a better understanding of his surroundings. These mellow loungers seemed a world away from the jostling pedestrians on nearby sidewalks and U.S. military patrols hogging the opposite side of the street.

Majid glanced down just in time to see the wheelchair zip away, a blur of metal and positivity.

“Take care!” Majid yelled after the man in the wheelchair, wishing he had chosen different words. *But that’s the first saying that came to mind,* he argued with himself. Majid caught sight of the old man waving his cane in response, using his free hand to wheel around the shop’s entrance.

An AH-6 helicopter buzzed overhead. It was gone, concealed by a building, by the time Majid looked up.

Majid basked in the peace, doing his best but struggling to be present, recognizing that he’d come crashing down in a couple of hours, just like every other day. For now, he gave thanks for such a simple pleasure. He turned to find Munir when his ears perked up.

“After we shed one form of colonialism, our elites didn’t even try to create a genuine democratic society!” These intriguing words, of a guest being interviewed on a satellite channel playing on the TV, urged Majid to stay.

“Nor did they encourage any sense of national unity. Instead, they allowed the rise of a military dictatorship.”

Majid nodded. *Munir should be here to hear this guy.* Majid turned and made eye contact with his best friend, who was still waiting in line inside the cramped shop. Munir was dancing with a floor fan, t-shirt extended outward to snare the moving air, while simultaneously keeping one foot in line. Majid laughed.

“Meanwhile, our political parties, even so-called progressives, jumped at the chance to please those now in power,” the guest opined. “But, like a corporate weed killer that eradicates all flora under its spray, their actions just killed any alternative or grassroots political
structures that one day might have helped us actually confront foreign interference in our beloved country.”

Majid thought about the various factions roaming the city these days. *Are their ideas the only ones left for some people to rally around?*

Majid paused, reached for his pen and pad, and jotted something down. Munir was usually the one constantly writing down ideas big and small, a trick he learned from hard-working minds, Larry David and Charles Darwin in particular. Even if the idea ran contrary to his beliefs, Munir would write it down; riffing with clashing ideas provided him with his best material, he’d often say.

One of the lounging men piped up from the far couch. “Don’t forget the damn Gulf countries tossing their billions around,” he shouted, receiving a chorus of murmurs and nods from his couch companions.

“After foreign interventions – again and again and again – everything fell apart. We’re just left with permanent war and gruesome neoliberal economic policy.”

Majid scribbled frantically, taking note of the television’s best points.

The TV guest paused to catch his breath, allowing Majid to snap out of it. He had been in a momentary trance, absorbed by the guest’s persuasive delivery. *So simple, yet so damn complex.* While not a fan of television, mostly because he preferred the feel and smell of a book, Majid resolved to research the guest whenever he got access to the internet next. *It could be a while though. Electricity isn’t exactly reliable these days.*

As if on cue, the electricity cut out. Munir’s fan whirred to a halt and the TV winked out.

Ignacio – tan, bald, unassuming – could see part of Al-Firdaws Square as he stood on his tippy-toes atop the eastern diplomatic building within the U.S. Embassy compound. He enjoyed coming up here whenever he could sneak away; it provided him with a quiet place to
think and read. Today’s fare was a section in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The U.S. Embassy compound was massive, covering over one hundred acres above ground and employing thousands of personnel. The U.S. government claimed it cost $750 million to build, but special projects – i.e. undeclared intelligence capabilities: stacks of mainframes; sensitive acoustic devices; satellite relay; distributed common ground systems; two tactical operations centers – and cost overruns easily tipped the scales at $1 billion. The entire complex boasted diplomatic buildings, dormitories, its own power station independent of Iraqi public infrastructure, rows and rows of emergency generators, and recreational facilities about which the average Iraqi could only dream. The primary construction company, a multi-national corporation with headquarters in the Gulf and deep ties to a popular U.S. war profiteer, had engaged in severe human rights violations on a massive scale when acquiring and trafficking construction workers to build the complex. The U.S. Department of Defense had leaned heavily on the Inspector General who was investigating these alleged human rights violations, so the IG cleared the Gulf firm of any wrongdoing. *Can’t police the police*, Ignacio thought with a frown, looking down at his employer’s ashen logo emblazoned on his polo shirt. *Capitalism’s most basic instincts*, Ignacio noted, *profit above all else.*

He marked his page, adeptly adjusting the bookmark – a recipe for *masgouf* seasoning – with his left hand as he got up and stretched. Ignacio’s solid frame fit perfectly under the eaves of the hut that housed the peak of the building’s stairwell. Once a diehard gym rat, Ignacio now worked tirelessly to reconstruct his body into a more functional physique. He noticed some faint letters on the back of the bookmark as he leaned over to stretch his calf:

> There’s no discharge in the war.
Contemplating that familiar refrain, letting it sink deeper than ever before, Ignacio flipped the bookmark over to read the seasoning’s ingredients. It seemed like a lifetime ago since Ignacio had shared masgouf with his former mentor.

“RIP,” Ignacio whispered in memory of his friend. The words on the bookmark blended, cautiously at first, with anger at the mentor’s passing, together forming an even more powerful conclusion. “No!” Ignacio told himself, attempting to shun a radical insight. He closed his eyes and looked up at the sun. His eyelids warmed. He watched the red heat’s slideshow on the inside of his eyelids.

“What is wrong?” his friend Nguyen asked, catching Ignacio off guard. Nguyen’s presence was so subtle and light as to be stealthy. Ignacio and Nguyen never knew when they’d cross paths on the roof; the two friends often worked different shifts.

Ignacio stuttered, “I-I... Just thinking about fish, fishing.”

“It’s down,” Nguyen said after waiting a moment. He took a seat. He was agile for a man in his late forties. “Huh?” Ignacio asked.

“Fishing. Trouble. They have problems,” Nguyen clarified.

“Out there?” Ignacio asked, gesturing to the Tigris River.

Nguyen nodded slowly.

“Where’d you hear that?” Ignacio adjusted his legs to stretch his other calf.

Nguyen raised his hand slowly and tapped his forehead. A smile percolated.

Ignacio laughed. He appreciated Nguyen’s sense of humor.

“No,” Nguyen said. “I read it.”

Ignacio had heard similar reports. Fishing in the Tigris had declined significantly since the 2003 invasion. Many factors contributed: pollution, due to munitions and sewage runoff; deteriorating security conditions; and upriver dams decreasing the water level.
“I’ve read the same,” Ignacio said. He found himself adopting Nguyen’s soft tones and patient cadence. “My friend – do you know Andrea?” Ignacio digressed. He looked to his left at the horizon beyond an array of NSA dishes.

Nguyen shook his head.

“She works for the State Department. She recently found bodies floating in the river while out on a trip to meet some sheikh,” Ignacio said, delivering the rough words in as calm a manner as possible.

Many years before becoming a contractor, Ignacio had deployed for Desert Shield and Desert Storm as an infantryman. He vividly recalled a sergeant opening fire on some fishermen south of Baghdad. Later in the day, the sergeant had justified his actions to the platoon’s lieutenant by claiming, “I felt threatened. Something just didn’t feel right. I made a decision and I stand by it, sir.” No punishment was meted out. Ignacio hadn’t thought about that memory in ages. He briefly considered sharing the experience with Nguyen, but quickly ruled it out. For now.

“I saw that before,” Nguyen whispered, recalling his younger days in Vietnam.

I wonder what else he’s seen in Iraq, Ignacio thought. Ignacio sat back down, trying to push brutality out of his mind. He leaned back against the shed that housed the stairwell. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Don’t be,” Nguyen replied slowly, firmly.

“Hey, they don’t notice you’re gone when you come up here?” Ignacio asked randomly.

“They never notice the little guy,” Nguyen grinned.

Ignacio’s smile facilitated deep breaths. He adjusted his seating and savored the post-stretch sensation. Let’s go big, Ignacio thought while rotating to all fours. Breathing deeply, Ignacio drove his hands to the ground, rotated his shoulders inward, and maintained bent knees to ease into equilibrium. His breath guided him. After a few minutes, he stood tall and entered the finale. His calm exterior belied the energetic exchange, which was taking place as his soles rooted into the roof.
The hum of electrical wiring, which Ignacio assumed ran directly below the roof paneling, confined his practice slightly, although he had vowed to embrace it as an opportunity instead of shunning it as an obstacle. He sat back down. Ignacio focused continually on his breath while massaging the hollows beside his collarbones. He knew these simple minutes would revitalize him and allow him to get through another day. He took a moment to give thanks, and then opened his eyes and sank into a few more pages of reading.

Without lifting his eyes from the pages of his book, Nguyen reached over and patted Ignacio on the shoulder. Nguyen worked for Vectital, one of the major corporations that provided base support services to the U.S. military throughout the Middle East. Third-country nationals – i.e. not locals, not U.S. citizens – performed the menial tasks around the installation: garbage collection, landscaping, janitorial services, pest control, food preparation and distribution, laundry, and even some minor construction.

“You know you’re the only guy I ever see up here,” Ignacio said.
“I’m late,” Nguyen replied, sharing some of the responsibility for not having enough time to fit in both talking and reading.

As they read quietly, Nguyen drummed his fingers along the spine of a second book, which was tucked discretely under his left thigh, like a sheriff readying his revolver.
“I’ll definitely be up here tomorrow, if you’d like to finish yesterday’s conversation,” Ignacio offered quickly.
“What?” Nguyen asked.
“Sorry,” Ignacio said, often forgetting that English was not his friend's native language. “I’ll be here tomorrow. Will you be here tomorrow?”
“Yes,” Nguyen said. “This time.”
Ignacio nodded.
Even though he was in the shade of the eaves, Ignacio still felt the sun flicking the tips of his ears. Ruing his earlier decision to leave sunblock in his footlocker, Ignacio decided to press on and deal with the consequences later. He read three more pages in *Karamazov* before his watch went off reminding him that he needed to meet his colleagues downstairs. Batteries recharged, Ignacio treasured one last moment of relative serenity. He closed his eyes, ready to inhale.

The distinct wash of a V-22’s engines forced Ignacio to glance upwards. He momentarily lost the aircraft in the sun’s glare. And then it hit. His left eardrum and temple took the brunt of the wave; prior training aided his quick reaction as he tucked and curled his torso around the leeward side of the shack, shielding him from heat and any shrapnel or debris that might head his way. *That wasn’t the sun’s glare,* punched his mind. With vital organs protected, Ignacio began battle damage assessment. He scooted his left leg into his chest.

“Nguyen!” he screamed, embarrassed that he hadn’t protected his friend.

“Here,” Nguyen said softly – or was it loudly? – as he exited the stairwell shack.

*He had been a step ahead of me the whole time,* Ignacio mused. Ignacio grunted, using his right hand to prod his left side, proceeding slowly, forcing himself to pause regularly and collect his thoughts. His jarred senses estimated the fiery fuselage had landed southwest of his position. Nguyen knelt by his friend’s side. Ignacio shook his head violently. The ringing still ran laps between his ears.

Nguyen knew Ignacio would be needed. He patted Ignacio on the shoulder, encouraging him to take care.

**Chapter Two**

Knowing his supervisor was going to want an accounting of all personnel, Ignacio flew full speed down the staircase. He avoided the confines of elevators at all costs; elevators were the preferred domain of most
officials, contractors, and Embassy employees. At the bottom of each flight, Ignacio grabbed the railing and pivoted to the next set of stairs using his own momentum to round the bend. Sailing around the third floor turn, he plinked off two men in suits. Only by releasing his grip from the railing at the last second did he save them all from injury.

“Sorry! Sorry, gentlemen,” Ignacio sputtered before stumbling on. Ignacio took pride in tactically downplaying his abilities, even feigning a clumsy incompetence, when he deemed it necessary. He saw the suits were entering the third floor, so he continued on down to the ground floor. He paused for a second, turned around, and then headed back up. Mid-spin, his eyes caught the oblong discoloration along the wall. Some unlucky chap had asked about this rectangle during indoc, which had infuriated the briefer. Regaining composure, the briefer merely stated, “The most effective bunkers in the world are the ones people don’t know about. Let’s keep it that way.” This particular bunker’s chief contractor had helped build Greenbrier in the 1950s and Cheyenne in the 1960s, a fact the CEO had leveraged during the Pentagon’s non-competitive bidding process. All the new personnel could glean during in-processing was: the bunker’s main door was fifty centimeters thick, one subcontractor almost went bankrupt paying to import reinforced steel, and seven of the bunker’s eight rooms rested on composite alloy springs. What the hell are they preparing for? Ignacio thought.

Exhibiting a little perspiration and a lot of haste, Ignacio exited the staircase and entered the third floor air lock – a mini-corridor, the beginning of which Ignacio thought looked like a wide-open mouth. The airlock restricted access to the third floor, the entirety of which was a giant Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility (SCIF). Procedures required him to swipe his Common Access Card (CAC) at two separate stations. Whenever he arrived during non-duty hours, he was required to also punch in a code.
After two routine swipes he was through the airlock. He rounded the bend and headed to the company’s offices when – THWACK! – his shin cracked a box. Staggering a bit, Ignacio looked up. A dozen or so similar boxes were lining the hallway.

“What's this all about?” Ignacio asked a concerned Marine who had slowed his gait after seeing Ignacio stumble.

“No clue. Fucking tax dollars at work,” the Marine replied, double-timing it down the hall, savoring his brief stint with human emotion.

Ignacio read the boxes: 78” LED 2160p. “The hell does that mean?” he whispered downwards, into his shirt.

“They're replacing all the white boards with flat screen TVs.” Ignacio’s ears still rang, but he thought he recognized the female voice educating him.

He looked up to see Andrea walking delicately toward him. Rocking a bouncy brunette ponytail and a tight blue polo shirt, Andrea was cradling three unwieldy stacks of files with packaged index cards sliding around on top. A coil of wires dangled from her elbow like a drunken snake. Ignacio considered offering to help, but he knew she’d bristle and decline.

“Why?” he asked.

“No idea,” she said with an almost imperceptible shrug.

Ignacio read her face. The bureaucracy was weighing on her deeply. It was winning. But he read more beneath the surface. She was ruminating. A monster within these walls, he assessed.

“Welp.”

“Yup.”

They often communicated better with few words. Yeah, but can I really trust him? Her internal debate raged again as she walked away.

The third floor SCIF was arranged like a hollow square. A drab hallway ringed the open workspace in the center, where most of the classified work took place. Bug-eyed glass windows allowed anyone walking in the outer hallway to see into the center workspace. Offices
and a few break rooms lined the outer portion of the hallway.
Someone tapped Ignacio on the shoulder with all five fingers. Ignacio turned around.
"Boss is looking for you," the colleague informed Ignacio.
"Thanks," Ignacio said, and hustled down the hallway. The Station Chief and his aide bustled by in the opposite direction.
"No, Mossad has got the Deputy Director in their pocket," the Station Chief affirmed with a formidable grumble. "I can't tell you how many times he's blabbered on and on about Hezbollah being a 'global terrorist organization' that has intent to strike inside the U.S."
"Goddamn clown," the aide said with a quiet power.
"We can't tell him about this. We gotta go around him," the Station Chief said. "Who else you got?"
Ignacio's legs leadened as the Station Chief and his aide walked out of earshot. He wanted to stop in his tracks. A wise determination told him otherwise. He wanted to turn around and head into his beloved stairwell, but he made it to a corner break room before letting himself pause. The motion sensor light flickered on as he entered the vacant room. He pressed both palms against the wall and stretched his calves in a sturdy pose.
"What the HELL was that about?!" he whispered-shouted. The concrete echo took his rustled words to the plastic cupboards behind him. "Andrea'll know."
Ignacio wasn't read into the Station Chief's program or privy to the details of his information, but he did know Israel had blanketed the U.S. military-industrial-congressional complex with the slick proficiency of a turreted electro-optical infrared sensor. Ignacio had no faith in the system. Even if the heads of all sixteen U.S. intelligence agencies were tuned into reality, there would still be political appointees in charge of them and politicians tempering the gates. And politicians are corrupt. He recalled George Carlin's wisdom: The politicians are put there to give you the idea that you have
freedom of choice. You don’t. You have no choice. Capitol Hill’s brackish treason boiled Ignacio’s blood.

Ignacio breathed deeply and soon wrestled his demeanor under control. He pushed off the wall and wiped his brow with his hairy forearm. Sly wrinkles cracked his mien as he stepped back into the third floor hallway.

Chinese alchemists’ discovery had beat Dom Perignon’s fizzy fluke by at least a millennium. Gunpowder’s arms race bled westward, helping humans tyrannize humans, which continued to this day in more refined mixtures than the classic charcoal, sulfur, and saltpeter combo. Majid and Munir heard the quick explosions follow a familiar sequence: trigger moves striker, striker hits cartridge, gunpowder ignites, gasses expand, bullet fires, shell ejects. The Iraqi Resistance was stinging at the tail of a U.S. Army convoy. Three angles of approach ensured success, the home team determining the stakes and the arena. The four men on one corner got off roughly two hundred and forty mini-explosions – only hampered by their thirty round magazines and jittery nerves – before the lead vehicle in the convoy even realized which car was under attack. A rocket propelled grenade chirped in, confirming its attendance.

Munir stepped forward, towards the skirmish.

“Are you nuts?” Majid said, placing a firm palm on Munir’s chest.

Munir looked up at him, grinning like a puppy testing the rules. Majid stood tall, making the most of his extra centimeter in height. Munir’s skateboard swung like a pendulum by his side.

The nearest shopkeeper slammed shut the roll-down metal grille in front of his store.

“What are you going to do? Find a weapon and start shooting at the Occupation?” Majid asked.

The shopkeeper locked the grille with sad fluency.

Munir’s eyes narrowed. He replied, “How do you know I don’t have one already?”
“Muniiiii,” Majid said, bringing Munir in for a hug. Munir stood on his tiptoes to keep an eye on the skirmish over Majid’s shoulder.

“I know. I’m a liar,” Munir said with a laugh.
One body lay motionless in the street.

*Why don’t I help?* Majid asked himself. He didn’t offer any answer.

*Should I help?* Munir wondered.
They spoke at the same time. “Wanna go?” Majid asked. “We should get going,” Munir suggested.
The smoldering scrap of a High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV) concurred.

In silent agreement, Majid and Munir backed away, soon turning and fleeing the area along with other stragglers. They weaved through city blocks, heading northwest and southwest in a sequence only they knew.

An AH-64 attack helicopter flew overhead. Another followed. Neither opened fire.

“How do they move in all that gear?” Majid asked.

“How do they move in all that gear?” Majid asked.

“Who knows?”

“Those soldiers couldn’t have been more than twenty-five years old,” Majid appraised.

Munir hummed something, a detached corroboration.

“Thereir helmets look very uncomfortable,” Majid continued.

“Mmhmmm,” came Munir’s response.

“Can we call them bucketheads? I mean, they call us towelheads,” Majid said, attempting a little humor.

It worked. Munir’s thoughts drifted home. He laughed.

Majid looped his arm around Munir’s elbow.

“Plus, I’ve heard them call us *haji* in their shit accents,” Munir said, doing his best to mimic the foreigners’ standard pronunciation.

The fighting faded behind them. Majid handed Munir the notes he had written down earlier.

“At least one side knows why they’re fighting,” Munir offered.
Imagine if that amount of effort and logistics was directed to a good cause,” Majid said, thinking out loud.

Explosion. A crash. The two friends paused with their backs on a random wall, waiting for rising smoke to pinpoint the detonation. Soon a caustic trail drifted over rooftops. The friends set off in pursuit.

“They're fishy,” Munir said, slightly winded, referencing the Occupation. Majid was setting a firm pace.

Majid looked at him, mouth ajar and off-center. “I mean, on the ground they’re like a school of fish, without even knowing it,” Munir asserted.

“There’s a lot they don’t even know. What do you mean, though?”

A cat darted in front of the duo and dove down a nameless alley.

“Check it, fish swim in schools as a defense mechanism, right? If a predator comes around, their odds of getting eaten are relatively small in a big school.”

“I’m following so far,” Majid said with a tug on Munir’s arm. “So what does that mean? Does that mean the local Resistance can’t really put a dent in the Occupation?”

“I don’t know,” Munir said with a gurgle. “I guess I haven’t really thought through this analogy.” He spit a small strand of saliva into the street.

“No, I hear you. There’s some sense in there.” They turned a corner.

“Thanks, Majid.”

Majid squeezed Munir’s hand in response.

“Though I think the Resistance is fishier than the Occupation,” he added.

“How so?” Munir asked.

“Like the way they operate as a whole. They hit and run, they support each other, and they synchronize very well.” He cleared his throat. “I guess I just prefer to think of Resistance as more natural than Occupation.”

Munir smiled at Majid as they weaved around an overflowing dumpster.

“What’s that look for?” Majid asked.
Munir began chewing air as his grin widened. “Nothing,” he said, a fib to be addressed later. He shook his head violently, like a thrashing Rottweiler on sale in the alleys of al-a’zamiyyah. “Mark my words,” he said sternly, pausing to grunt. “They’ll end up selling those beasts to our government.”

Majid stifled dismay at Munir’s abrupt change in demeanor. “What beasts?” Majid asked.

“Those Hummers.”

“Yeah?”

“And much more. You wait,” Munir prophesied.

“Wait and see?”

“Wait and see.”

The burning V-22 wreckage, sprawled in the center of a sidestreet intersection, came into view as they turned east on Karrada Dakhil.

“That’s the game,” Munir said. “U.S. corporations make tons of cash throughout the entire process, no matter what turn – destroying the country, rebuilding the country—”.

“And providing so-called security to the country,” Majid chimed in.

“Cash in, cash out,” Munir noted.

The brothers in soul approached the $75 million offal. They heard sirens but saw no signs of U.S. or Iraqi government forces.

“I mean, I’d seen this monster in a couple Mike Bay movies, but I had no idea it was so damn huge!” Munir managed to say, mouth agape the whole time.

*He switches between the benign and the serious in a heartbeat*, Majid thought, determined to address this new quirk in the near future.

A proud joint venture between two giants of the U.S. war industry, the V-22 was intended to blend the best features of a helicopter with the best of a fixed-wing aircraft. It was now capable of taking off vertically like a helicopter, rotating its engines horizontally, and flying long-range like a conventional airplane. Like all of DOD’s modern weapon acquisitions, the V-22 cost a fortune. By one estimate, funding the V-22 had swatted twenty-five billion loaves of bread from hungry mouths. That
calculation only included development expenses, not continued acquisition and maintenance costs. Ike was right. While sucking a few coffers dry, the V-22 took a few U.S. lives with it as well. Pilots, crew, and passengers perished in multiple accidents during testing phases. Over a decade and a half after claiming ‘human error’ caused one particular crash, the Pentagon finally admitted pilots were not at fault. It had been design and engineering flaws. The families still grieved. Crashes continued during today’s operational phases, but bureaucratic classifications of what constituted a ‘crash’ and what constituted an ‘incident’ allowed manufacturers to claim robust safety assessments in slick promotional videos, pamphlets, and the Armed Forces hagiographies that aired on corporate television media.

Aside from a singed green flight bag hanging from a rusty traffic sign, neither Munir nor Majid saw any signs of the V-22 crew.

“Like a drunken teenager,” Munir muttered.
“What?” Majid asked.
“U.S. Empire threw up,” Munir clarified. “The damn wreckage has stained this neighborhood like a drunken teenager vomiting on his parent’s carpet.”
Majid scoffed.
One of the two AE 1107 engines knelt lifelessly on the ground, its axial compressor tail between its legs.
“Look at this guy,” Majid said, pointing to a boy who had just zapped onto the crash site. Munir and Majid watched the boy hop around the wreckage with ghostly disregard for his own safety. Prior to the Occupation, the youth had made his living selling handfuls of plastic bags for twenty-five dinar. Lately, he had been using his spare bags to aide mortuary crews and first responders who collected nameless body parts.

“He’s everywhere these days,” Munir noted then jumped back, yelping, “Holy sheets in a handbasket!”
“What? What is it?” Majid asked through stifled laughter. Munir’s artistic expletives always made him crack up. He tried to follow Munir’s gaze downward.

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“What’s that look like to you?” Munir asked, gesturing with his right hand, which was clasped firmly in Majid’s left.

Majid stared, stepped back, and refocused. After a minute of silence, he piped up, “I don’t get it. I don’t see anything.”

Sirens approached.

Munir was silent. He sidestepped slowly to get a better angle. Doing so provided two bonuses: more air circulated in the crotch of his sweatpants, and now he was positioned in the shade of a building that prevented the late sun’s rays from singeing his hackles.


“I don’t know. A paw print?” Majid took a shot in the dark.

“Damn close. A cloven hoof. No?” Munir wondered. “A big one, too! Yeah, that’s not a bad call. What caused it though?” Majid asked. “Maybe the aircraft came down at a weird angle,” Munir suggested, having to raise his voice to contend with the approaching sirens. “Must have bounced,” Majid agreed, as the two friends sneaked away.

Heading into the shadows, Munir began to hum. “What’re you humming?” “Guess,” Munir yipped. Majid listened for a minute and then sang along. “... you a thicky-thicky-thick girl, you know that it—” “You’re learning!” Munir exclaimed. “What?” Majid asked playfully. “It was a big hit when I was over there.” “I’ll still take Ahmad Qa’bour any day.” “Agreed.” “Keep going!” Munir encouraged. Majid shook his head. Munir hummed louder, now contending with the street noise. “C’mon!” he cheered.
Majid stared straight ahead. Munir followed his sight line, but saw nothing except citylife.

“Music will cure—”.

“I get it. I get it,” Majid jabbed. “It’s just—It’s just not worth it, man.”

Munir looked at him askew. “Tunes? I know you don’t believe that.”

“Empire,” Majid clarified. “You think the people here can beat U.S. Empire?”

Munir munched on the question for a bit.

“Well?” Majid asked.

Munir didn’t answer.

“I don’t,” Majid said. “They’re just too damn powerful.”

“Bullshit,” Munir said. He coughed and said again, “Bullshit.”

Majid laughed at him.

“Think about it,” Munir ordered gently. “When was the last time the U.S. straight up won a war?”

Majid laughed again and then caught himself.

“Hmmmm.”

“Wait!” Munir spat. “You know, I bet the good people back in the U.S. are saying the same shit.”

“What?”

“That they can’t install a decent government into power. That they can’t overturn the corrupt cesspool in their capital.”

“I don’t see the connection,” Majid said.

“Look. They’re facing the biggest damn surveillance state ever assembled. They’re gonna face a real uphill battle when they get their shit together and start actively opposing the corporate bosses who run the show in D.C.”

“Think their surveillance state will try to crush them?” Majid asked.

“Yes. Full speed,” Munir forecasted.

“So they’re facing a similar battle?”

“Maybe not a similar battle, but certainly a complementary one.”
“Where the heck are we?” Majid said, taking pause to ask about their location. “Have you been paying attention to our route?”

“Follow me,” Munir said cheerfully.

“All I’m saying,” Majid began. “All I’m saying, and then I’ll drop it, is that it’s best to just accept it. Accept the fact that U.S. Empire is here to stay.”

Munir said nothing.

“The sooner we come to terms with it, the sooner we can move on,” Majid concluded.

Parishioners flocked out of a Sunni mosque cheering for a Shi’a cleric. Majid nodded at them from across the street.

“You’ll never hear about that back in Montana,” Munir said.

“True,” Majid conceded.

Shouts of Long Live Baghdad and You Shall Be Victorious Baghdad rippled throughout the district.

Munir and Majid kept walking.

Just to be sure, Andrea eyed the office through the blinds as she approached the door. She knew she had several hours; Charles, her boss, was under armed escort, meeting with a principal agent outside the wire. But she peered through the blinds nonetheless. Arms full, she balanced a stack of folders against the wall next to the doorknob; she raised her right leg, knee against the wall, so her thigh could support the heap. Her right arm kept the stack steady while her left hand felt around for the door handle.

Once inside, Andrea kept her spine as neutral as possible as she bent her knees and set down her ponderous stacks. Files everywhere, all day, everyday.

She stood up. Without turning around, she walked backward to the door, doing her best to retrace her steps. With her back against the door, she stepped sideways slowly. Her hands felt for the dowel that controlled the blinds. She shut the blinds with two practiced turns.
She glanced at her watch, set her timer, and got to work.

“Ah!” Majid exclaimed, realizing where they were. Spying their favorite nook in the city, Majid approached the cozy concrete to kick back. Munir had noticed this quotidian wonder many years ago when he was working part-time as a delivery boy. One ‘precision’ strike in 1991, courtesy of a 35-year-old B-52 bomber, had taken out a homeless shelter. The blast had also carved the ideal reading nook out of an adjacent wall. The shelter was eventually rebuilt, but the wall remained damaged and crumbling.

Majid, reading the stars on the inside of his eyelids, inhaled deeply and then scooted down a bit to get more lumbar support. It was as if the explosion had known his body size and had gladly obliged. Munir tucked his lap snugly under Majid’s legs, the two friends forming a perpendicular pair along the bend in the wall.

Munir once read that a B-52 had crashed on approach to Diego Garcia around the same time the homeless shelter had been bombed. According to the newspaper, which he had swiped from the Palestine Hotel lobby after a morning walk, the bomber had almost made it to the island base after a seventeen-hour flight. Munir wondered if it was the same flight that had bombed the shelter, and if karma could act that quickly. I don’t think my body could handle ejecting from an airplane, he speculated randomly, hitting the snooze button on any other thoughts.

Our spot of Earth is righteous right now, Majid affirmed.

Five thousand, four hundred kilometers southeast of Baghdad, five hundred and fifty-five meters below the surface of the water, a human skeleton rested in tranquility. Another death entirely avoidable. If only the aircraft’s commander had given the eject order sooner... If only Saddam hadn’t decided to invade Kuwait... If only dire economic circumstances and lack of job opportunities hadn’t forced Airman Dworkin to enlist
in the U.S. military... If only the U.S. citizenry had stood up to the war economy... If only.

Back in April 1991, sea life was polishing off the remains of Airman Dworkin while Universal Studios and ABC wrapped their “Welcome Home America” tribute to Gulf War veterans. A disgruntled Vietnam veteran in attendance grumbled, “We got nuttin’. You guys get fuckin’ parades and free beer.” On Earth’s other side, a child, whose town was still steeped in dichlorophenoxyacetic acid, tried to speak. Regrettably, birth deformities precluded such action.

The larger animals fed first, opening up the body cavity to the smaller feeders. A lone crab, Mister Salta’, arrived from over a mile away as Tony Danza praised the brave service members. He nodded to Madam Nuffekha. A few tiny bubbles sneaked out of Madam Nuffekha’s mouth as she nibbled. Mister Salta’ was able to relish a tasty finger before it got too crowded. He looked around for more goodies.

A Bluntnose sixgill shark removed a chunk of Airman Dworkin’s large intestine, snagging the remaining pieces with a quick thrash. *Eunice aphroditois* lunged at Dworkin’s leg as Bob Hope regaled President George Herbert Walker Bush, “You’re probably the finest commander in chief I’ve ever known!” A squat lobster, stoked for his first bite, pulled eagerly at what remained of Dworkin’s right gluteus while Brook Shields kissed the former Director of Central Intelligence. This spot on the seabed was rich in oxygen, and the animal’s body was quickly picked clean. Sharks, lobsters, fellow crabs, and other large scavengers were soon packing up to leave after the initial, wonderful feast. A team of Polychaete worms invaded Dworkin’s torso through a gash in his rib cage.

Respective audiences of *Beggiatoa* and *Homo sapiens* applauded vigorously.

**Chapter Three**

Lines of men and women looked like beads of sweat from the bird’s eye. The pallid harrier flew at 1,500 meters
observing humans standing in line. They were waiting hours to move an inch, hoping to collect the remains of their loved ones before the makeshift morgue closed.

Blind weeds formed a tight convoy: M35 cargo trucks, HMMWVs, medium tactical vehicles, and mine-resistant ambush protected vehicles millimetered southward on Highway 8. A black tear from a mile up. Palm fronds and names scrawled by hand in cheap concrete stabbed upwards to mark each grave. Mother Earth gurgled long peals, equal parts warning and I-told-you-so. Majid and Munir walked nearby, doing their best to ignore the stain.

“That was a heck of a dismount earlier,” Majid said, complimenting Munir.
“Back there?”
“Yeah, off the nook.”
“Thanks, man,” Munir said. “I’m practicing.” He swung his skateboard gleefully.
“Every little bit helps.”
“What you saw was a failed laser flip,” Munir admitted. “I learned it from an underground skate video from Ramallah.”
“They got good skateboarders?” Majid asked.
“Ramallah claims to have the most skaters,” Munir stated, “but their quality varies. I could be wrong though. It’s been a while since I followed their game closely.”

“Then who’s got the goods?” Majid asked.
“In my opinion? Al-Khalil.”

Images of Munir’s first kiss peppered his mind: the stone stairs in front of Palestine Polytechnic’s College of Engineering, the shade provided by the column to the left of the steps, the mischievous look in her eyes.

His index finger took a journey along one of the skateboard wheels, spinning it steadily. Tiny specks of asphalt leapt off in all directions. His ring finger tapped the truck attentively. “Bil’in skaters—”, began Munir.

“All three of them?” Majid blurted out, his misplaced jest settling by the wayside.
“Heh, yeah their daily resistance is unreal. The town, I mean,” Munir clarified.
“They the ones who rocked Toy Story costumes during a protest?” Majid asked.
“To hell with Woody! They dressed up as Avatar characters,” Munir beamed.
“Dope.” Majid was genuinely impressed. Thoughts of creative rebellion knocked something loose inside of him. “So what did that accomplish as part of the bigger picture?”

They turned another corner and kept walking. “My upstairs neighbor’s got relatives there. She said it brought together a lot of passionate protestors from across society—”, an adoring Munir explained.
“To keep fighting the good fight,” interrupted Majid. “Hell, I’m with anyone who highlights Palestine’s diverse struggle against Zionist oppression.” Majid kicked a small rock.

Munir’s heart fluttered when hit with Majid’s effervescent remark.
“That protest was a while ago, too. They were at it well before then, and they’re still going into the streets on a weekly basis,” Munir elaborated. He glanced to his right. The V-22’s smoke was still berthed above crash site.

“Protesting the apartheid wall?” Majid wondered. Munir nodded. “Among other injustices.”
Steps synchronized. The brothers in spirit, walking hand in hand, smiled together at the rests of silence among the city’s bedlam. Majid looked up. His old host family once referred to Montana as Big Sky Country, but as dusk wore out and Puppis, Lepus and Eridanus mustered the chivalry to come forth, he knew it was all a matter of perspective. Even against the city’s light pollution, the sky above him still put on a hell of a show.

A thought came to Majid. “Wait. Your neighbor’s relatives… The one whose trees the Israelis uprooted?”
“Yeah. I mean, the Israelis have demolished thousands of trees in and around the town. But yeah, bulldozers leveled their grove,” Munir said, exasperated. “Made in the USA.”

“I love it, though,” Majid said, returning to square one. “The people of Bil’in are winning, and they’re going

Munir waved to a friendly storeowner across the street.

“So who’s got best skaters after Al-Khalil?” Majid asked.

“After Al-Khalil, then... probably Qalqilya.” Munir nodded rhythmically. “Although Nablus is flying well under the radar. They’ve got some great skaters, but nobody gives them credit.”

“Nice. Nice.” Majid loved learning from Munir’s passions.

“One day, mark my words, some young kid will grind along the collapsed apartheid wall,” Munir vowed. “It’ll be a hell of a party, that’s for sure,” Majid entertained. He looked up again and inhaled deeply as dusk enveloped the city.

“True...” Munir uttered, adrift in future possibilities.

“Did you catch the Algeria-Palestine friendly?”
“I just read about it briefly. Who won?”
“I’m not sure anyone in the stadium cared. They were all cheering for Palestine.”

“At Five July?”
“Yup. The crowd loved ‘em.”
“Fireworks?”
“And then some. The whole stadium was draped in Palestine flags.”
“One love!”

The brothers in arms turned the corner, Munir in the lead. They stopped in their tracks. A U.S. checkpoint stood in their way.

“This shit wasn’t here yesterday.”
“Hideous,” Majid replied.

Majid and Munir surveyed the scene. The checkpoint clogged east and west pedestrian and vehicular traffic.

“I only count about ten of them,” Munir stated flatly.

“There’s more. There are always more,” Majid replied.
Concrete barriers of varying sizes funneled cars into a slow zigzag before they approached the staggered inspection points. Ahead of the first inspection point, a young female soldier waddled around the cars with a mirror attached to the end of a collapsible staff, checking the undercarriage of each vehicle. She took her time. Two male soldiers checked the trunks and the backseats. Two others raised the barrier after a sergeant waved each car through, one by one. Three soldiers manned the .50 caliber machinegun nest adjacent to the checkpoint. Two others roamed deeper into the traffic, weapons at low-ready, projecting power into the crowd.

“Let’s go,” Majid said with a sigh. From his vantage point, he could see pedestrians lined up, but he couldn’t see where the line began. “Let’s get it over with.” The two friends walked toward the checkpoint. With each step, Majid noticed more soldiers. Majid and Munir joined the tail end of the line. “About fifty deep.”

“How?”


Munir saw the soldiers waving the line of pedestrians toward a makeshift gate, the line forking as it got closer to the checkpoint.

Shrill shouts rattled the friends’ ears. An elderly woman was screaming. Her husband appealed to one U.S. Army sergeant. The husband asked respectfully for a female soldier to pat down the women in line, but none of the occupying soldiers at the checkpoint spoke any Arabic. Majid tightened his grip on Munir’s elbow, a clear message to not intervene. After a few seconds of listening, the sergeant started to respond angrily, interpreting the husband’s pleas as aggression.

“Gag and bag this fucker,” the sergeant ordered. Two privates leapt into action, knocking the husband to the ground. One private leaned on the husband’s neck with an anvil-like knee. The second private cuffed the husband’s wrists with two plastic zip-ties. Tears of futility rolled down the husband’s face. They mixed with the dusty sidewalk – a relatively new tradition.
Familiar whimpers of “I can’t breathe” fell on deaf ears. The soldiers interpreted the husband’s struggles as clear signs of guilt, so they picked him up and threw him against one of the Jersey Barriers. They tossed a fetid cloth hood over his face, as he was bent over and gasping for air.

“Glahg!” The warm stench inside the hood invaded the man’s throat, gagging him repeatedly.

The calling cards of Occupation – vomit, reek, tears, blood, rage, and futility – combined to force the husband to lose consciousness.

Munir and Majid passed the husband’s limp body as the line millimetered forward.

The wife, now wailing in a frenzy, sat down in the dirt next to the line and refused to move.

“At least our sun has set. This would be a bitch in the mid-day heat,” Majid whispered, trying to be optimistic, trying to ignore his rage.

“Don’t they read? Don’t they think for themselves?” Munir asked, positioning the skateboard so the U.S. Army could easily identify it.

“Can’t. Not allowed.”

“But surely they read books,” Munir speculated.

“Nothing that might spark genuine free thought.”

“But how do they police that?”

“Who?” Majid asked.


“They don’t have to. This isn’t Vietnam. The training and indoctrination is much more subtle, more refined. And the distractions and delusions are much more intense.”

“So the generals and the politicians don’t have to try very hard?” Munir asked, dropping his voice below a whisper.

“Exactly.”

“So within the military there is no active resistance against the war?” Munir couldn’t tell whether Majid was speaking from his experience or from all the books he had read.

A soldier walked by, looking them up and down.
Majid and Munir millimetered forward, heads down, mouths shut.

“Are they letting people through? Or is the line just tightening a bit?” Munir whispered once the soldier was behind him.

Majid mumbled that he didn’t know.

“Why are you out this late?” the soldier returned and screamed to the man in front of Majid.

*It’s not* that late, Munir thought.

The man shook his head. Munir and Majid kept their heads down.

“Where you headed?” the soldier asked, now addressing Majid.

Majid shook his head. He kept his eyes on the ground as the Occupation’s retch closed in around him.

“Look at me when I’m fucking talking to you!” the soldier yelled, prodding Majid in the ribs with his rifle butt.

Majid slowly raised his gaze. He couldn’t see the soldier’s eyes. All he saw was his own distorted face painted in an array of colors across the soldier’s ballistic lenses.

“Where you going? Huh?” the soldier repeated, tilting his head slightly.

Majid replied softly in Arabic. Although unintelligible to the soldier, Majid’s response seemed good enough. The soldier walked away slowly, keeping his eyes on Majid for several paces.

Munir reached for Majid’s hand and squeezed hard. Majid returned the squeeze. Munir raised his skateboard to his chest.

The line millimetered forward.

Glimmers of the gentle stars pinged off the helmet of the soldier who manned the .50 caliber.

Two soldiers stepped forward from the shadows and separated another pedestrian from the line.

A soldier slammed a car trunk somewhere behind Majid and Munir.

More soldiers stepped forward from under a nearby awning.
“Florida National Guard,” Munir whispered, for Majid’s ears only. Majid squeezed Munir’s hand. “How do you know?” the squeeze conveyed. “I’ve run into them before,” Munir replied.

Even with his head down, Majid’s eyes couldn’t help but catch a soldier striking a middle-aged man across the face. The rifle butt cracked bone with proficient ease.

Soft steady news reports floated from a car radio on the hazy eventide.

In other news, early reports from Nisour Square state that U.S. mercenaries have open fired on civilians. Women and children are among the dead and injured.

Munir closed his eyes, the Nisour scene presenting itself readily: white sedan smoking; driver’s seat charred; helicopter buzzing; red beret perched, observing; white van idling; mosque tower discerning; yellow and white curb pockmarked; and traffic chaotic, but fluid.

“They kill and they kill and they kill...” Munir stopped speaking. The Occupation drowned out his words. He tried to stop the tears, but no amount of blinking and wiping kept them at bay.

Tears and soft words coated Munir and Majid as they walked silently through the checkpoint.

Stepping through to the other side was like surfacing for air after a record-setting dive, only to realize the atmosphere was now made of methane.

“If you come,” Munir whimpered as they walked briskly away from the suffocation.

“I’ll be there,” Majid replied.

Their minds shared volumes. Majid spoke gently through his thumb and as-sababa, ibham and index, abrading Munir’s t-shirt hem throughout the ages.

Munir lit up. “Thank you!” He composed himself playfully. “Thank you,” he repeated. “You don’t even have to stay long. Just stop by for a bit.”
“Sounds good,” Majid said. He put on a smile for Munir, knowing well Munir could see right through it. 

*I’m lucky*, Majid thought. And he meant it. He knew he was relatively fortunate, but he just couldn’t stay positive as the foreign army entrenched.

The best friends hugged for a minute and then parted ways, both looping away from the checkpoint to head home.

Majid shivered. He felt suddenly cold without his best friend. His skin, up through the back of his neck, felt barren. *Are they looking at me? Is one of them, somewhere, looking at me? They’re everywhere. Even if one of them isn’t looking at me on the ground, they’ve got eyes in the sky. Is a pilotless airplane up there watching us all, all day? Humans. Why can’t they see that we’re humans, too? Humans send humans thousands of miles based on lies. Humans accept lies and delude themselves. Humans pollute on a mass scale.*


Cold.

Time’s bleak curtains held little sway as Majid ascended to his apartment, his thoughts jolted back to the present, leaving the truth about U.S. Empire’s relevance clambering in the front of his mind.

Majid eased the door open, trying to stifle the jingling keys with his pinky and ring fingers. He didn’t want to wake his sister; she worked nights and slept days. Seneen laid snoring, sprawled out on the bed like a starfish. *The Question of Palestine* by Edward Said lay folded across her right thigh. Majid could see the binding of Graham Hancock’s *Fingerprints of the Gods* nestled under her neck and shoulder. Seneen’s mind was progressive, sharp, and witty, her frame thick and athletic.

Majid adored his sister, his only family remaining in Iraq after Baba headed west last year in search of work. Majid slid off his crumbling shoes and tiptoed
across the kitchen floor. The siblings called it a kitchen, but it was really just the southwest corner of their one-room apartment. His tattered socks provided sparse protection against the dusty, cheap flooring. He opened the icebox and poured himself a glass of iced-tea from the copper jar he once purchased with Baba at As-Safafeer market. Majid chugged the sweetness in one breath. He actually preferred the icebox. (They had sold their old refrigerator three years ago). They usually didn’t have ice, so it was just a box in a shaded part of the room. Rolling with the punches, the name of the game in post-invasion Iraq, Majid thought while scanning the room for the new non-fiction book he was currently reading: The Second Oldest Profession by Phillip Knightly. Majid loved non-fiction, especially books about the people who tinkered with history.

Sound of salaat al-magrib enriched the room and echoed off the walls. I’ll let her sleep a little more. She damn sure deserves her rest.

“What are you doing out and about?” Seneen mumbled. Majid hadn’t even noticed her snoring stop. “You should be sleeping,” Majid countered. Seneen mumbled something clever under her breath.

“What was that?” Majid smiled and jumped on the bed.

“What are you doing out and about? You’ve been cooped up in here for m—”.

Before she could finish, he leapt on top of her, straddled her stomach, and pinned her arms down with his beanpole shins.

“No! Not the typewriter! Pleeease!” Seneen hollered, dividing her efforts equally between laughing and struggling.

“Yessss!” Majid hooted joyously. “Dear, fool,” Majid began, using his forefingers to stab playfully at Seneen’s collarbone as if typing a letter.

“You know...” Seneen grunted as she leveraged her foot on the headboard to flip herself over, tossing Majid's antics aside. “My power beats your skin and bones any day of the week.”
“Awh, shoot. I shoulda seen that move coming,” Majid admitted, thwarted.


“Absolutely,” Majid offered. “Come on!” he said while popping up off the bed. “You need your rest.” He grabbed a blanket to tuck her in. “I’ll make you something to eat for when you wake up.”

Majid skipped to the window, opened the shutters, and stumbled forward into the kind starlight. The shutters slammed against the side of the building. An ‘ammat al-qaadii fang puffed into the room and landed on Seneen’s folded laundry.

“Good evening, friend!” Majid chortled as he scanned the sky for the moon.

“You’re relatively chipper,” Seneen said. “I haven’t seen you smile in weeks.” She coughed into her sleeve.

Majid looked at her over his shoulder. “I guess it feels good to get out…”

“Were you out for a while?”

Majid nodded. “Checkpoint,” he said.

“Ah, I see,” Seenen said, tucking herself under one tattered blanket. “Were you detained long?”

“What makes you think we were detained?”

“I think that’s what has given you the pep in your step,” Seneen said.

“Really?”

Seneen confirmed, “Uh-huh.”

The ‘ajalat in Majid’s mind started turning, but he digressed to another topic. “Tell me. How do you avoid the Occupation when you head to work?”

Seneen replied quickly. “It’s an art form.” She leaned over the side of the bed and gathered a few of her scarfs into a bundle.

“Where is the rice?” Majid asked, his head inside one cupboard.

“Haven’t seen it,” his sister answered. “Well, I, for one, am happy you are getting out there.”
“I’m going out again tonight,” Majid said, banging cupboards, done looking for some semblance of food. Seneen wrinkled her forehead.

“Munir’s having a few people over,” Majid clarified.

“Just be careful,” Seneen advised.

“Me careful? You careful,” Majid responded. He walked over to the bed. “I’m going to go out and pick you up some ingredients.”

“You don’t have to do that. Just stay here. Just be.”

Majid exhaled through his nose to convey mild frustration with his sister. He admired how his breath disturbed the dusty air amid the starbeams. “I’ll only take a second,” Majid said. He turned around and walked toward the door.

Seneen hopped in his path, grabbed him in a bear hug, and jumped to kiss his forehead. He smiled down at her.

“La-uh-v you,” she exhaled, a brotherly squeeze chopping her words.

Munir stopped abruptly as he entered his apartment. *It looks like a Wonka ticket.* He bent at the knees and picked up the paper, which was wedged upright between the wall and the rear left leg of his desk.

“Desk my ass,” he said, forcing out a chuckle. The desk was a stack of cardboard and scrap wood layered across plastic crates.

“How did you escape?” he asked the paper in the same tone an uncle might use to reprimand an adorable nephew. With a gentle exhale, he dusted off the letters and stood up. The sole remainder of a hefty psychological operations leaflet puck, the message read:

*Iraqi Commanders and Soldiers:*

*Show that you will not resist coalition forces.*

*Make your intentions clear.*

Munir flipped the leaflet over. He read how to contact the U.S.-led coalition and what information they were
looking for. Scents, images, and emotions of the March 2003 invasion – all of which Munir had worked assiduously to suppress – thundered through his mind once more. Sweat rolled into his eyes, stinging. He smelled crispy corpses and fetid feces in one whiff. A GAU-8 strafed his sight with the true costs of war...

An adolescent boy with nowhere to run coddles his severed right arm. Cold, like an orphan baby left on a doorstep.

An elderly woman, whose face swells to murky purple, picks shrapnel out of her limp, veiny left thigh.

A young woman, trousers stained with her feces and her father’s blood, crawls slowly out of the rubble. A faceless woman stares at her. Her face has been blasted off her body. Only grime, charred muscle fiber, and seared, blunted bone remain.

A brother and a father sit silently, cross-legged, in front of their old apartment building. Their faces, blank, gaze at nothing. Astonished partners in peace, the two hold hands as their innards sob.

An infant, riddled with birth defects, will never enjoy three of his five senses. Toxic metals and depleted uranium preclude life. Clouds of uranium oxide dust and alpha radiation roam for miles. The infant’s twin sister died yesterday from anencephaly complications, having just blinked through her fortieth hour. The understaffed hospital can’t accept patients who only suffer from external, physical deformity. Thousands of cleft lips, fused toes, missing arms, stunted legs, and crooked spines, are asked to return in a month when more staff might be available.

A young mother twitches and flops intermittently on the concrete, unable to control her muscle spasms. Burn pits, the cheapest way corporations dispose of trash on U.S. military bases, have tainted swaths of Iraq’s water resources. The corporations, which were hired to provide a variety of base support services, have incinerated everything: plastics, asbestos, feces, old batteries, chemical solvents, and tires. Everything. Poisonous particulates and volatile compounds have taken flight and seeped into the
water table. She shouldn’t have drunk water. She shouldn’t have breathed air.

A pile of mothers, brothers, sisters, fathers, cousins, sons, daughters, husbands and wives bake under the Baghdad sun. Gasses leak from one sister’s anus. Once a bubbly bookworm, her putrefied cadaver now shifts as the gasses seep, causing the pile to tumble. Maggots, cadaveric bacteria, flesh flies, and sundry larvae feed.

A cable newscaster, who shot to corporate stardom covering the invasion and Occupation as a crystal-clear good-versus-evil battle, swallows the Pentagon’s talking points, hook, line, and sinker. Hyping the technological achievements of U.S. weaponry, she embraces the career advancement and rides the profitable wave to high ratings. Her boss thanks her in an email, which she checks from press pool in the Combined Air Operations Center in Qatar; the network is swimming in advertising revenue. In her private life, she donates annually to charity: American Veterans of Afghanistan & Iraq. This soothes her soul. Back in her hotel at night, she hears her phone vibrate. She ruffles the down comforter trying to find her cell. It’s a text from a retired General. He wants to arrange a business lunch next week in order to follow up on their previous discussion. The Pentagon’s military analyst program is still running strong, decades and counting.

Munir tried desperately to scramble off the ground, but his soaked palm fell crudely to the grubby floorboards, bruising the meaty part of his thumb.

After minutes of mental mêlée to regain control of his trembling limbs, Munir finally sat up firmly, head between his knees. He reached into his pocket, pulled out the crumpled leaflet, and slammed it face up on the floor. Three hours, nineteen minutes, and three seconds later, Munir perked up. Stillness held the room together as he crawled over to the corner.

Ignacio liked Andrea. Andrea worked as an assistant to the Embassy’s third secretary, Charles. Charles was CIA. From what Ignacio could tell, Andrea was just rotating
through as part of some State Department program that offered bureaucrats experience overseas. Andrea was down to earth, brainy, hilarious, and bold; Andrea once spent an entire afternoon jamming the communications of a visiting British High Commissioner in protest against the diplomat’s corrupt behavior within the Conservative Party. Ignacio was the only person Andrea had told. She and Ignacio dined together every day at the southwest corner of the Embassy’s dining facility. Andrea would place her plastic juiceboxes on the wooden ledge next to the fake palm trees, a habit Ignacio found endearing over time.

She grinned ear to ear as she reached in her coat pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of printer paper.

“Whaaat?” Ignacio asked, well aware that Andrea had something mischievous to share.

Andrea didn’t say a word, letting the convivial suspense build as she slowly unfolded her prize, flattening it out on the table like Blackbeard showing his most loyal marauder where he had buried the loot.

“I present to you the finalized list of Best and Worst Lays in the wonderful wizard world.”

Ignacio, relishing Andrea’s enthusiasm, pushed his tray aside with his hirsute forearm and scooted forward to see Andrea’s hard work.

“You mugglefuckin’...”

Andrea laughed. “I was up all night working on this. Charles tasked me with some visa duty, but I finished early and treated myself,” she conceded, pronouncing the V as F. Andrea’s lower lip did most of the work when she spoke, giving her the appearance of a young guppy. This mannerism, along with a bulbous occipital bone, allowed most people to write her off as stupid. It only took a minute of conversation to realize Andrea had more to offer intellectually than most humans. According to Ignacio, one of Andrea’s most charming traits, aside from her insatiable reading habit, was her rare ability to refrain from judgment.

Appreciating Andrea’s attention to detail, Ignacio began cracking his knuckles and encouraged, “OK, let’s have it. First up!”
“Let’s start with worst. Coming in at number three is... Argus.”

“Ha!” Ignacio allowed himself a hearty roar, causing a few stiff necks in the dining facility to turn. He could be himself around Andrea, which was a rejuvenating rarity during deployment. Yet another reason why he liked Andrea.

“That’s great! Next, please.”

“Second place goes to...”

“Demented spirit orgy?” Ignacio blurted. “They suck like wild.”

“Negative,” Andrea said chuckling. “Second place is the dude with the crazy eye. He has no penis, like Ken.”

Ignacio stifled laughter until tears welled up. He nearly spilled his milk while fumbling blindly for a napkin. Her delivery more than the content made him laugh.

“Wait, wait, gimme a few of the best lays before you reveal the number one worst,” Ignacio directed.

“Absolutely!”

“I bet the Bulgarian hunk is in there somewhere,” Ignacio predicted.

“You’re jumping the gun! How’d you know? He’s at number two.” Andrea stood up. “I gotta hit the latrine. Back in a sec.”

“Well... I imagine he’s rough, always hard, and capable of nearly limitless stamina. Who wouldn’t want that?” Ignacio conjectured. He could hear Andrea’s chuckles and footsteps fade.

Seizing Andrea’s absence, rebellious thoughts crashed back into Ignacio’s mind. He analyzed them. Soon, he told himself, answering their demand. Always using downtime to the fullest, Ignacio pulled Arabic vocabulary notes out of his pockets. He placed them on the table to his right. He eyed Andrea’s sheet in front of him.

Andrea returned within a couple minutes, laughing silently as she often did. She sat back down, folded the paper up, and tucked it back in her breast pocket.

“Whyyyy? What are you doing?” Ignacio pleaded.
“We gotta save something for tomorrow. Anticipation keeps us going around this place,” Andrea imparted.

“Truth,” Ignacio concurred. “Just tell me... Is Moaning...”

“Wait!” Andrea scolded, cutting Ignacio off. Ignacio smiled widely, visibly probing a molar with the tip of his tongue.

“You headed home soon?” Andrea asked, licking the outside of her wrist, which had accidentally dipped into some nearby mustard.

“Next month. Thirty-nine days,” Ignacio replied. “You? You in it for the long haul?”

“We’ll see,” Andrea exhaled, cracking her neck as part of her dinnertime routine.

Andrea’s mind was elsewhere. Ignacio let it float. Their friendship was based on mutual affinities, one of which was silence.

Andrea thought about the linguistic consistency between the Cold War and the War of Terror. She then thought about how privatization had ruined the Intelligence Community.

Ignacio ruminated, too. What would happen if – for one day only, and under strict supervision – every scientist in the U.S. consumed cannabis and went about their day? How many scientists would achieve breakthroughs? How many would look at a problem in a new light? Taboo thoughts for a government employee, he mused.

Andrea thought about former Directors of Central Intelligence and how the position was once part of the ruling clique. These days, the post is just filled with feeble political appointees. Andrea drifted back to immediate plans, wondering if she should invite Ignacio into her scheming. If los poderes fáticos only knew what goes on in my head. Andrea smiled. What about his head? Andrea wondered. She looked up. He was surveying her with a similar squint.

“Huh?” Ignacio requested.
“Nothing,” Andrea said quickly. “You dug those books, right?” she asked, returning to the world of witches and wizards.

“Hell yes. I never knew the word for enchantment before reading the first book in Arabic. And the translator did a wonderful job,” Ignacio stated.

“Although there’s not enough credit given to translators these days. I mean, you rarely ever see them on the cover or binding,” Andrea contended, before digressing: “Do you think violinists choose their bows like wizards choose their wands?”

Ignacio wobbled forward laughing.

An inflatable palm tree swayed next to Andrea. She scooted away from its reach. “I hate these fucking lights,” she grumbled, motioning to the fluorescent overhead fixtures with her straw. “They give me a headache when I stay in here too long.”

Ignacio composed himself. The Station Chief’s conversation in the hallway surfaced in Ignacio’s mind. “I heard the contractor charged State double by pretending the lights are some environmentally-friendly model,” he said, somehow managing to speak through a mouthful of noodles. “What are you up to tomorrow?” he asked, rubbing the enduring callus located between his left thumb and index finger.

“Eh, paperwork, paperwork, and more paperwork,” Andrea lied. “You?”

“I’m meeting someone on Al-Kindi Street, near the consular entrance,” Ignacio complained. “Then I gotta pick up an Israeli liaison from the airport.”

“That blows. You’d think at least one politician would have the guts to put a stop to these fucking liaison activities. I mean how many times does Mossad need to get caught spying against us before Congress starts to notice?”

“Oh they notice,” Ignacio stated. “They just ignore it. It’s all politics.”

“How’d you get tasked with that shit, anyway?” Andrea inquired.
“Beats me. Some folks around here think our employer is synonymous with bee-otch.” Ignacio smirked, acknowledging his own weak attempt at humor.

After a generous courtesy-laugh, Andrea asked, “How many people in this compound even know who Al-Kindi is?”

“Zero,” Ignacio said. “No. Maybe a few,” he quickly amended. “Speaking of which, when is the next time your boss is headed to that Al-Kindi teaching hospital? Is that what you call it?”

“Yeah, I’ll have to ask. Lately his business has been in a different part of the city,” Andrea replied.

Ignacio smiled. “Thanks.”

The two friends sat in silence for the remainder of the meal, just enjoying one another’s presence. The peak dinner crowd soon arrived: batteries of mercenaries strutting and bevies of diplomatic staff shuffling. Clouds of third country nationals kept watch. The largest table of mercenaries made the most noise, projecting power across the facility. Tales of their sexual conquests oomphed off the walls. Andrea stood up with a wink. Ignacio stayed behind to think. Andrea turned around on her way out the door of the dining facility.

“Oh, about our writing contest, how about The Anbari Exception as a title?” she shouted across three tables, one at which the Labor Attaché was seated. Probably trying to feign leadership by eating with the workers, Andrea surmised. Her powerful voice drowned out the table of mercenaries; offended by her breach of etiquette, thick necks turned in unison to stare her down.

Ignacio grinned widely. “Sounds like a Ludlum title!” He bent down to tighten his bootlace. Take care of your gear, and your gear will take care of you, he recalled.

“Exactly!” Andrea’s howl bounced off the blast barriers as the DFAC doors swooshed shut behind her.

Ignacio liked Andrea.

Chapter Four

Majid almost tripped on the crumbling sidewalk as he gazed up at Munir’s apartment complex. Built by the
Iraqi Development Board in the 1950s, the housing project boasted refined architecture and fairly modern amenities.

*Place still looks the same,* he noted.

He walked up a few steps and entered the courtyard. White walls and sharp angles greeted him austerely.

*I gotta come by more often. When was the last time I was here?* He had no answer for himself.

Two doors down from the corner, Munir’s apartment was wide open.

“Game on!” Majid yelled as he strutted into the apartment.

No sign of Munir. He looked around and eyed the hovel that Munir called home. Maps old and new gilded the walls. All around him, crates and stacks of newspapers climbed up from the dusty floor. The ones closest to the walls branched out like precarious vines.

“Muniiii, where are youuu?” Majid said playfully.

A sniffle.

Majid turned. A leg extended from behind stacks of brown paper and typewriter boxes.

Majid walked over cautiously. Munir looked up at him, eyes red and puffy.

“Either you’ve been hitting the hashish or you’re having a rough day,” Majid said with a grimace, hoping his humor – never as good as Munir’s – was enough to elicit a smile.

It worked. Munir laughed. “You’re a good man,” Munir said between sniffles.

Majid sat down and scooted next to Munir's extended leg. The other leg was still curled up, the remains of a once formidable fetal position. Majid reached out and patted Munir’s nape.

Majid laughed again. “Like Thoreau, this work won’t see recognition in my lifetime.”

“Nonsense,” Majid said.

Munir sat up a little taller.

“Anything I can do?” Majid asked slowly, not sure how to proceed; Munir was usually the one trying to cheer him up.
“Nah,” Munir said eventually. “Everything’s fine. It’s just... once in a while it’s all too much.”
Majid nodded and held his breath. Exhaling, he comforted, “It’s always all too much. You’ve just been holding out longer than most.”
Munir dropped his head to his chest, rubbing it lightly, slightly, against his knee.
“Has this... happened before?” Majid asked hesitantly.
Munir mustered a “mm mmm” before lifting his head and wiping his eyes.
Majid wasn’t sure if that was an affirmative or negative response, but was happy to see Munir appearing to rally.
“Ha! You came!” Munir said suddenly, dropping a filthy rag, which Majid hadn’t seen, from his right hand. Munir stood up to hug his soul brother. “And you’re early!” Munir behaved as if Majid had just arrived.
Majid went with the flow. “I thought I’d help out a little bit. You know, get the place ready,” Majid said, happy he was the first to show up. “Um...” Majid began, not knowing where to begin cleaning first.
“I know, I know. I’ve gotten a little carried away with my writing,” Munir apologized, not meaning a word of it.
“You’re going to be a famous author one day, you know?” Majid affirmed, meaning every word of it. He started to move one pile of newspapers towards the wall.
“Wait,” Munir pleaded gently. “There’s a system to it.”
Majid raised his hands over his head.
Munir laughed. “This stack can slide over there.”
“You wish is my command,” Majid replied. He bent over to push the stack of newspapers, but soon righted himself. He walked the two steps back over to Munir and hugged him again.
No words were exchanged.

An hour had passed by the time the duo was done rearranging Munir’s collection. Having endured a little
flexibility, Munir’s system for organizing his passion was still intact. And there was a surprising amount of room for guests to socialize and walk around. The BBC’s Arabic service played faintly from the top of the tallest stack of crates.

“I’ll clean the toilet,” Majid offered.
“Don’t,” Munir said.
“No, no, I don’t mind.”
“No, I mean, don’t. It’s broken. I’ve been using my neighbor’s,” Munir clarified.

Majid pointed to the north wall and the south wall, right and left hands extended in a cross.
“These guys,” Munir said, pointing to the south wall. “They left shortly after the March bombing.”
“2003?”
“Of course.”
“You know—”. Majid cut himself off, refocusing his eyes on a random spot on the wall.

Munir cocked his head like an inquisitive raptor.
“Nothing,” Majid said.
“Say it,” Munir ordered.
“Nothing. It’s damn depressing.”
Munir straightened his head, issuing the order once more. “Say it.”

“Fine. I was just thinking about how my Montana friends watched the so-called Shock and Awe bombing on television,” Majid admitted.

Munir forced a laugh. “That is depressing,” he granted.

“Did they leave the country or just move to another neighborhood?” Majid asked.
“No,” Majid said. “I mean your neighbors.”
Munir laughed through the sorrow. “I have no idea. Country, I think.”

“Sunny or Shi’a?” Majid asked.
“Like it matters?” Munir replied sternly, surprised at Majid’s uncharacteristic concern with matters of faith.
“No, man. Not like that. I mean, you said it yourself: your neighborhood is no longer a blend of sects like it once was. Certain people are moving out, ya know,” Majid said.

“True,” Munir acknowledged, still not answering Majid’s question.

“True,” Majid said. “These are the times.”

“Damn it!” Munir suddenly yelled. “This is supposed to be a happy night!”

“That’s my fault. My fault.”

“No, it’s mine,” Munir shouldered. “For one night, for one fucking night, we’re going to party like it’s 1979. No Occupation. No horseshit.”


“Tunes first,” Munir concurred, walking over to the old radio and flipping it to the TAPE function. “Do me a favor? Toss me a tape?” Munir gestured to the box to the right of the door.

Majid eyed the box of cassettes. He scooped through a few tapes. Familiar handwriting popped out at him. He grabbed the cassette case and tossed it to Munir. Munir caught it with his left hand, and with the same momentum flicked the case open. The tape launched into his outstretched right hand, a lucky, dexterous feat that he pretended was routine.

“Smooth,” Majid commended.

Munir hit PLAY. The room filled with—

“Floats! This song just floats,” Majid said.

“Far from our city that’s fed up with death…” Kathem Al-Saher sang with the incision of bitter recall.

“You been following his advice?” Munir asked, walking over to prop open the door.

Munir’s reminder was appreciated. Munir always took care of Majid. Majid used to make time to care for the city and its people. Majid recognized the need to rejuvenate his soul regularly, and viewed caring for the city as a revitalizing act. Majid nodded.

“How’s Seneen, ‘ala fikra?” Munir asked, politely grabbing Majid’s hand to stop him from dusting.

He guided his friend to sit down in the doorway. Majid sat.
Majid thought about the small meal he had left for his sister on top of the ice chest. Munir thought about the next step in his current writing project. The evening’s moon supervised.

“When the east is in the house, oh my god!” Majid popped up. “My jam!” Though his muscles felt a little stiff, he was still able to hop nimbly, dancing his gangly body around Munir’s cramped apartment, dodging the new arrangement of newspapers and books.

“Thanks again for all your help,” Munir said loudly, now competing with a powerful chorus. He pushed the ratty couch towards the north wall with his shinbone.

“My pleasure,” Majid replied, patting Munir on the nape of the neck.

“So what’d you do before you showed up?” Munir asked.

“Nothing much. Visited a few people. Sorted a few things out. Walked around Abu Nuw’as Park mostly,” Majid said. He didn’t know why he was lying. He had just been at home with Seneen.

“I hear they’re wrecking part of that district,” Munir panted, working to tame his breath.

“I hear a lot of rumors these days,” Majid acknowledged. He inhaled deeply. “Seizing land for military needs. Sounds like a page out of the old Zionist playbook.”

“Seize, expropriate, and declare. Tactics of colonial power,” affirmed Munir.

“I love your mind,” Majid said, suddenly out of breath.

“I feel stressed,” Munir admitted.

“Why? This is supposed to be a fun night. Time to relax, right?”

“You’re right,” Munir conceded. “I just... I’m stressed. I feel like I drank too much coffee or someth—"
The downwash from an Occupation helicopter drowned out Munir’s words.
“You’ll mellow out after the first guest arrives, I’m sure,” Majid comforted.
“Any news from your Baba?” Munir asked as he dusted the windowsill with another funky cloth.
“Not since last year. I think he’s still in Akrab.”
His makeshift duster – a filthy rag, all he had on hand – wasn’t helping much. Munir walked over to the door and tossed the rag on the concrete outside.
The moon nodded to Munir. Munir grinned back.
“I’ll dispose of it when I leave,” Majid offered.
“Has Egypt charged him with anything? Any crime?”
“No. His only crime was being Palestinian, crossing Rafah, and overstaying his papers.”
“God willing, he’ll be home soon.”
“God willing.”
“Uh-oh!” Majid yelled to himself, stepping back as a pile of old newspapers came tumbling to the floor.
“Precarious stuff,” Munir said laughing. “Sorry about that.”
“You’re still collecting?”
“Three papers every day. It’s the historical record,” Munir said, permitting a humble boast. “One day, this will help them sort out the mess.”
“From when until when?” Majid re-stacked the papers.
“From early 2003 until now,” Munir replied. He walked over to a rusty sink in the back of the apartment and turned on the tap. The pipes groaned, eventually granting a trickle of cool water. As the chill flowed over his skin, he gave thanks for having an opportunity to live another day. He was very appreciative of how the hours seemed to stretch out before him, as if the solar system had huddle up and decided to grant Earth’s plants and animals a little extra time. But how to give Majid some of this joy? Munir wondered.
Majid stretched, using Munir’s peeling wall as support.
“Hold that stretch longer, my man,” Munir recommended, flicking some of the water left on his fingers in Majid’s direction.

Majid nodded and kept his pose; right heel to right cheek, he exhaled steadily. He used to hate stretching, but Munir had helped him take pleasure and see the challenge involved. After a few weeks, Majid had begun to see progress.

“Who knows,” Majid said through soothing breaths.

Munir didn’t remember asking a question. He walked over to the lone window to the right of the door and opened it. The rusted metal runners jammed halfway up. He pushed the shutters outwards. There was no screen. The night air was cool and calm. It flowed slowly into the room.

“Alright, Colonel Budahas, should we change the music before the guests arrive?” Majid asked.
Munir stared at Majid’s chest. “Ah, shit,” he conceded.

“What? Don’t tell me. I’ve stumped you?”
“No, no,” Munir insisted. “Give me a sec.”
Majid smiled triumphantly, perhaps his first genuine smile of the day.

“Budahas, Budahas... Bu-da-has,” Munir repeated.
“Movie or television?”
“Television.”
“How about ‘they’ve been here for a long, long time?’” Majid tendered.

“Ah, I can picture the dude’s face!”
Majid returned to the wall and began re-stretching his legs while Munir stewed it over for a bit.

“Shoot, what is it?” Munir tapped out.

“X-Files, season one.”
Munir charged at Majid, pretending to tackle him.

Munir picked Majid up, the nook of his right elbow supporting Majid’s left hamstring.

“Great show!” Munir proclaimed while letting Majid down gently.
Majid basked in his rare victory. “Well, this won’t happen again for another hundred years,” Majid predicted.

“How many more times will the U.S. have invaded by then?” Munir inquired.

“Mr. Munir, they’ll be here for a long, long time.”

The guests arrived in quick succession. Noora, a paper pusher at the Transport Ministry, breezed in, the soul brothers offering her a round of comical bows, as they always afforded the first guest. Mohammed, a university student and aspiring sociologist, arrived next. “Help me with this,” he said, all business, juggling two heavy paper bags. He embraced his friends warmly as soon as his hands were free. Khalid, a freelance journalist who worked mostly with a Gulf media enterprise then came swooping in. “Lovers!” he declared. A group hug met him at the door. “You didn’t hear me?” Sara scolded as she entered. Spending her days studying for her Master’s in agricultural economics and spending her nights working as a hotel maid, Sara rarely surfaced for air. She jumped on the pile of bodies by the door as she rounded the bend. “You walk too fast,” she told Khalid. “I was calling your name for three damn blocks.” Fares, an elementary school teacher from Al-Baiueia, whispered, “Thought I’d be late.” “Who is that?” Noora asked from the middle of the pile. “It’s mee!” “Who whispers? Freak,” Noora teased. The pile of bodies vibrated with the wave of laughter. Noora soon broke through the mass of limbs and headed towards the couch.

The dancing started immediately, prompting Majid to close the door in case of a nosy neighbor.

“Can I place this here? Noora asked, folding her hijab intricately and putting it atop a nearby newspaper stack.

“Fucking Embassy,” Fares began.

“You know the rules,” Sara said as she poured a glass.

“No politics, no religion!” a few of the guests yelled back.
Salat al-‘ashaa, the evening’s final call to prayer, stroked Munir’s eardrums. He looked around, basking in his small victory: in increasingly sectarian times, he had pulled together different classes and sects for a night of rest and relaxation.

“Turn it up!”
“I’m filled with a yearning to return, my dear,” Kathem Al-Saher crooned.
“You always were master of the mix tape,” Majid yelled.
Mohammed danced the lady bump across Majid’s path.
Kareem cracked the door and eased his way in, pushing a crate out of the way.
“Am I late?”
“Tardyyy!” Munir yelled from the back of the room.
“I didn’t think you’d come,” Kareem said to Majid as he hugged Munir. Kareem worked as an interpreter for the Occupation. Majid had gotten him the job when he quit.
“Yeah,” Majid acknowledged. “It’s been a while since I went out.” Changing the subject, Majid asked Kareem, “Did you see Algeria play Palestine?”
Kareem pulled his head out of a paper bag. “You got the goods! Hell yes. First show of Arab solidarity in ages.”
“Could teach the damn Arab League a thing or two,” Fares interjected.
“No politics!” Noora yelled, mid-gyration.
“Amr Moussa needs to grow a pair;” Sara snuck up and whispered before joining Noora mere feet away. And so it was. Politics crept up only to be shunned with varying success.
The core group partied well into the night. A few neighbors stopped by for a dance or two early on. Noora politely re-donned her hijab depending on the visitor.
Majid reached for his best friend, dismayed that he wasn’t nearby. Pausing in the middle of an atrocious dance step, Majid wheeled around and searched for a
frantic second. Munir was standing by the door, looking out the window at the inky sky.

Munir soaked in the soothing confluence of street clatter and party chatter. He permitted himself a brief daydream.

“Mail call!” he yelled in the faint reverie, pounding on the side of the M1A1 tank with his open palm. “Mail call!” he repeated, making sure to stay in one of the tank’s few blind spots. His heart bombed around his chest like a coagulated pendulum. Sixty-eight and a half tons of corporate greed loomed over him. It's too late to turn back now, he rued. The tank crew surrendered one by one as Munir read off their names from the pilfered manifest. “OPSEC violation!” a plump security officer frothed somewhere stateside. That crew alone – four in total – could have slaughtered many more civilians. Munir’s creativity saved the day. M1A1: four months to build, four seconds to destroy. A new motto, GD, Munir mused.

Majid placed a gentle palm on Munir’s broad bony shoulder. Munir eased back into the present with a warm heart, appreciating the whims dreamland provided.

Majid let his hand drop. He dusted off Munir’s t-shirt and right pant leg. Majid preferred jeans, but Munir always wore sweatpants. Munir liked the bagginess and enjoyed the freedom to roll them up a bit whenever the days began to roast.

“Being antisocial at your own fiesta?” Sara yelled across the room.

The duo rolled forward and stepped back into the celebration.

“Happy you could make it,” Majid said to Sara as she approached.

“I was just thinking, how many of us have worked for the Occupation?” Winking, she raised her cup.

“Don’t start,” Munir cautioned, hitting her playfully on the shoulder.

She hit him back much harder.

“Mama mea, ‘azoubiya!” he proclaimed. He rubbed the future bruise.

Majid laughed nearby.
“Tell me again what you did to get fired from the CPA,” Munir asked Sara, trying to push her buttons a little. Sara had been dismissed from the Coalition Provisional Authority in 2004 after questioning Bremer’s Order 81, which in practice outlawed traditional Iraqi agricultural methods, opening the country up to multinational agro businesses.

Sara laughed, refusing to take the bait. She remained calm. “I told my boss something like, ‘Corporate America shouldn’t tell the fucking Fertile Crescent how to farm.’”

Munir laughed, conceding defeat. He should have known he couldn’t crack Sara’s composure.

_They’ll come for the wheat, rice, and barley next_, Sara considered as she danced her way around Munir and Majid.

“Didn’t anyone question the viceroy’s business interests?”

“You think a journalist from a corporate cable news powerhouse would ask to see his Kissinger & Associates tramp stamp?” Kareem asked rhetorically.

“Or agribusiness piercings?” Majid added, impressed with his swift wit.

“So much for democracy,” Fares observed.

“So much for civilization,” Sara sang.

“And the cradle will rock,” Majid added. “Did we party like this before the invasion?”

“I didn’t know you before the invasion,” Fares noted, his laughter aligning with the rhythm of the music.

“I think so,” Munir added. He gestured to Mohammed, who was dancing like a sprinkler in the corner.

“Hey Mohammed, get over here!” Sara demanded. Ignoring her, Mohammed started grinding with a stack of newspapers.

“I hope it falls on him,” Sara laughed.

“Majid, you were in the U.S. for a while, right?” Fares asked.

“Yup, yup,” Majid replied.

“You party there?”

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“I didn’t drink alcohol, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“But you jammed.”

“Yeah, I went out,” Majid confirmed.

“What’s the biggest party school there?” Noora asked, butting in. She wiped her brow, glistening from dancing up a storm.

“Good question,” Sara supported.

“ASU?” Khalid asked from across the room.

“The Sun Devils? I know a few Montana Grizzlies who’d disagree,” Majid said with a laughing snort.

“Yeah, but can they pound Arak in the middle of a theatre of war?” Fares wondered.

“You talking shit?” Noora prodded.

“Wait. Theatre?” Sara asked. “I thought it was a warzone.”

“No politics!” Mohammed yelled.

“And the Wheel of Euphemism goes ‘round,” Majid said, rhythm flowing back up his legs.

They danced and danced to Munir’s masterful mixtape, a blend of 1950s Cairo classics, 1970s rock, 1980s dance hits, and 1990s pop.

Majid, exhausted by the day’s events, inside and outside his mind, lingered by the doorway.

“Taking off?” Munir asked.

Majid nodded.

“But you haven’t seen my Tahiyya Kariokka impression yet.”

Majid’s dimple shined.

“Swing by in the morning, will you?” Munir asked with a slight whine.

Munir walked him outside. A light of affection, Majid grabbed hugs like a magnet on his way out.

“Sounds like a plan,” Majid said. “You gonna be a little dusty?”

“Who knows? Probably not.”

_Ghuroob ash-shams_ nodded to Andrea and Ignacio as they said goodnight and parted ways for the evening. Each looked forward to a good night’s rest. Tonight, Andrea’s
reading and writing danced the tango in dreamland, strengthening symbiotically in an intimate union; writing enhanced reading, and reading enriched writing. She learned passively through active delight. Later in life, these moments would awaken in appreciation, simple aids gifting keen mindset. The space to read had given her the tools to write, nature’s buds once showing her how to pay attention in different ways. The supportive notes of Gustav Holst daubed and massaged a deep fold in Andrea’s auditory cortex. She would later use the interaction between Mickey and the brooms in The Sorcerer’s Apprentice to describe this sensation.

Too tired to keep her eyes open, Andrea finished reading and rolled over. She tucked her pillow vertically between her bedside table and bedpost. She only used the pillow to read, not sleep. Thoughts bounced. *How the hell did they get my personal email address anyway?* She pushed the soles of her feet as far away from her torso as possible. The sterile lights streaming in through the window blinds tapped her crisp socks.

*I’ll just delete their email. Screw them.* Major investment banks were now hiring former intelligence professionals to scour employee behavior and to comb employee communications in order to deter rogue trading. Apparently Andrea’s skill set made her an attractive job candidate to some of these banks, except for the fact that Andrea had never applied for any of these positions and secretly loathed capitalism. *I bet damn Jaleel gave it to them,* Andrea thought, conjuring up images of her rowdy ex-GCHQ buddy pounding an overpriced Guinness in a Harrogate pub. Andrea arched her back and did her best to shove the email out of her mind.

Andrea thought about the beauty of the written word. She always took a paperback with her wherever she went during the day, finding plenty of downtime to swim among the pages. She’d emerge soaking wet in checkout lines, bank queues, and street corners. In turn, the bound pages followed her into her unconsciousness. Andrea never remembered her dreams, which was unfortunate because she almost always dreamed about
books. She would recognize familiar territory upon entering dreamland, but the details would fade away as she woke up.

In her dreams, Andrea mended wounds and granted opportunity. Her first order of business – a personal errand, rather – was to allocate half of the earth for non-human nature, so that all species might thrive. *No humans allowed*, an edict long overdue. She then turned her attention to the absurd pace at which animals and plants were dying. She brought a few back to life, but rued not paying greater attention in high school biology class; she could only help those she remembered. Frustrated but determined, Andrea soared higher, creating more habitats for pollinators. In one fell swoop, Andrea tore down dams and repopulated butterflies, the aesthetics of which helped several thousand humans overcome depression. Her last stroke before waking up was to cleanse water of humanity’s pollution. *We shouldn’t even have to ‘treat’ water*, she fumed. *We shouldn’t pollute it in the first place*. This thought bounced around the globe as she woke in a cold sweat.

Headlines scrolled before Ignacio’s eyes.

Mulling over something Nguyen had said, Ignacio did his homework and found some ledes from freelance journalists about human trafficking and Pentagon bases, but concrete details were few and far between. Ignacio knew the U.S. government owned over a hundred of facilities across southwest Asia. *That must mean tens of thousands of migrant workers*. Mostly, though, Ignacio found the mediocre or watered-down work of corporate journalists who preferred a pundit’s comment to a local’s word. Ignacio only came across one journalist who used her platform to amplify laborers’ grievances. *Drudges, transitory and informal, a living limbo*, Ignacio thought. His eyelids fell lightly.

Ignacio stepped slowly into dreamland. He laced up his sneakers one by one, spent a minute in his favorite pigeon pose, and then hit the trail. The first ten seconds were a breeze, and then he felt his body grapple with a
new cardiovascular rhythm. Even in dreamland, it took a mile before he reached the aerobic zone. Crisp weather, sparse traffic, and fresh body whisked him into ineffable delight. The air felt cleaner in the mornings. Today, the wind and the incline ganged up on him, but he welcomed the challenge.

Familiar silhouettes stalked back and forth along the edge of the city, encroaching month-by-month, day-by-day. Dome huge, hair thorny, shoulders *thakheen*, and gait funky loomed eight meters tall. Ignacio did his best to time his footfalls, but layers of cement and loose aggregate proved a persistent nuisance. Eyeballs spangled and paws shadowed. Yelps and mutters instilled a monstrous depravity in his heart that words could never convey. Jaws snapped; like hyenas during Qey Shibir, these men and women nibbled limbs, drained territory, and efficiently disposed of bodies.

**Chapter Five**

Nobody heard the door splinter. Manufactured in New Jersey and Illinois, the flash-bang grenades blinded and stunned. Born in Oregon, Texas, Maine, Florida, Iowa, and Virginia, the shooters stormed the apartment. Munir and friends recoiled instinctively. Newspaper shreds flew like spittle.

A 5.56mm round pierced Fares’ right cheek.

“Fares!” Munir screamed.

Made in Mississippi and discharged in Baghdad, a second bullet simultaneously entered Fares’ lower back. He dropped like someone had pulled the plug. Rosy smog followed his descent.

Pure pandemonium ensued. Vocal cords thrashed, weapons discharged, drinks flew, and eye sockets blued.

More U.S. militants flooded into the apartment. Munir tried to tell the invaders that his uncle had worked for Kellogg’s junior staff on the CPA, but speaking only seemed to enrage them.

Guttural howls of “Shut the fuck up!” ruled the night. “Get down!” was another phrase they knew.
Munir’s friends didn’t even bother trying to communicate. They recognized the savagery of the Occupier.

As the burning grit faded, Munir chanced a look around. Noora and Kareem were cuffed alongside him, on their knees, foreheads against the wall. The invaders, some still donning green eyes, were ransacking Munir’s belongings. Munir sneak a peek to his left and saw one of the militants digging a bullet out of someone’s back. He couldn’t figure out whose body it was. *Fares?* Off balance from all the equipment he carried, the man mangled the corpse. Munir quickly returned his forehead to the wall, fearing the invaders would seize any excuse to murder some more.

“I didn’t know you pricks drank,” Munir heard from across the room.

A bottle shattered. Munir imagined one of the invaders taking a swig of the drink and then throwing the bottle against the wall.

Boots stomped. Two shots snapped. Shells fell. A gloved hand grabbed Munir by the neck and forced his head parallel to the ground. Munir thrashed and thrashed as the green eyes dragged him away until – THWAP – they knocked him out in a blare of stars.

A smoldering newspaper danced by.

Bennett’s nightmares returned on schedule.

His limp only made him snarl more. His left leg wouldn’t respond. It did not even tingle. Nothing.

“Fuckin’ empty flesh!” Bennett huffed, kicking up dust as he tried his hardest to reach the checkpoint. Oddly, he could make out the blue and grey bars flickering from over half a kilometer away.

*At least it holds weight,* Bennett said while punching his left thigh. Seconds chaperoned his slog like a boggy blanket.

Plumes above Atarot airport floated into Bennett’s sightline. A revoked work permit moseyed across Bennett’s track.
“What the...?” Are my eyes messed up too? Bennett couldn’t believe the scene laid out in front of him. Those aren’t grey and blue bars. They’re... bodies?! After decades sustaining bites, gashes, and slaughter – demeaning, torturous, grinding, slow – humanity was finally able to leap over and squeak through the metal rods and iron barriers. Peace and love was mowing down hundreds of these odious warrens across historic Palestine, and Bennett was powerless to stop them.

Bennett saw a young man pick up cylindrical remains of a turnstile and begin filling it with dirt. As the young man scooped and cupped soil into the makeshift container, an older man tinkered with the remains of a security camera. “I’m taking this?” the older man said. His younger brother’s ears registered more inquiry than statement. The older brother didn’t care. He was already finalizing plans to repurpose the camera’s remains as part of a desk lamp.

How did those barbarians pull this off?! Bennett squealed.

Palestinian software engineers had launched malware onto the checkpoint’s local area net. Thirteen devices were connected to the LAN at the time of the attack. All were infected without an alarm sounding. The dedicated uplink, active for slightly more than a decisecond, had paved the way for meritorious non-violent action.

Resistance fighters had used open source intelligence to collect information on their oppressors. Boastful LinkedIn profiles, bigoted Twitter accounts, and racist Facebook pages offered loads of personal information about checkpoint employees to the patient observer – all of which came in handy when deciphering passwords and pursuing fleeing tormentors.

Bennett approached the checkpoint, watching in awe.

“Heyyy, Shlomo!” Ibrahim yelled in his best Israeli accent. He had been practicing for over twenty weeks. Shlomo’s left hand moved to his weapon, listlessly but instinctively. Overreliance on technologies and
dominating routines has weakened our instincts, Bennett thought as he observed Ibrahim collect Shlomo’s gear.

Ibrahim marveled at the hacker team’s efficiency. Unlocked permanently: brand new computer-automated revolving doors used to cage and control Palestinian travelers. Frozen stiff: fiber optics linking several M2 Browning .50 caliber guns with remote operator stations. Jammed repeatedly: wireless radio comms that connected the checkpoints to nearby Israeli military units.

Bennett watched helplessly. Youngsters now played hide-and-seek in abandoned pillboxes. Two university students gently placed a crate of manot krav, Israeli field rations, across the intersection of concertina wires. A teenage girl planted legumes around loose rebar atop waist-high concrete barriers. Three moms collected and sorted discarded quick-change barrels while humming ya nabd ad-diffa and brainstorming ways to repurpose tank tread and x-ray machine conveyor belts into garden walls.

Bennett’s nightmares continued without pause. The effects of Peak Oil wrecked capitalist markets. Dramatic rises in oil prices ensued, toppling Israel’s military and colonial infrastructures, which were highly dependent on fossil fuels. Where Israel was slow, heavy, and immobile, Palestine was rapid, light, and flexible.

Merkava’s diesel tanks ran dry. Armored personnel carriers like Achzarit lined the roadside. Namer ground to a halt. The M270 rocket artillery screeched out of position. P&W engines began to rust, so F-15 and F-16 aircraft lay idle. Engines flaked; AH-64 and UH-60 helicopter rotors cramped. An unmanned aircraft, nicknamed Steadfast, fell out of the sky. The vast machinery of war was unable to project power beyond a few coastal cities.

No one heard Bennett’s screams. Given budgetary challenges resulting from skyrocketing oil prices, the Israeli Defense Ministry scrambled to retrofit existing vehicles and fleets to consume renewable energy. Zionist scientists worked round-the-clock to figure out how to manufacture small arms without petroleum’s
convenience. Elderly ministers sat down with young studs to revise small unit tactics and war game strategies, which used to be contingent upon traditional petroleum reserves, access, and prices. A local katsa reminisced about the days when he could hop effortlessly to Nicosia, Ankara, or Alexandria. Unit 8200’s coal-based electrical infrastructure shuddered, and Israel’s wider energy grid seized. Senior War Ministry leadership could not implement the Samson Option. Recourse to natural gas (a dab of antibiotic ointment on a severed leg) postponed total collapse by a few weeks; workers at gas fields could not meet a fraction of the demand, and, without petroleum, transport of their product slowed to a crawl. State terror was forced to make on-the-fly decisions.

Bennett’s leg twitched.

“The treasures of the voice of the silenced must be protected, vestiges of a more complete wisdom delayed like cloves...” a voice counseled, fading.

Israel fell back on its global public relations apparatus when claiming victimhood and appealing for more U.S. aid, but Israeli talking points decomposed when exposed to sunlight. Hasbara, too, depended on cheap fossil fuels. Contemporary best practices (flying U.S. military generals to Tel Aviv for JINSA indoctrination; flying youth to Israel on ‘birthright’ propaganda trips; flying U.S. Congress to Israel for thorough, free tours rife with Zionist talking points) were all oil intensive. Hasbara staggered, plummeted, and hemorrhaged.

Palestine smiled and stretched, embracing this rare breathing room. Palestine rose softly and nimbly here, assertively and directly there. Collaborators in the Palestinian Authority liquefied. Stone throwing, sit-ins, popular protests, boycotts, and marches required little oil. Novel acts of resistance and innovative forms of struggle peppered the 1948 lands. Millions of feet marched north, west, and south to the sea, homing in on 32.0667° N, 34.8000° E. The Mediterranean lapped chilly toes.
Major Bennett wept. His beloved ethnocracy had fallen. Zionism’s racist ideology was beaten, and democracy had finally arrived to Israel. Bennett woke up trembling as the airplane touched down amid dawn’s rosy fingertips.

Her watch glowed 04:28. She rolled over, flicked on her lamp, and curled up with her book. Her breathing sped up, mind diverted. After reading the same paragraph three times, she tuck the book under her leg and reached for her laptop.

“Where’s that wire?” she whispered to herself. Her left hand fumbled along the gap between the wall and her bed frame where she had last placed the Ethernet cable. Her right hand flicked the corner of the files tucked under her mattress. I need to collect a few more, she directed herself. Bureaucracy can’t function without files. And journalism can’t function without sources.

“Gotcha!” Her index and middle fingers tweezed the cable, slowly raising it above the sheets. She plugged it into her laptop, eased open the screen, and pressed the POWER button.

The start-up noise riffed around her spartan room.

“Let’s skip the email and go straight to news,” she said.

She opened three tabs, each reporting on vehicle-born improvised explosive devices going off throughout the city in a coordinated attack.

“Next,” she said. She would get the un-sanitized analysis in the office in a couple hours.

Ping. A new email. She ignored it.

She clicked on a tab marked “Chalabi Eyes Iraqi Services Committee.”

“Same old,” she whispered. “Next.”

She clicked on a different news tab: “U.S. Monies Earmarked for Clean Water Initiatives Diverted to Fund Embassy Upgrades.”

Ping. Another new email.
“Who the hell is up at this hour?” she asked, caving in and clicking on her email icon at the bottom of the screen.

“Ah, it’s from D.C.,” she said. “Time zones, dumbass,” she scolded

She double clicked on the newest email, titled Meet Rayheed’s New Vice President.

RESTON, Virginia – Rayheed [NYSE: RYHD] has appointed Edward Pontiff, 56, to vice president for Washington Operations, effective 1 January. Pontiff succeeds Frederick Weinstein, 63, who is retiring in two months.

In his new role, Pontiff will be responsible for leading Rayheed’s dealings with the Pentagon and U.S. Congress. He will also be responsible for supervising engagement with state and local governments. He will continue to chair the corporation’s primary Political Action Committee.

“Edward has decades of experience working with our nation’s congressional and defense leaders,” said Rayheed CEO Jessica Dawson. “We know his expertise will strengthen our customer relationships.”

Pontiff is currently deputy vice president of Rayheed Global Security Policy, where he helps manage the corporation’s relationships with the Office of the Secretary of Defense and several key U.S. federal agencies.

Prior to joining Rayheed in 2000, Pontiff served as the Special Assistant to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In this role, he advised and ensured execution of Defense Department policy, budget, programs, and personnel, as well as legislative and public affairs.

Pontiff also previously served as the staff director of the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Rutgers University.

Headquartered in Reston, Virginia, Rayheed is a global security and aerospace company that employs approximately 120,000 people worldwide. The Corporation’s net sales for last fiscal year were $50.3 billion.

“Ghhhhah!” Andrea grumbled. “Deep breaths,” she counseled herself, doing her best to avoid starting the day on a stressful note.

She eased down her laptop screen and sat up in bed. She swung her legs over the side, her toes brushing the thin layer of linoleum that covered the concrete floor.

Can I open up to Ignacio? He’s cool and all, but he did sign up for this...
Andrea sighed loudly. War profiteers flock here like scalloped hammerheads circling Darwin Island. The damn compound rises from the water like Darwin Island’s stone arch. X marks profit’s spot. Andrea felt the frustration welling up inside of her. U.S. war corporations crave and promote conflict to augment profit. It’s the oldest trick in the book, yet one that still eludes most of my fellow citizens. Tonic immobility abounds, as most D.C. pundits refuse to call out the war economy.

“Deep breaths!” she coaxed. She looked to her right and eyed a library book on her bedside table. Andrea sighed again.

But who am I to criticize? I’m here, part of the problem, regardless of my idealism. Was it better to come here and try to do something? Should I have stayed back in Foggy Bottom and Langley, pounding my head against the seventh floor bureaucracy? Hell no. Like hammerhead swimming in place within a strong current, war corporations hold a fixed position over cash reef. We will change this.

Sun’s first rays warmed corporate USA’s finest marvels that were spread out across Mesopotamia – a veneer of comfort to foreigners, yet consummate reproach to the region’s children: AE-1107 powered MV-22, a nod to the USA/UK special relationship; C-17 hauled MRAPs, all too happy to help out the troops; MQ-9 ripened with AGM-114; a Tucson cruise missile was led to target using software from Melbourne, Florida, and satellites of Colorado courtesy; pilots, trained on corporate simulators, revved F138 engines to propel C-5M, which transported M1A2 and M-ATV running on C7 diesel engines; MC-130J utilized Cedar Rapids’ finest head-up display when refueling MH-60M with Standard Oil’s best; APY-9 radar cued AIM-120 for F/A-18 via Link-16; Providence, Rhode Island’s tepid Shadow yawned its rotor engine awake and fed bleak distributed common ground system, made in Richardson, Texas; and F135 turbofans graced the bumbling F-35.
A garrulous MC-12 pilot, on loan from Souda Bay, vented marital frustrations by throttling the aircraft’s turboprop long and hard. Manufactured near Hartford, Connecticut, the turbines shook New York sensors and datalinks as he flew low absorbing sun’s rays and cells alike.

One particular mu’azzin begged power to cleanse the land of these profitable leeches, but to no avail. Perhaps some other day.

The sun’s eager rays flicked dewy mist, offering the locals a glimpse of hope, or perhaps a glimpse of distraction. Ignacio woke suddenly, feeling like he had been punched in the gut. Instinctively, he reached for his journal. Wisdom bombed around his conscience. Ignacio read Kingly sagacity, underlining and tweaking as he went.

The only change came from America, as we increased our troop commitments in support of governments, which were singularly corrupt, inept, and without popular support. All the while the people read our leaflets and received the regular promises of peace and democracy... Now there is little left to build on, save bitterness. Soon, the only solid physical foundations remaining will be found at our military bases...

Ignacio read on.

Surely we must see that our own computerized plans of destruction simply dwarf their greatest acts... They question our political goals and they deny the reality of a peace settlement from which they will be excluded. Their questions are frighteningly relevant. Is our nation planning to build on political myth again, and then shore it up upon the power of new violence? ... Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence, when it helps us to see the enemy’s point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves.

Kingly words echoed into the present...

And as I ponder the madness of Iraq and search within myself for ways to understand and respond in compassion, my mind goes constantly to the people of that land. I speak now not of the soldiers of each side, not of the ideologies of the Baathists or sundry religious dogmas, but simply of the people who have been living under the curse of despotism, war, and
sanctions for decades now. I think of them, too, because it is clear to me that there will be no meaningful solution there until some attempt is made to know them and hear their broken cries.

Ignacio closed his journal, some words understood, other principles rejected outright. He decided to let the words settle in his mind and return to them later in the day.

He was a morning person to the extreme; he set three alarm clocks, but never needed the redundancy. Like today, his body usually woke itself up a few minutes before the first alarm clock went off. He thought about how it had taken a few days to adjust his longstanding circadian habits to UTC +3. He expected the same transition period for his upcoming return home.

*Shower. Cold shower.* His body craved that key part of his morning routine. He groaned a bit as he popped out of bed. He thought about his younger days when his back didn’t hurt so much. He donned a pair of ratty sweatpants and grabbed his towel off the hook on the back of the door. He opened his door and looked across the hall into the spotless kitchen. The dorms had one on every floor, but most of the residents were not allowed to leave the Green Zone to purchase groceries, so the kitchen’s right wall was now used for ad hoc storage. He stepped silently into the hallway. He ducked into the latrine, five doors down. Three minutes later, he surfaced feeling reinvigorated. He dressed carefully back in his room. Each foot rooted into the cold floor through the skeletal carpet as he stepped into his cotton boxers. As he put on a light undershirt, he thought about Baghdad’s future. *Will it ever be free?* Fully dressed, he emerged from his room with a quiet precision. He picked up speed in the stairwell and soon dashed out onto Andrea’s floor, slowing to a halt outside her corner room. He tried to stop by in the morning at least once a week.

Two firm knocks, a pause, then one more knock.
No answer.
Two firm knocks, a pause, one more knock.
“Nobody’s home,” Andrea said with a forceful whisper as she approached from behind him, green
toiletries kit in hand. She was wearing gym shorts and a loose t-shirt. Ignacio pretended not to notice.

“You’re late,” she joked. Can I trust him?

“Minty fresh,” he replied, gesturing to the bottle of mouthwash protruding from her kit. How much of a rebel is she?

“Always,” she said with a laugh, pushing her door open. Is he ready for the darker side of awareness?

“You keep it unlocked?” he asked.

“Always,” again her response. “Wait here.”

The door closed gently. A light at the other end of the hallway flicked off. The hallway was desolate, as most employees were still asleep in their beds.

Andrea emerged, once again in her standard cargo pants, blue polo shirt, and generous ponytail. They walked down the hall in valued silence. They entered the stairwell.

“Charles has already sent me two emails,” Andrea huffed. “Where you headed?”

“I gotta dip out onto Al-Kindi Street then head to the motor pool,” Ignacio replied, matching Andrea’s exasperated tone.

Their boots echoed throughout the cold stairwell.

“Dinner tonight?”

“Of course. I’m sure I’ll see you before then, though.”

They exited the stairwell on the ground floor, walked out of their residential building, and took off in different directions.

In no time, Ignacio was back in his stomping ground, the eastern diplomatic building. He walked the halls chugging water. A King helped him consider Resistance.

... we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition... Perhaps only his sense of humor and of irony can save him when he hears the most powerful nation of the world speaking of aggression as it drops thousands of bombs on a poor, weak nation
more than eight hundred -- rather, eight thousand miles away from its shores...

Ignacio brewed.

“Nah, my Arabic is pretty shitty these days. I was in D.C. on my last assignment, so not much time to review Arabic notes while chasing skirt, hitting up Caps games, and covering Congress!” Major Bennett yelled over the morning traffic. The Israeli liaison’s candor didn’t surprise Ignacio. Some Israeli officials he had met previously were pretty nonchalant about their government’s coziness with – what Ignacio considered penetration of – D.C. institutions.

Ignacio knew the driving directions well. He sped along one of thirteen tracks the U.S. Embassy staff took from the airport to the Green Zone. Although some constellation of U.S. bureaucrats had changed the name, everyone still called it the Green Zone. Doing his best to tune out his new acquaintance, while still sustaining the minimum of professional courtesies, Ignacio breezed by the old Chinese Embassy and turned north off of As-Safarat Street. Ignacio forced himself to smile, rolled down his window in breach of standard operating procedure, and breathed in the fresh morning air.

Ignacio suspected his own love for Mesopotamian history would clash with Zionism’s aggressive rejection of Arab custom and tradition. Probably, Ignacio concluded. So he decided to keep his mouth shut. He embraced the breeze and let his mind wander.

And this guy is still jabbering away, Ignacio said to himself.

“He was riding a skateboard when I shot him,” Bennett described.

Does he think he’s building rapport by spouting this shit? Does he think everyone who occupies is the same? Ignacio wondered.

“I didn’t even know the sand niggers knew how to skate back then,” Bennett continued. “And this was in early 2000, mind you. So, get this, his upper teeth caught
the edge of the wheel as he fell. Fucking hilarious! I walked over about an hour later to inspect the body, and his whole mouth was wrapped around the wheel, propping his head up off the ground,” Bennett guffawed. He slowly realized that Ignacio wasn’t paying any attention. “Thanks for picking me up,” Bennett roared, clapping Ignacio’s lapel with the back of his hand.

Ignacio fizzled back into the present.

“I was going to get a ride down with some Canadian frogmen,” Bennett continued, “but they bailed early.”

*Wise Canadians,* Ignacio thought. “We’re three minutes out,” he exhaled with the utmost restraint.

Ignacio accelerated around a bend, passing a group of what he assumed to be post-docs, ethnographers, or archaeologists digging by the roadside. *I see more private security than actual academics,* Ignacio observed. He glanced at them as he throttled through the corner. Most of the diggers did not look up. One did. He caught Ignacio’s eyes for two seconds, but that fleeting moment permitted a lifetime of exchange. They cut the connection with swapped smiles. The digger’s face flushed when the connection severed. He gripped his mini mattock with renewed vitality and bent towards Earth. In an attempt to stay positive, he reflected on his current dissertation regarding textiles’ importance. *Clothing, as a deliberate presentation of ethnic identity, can teach us a lot about group dynamics and culture.* He loved the minutiae: Why these geometric patterns? Is this more for function or style? When did this fashion originate? Why? What social classes wore this arrangement of threads? *I can fit these tatters into a larger cultural context and do my best to share their insight with the world, if the world is even listening.*

The HMMWV took a stiff bounce as Ignacio weaved through the concrete barriers at the gate. A wince flashed across Bennett’s face.

Ignacio asked, “Are you OK?”


“Still hasn’t healed?” Ignacio pushed.
Bennett’s physical discomfort belied his current reflection. It’s good to see Baghdad up close and personal. Iraq was the only regional power capable of challenging Israel or even competing with us militarily, so we had to take them out. Of course it’s always easier to get your older brother to solve problems for you. Hence the Office of Special Plans. Americans are easy to steer in the right direction.

“Glad we’re allied in this fight,” Bennett affirmed, directing the conversation away from any sign of weakness.

“Well...” Ignacio paused, immediately regretting re-engaging Bennett.

“True.” Bennett smirked. Ignacio wondered what Bennett was thinking.

Bennett inhaled to begin a rant.


“So what did you think of D.C.?”

“Wonderful town,” Bennett said. He thought, Your media are shit and your people are morons. “But your Congress,” Bennett paused to spit a wad of phlegm out the window, “fall over themselves to kiss our ass.”

Bennett’s heavy mucus glooped quietly to the wall of the motor pool. Ignacio pulled into his assigned space, turned off the engine, and fled the car.

I hope never to speak to this man again, Ignacio told himself.

Clipboard in hand, a short Greyriver employee with a giraffe neck greeted Bennett.

As Ignacio jogged to check in with his superiors, he thought of Brigadier General Karpinski who once informed the BBC that she had met an Israeli interrogator working alongside U.S. intelligence in Iraq. The U.S. State Department and the Israel Foreign Ministry had denied her assertions vehemently. Corporate media followed suit. No more mention of Israelis in Iraq. Mossad went about its mission without skipping a beat. They were able to access former Iraqi intelligence officials who had worked on Iraq’s Israel file.
They also were able to install state-of-the-art taps and relays throughout Iraq’s communications grid. Both objectives were achieved with relative ease by the end of 2003.

*Mossad then dug in deeper, using the opportunity to become more creative than ever. How deep are they? And what is Bennett really doing here? What’s his real mission?*

“The Institute,” Ignacio muttered. “Creative fucks.”

“I've left the apartment two days in a row,” Majid said, congratulating himself.

Varying his route from the night before, Majid approached Munir’s housing project.

He furrowed his brow, noticing the shutters were closed on every apartment window. “Why?” Majid asked aloud.

He stepped up to the threshold. He knocked lightly.

No response.

“They're probably pretty dusty,” he reassured himself.

The clock ticked.

He knocked once more on the door. No response.

*What’s that smell?*

He knocked again. Somewhere behind him a HMMWV ripped around the corner. Majid looked back and caught site of the driver’s blur. Suntanned, inconspicuous, and bald, Majid described the driver.

*What the hell is taking Munir so long? Maybe he stepped out for a bit.* Majid reached for the doorknob. The door opened as soon as he touched the jingling handle.

He entered, three steps.

The scene overwhelmed each of Majid’s senses. Its blood tore at his eyes. Gunpowder and seared flesh assailed his nostrils. He fell to his knees, his palms pounding the gritty floor. Acrd plasma, bile, and stale urine flooded his taste buds, interdicting his words. The silence of death’s void pounded his head.
He looked up. Newspapers – stomped, burned, and neglected – peppered the floor.
“Get ahold of yourself!” he yelled. He stood up, wobbled forward, and fell again.

From his knees, he began to tidy up a bit, forcing himself to concoct an absurd best scenario. He was out. He wasn’t here.

Majid crawled a couple feet towards the center of the room. Kneeling in the middle of a sea of newspapers, he began to arrange them in neat stacks. He picked up one newspaper and unfolded it, making sure all of its sections were in their proper order. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple and into his right eye. He closed his eyes tightly, squeezing them so hard that his vision turned from dark purple to a warm, pixelated red. He opened his eyes again. Short choppy breaths forced him to regain an understanding of the room around him. He refolded the paper in front of him, taking his time to make sure that all of the edges lined up. After the final fold, unaligned edges fanned out from the bottom quarter of the newspaper. He seized the paper, tore it up in vicious clumps, and reared onto his feet.

He swayed to his right and grabbed ahold of Munir’s desk, still buried underneath the rubble of future acclaim. More of Munir’s pack-rat notes slumbered calmly, patiently in the depths of his desk. Gorgeous cross-disciplinary patterns lay dormant, waiting for the right cogit-quake to reboot. Breakthroughs in queues. Majid nodded, accepting the vital challenge to reach down there soon. Munir’s wisdom deserves to greet the world.

Alright, alright, here we go, he thought. He stood up a little firmer this time. Stumbling to the south wall, he espied Munir’s skateboard cowering in the corner. He tried to scoot a stack of newspapers out of the way in order to reach the skateboard, but, without a sound, the whole pile timbered and spilled across the floor.

Damn it! Majid felt awful. He knew how much time and effort Munir put into collecting those periodicals. I’ll fix it later, he apologized.
Majid reached for the skateboard and brought it into his chest. He held it tight, like he would a child finally old enough to roughhouse with. The skateboard rewarded him. For then he saw it. The transcript – a first draft of Munir’s latest short story – bloomed where the felled stack of newspapers once stood.

Knowing how closely Munir guarded his work, Majid determined, “I can’t leave this gem behind.” I don’t even know where I’m going!

Majid gently lifted the manuscript and put the skateboard in its place.

“What else? What else?” Majid ask as he scanned the room for Munir’s personal effects.

He stood up. He was facing the south wall. The neighbors! Somebody must have heard something! He exited and turned north, knowing the southside neighbors were long gone. He knocked on the first door he came across, Munir’s nearest neighbors, three doors in from the corner.

No response.

“Pardon me,” Majid said loudly.

Muted feet shuffled away from the door.

An unseen hand locked a pair of shutters one apartment down.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Majid muttered. “It isn’t going down like this.”

Majid tried the next apartment and the next. He tried all the ground floor apartments in Munir’s building. The best response he received was a resigned nod from a young boy who didn’t heed his mom’s call to lay low. The final home in the row at least opened the door, but Majid’s questions were met with silence and a trembling lip. The door closed gently but firmly.

Majid backed up into the courtyard and looked up at the second floor.

“Did nobody see anything?! Anything at all?” he screamed. “Last night?” What time did I leave? “After two in the morning! Anyone?!” Majid hollered. “We’re nothing but cowards. All of us!”

Majid stumbled back towards Munir’s apartment. En route he managed to overpower his trembling limbs,
hoping a slower pace would somehow draw out a concerned neighbor. He arrived back at the door. He turned around and looked out the doorway. No shutter opened. No door cracked.

“What else? What else?” He tried again to assess the situation. He stared at the manuscript in his hands. “Just you and me, my friend.”

He grabbed the spare set of keys out of Munir’s desk drawer and headed out. He tried locking the door behind him, but the doorknob wasn’t functioning; it barely held on by a screw. In fact, the entire doorjamb was shattered. How did I miss this on the way in? he wondered.

“What would Munir do? What would he do in my shoes? Think! Think!”

He wandered and berated himself. He berated himself and wandered.

“I should have stayed put! Why’d I have to leave early? Why couldn’t I be a supportive friend for once?!”

*Bubo ascalaphus* answered him from a distance. “Stay positive, stay positive,” he counseled.

“What would Munir do?” *Music*, the first answer to pop into Majid’s mind.

*Music.*

“OK,” Majid replied, totally lost, as images of the bloodshot floor surfed across his memory.

Majid tried to sing as he walked. He muttered various combinations of “lookin’ through the paper though he doesn’t know to read” and “prayin’ now to something that has never shown him anything” over and over. His distraught mind remained unable to straighten out and unthread an entire song.

Already a kilometer from Munir’s home, he couldn’t force himself to walk any farther. He sat down on the curb, the city flitting around him, his personal grief a drop in the bucket.

“... on a pillow made of concrete,” he sang, softer and softer, slower and slower until he broke down.

“Focus!” he yelled at himself through the army of tears. Passers by paid no attention to him. Just another shell shocked citizen? Another refugee from Empire’s
wars? It didn’t matter. They were dealing with their own problems. Majid dimly recognized an ancillary benefit of U.S. wars: shredding the communal fabric of the Iraqi people.

“Focus!” he repeated, trying to figure out his next step.

“I can’t go to the police. They’re corrupt and they answer to the Occupation.”

“What about Seneen? No. What time is it?”

Salat al-Zuhr responded.

“Yeah, she’ll be in bed by now.”

“What would Munir do? FUCK! Where is he?!”

He bounced up. “He sure as hell wouldn’t be sitting on his ass.”

He walked some more, often stopping to catch his breath, rests mere minutes apart. From his current roadside perch, Majid peered west across the Dijla at the U.S. fortress, a citadel, a confluence of the power of modern ignorance and capitalist profiteering. He wondered what the insides looked like. *I rarely even went inside the Green Zone during my interpreter days. I bet non-stop construction has made it look completely different.*

Hunter green bubbles lapped at the nearest bank. Majid stared. He wondered if those colors were natural or the result of some pollution. *Damn! That’s a fish!* Sure enough, the remains of a dark fish bristled through the foam. She had asphyxiated yesterday afternoon. An unnatural contaminant had caused her gill filaments to cling together.

Majid frowned, briefly wishing an asteroid would land on the Cristal Grand’s ostentatious swimming pool and take out the whole damn planet. He would even settle for another *Jabal Wa’af As-Sawwan.* Mother Nature would recover well in due time. Humans? Majid wanted humans gone.

“The hospitals!” Majid screamed, jumping and running to use the phone at the nearest store. The manuscript clung tightly to his ribcage.
Chapter Six

Early for his meeting, Ignacio sat in the back of the conference room as the current occupants finished their presentation.

“... and that is precisely why each of you should study the Son Tay prison raid,” the portly speaker admonished his sparse crowd.

Ignacio scanned the audience. Bureaucrats, private military contractors, and some other governmental agencies, he appraised. He recognized a few faces, passersby in the daily grind. A hand rose slowly, marking the beginning of the question and answer portion of the talk.

"How do we defend against the enemy's psychological operations? What should we keep in mind?" one attendee inquired.

"To be honest, we must remain vigilant. Be alert and keep lines of communication open in your respective chains of command. We have plenty of weaknesses the enemy can exploit, domestic racial issues, for one," the speaker noted, pointing to an enlarged card on the corkboard behind him. "Only when we have no weaknesses, and that is a long ways away, can we be immune to psychological operations."

Ignacio squinted, but couldn't read the corkboard from where he sat.

To kill time, Ignacio took out his pocket notebook and ticked off some boxes on his to-do list. He yawned, shook his head, and crossed out all the remaining boxes. He let his pen scribble wildly. Today, he resolved, would demand new responsibilities. A cold thrill floated up through his soles, giving him the distinct feeling that he had just shed a seventy-pound rucksack.

“Better than adrenaline,” he said through his smile.

The meeting wrapped up and the attendees slowly dispersed. Only Ignacio and an AV technician stayed behind. The silence allowed verboten thoughts to scheme, blend, and progress well. He stood up to keep
the blood flowing. He walked toward the dais. *Is this what you're fighting for?* the enlarged card read. Dead African-American males killed by U.S. police officers were pasted digitally beneath the white lettering.

“*Bint zakiya,*” Ignacio whispered to himself, quoting his all-time favorite movie line.

Ignacio leaned against the wall for support while he stretched his quads. The AV tech nodded at him, as if to say ‘I approve of your stretching.’ Ignacio laughed at the situation, released his taut leg, flicked a ball of dust off the main podium, and walked back to his seat. The AV tech removed the enlarged card and the corkboard.

Ignacio sat back down and pulled out an Arabic crossword puzzle to keep his mind busy while he waited for the next meeting to start. On some level, Ignacio feared an idle mind. He didn’t work just for the sake of working, but he did believe in the value of what he deemed to be progress. *Two words ... starts with fa’ ... the clue is ‘how to get your way’.*

Ignacio looked up from his crossword and saw a couple new technicians setting up teleconference equipment and speakers. A lone third country national bobbed quickly about the room, emptying trashcans and aligning chairs.

*How to get your way? I have no idea. Moving on... The next clue is ‘how think tanks get the job done.’ Hmmm. The clue’s answer is two words, twelve letters total... What the? These are hard!*

Ignacio stared at the wall and thought about his garden back home. Ignacio hated humanity’s pathogenic behavior: draining natural resources recklessly, multiplying blindly, and polluting like extremists. His garden provided him with mental relief and a steady source of food. Gardening also allowed him to feel productive and kind amid humanity’s madness.

Ignacio had learned most of his gardening basics from a South African Police Service retiree who lived down the road. The old captain, who had spent most of his career as a non-commissioned officer in the SAPS Special Task Force, was a wealth of information.
Observe the sun. Know its path. Plant accordingly. Prep soil before you plant. Take the time to make sure soil is healthy. Research when to start your seeds and when to put your seedlings in the ground. Don’t go too big when you start. Expand a little more each year. Master the three champs: corn, beans, and squash.

The captain and Ignacio always shared a few pints of cask ale whenever Ignacio returned home. It was their simple tradition, a great way to unwind. The captain owned a humble setup of casks and handpumps in his basement. Sometimes he threw a curve ball by offering Ignacio *le vin du diable*, which Ignacio sipped eagerly. “A crusty crab’s pop rocks,” Ignacio always jested.

Ignacio always paid close attention whenever the captain began to rumble. Ignacio could tell the captain was restless. But the captain never spoke of his days in South Africa. His Gold Cross for Bravery remained tucked away.

Knowledge and advice flowed back and forth between them. Ignacio taught the captain how to make a cheap outdoor shower using a repurposed watering can and window frames salvaged from the local landfill. The captain also learned that icicle radishes make an excellent companion plant for most winter squash, and pine chips or sawdust work better than wood ashes in makeshift compost toilets. Ignacio learned ladybugs eat aphids, a piece of knowledge that saved him much time and effort in the garden.

Upon arrival in Baghdad, Ignacio had written the captain. The brief missive asked the captain to prepare the groundwork for an open course the two would hold for neighborhood residents. It would cover rainwater collection, greywater distribution, compost fundamentals, and how to build simple compost toilets. Ignacio came up with the idea during the flight from southwest Germany to Baghdad. He knew the captain’s mind would chew on the idea for a few weeks and spit out a no-bullshit, comprehensive plan to engage the community. Ignacio now took the time to write the
captain another letter. *Short and sweet, it'll get mailed later today.*

Images of springtime in the garden jumped and jived in Ignacio’s head. Warm sun, chill wind, daring sprouts, and eager birds encourage Earth to yawn and stretch. Fitful showers dash across curious cotyledon. Faithful conifers crack and breathe sunwards. Briers thicken, astonishing Ignacio with their tenacity. Steadfast bees paint the garden red, fighting an upward battle against nearby corporate pesticides. They revel their role as pollinators in chief.

*THAT’S IT! How think tanks get the job done! The answer is ‘cross-pollination of ideas,’ talaaquh al-afkaar.*

“Three hospitals, two clinics, no Munir,” Majid whispered dejectedly. “Alright, alright,” he told himself, dragging his feet towards the police station. “It’s worth a shot.”

He had expected to see an unruly glob of citizens, but fatigue and heavy surveillance seemed to be keeping the queue in order.

The line slugged along. It moved a meter in two hours. Majid and the other Iraqi citizens standing outside baked in the afternoon sun.

“Merciless,” the woman behind him whispered through a loose *niqab.*

Majid couldn’t tell if she was referring to the stifling heat or the stifling bureaucracy. *Both, probably,* he guessed.

Two Iraqi Army majors walked to the front of the line, flashed some sort of identification to the first lieutenant and his sergeant, and entered the building.

Majid raised his hand to block out the sun and estimate the time of day. *How long since I got in this damn line?*

“Don’t they have any pity? the women behind him asked. “Where’s the water?”

The line stayed firm.

The man in front of Majid leaned on his crutch and pivoted around to face Majid. “There are two more lines once you get inside,” he told the group. “I was here
yesterday to file a complaint against the Occupation. They gave me some damn paperwork and sent me on my way. Told me to come back today.”

“You’ve got the paperwork?”

“Right here,” the man said, tapping his breast pocket. “We won’t be seen until tonight. Even if we make it past the next two lines, they just shove us in a row of benches.”

Majid nodded.

“Will you hold my spot in line?” the man with the crutch asked.

Majid nodded again. The man hobbled off.

“Want anything?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Water?”

Majid said, “No, thank you.”

“I’ll bring some water!” he yelled.

“It never ends, huh?” the woman said.

“The Occupation or the—”. Majid stopped, trying not to blame everything on the foreign army.

She didn’t answer.

The line moved, centimeter by centimeter.

An hour saw them reach the inside. ‘Inside’ turned out to be a tent adjacent to the police station. Cherub-faced police officers patted them down twice and forced them through two different rows of metal detectors. MADE IN FRANCE, Majid read as he passed through the second machine.

Another hour saw them reach the elusive first row of benches actually located inside the police station.

Majid looked up to see a U.S. Army major walk past, O+ displayed prominently on the man’s chest. The major walked into the farthest office and embraced the on-duty police chief – a colonel, as far as Majid could tell. Majid had first seen these ranks during his time abroad. His high school in Montana had a heavy military presence, recruiters and junior ROTC. Is that what they called it?

“What are they discussing?” Majid whispered to himself. “He doesn’t speak Arabic, I bet. So that means the House Arab must be speaking English.” Majid melted into the seat. “What would it take for this entire police
station to rise up? What would it take for these asshole bureaucrats to actually resist against the real bad guys?”

Majid looked up. Two U.S. Marine captains strolled by, legs clunking with gas masks. *Unnecessary gear on an unnecessary invasion,* Majid determined. *Why are they still carrying around gas masks?*

One of the Marine captains left a stamped piece of paper on an Iraqi captain’s desk and walked briskly but arrogantly out of the station.

The man on the crutch hadn’t returned by the time an Iraqi captain attended to Majid’s inquiry. The captain waved Majid into his office. Majid bounded to the door, forgetting, or perhaps unable, to compose himself before entering.

*Futile,* the first word to enter Majid’s mind as he exited the captain’s office fifteen minutes later with a stack of forms and a verbal promise for a formal police investigation as early as next week.

“What made me think my case was unique?”

Majid wondered aloud, tapping the stack of forms in his left hand against the manuscript in his right hand. *I shouldn’t have raised my voice,* he scolded.

Times were simpler prior to the post-9.11 corporate power grab. Back then, maybe one in twenty employees was a contractor. These days... God damn! *The corporate boardrooms dictate policy, moving funding toward big-ticket purchases. Meanwhile, fucking hell, the Agency is nothing but a rise-averse, stifling bureaucracy,* Andrea admitted to herself.

She thought about the files she had in her possession, not the ones in her hands. *Then again,* she considered, *this bureaucracy can be set along dangerous paths. I must make a few alliances if I’m going to make it out of here.*

Andrea entered her boss Charles’ office carrying a stack of brown and red files. The navy blue carpet felt surprisingly soft under her boots. Her morning deliberations had invigorated her, flicking away the bureaucracy like a protective older sister. She was
content. The overhead lights were off, but the banks of computer monitors cast a belligerent radiance throughout the office. One desk lamp struggled to remain relevant with its meager glow.

Charles – potbelly honed from years floating in the CIA bureaucracy, bald except for a few static tufts shooting upwards from just above his ears – was leaning lightly on the balls of his feet, an aggressive pose. He habitually adopted this stance whenever reading the hive of daily intelligence reports that crossed JWICS and NSANET.

“God damn shit! These reports don’t stop, do they?” Charles asked rhetorically.

“What’s that?” Andrea asked softly, slyly playing the role expected of her.

“Nothing but unoriginal horseshit!” Charles yelled, taking a swipe at his desk and sending a mug of pens flying across the room.

“What?” Andrea asked again.

“These intel reports from ODNI. Fucking awful. Most are just rehashed old news,” Charles complained. “Sometimes – if you’re lucky enough – you get an analyst who at least triiiiies to present rusty observations in new terminology.”

“Still—”, Andrea began.

“Yeah, still...” Charles agreed.

Andrea often read the product coming from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. She couldn’t help but agree with Charles’ assessment. She knew her boss often fantasized about firing the swamp of worthless analysts employed within the so-called Intelligence Community.

“Andrea!” Charles brightened. “Remember when I told you about the time we introduced Old World Screw-worm to Iraqi cattle?”

“Yes, sir,” Andrea replied, bracing for her boss’ nostalgia. “What about it?” Andrea still called her superiors ‘sir,’ a vestige of old habits pounded into her while growing up in a military family.

“Would that shit fly today?”
“Not a chance,” Andrea answered. “For starters, it wouldn’t make it past the requisite three or four layers of Langley management. And if it ever got approved, they’d water it down. It wouldn’t even resemble your initial proposal.”

“Atta boy,” Andrea’s boss beamed, appreciating the validation.

Andrea looked at her boss as he returned his attention to the flood of unoriginality. *He looks like he’s in his mid-fifties, but I know he’s only forty-two.* “Did the JSOC aide get back to you yet?” Andrea inquired.

The boss just shook his head, eyes glued to the far left monitor on his desktop, mind berthed. “I need you tomorrow, oh nine hundred. Need your knowledge about unmanned aerial systems.”

“Understood,” Andrea replied. She waited, thinking Charles was going to say more, but his eyes remained stuck to the far left monitor.

Andrea waited some more. She seized the welcomed pause, putting down her stack of files and starting to arrange them alphabetically according to a new arbitrary criterion issued by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Old allegiances inside her complained. *This shit is fucking everything up. Why don’t the bureaucrats just leave good-enough alone? Negroponte and McConnell are just adding to an already unbearable officialdom.*

Andrea’s father had put in twenty-two years with the 57 WG in the U.S. Air Force, so Andrea hadn’t thought twice about applying to the Air Force Academy. *I don’t regret those four years in Colorado Springs. I learned a lot about my limits and the meaning of true integrity.* Andrea had spent much of her twenties and early thirties as a C-130 pilot for the U.S. Air Force. During those twelve years, the only time she ever felt at peace was on the tarmac and in the air. Oddly, the pre-flight checklist and takeoff were her favorite moments; she had a whole flight in front of her, free from the squadron’s bullshit: insipid computer based training; too many medals for too little work; conformist leadership; ignorant changes in policy; performance reports that promoted everyone,
dirtbag officers and lazy enlisted included; endless paperwork; and ceaseless, pointless building construction across the Wing.

Friends from her Academy class all reported similar frustrations. She recalled her Academy buddy who had shared his epiphany in a group email this morning.

Screw this. I should follow our dreams. The Air Force will only stifle me. I know some of you have kids now. If any of them aspire to sit in a fucking cubicle, wander the base completing meaningless tasks, or surf the Internet for hours on end, tell them to sign up. This system sucks. It’s beyond repair. I’m getting out this year. And no, I’m not being too harsh.

Reality, Andrea had learned quickly after her training was over, was far from whatever motto and imagery the U.S. Air Force was pushing in slick television commercials. While her colleagues dicked around most days in the squadron, Andrea had spent her free moments learning Arabic. The first four months were the hardest part, as her brain grappled with the alphabet (new letters, pronunciation, and writing direction). Andrea persevered, mastered the script, learned how to pronounce even the hardest letters, and began to gulp down vocabulary. She would spend the mornings with flashcards and the afternoons tackling poetry, mostly Darwish. She rewarded herself with the songs of Julia Boutros as she got ready for bed at night.

She knew it was time to get out of the military when the impulsive swipe of Brigadier General’s pen converted the entire squadron to unmanned aircraft support. Drones. The squadron’s commanding officer, a Lieutenant Colonel named Behrens, didn’t even try to object. It would have been career suicide. Andrea watched the squadron’s transition during her final months in uniform. Thank the universe I was able to avoid most of that douchery in order to out-process from the military.

One day, Andrea had to enter the squadron during lunchtime to pick up some personal effects. The
squadron’s executive officer cornered her in the hallway to give her the news: She, Andrea, was getting chopped to Creech Air Force Base for a couple weeks. The XO told her to report back regarding how the 15 Reconnaissance Squadron administered their daily operations and liaised with Air Combat Command headquarters. Andrea seized the opportunity to write a candid report for the XO.

The XO had called ahead. Andrea was greeted with all smiles at Creech, which was located northwest of Las Vegas, Nevada. Tech Sergeant Miller gave her the necessary goodies: a badge, paperwork, a base map, and an extra reflective belt. Staff Sergeant Morgan escorted her around during the first day. Both non-commissioned officers were friendly and open. Andrea was granted twenty-four seven access to all ground control stations, which were housed in trailers on a relatively quiet part of the base. In no time, Andrea settled into a nice routine that took full advantage of her mandate.

Creech Air Force Base immediately struck Andrea as odd. Nobody lived on base, as far as Andrea could tell. Her cursory estimates tallied thousands of military personnel commuting on and off base every single day. Most people complained about traffic jams at the gates during peak hours. Andrea complained about the pollution and waste. This thought, her first revolutionary idea, had felt really, really good.

Pilots, sensor operators, and mission coordinators assembled inside the ground control stations. Cushy chairs observed live MQ-1 and MQ-9 feeds toggling across nine flat screens. “It sounds like that scene in Chris Nolan’s second installment,” a friend would tell her much later. Not quite, but you’re a hell of a cinephile. Andrea also observed secure comms, relayed through Ramstein Air Base, among units at Hancock Field, Creech, Umm al-Melh, and Chabelley. Creech’s ground control stations didn’t handle any CIA operations, but were still able to view some of the Agency’s live feeds. During her brief stay, Andrea’s eyes visited Somalia, Niger, Afghanistan, Colombia, the Syrian coast, Honduras, Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq, Mexico, and the
Philippines, all from the comfort of an air-conditioned trailer.

After three days of observation, Andrea decided to dedicate a section of her report to the casual language used inside the trailers. Strikes that actually killed their intended targets were commonly called ‘jackpots.’ Andrea even heard one called a ‘jam session.’ People killed inadvertently or carelessly were deemed ‘enemies killed in action,’ even when the airmen in the trailer could not determine the dead person’s identity. Andrea noticed that most deaths were chalked up to EKIA. She only witnessed two jackpots during her entire time at Creech.

After just a week on base, Andrea had most of the nomenclature mastered. Airmen called children ‘happy meal howdies,’ ‘critters,’ and ‘bite-sized terror,’ when observed from 14,410 meters. The airmen called track/kill missions ‘pulling weeds’ and ‘cutting the grass.’ As she left a trailer one night at 0130, a chill Nevada breeze knocked into her: *Israel used ‘mowing the lawn’ whenever bombing the shit out of Palestinian population centers.* Same terms, different location. This thought, her second exceptional idea, revived her spirit in odd ways that she was still coming to grips with.

Andrea began to think of the ground control stations as asylums. Their bizarre, insular character seemed to Andrea like an entirely different planet. Meeting Chaplain Oates was the straw that broke the conformist’s back. Chaplain Oates was an Air Force Lieutenant Colonel who held a top-secret security clearance in order to counsel drone pilots and sensor operators about their mental anguish, stress, and fear. Most airmen who Oates talked to were quite frazzled; they were overworked and unconsciously employing a range of harmful coping mechanisms. Chaplain Oates would listen to their grievances, wrap their emotional bruises in Old Glory, and cajole them back into the trailer. *Talk about religious extremism,* Andrea thought. (She toned down those words in her final report, but was still able to convey her severe consternation in military jargon.)
Andrea met three enlisted members, all E-5, who were separating from the military in less than a month’s time. They filed in and out of the trailers randomly during their out-processing. She quoted them anonymously in her report. Two of them confided in Andrea that they already had contractor jobs lined up. Their future employment? The same job they were currently performing, just in more comfortable clothing and earning thrice as much. The third enlisted member, a sensor operator, was in talks with two big-name war corporations. They wanted him to help upgrade the user interface that helped sensor operators guide AGM-114 on target.

She returned to her primary duty station after thirteen days at Creech. The squadron’s Executive Officer made Andrea wait outside the commander’s office for an hour and forty minutes while the upper brass reviewed her report. They strongly disapproved of Andrea’s characterization of drone strikes as “based on shoddy or non-existent Human Intelligence” and “overly reliant on a deluge of Signals Intelligence.” The upper brass never even commented on Andrea’s statistics, which indicated most drone strikes were killing a large number of innocent people. Consecutive U.S. presidents – steadily lied to by officials at CIA and DOD and uninterested in the technological details of drone operations – had affirmed, “We act against terrorists who pose a continuing and imminent threat to the American people.” Andrea’s report was stuffed into a burn bag. Her government-issue laptop was confiscated. Andrea spent her final three days as a member of the United States Air Force in ‘administrative quarantine,’ as the Executive Officer had called it.

Andrea was at peace with how Air Force leadership had treated her. She was happy to move on to pursue a new career. After separating from the U.S. Air Force, Andrea took an internship in D.C. and lived on a friend’s couch for seven months until she parlayed her wisdom and language skills into an entry-level position at CIA. The Agency’s bureaucracy wasn’t much better, but the freedom to at least think independently had initially
been a cool breeze. Now she realized her next step would require true independence.

“Don’t get me started on the fucking NCTC!” Charles fumed as he pounded the desk with his fist. The tufts of hair above his ears danced *raqs sharqi.*

The bank of computer monitors shook in reply. “This is my last assignment, I swear. My last,” he vowed.

Andrea smiled, placing the final folder in its proper pile.

*Is he dead? What does that mean? If he’s dead, where did he go? If he’s alive, where did he go? Recognizing a looming downswing in his mood, Majid walked faster, hoping to stay engaged and alert. He walked to ward off the imminent depression, adopting different walks – sometimes sulking, sometimes almost jogging – around and around Firdaws Square. The mosque counseled, the cars screeched, the peddler yelled, all just enough to keep him alive and engaged. Death’s awareness lurked.*

*Happy force? Circle of life? Sad force? What’s the fucking point? Do I swear too much? Am I offending people? What is offense? Racist words aside, how does a word become offensive? How does it stop being offensive? I can easily offend people without swearing, so what’s the big deal? If I know it will offend and do it anyway because I don’t care, am I disrespectful? If I can let a swear word fly, and that helps me deal with some pain, then I’m fine with it. Fuck ‘em. Fuck them all. Gimme my emotional release. Gimme my catharsis.*

He looked up and nodded to the *masjid.* He looked back down in time to step over a string of colorful pennants, remnants of a bygone festivity, happy to no longer be part of freedom’s flap.

*So is awareness of death an individual Armageddon or something to embrace? If he’s dying, he should be at home in his bed. Not in… wherever he is. Majid thought of Munir dozing in bed, living with a terminal illness, Bob Marley and Beshar Al-Azzawi playing in the background. Maybe his death was quicker. Maybe a bullet*
– even from the Occupation – is preferable. No! Think positive! He’s still alive! I will find him, and he and I will suffer together!

He looked up. The masjid nodded at him. He replied in kind. Without looking down, Majid stepped around a coil of concertina wire. Normally used to divide neighborhoods and city blocks, this errant concertina wire stuck out like a discarded slinky.

Even before this Occupation, how much of the buildings and architecture in my city, beautiful Baghdad, was dedicated to death or dying? Cemetery, mighsalchi, ... what am I missing? Now that we’re occupied again, the whole cityscape, whatever was death-free, is now drowning in death. Thanks. Who the hell am I thanking? The U.S. taxpayer?

The masjid tapped him on the shoulder. He took a right turn and headed off to points uncharted. Baghdad wasn’t exactly a walking city, but Majid always made it work.

Soul? Physical resurrection? Damnit! I hope he didn’t suffer. No. What’s the damn point? What is it?! What’s his legacy? He’s just another drop of blood? Just another bug smashed under Empire’s boot? What’s his legacy? No tribe, no family, no children.

Majid looked down. His right hand dripped blood at a steady pace. Munir’s manuscript basked in the warmth radiating from the pavement, not a page disturbed. A lone drop of blood blotted outward on the cover in a slow heave.

“Oh, God! I’m so sorry!” Majid sobbed, dropping to his knees once more, appalled at his accidental desecration of Munir’s sanctified tidings.

Two thousand one hundred meters above sea level, tucked snugly among Golan Heights crags, Israeli military Signals Intelligence teams batted around predictions regarding when the next major Israeli incursion into Lebanon would take place. Weathered First Brigade military police and paratroopers stood watch throughout the facility.
Refrains of “this year, definitely,” “springtime,” and “no, no, next year” rang off the computer racks. The debate steered clear of the elephant in the room: how badly Israeli infantry had been crushed during Israel’s most recent invasion of Southern Lebanon. Zionist pride was deeply bruised. At a time of her choosing, Israel would again seize any pretext in order to pummel all of Lebanon because of a few groups’ will to resist. Collective punishment for selective resistance.

Having already worked side by side for over two months, two of the discussion’s participants needed no reminder when it came time to hop up for their routine hors d’oeuvres, which they called their late afternoon smoke-break.

A final piece of the conversation hit the smokers’ ears as they exit the facility: “No matter what, if rockets are fired from a village, the source will be obliterated.”

“He means the village and its residents will be obliterated,” the male colleague corrected nonchalantly while holding the door for the female colleague. She ignored him. He just gets worked up every time cattle herders over the fence seem busier than usual.

Mount Hermon’s chill nipped at them as they exited the facility, pricking his exposed nostrils and ticking her bare throat. They rounded the bend and ducked into their favorite alcove, three walls which offered some protection from the nosy wind. He leaned against one wall and peered southeast to admire the construction equipment and the border fence upgrades. According to the morning bulletin, Pure Sight, a new remote monitoring product from the U.S. war industry, would be installed along that section tomorrow.

As he took his first drag on the day’s Noblesse, the Prime Minister’s voice came to mind. “In our neighborhood, we have to protect ourselves from wild beasts.” Even over the MP’s radio, the Prime Minister had seemed flummoxed and disorganized. His voice was distant and his timbre tense from juggling dozens of personal and professional challenges. The male SIGINTer pictured the Prime Minister’s sooty conscience racing: I hope that AIPAC account has turned off its tweet location,
because last night through the yelling I saw they were tweeting from Tel Aviv... My wife must get her temper under control! Hush money will only last so long. For god’s sake, she bloodied two housemaids! That reminds me, I must deposit that check in her personal account on my way back from lunch... I need to set aside some time to visit my brother’s grave. I know he’d be proud of me as I fulfill our pact to dominate Judea and Samaria.

“I don’t like it,” the young woman remarked, huddling up to her Styrofoam coffee cup.

“What’s not to like?” her mustachioed colleague countered quickly.

“For starters, we’re moving too fast, no?” she asked.

“Oh.” He realized she was referring to their big operation in Iraq and the States. “We aren’t moving too fast,” mustache corrected as he tried to count how many Nahal soldiers were jogging distant hills, the latest move in an endless dance. The Israeli army had shifted training away from exposed hillsides to incorporate ravines, rockey groves, and even verdant orchards, implementing a lesson learned from the recent invasion of Southern Lebanon. Observers over the border waited, noted the change, and planned accordingly by redirecting flanks and reposturing materiel. U.S. contractors in the distant Troodos Mountains watched the dance unfold.

“Fair enough. Why is our government moving so fast?” she conceded, knowing she could win the semantic argument if she cared. “Plans like this, they just – they should be implemented slower.”

A pause floated pleasantly on the day’s chill.

“I guess,” mustache said, popping the pause, “it is politics.... Look, the Institute’s got the lead on this. We’re only playing a support role, if that puts you at ease a bit.”

“No, but we’re sure as hell...” She trailed off, not sure if her portion of the compartmentalized operation was relevant to the conversation.

“You keep saying we,” mustache reminded.

“You know what I mean,” she said, holding back any sign of exasperation. “I don’t know. I just think we
should slow down. What’s another week or month of planning?”

“Just make sure you’re ready. Our sayanim in Western outlets will need detailed support.”

“The civilian casualties will be enormous.”

“They can handle it,” mustache condoned.
She shot mustache a quizzical look.
“They’re professionals,” mustache encouraged.

“Plus, the Institute’s officers have done this kind of thing before,” he added in a wheezy whisper. “I’m sure they’ve planned thoroughly.”

“You don’t love this job?” she asked, her conscience eager now to change the subject.

“Our job? Of course I love it. It’s mentally challenging, at least for me. And it’s super cushy,” he replied.

Wind dove briefly into their nook, daring them to retreat indoors.

“Plus, it’s a good career opportunity,” the mustachioed professional proclaimed. “Brand Israel has done a good job marketing our skills internationally. Tech companies are salivating to get any one of us on their team.”

She knew loyalty to her unit was for life. She knew foreign corporations were increasingly hiring veterans of the unit who would then use their positions to enhance Israeli intelligence objectives internationally. She ignored these nagging politics and sped back into talking shop. “The skiing is great,” she offered up to silence.

Her words were not just small talk. She did enjoy most aspects of the job. She was challenged every day, particularly with her present tasking regarding the Americans in Iraq. She got to work alongside analysts, linguists, and translators, having recently liaised with dispersed signals intelligence departments that targeted the so-called Palestinian territories. Her days had proceeded rather slowly, comparing and collating information to look for tenuous links between Lebanese resistance fighters and West Bank adolescents. Once in a while, new tasking would come her way, like translating
Palestinian Authority emails or crafting ominous text messages to send to families in the Gaza Strip. At least that work involved more active use of language skills.

Her parent agency, known informally as Unit 8200, blanketed Palestinian society. The unit’s reach was pervasive. Its mandate involved complete collection of Palestinian communications, including text messages, private social media messages, email, and phone calls. Israeli control over Palestinians’ electronic communications was total. The German Staatssicherheitsdienst would have been in awe of such complete power. Common nuggets Unit 8200 hunted for included news about financial difficulties, marital problems, recreational drug use, and family illness. Every bit of information was stored and catalogued for easy reference. Information was then used to sow strife, blackmail, extract confession, and maintain collaboration. No distinction was made among the population. A bored store clerk sexting her husband and an armed fighter plotting to ambush an Israeli colonist were scooped up with the same cavalier antipathy. Only the priority assigned by the attending SIGINTer differed.

“I mean, they should’ve started soon,” she heard the mustache say. “Though I’m not saying any more outside of the building.” He shrugged his shoulders.

Creative Unit 8200 personnel had been given the green light to remotely activate laptop cameras and cellphone mouthpieces in order to collect incriminating information. Priority went to nude photographs, bedroom scenes, and explicit sexual discussion. One notorious rav samal kept a basic spreadsheet of his favorite Palestinian ‘dirty talk’ phrases. He ranked them based on creativity and hilarity. At the end of every month, the rav samal shared the latest additions with his immediate peers. One day his unit commander found out about the spreadsheet. Instead of reprimanding the rav samal, the unit commander made the man’s workstation a mandatory stop whenever he gave tours to visiting generals and dignitaries. Everyone got a good laugh at the ‘dirty talk desk’.
“The situation is fucked. We’re the only sane players around,” mustache affirmed.

While he rambled on, she wondered about her brother. They hadn’t talked in a week. How was his on-the-job training progressing? Was he adjusting well to the tunnels? Would his unit commander approve her pending visit to his base? Her brother was an infantry commander, now in charge of a new initiative developing realistic underground tunnel training. Divided into seven evolutions, the tunnel training knocked even the best infantryperson’s dick in the dirt. Located off Highway 44 southeast of Ramla, the discrete, underground complex mimicked the trying conditions Israeli infantry might encounter along the Gaza border. Israel had strangled Gaza over the land, across the sea, and through the air, turning Gaza into a hermetically sealed ghetto. With generous U.S. funding, Israel had ramped up ‘anti-tunnel’ infantry tactics and electronic detection/destruction technology, both of which were aimed at snuffing out Gaza’s last lifeline. Individuals from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency’s Special Operations Division and U.S. Special Operations Command trained at her brother’s facility as well, which was another solid marketing opportunity for Israeli intergovernmental public relations. The bonuses kept coming: the Institute had recorded video of two DEA special agents with prostitutes (on the Institute’s payroll) during the last U.S. rotation. Israel then marketed the proprietary tunnel technology to the U.S. for use on the Mexico border.

She heard “… the PA is very helpful, in fact. They keep a lid on Palestine aspirations and give us time to dig in with settlements…” while thinking of her brother’s ability to put on the tough-guy demeanor among his peers but remain a total family-man when at home. I wonder what that’s like.

“So?” mustache asked. “What do you think?”

“You make a good point,” she replied quickly, not wanting to let on that she had been spacing out.

Mustache was truly a great coworker, but even the best people could get on her nerves. The facility was top notch, but close confines weighed on her. Almost all
of her day was spent inside the mountain. Chow hall to lounge, lounge to duty station, duty station to gym, gym to lounge, lounge to duty station, duty station to smoke break, smoke break to duty station, duty station to sleeping quarters. And repeat.

Mustache continued, unfazed, “All I know is that the longer Iraq burns, the greater chances it breaks apart. And that’s good enough for me.”

Fighter jets shredded blue skies and drowned out Mustache’s last words, heading north over Sheba’a to Baalbek. Neither she nor Mustache looked up. The Israeli pilots, who had honed their skills at Nellis Air Force Base in southern Nevada, were en route to conduct a mock raid against resistance positions in eastern Lebanon. Israel was testing responses, trying to see what air-defense systems the enemy possessed, but this enemy didn’t bite. Wisely, they didn’t turn on their equipment, which would have revealed their hand.

She turned to head back inside, punching the access code with stiff fingers. Mustache followed, still talking. Her first attempt punching buttons was declined, so she had to try again. She looked sideways at him. *I can’t believe how pencil-thin it is,* she thought about his mustache. Her cold hand overshot the control panel. The deliberate effort she put into correcting the miss alerted mustache to her otherwise solid sideways sneak. She tried to cover that funk by staring blankly at the stout steel doors. *The grooves look fake,* she mused. Her colleague didn’t think twice. He naturally ignored her spaceout, swiped his own badge, typed his own code, and opened the door. She nodded and rumbled ahead.

In one gust, she sat down, spun in her desk chair, snagged her cold headphones, and nudged the computer mouse to access the login screen. The screensaver (a picture of her favorite basketball team, Maccabi Haifa, playing an exhibition match against the Los Angeles Lakers) dissolved into stony blue desktop wallpaper. She spent several minutes warming her fingers, then minimizing tabs and clearing a lot of file clutter. *A clean barracks is a lethal barracks,* one of many proverbs from basic training, frizzed in her mind like an F-4 Phantom
vacuum tube. She double-clicked her next assignment. Three minutes later, Bennett felt the Morse code pulse against his inner left calf muscle. He winked at the Great Seal of the United States on the mousepad beside his right wrist. For a few seconds, he tapped along with the Morse code, his middle finger striking the blue top of the eagle’s shield. He stood up from behind the desk, grinning as the go-ahead orders came through.

A paltry gathering began to assemble, turning the main conference room into a makeshift pressroom. Ignacio was confused. *Isn’t this where our meeting is supposed to be?*

A Lieutenant in starched camouflage stepped up to the podium. “The oh-nine-hundred meeting scheduled for this room has been moved to the first floor auditorium. I repeat the oh-nine-hundred meeting has been moved to the auditorium on the first floor.” He stepped away from the podium and darted into the hallway.

“Classic,” Ignacio muttered, deciding to stay put and hear the latest news reports. He looked around at the corporate and government news crews as they filed in noisily. He smiled. Nobody had asked for his documentation or credentials. Once inside the Embassy compound, he was in. People assumed he belonged there. Sure, the badges dangling around his neck helped, but employees were generally too busy to question.

Lieutenant Colonel Jack Metzger, rocking a fresh high-and-tight haircut, looked even more stern than usual as he entered the conference room with his assistant. One of the U.S. military’s most practiced spokespeople, he walked immediately to the raised platform at the front of the room and positioned himself behind the podium. He shuffled up some files, and began fiddling with the array of pens in front of him as the overhead lights shined a grid of white squares across his bulbous pasty head. His tall frame and broad shoulders blotted out the *Multi-National Force – Iraq* seal on the felt façade behind him.
Suddenly self-aware, he shifted on the balls of his feet to directly face the camera, which relayed his image back to a larger press corps waiting along the Potomac. The Lieutenant Colonel deemed a quorum had been reached, so he motioned to an aide who promptly closed the conference room’s main door. A straggler then tapped on the glass and asked to be let in. The aide looked devastated, as if someone had smashed his prize vase – or, more appropriately, pissed on his autographed 1997 Vols jersey. The aide grudgingly opened the door to let the straggler inside.

Lieutenant Colonel Jack Metzger began, “Good morning, everybody. Welcome. I'll jump right in. It's great to see the Pentagon press corps today, as always. And before I get started, I have a quick announcement.” The Colonel wondered momentarily if his sham smile had fooled anyone. “Next week will be twenty-seven years since Saddam Hussein invaded Iran, starting the gruesome and tragic Iran-Iraq war. I ask us all to take a moment to reflect on Saddam’s brutal legacy. We join together, Iraqis alongside the international community, in pride at the burgeoning democracy that Iraq has become. The United States’ government commends the Iraqi people for their sacrifices. We are proud of your commitment to peace and democracy. We look forward to working together to ensure your great country remains free and sovereign. We commend the Iraqi army for its accomplishments thus far and we look ahead to future victories.”

Lieutenant Colonel Metzger was relishing the days. Prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Metzger had been a ‘career Captain,’ as he called it. He had sat at the O-3 pay grade for ten years. When asked by a random family member at Thanksgiving dinner or when teased by a colleague, Metzger used to explain his stalled career like so: being a public affairs officer in Europe during peacetime wasn’t exactly an advantageous career path. After spring of 2003, however, his career began to skyrocket. Other brass benefited as well. Promotion after promotion advanced him through the field grade officer
ranks rapidly. He expected to make full bird Colonel very shortly.

Nonetheless, his current status didn’t placate his need for approval. When possible, Metzger did what he could to make himself feel more important. In his private life and out of uniform, he answered questions vaguely, deliberately leading civilian friends to believe he dabbled in dangerous and thrilling activities. “My job is to play with the enemy’s head,” Metzger once told an inquisitive neighbor as they pruned the dense hedges along their property line.

Standing at the conference room podium and squinting into the camera, Metzger continued. “Quite a few battlefield updates for you before we move on to questions, so let me get through it. In Ramadi, U.S. forces and Iraqi counterterrorist forces continue clearing eastward into the city’s core. They’ve encountered the enemy… small arms fire and RPGs, mostly. There are unconfirmed reports of an RPG in this location.” Metzger’s aide gestured to a PowerPoint slide.

“It’s no secret that our enemy does not care for the safety and the lives of the Iraqi people. This past week, Iraqi security forces, with minor assistance from U.S. forces, have been clearing the city. Iraqi troops discovered civilians who were injured by Improvised Explosive Devices and civilians used as human shields.” Metzger winced internally, immediately regretting using the second example so early in his presentation. He considered his error the equivalent of throwing a challenge flag after a three-yard run, the first play of the game. His mentor, a civilian named Richelieu who studied under the Edwards (Bernays & Hunter), always told him to play the ‘human shields’ card wisely, to always hang onto it until he heeded an ace in the hole. Richelieu was a pioneer in the field, honing his skills as part of the Israeli military’s public relations team, the best in the business. The veracity of ‘human shields’ allegations doesn’t matter, Richelieu once counseled him, because it demonizes the enemy and is difficult to disprove. It was a gem.
“In sharp contrast to the insurgents, U.S. forces with Iraqi forces in the lead have helped hundreds of civilians – many of them children – find food, water, and medical attention,” Metzger affirmed, flicking a manila envelope on his desk.

“Moving on. In western Anbar, yesterday insurgents conducted a synchronized attack near Haditha. The attacks were limited in nature. It is important to note that the Iraqi army was able to regroup and counterattack with minor support from coalition airstrikes.” Lieutenant Colonel Metzger’s omissions were decisive. Ignacio watched attentively.

“I want to talk briefly about our airstrikes, which have increased in both intensity and pace. When conducted in conjunction with surgical ground operations, we see the enemy losing all across the battlefield. This, in turn, makes it easier for us to strike them.” The Colonel delivered those words as if he had disclosed a cache of truths, but his fancy statement did not convey any new information. Either he’s a damn good wordsmith or he’s forced to deliver a press conference with nothing to report, thought Ignacio. Or both.

“We estimate approximately 2,500 insurgents were killed in coalition airstrikes and ground operations across Iraq last month,” Metzger fibbed. “And finally, I want to update you on Operation Polar Weight, which, as you know, goes after high value targets within the insurgency. Yesterday, U.S. aircraft struck a high value target in a weapons depot in Fallujah.” Metzger paused, embracing the performance aspect of his craft.

“Since we initiated Polar Weight, the coalition has conducted over eighty strikes against the insurgency’s infrastructure. These strikes, in conjunction with our COIN strategy on the ground, are progressing nicely. According to our estimates, recent operations have reduced enemy IED-making capacity by about thirty five percent,” Metzger stated, unconsciously tapping his right foot at the conclusion of each sentence.

Ignacio contextualized what he was seeing. In theory, a firm line delineates the boundary between public affairs and psychological operations. PSYOPS,
mental warfare, uses propaganda to influence an enemy’s behavior and emotional state. PSYOPS is intended to target the enemy only, and, by definition, should never be used on the U.S. population. Public affairs, on the other hand, claims to give the public information. What the public does with this information is up to them. In other words, PSYOPS influences while public affairs informs. In reality, however, PSYOPS and public affairs share many of the same tactics, techniques, and procedures: vague statements, deceitful speeches, devious testimonials, and blatant and subtle omissions. Both PSYOPS and public affairs convey selected information with the intent to alter behavior. U.S. Congress passed the Smith-Mundt Act in 1948 to prevent the U.S. government from using propaganda techniques against the U.S. public. However, CIA’s domestic propaganda activities flourished non-stop since the 1940s, except for a brief three-month lull after the 1975 Church Committee hearings.

In Ignacio’s view, there was no difference between dropping leaflets on hostile populations with the intent of influencing their behavior, on the one hand, and installing compliant executives in major U.S. news bureaus with the aim of influencing domestic behavior and emotion, on the other hand. Carefully positioned Agency assets regularly placed stories, befriended and patronized journalists, and pressured editors and producers (or were the editors and producers) to follow the Agency’s edicts. That was just the tip of the iceberg. Additionally, CIA paid monthly stipends to over two hundred U.S. journalists, each of whom thought they were in an exclusive club.

One of CIA’s favorite locations to canvass for potential media recruits was the annual White House Correspondents’ Dinner, known as ‘nerd prom’ by attendees and sycophants alike. Agency veterans sat back and observed. Who was trying too hard? Who laughed on cue every time? Who moved seats to get closer to garrisons of power? Who hobnobbed deftly, knowing when to duck an incoming lummox and when to dive
towards the finer post-dinner parties sponsored by corporate media? These folks were the future.

The playing field already favored CIA before their officials even walked out of the Langley clubhouse. Media conglomerates, including the fact that six corporations owned ninety-three percent of U.S. media, obviated any need to recruit more journalists. Without any encouragement, corporate media, aiming for high ratings and succulent advertising revenue, self-censored and tapered the spectrum of acceptable foreign policy debate. Omissions were incredibly powerful; corporate media at most played the thirty-six dark, thin keys. When covering foreign policy, corporate media never blamed U.S. Empire for problems in the world. This, by definition, was political conditioning of the U.S. public. And this was the least of corporate media’s offenses.

The only CIA career field off-limits to private contractors, the Agency’s domestic propaganda unit was finely tuned and remarkably effective. Less than twenty career employees worked in the unit at any given time. Domestic propaganda once consumed over one-quarter of CIA’s budget, but innovation and efficiency (not to mention administrative turf battles) had reduced that number to one-eleventh. CIA directors were not briefed about its existence, which allowed the Agency to dodge stifling bureaucracy and jubilee congressional inquiry.

Ignacio knew a firm understanding of history was crucial to being an engaged citizen. In 1947, the vestiges of World War II disinformation structures were juiced up and placed under CIA’s aegis. Under the direction of CIA’s senior decision-makers, these programs stressed that current hostilities against the greatest evil (communism) would require efforts tantamount to, and eventually exceeding, WWII endeavors and achievements. The gloves were off. Or, rather, they were never worn in the first place. Similar mentality gripped CIA when fighting the new greatest evil (non-white, non-state political violence). CIA’s bread and butter – appeals to pride, fear, greed, and hate – kept most of the Agency’s operations running smoothly, including domestic propaganda.
CIA also adjusted well to the advent of social media. They harnessed its power by creating an interagency special access taskforce with the National Security Agency. Only a few years into the initiative, they were already enjoying great success controlling public content and spreading disinformation. Two facts helped CIA greatly: 1) most Americans were conditioned against actively seeking out independent, non-corporate news organizations; and 2) most Americans believed what the U.S. government said, especially if the spokesperson was wearing a military uniform.

When events were particularly thorny, CIA assets blackmailed, stole, and sabotaged to ensure their secrets remained hidden and to guarantee the U.S. public only knew what Langley wanted. Once in a blue moon, a rare, intrepid journalist sniffed too close to a compartmentalized Agency project. Media assets would inform the Agency, and that courageous journalist would be eliminated. The circumstances would be carefully crafted to look like an accident or suicide. A select section of CIA’s Office of Security, which underwent a name change every five years as a matter of policy, would be dispatched to liaise with police and FBI investigators and shut down any meaningful leads. It was an easy job, since domestic police forces typically fell over themselves to help CIA whenever presented with the magical words: national security. (CIA increasingly relied on private intelligence corporations staffed by ex-Special Activities fellows in order to kill and cover up on U.S. soil, where CIA was legally barred from operating.) Other Agency assets would ensure media attention was directed elsewhere, investigations were impeded and bogged down, and evidence was overlooked. Law was neither obstacle nor hindrance.

CIA’s crisp domestic operations contrasted sharply with the Pentagon’s sputtering and flailing abroad. Like most military initiatives in Iraq, information operations hemorrhaged money. The Pentagon flushed away hundreds of millions of tax dollars annually pursuing these initiatives. Undisclosed private corporations, which DOD bean counters erroneously
claimed save tax dollars, implemented most of U.S. Central Command’s propaganda initiatives. Allowed to grade their own performance, based on output rather than effectiveness, and conduct polls with little oversight, these corporations continued to rake in wads of cash thicker than Israeli-built MRAP armor. Floundering attempts at internal audits showed that these same DOD bean counters were unable to account for most information operations’ funding allocations. Those funds must be chillin’ in the same hole as the $2.3 trillion Rumsfeld discussed on 10 September 2001, Ignacio considered. Somewhere nearby, U.S. tax dollars are bribing local media outlets, paying friendly NGOs to run favorable stories, funding efforts to bolster allied officials’ local credibility, and recruiting friendly Iraqi exiles to spread the Pentagon’s narrative.

“Jesus,” Ingacio grumbled into his collar.

“I’ll take some questions now,” Lieutenant Colonel Metzger said, easing forward to seem more approachable. Although Metzger’s stage, rank, and career gave him an opportunity the propaganda commandants only dreamed about, he knew he’d never be one of the greats. He lacked the initiative, subtle charisma, and aplomb – traits of the greatest practitioners. Brushing doubt aside, Metzger nodded at a twitchy journalist in the front row.

“So, in other words, everything that’s happening in Iraq right now?” Metzger lobbed back at Jerry.

The press corps laughed in unison.

I gotta read more about group psychology and behavior, Ignacio thought. I see a similar phenomenon in D.C. think tanks: a speaker, no matter how loathsome, cracks a mediocre joke, and the crowd laughs far longer
and harder than the joke deserved. Why? Is it just audience dynamics? Or am I missing something deeper about human nature?

Metzger smiled and moved on. “Next question, please,” he stated firmly.

“Dana Morrison, MSNBR. Thank you, Colonel, for that enlightening introduction. What can you tell us about the firefight in Nisour Square involving Embassy vehicles? And does this have anything to do with the downing of a V-22 aircraft yesterday? Can we attribute the latter to insurgent activity?”

“Both situations are still developing, and our responses are ongoing, so I will refrain from commenting at this time.” Metzger cracked the knuckle on his left thumb, squinted, and stood up straighter. “I’d also refer you to our colleagues at the State Department for any inquiry into Embassy activities. Thanks.”

“I was also wondering,” Morrison continued. “Could you talk briefly about your second slide, the Ramadi map? Some of us aren’t used to all the squiggles and colored lines.”

“Absolutely, Dana. Great question. So here’s the Ramadi map. The parts shaded in green... these are the areas that... the Iraqi security forces have control of. As you can see, there’s still some more work that needs to be done.”

Lieutenant Colonel Metzger shifted on his feet. Ignacio could now see more of the Multi-National Force – Iraq insignia on the wall behind the Colonel. Ignacio had never bothered to ask what animal-human hybrid was featured prominently on the logo. The beast was partially obscured from where Ignacio sat, but he could easily see the seven-pointed star hovering above crossed swords.

“As I mentioned, Iraqi forces are working alongside U.S. forces in order to clear and hold from west to east, neighborhood by neighborhood. The roads are tight, but ISF is doing an excellent job. They’re motivated...”

Ignacio tuned out the Lieutenant Colonel. Man, the U.S. absolutely owns the Iraqi military now. We fund, train, equip, sustain, and support them. It’s a lucrative
business; all those foreign military sales, base support services, and private military contractors. Someone’s making a killing. Ignacio looked down at his collared shirt. The grey logo of his corporate employer, a private military firm based in Falls Church, Virginia, stared him in the face.

“So that’s Ramadi,” Lieutenant Colonel Metzger said, knocking that softball out of the park. “It is difficult to put a time frame on the operation, but we know it will continue for some time. Okay, you, that’s right, in the back.” Metzger was pointing to a wiry, tan fellow in a sharp uniform standing in the second-to-last row.

“Sir, I’m Petty Officer Rogers with the Defense Media Activity—”.

“Good to see you again, Petty Officer!” Metzger boomed, cutting Rogers off and building rapport with the room at the same time.

“Thank you, sir. Can you speak a little about the attacks that occurred over the weekend? Do they signal a shift in enemy tactics at all? Thanks again.”

“Absolutely,” Metzger said, feeling suddenly uncomfortable with the subject matter. After all, he had not spent much time studying Iraq’s history, geography, or culture. He scrambled to buy some time while he collected his thoughts. “The attacks that we saw over the weekend and, really up until yesterday, in the Haditha area, really are, the kind originating from forces that are, that are moving around in that, in that kind of ungoverned and largely open space between the river and Lake Tharthar...”

This was almost too much for Ignacio. The Colonel’s pronunciation of Haditha and Tharthar made Jake Tapper sound eloquent. He used the wrong H in Haditha, and he put an alif in the wrong place in Tharthar. How can he claim to know anything about Iraq’s welfare or future when he doesn’t even know Iraq’s ABCs?

“That’s, you know, where the enemy is able to generate its force and infiltrate into attack positions in the vicinity of Haditha,” Metzger continued. “And then attack kind of from the northeast headed southwest into Haditha. So that’s that,” he wrapped up, thanking his
lucky stars he had just completed that geography
Computer Based Training.

Just as soon as he finished, he piped up again
with a positive spin, granting Iraqis some sovereignty, if
only in word. “The Iraqis own the gameplan, obviously,”
Metzger noted. “They decide what their next focus is
going to be. We, the U.S.-led coalition, are here to support
them. Does that answer your question, Rogers?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” Petty Officer Rogers
replied, knowing he wasn’t going to press the Army
Lieutenant Colonel for more information.

“I’d like to use this opportunity to talk a little bit
more about Fallujah,” Metzger declared. “So we’ve been
conducting shaping operations around Fallujah, really,
ever since the invasion. This includes strikes against
infrastructure as well as high-value targets.”

Ignacio glanced down at the scribbles on his To
Do list and considered the possibilities. He thought about
the gung-ho outlook he had when he enlisted in the U.S.
Army so long ago. _Shit, times have changed. Though, yes,
I’m still a cog in the war machine, still just in it for the
financial security, no different than the next guy. Coming
here, I thought I’d be able to bide my time on one final
tour. Now… I’m not so sure._

He recalled an axiom he once read at the John F.
Kennedy Special Warfare Center: Special Operations
Forces cannot be mass produced. _Shit, consecutive
defense secretaries ignored that one_, Ignacio noted. U.S.
Special Operations Forces were bordering on mass
production. Stacks and stacks of binders and training
manuals – tweaked a little more as each batch of trainees
got through the pipelines – helped veteran operators
train group after group of Air Force pararescue, Army
Special Forces, Marine Force Recon, Navy SEALs, and
others. Army SF was churning out more than any other
SOF branch. SEALs, Hollywood’s current dolls, had
trimmed bits of surf torture and rearranged other
portions of BUD/S training to comply with Pentagon
edict demanding more graduates. Granted, the men who
came off these SOF assembly lines were indeed of a high
caliber. And their time in Iraq contributed greatly to the
refinement and advancement of SOF skillsets, particularly as part of a larger team. What nobody seems to realize is non-stop SOF operations in Iraq will soon contribute significantly to the ongoing erosion of democracy back in the States, Ignacio predicted.

Iraq wasn’t merely a boon to corporate greed. People, negligible in number and epochal in influence, paced USA’s corridors of control. They were Allen Dulles’ enduring heirs. Rare, erudite, cautious, and prudent, they shunned the limelight. Citizens might have read about infamous ‘revolving door’ characters who exploited the economic and professional opportunities that D.C. corruption permitted. Even The Boston Globe knew those names and profiles. In contrast, those treading the corridors of control rotated discreetly and intermittently through the public and private sectors, staying under corporate media’s antiquated and submissive radar. They were men of firm conviction. They wielded purse strings, Wall Street rolodexes, and intimate knowledge of the intelligence community and military bureaucracies. In nameless capacities, far removed from Internet publication, they advised the cream of the crop of corporate beneficiaries. They felt at home in the subtle lodges of private equity firms. They made decisions. They knew when to play aggressively and when to initiate a calculated Danish Gambit. They selectively gave up low-value, replaceable materiel in favor of enormous long-term gain. This was how the U.S. had functioned since the nineteen forties. Ignacio worked hard to momentarily suppress these thoughts, which rumbled through his head at a million kilometers an hour.

“We’re known for our surgical strikes,” Lieutenant Colonel Metzger boomed. “Lately, we’ve opted for dynamic strikes that target the enemy as it repositions. The coalition’s pressure is working, squeezing them across the entire depth of this battlefield,” Metzger assured the press pool. His chin twitched – a classic poker tell – after he uttered the word ‘depth.’ He was pleased with his word choice.

“For example, we see squad-sized elements still able to operate in some of the neighborhoods that have
not yet been cleared. We killed over sixty insurgents inside Ramadi just in the last twenty-four hours alone. So they’re there. And when we see them, we strike them.”

Metzger paused, pursed his lips, and concluded, “It’s difficult, though, to give you a total enemy number on the battlefield at this moment.”

A Major – nametape: Cook – stepped forward from his sentry duty along the wall. “The enemy doesn’t share our concern for human life. We are very deliberate, methodical and careful as we clear, hold, and build,” Major Cook assured the audience. Metzger made a mental note to thank Major Cook during their next meeting.

Lieutenant Colonel Metzger took the ball and ran with it. “It’s difficult to get, you know, an idea of the effectiveness of various divisions, however. Certainly, a two thousand pound bomb will encourage you to desert, or it will end your fighting career entirely.” Metzger felt pleased with his verbal adornment, but Major Cook knew some of the press corps would frown upon the Colonel’s aggressive tone. Ignacio wondered, Was Metzger trying to be funny?

“We'll let the historians sort out what the original, you know, enemy strength was in most of these locations,” Metzger affirmed, slipping hard into lowbrow Army humor.

Ignacio couldn’t gauge Metzger’s demeanor.

“We don’t do body counts, but I can assure you that the enemy has lost hundreds of fighters in the past three days. Yes, they've got some freedom of movement in a lot of the unpopulated areas, as shown in slide three.” The presentation backed up two slides, the quick work of a sharp aide.

“The insurgency has suffered most losses in and around Salah-al-Din, Baghdad, Diyala, and Anbar.”

Ignacio noticed one reporter from As-Sabaah cringe as Metzger butchered half the letters in Salah-ad-Din. “So hopefully that helps,” Metzger said, concluding that portion of the Q&A. “Who’s next?”

“Hello, my friend. Welcome back,” Metzger replied, grinning, knowing the U.S. government funded Radio Sawa.

*This is some bullshit,* Ignacio steamed.

“What sort of rules of engagement is CENTCOM issuing to U.S. aircraft and ground support? Have these changed over time? Thanks!” Hassan sat down immediately.

“Excellent question.” *Right in my wheelhouse.*

“Higher headquarters has issued clear rules of engagement. They’re firm enough to permit quick engagement with the enemy, but they’re flexible enough to protect every civilian in the given area.” Metzger paused, weighing whether or not to add additional information. He decided to go ahead. “Keep in mind that this is Iraq’s fight. We’re here to enable Iraqi military forces. We advise them. We assist them. We help them in any way we can. As you know, we also provide air power for them. But this is their country. This is their plan. And they make the decisions.” He smiled crisply.

*Not one journalist is going to do their job, huh?* Ignacio thought. He tried in vain to breathe deeply and diffuse his mounting rage.

“Last call. Anyone else? We’ve got one more here,” Metzger said, gesturing with a flick of his pen.

Fed up with the mind games, Ignacio stood up in anger and pivoted to head down the aisle and out the door.

“Yes,” said Metzger, staring right at Ignacio. Ignacio froze. Half a second passed like thirty. Ignacio’s thoughts covered two possible plays: seize the moment and deal with the consequences, or let the Lieutenant Colonel know that he, Ignacio, was not a reporter. He quickly weighed the options. Journalists were often imprisoned when Saddam was in power. Journalists were still persecuted and killed, post-Saddam. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, Iraq was one of the most dangerous places in the world for honest journalism. The 2003 U.S. invasion had set the tone, murdering Tareq Ayyoub, José Couso, Mazen Dana, Taras Protsyuk and others right off the bat. Video proof, as in
the case of Namir Noor ad-Deen and Saeed Shmagh, would generate fleeting global outrage backed up by no deeds. The Pentagon and CIA just played the waiting game. Time was on their side. The longer they spread disinformation, the longer the lies seeped in. Eventually many U.S. citizens accepted the lies as truth. CIA was almost always in the lead. One exposé or solid piece of independent reporting did not make a dent in the imagery ingrained in the public consciousness, saturated from years of government disinformation.

*WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?!* Ignacio screamed on the inside as his mouth started moving. He was surprised by the calm tone of his voice. “Yes, sir.” Ignacio replied, slowly smoothing out the front of his shirt with one sweaty palm. “A few non-U.S. journalists and independent media outlets have reported on numerous instances of civilian deaths during the past month.” Ignacio allowed himself to settle into the antagonist role as he refused to use the euphemism *collateral damage*. He continued, “which occurred as a direct result of U.S. airstrikes. What is your position?”

The Lieutenant Colonel blinked. It had been three years since he had faced any responsible journalism. Recovering quickly, Metzger declared, “I’m glad you asked that question. We have completed a thorough investigation into these allegations and determined no civilians have been killed in U.S. airstrikes.”

Ignacio retorted quickly, “Can’t police the po-

Only the journalists in Ignacio’s immediate vicinity heard this aside. One young man in a blue short sleeve dress shirt and a loose red tie blinked hard. *Maybe this guy’ll wake up,* Ignacio hoped as he shuffled down the row. An elderly lady with silver hair and a plaid scarf scowled up at him. “How dare you…” she muttered. A middle-aged man with loose skin, five o’clock shadow, and wispy brown hair sat at the end of the row. He extended his legs in front of him, blocking Ignacio’s path. Ignacio stepped over the human logs. “Fuck off,” the man said without looking up from his yellow legal pad. His generous chin wiggled goodbye.
Ignacio ignored their comments and headed for the exit. On any other day, he would have fretted over the giant pile of administrative reprimands heading his way. But today his mind was quiet, already at peace with the course he had chosen.

Ignacio glanced at his watch. Screw it, he thought, *I’m heading upstairs*. He closed the conference room door quietly.

The Lieutenant Colonel had deliberately avoided mentioning how Pentagon lawyers classified all military aged people – not just males, as previously legerdemain dictated – as enemy combatants. Hence, Pentagon legalese allowed propaganda teams to fudge the civilian body count, winding the tally down to near zero. The greatest trick the Pentagon ever pulled was convincing the U.S. public that it obeyed the law. In reality, it utilized a stellar legal team and brand recognition to write and promote the laws in the first place. The National Security State was the law.

Ignacio’s impertinence swept the Lieutenant Colonel back to his formative years when he too was inquisitive.

“Good propaganda begins in peacetime. It should be orchestrated well in advance of the start of physical combat, so that we can hit the ground running. That’s how we do it. We play the long game in order to reap what we sow at moments of our choosing,” the lecturer addressed Second Lieutenant Metzger’s class.

“To what extent should war propaganda differ from peacetime propaganda? Are there any lines to be drawn?” Metzger asked, raising his hand after he opened his mouth.

“Not as I see it,” replied the lecturer calmly. “We have a job to do, and we do it well.” The lecturer turned and gestured to a different part of the chalkboard.

“Do you know of anyone who has fallen victim to their own propaganda? Believed the work they crafted?” Metzger wondered if he had selected the best words.

The lecturer turned around to face Metzger and his follow-up question. “Lieutenant, why don’t you catch
me after this meeting and we can talk off-line about some of the thornier issues?” the lecturer responded quickly before returning to his planned curriculum.

Refocusing on the present, Metzger decided to field one more question, refusing to end with Ignacio’s gross violation of decorum and procedure. “You, sir. In the back.”

“Hello, Colonel Metzger. Steve Jennings with BBS. We’ve heard a lot of metrics today regarding body counts. Where are these numbers coming from? And how are they verified?”

Although this was stronger than the typical inquiry he faced, Metzger responded coolly and in measured tones. “Fair question. So when reporters first come to Baghdad, they’re able to see exactly how we do it. We bring them into one of our ops centers and show them our procedures. We have continuous, unblinking intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. This is usually a drone observing the target before, during, and after weapon impact. We just count.

“When observing these video screens, you can count exactly how many fighters are there.” Metzger plowed through, hoping nobody would dwell too long on his error in word placement. “Count them. See the bomb blast. Watch for a couple more minutes. Nobody’s moving. Tally ‘em up.” Good thing he’ll have no time to ask about our criteria for selecting journalists for the guided tour. We’ll never disclose that.

Major Cook stepped in and closed up shop with a few quick sentences. “Okay, everyone. Thank you for attending and for arriving on time. We’ll see you at fourteen hundred one week from today. We’ll be back in the usual conference room in the Chancellery building next week. Don’t forget.” And with that, Colonel Metzger was off the hook.

“Thank you all for coming,” Major Cook reiterated. The attendees got the hint and began to pack up their belongings.
Metzger briefly caught a glimpse of himself in the left-hand monitor. The awkward angle reminded him to check on the status of his professional headshots. *Had the photographer retouched the second set? Gotta get that LinkedIn page lookin’ crisp,* Metzger thought.

“Do you have the file on Senator Reed?” Metzger asked the attending Major discretely.

“Yes, sir. We finished it up around 0530,” the Major stated firmly.

“Excellent. Let’s get General Keaton prepped and up to speed.”

Majid scrambled for solace amid the entrenched Occupation, grasping at the pleasure of a good walk and the depths of his own thoughts; navigating the random terrain of his mind provided him with temporary relief. He breathed in as far as he could and out as far as he could.

*Expand. Step back. Like a sphere showing up in flatland. Do I like violet and purple because they’re high frequency colors? Mmm, Nymphaea caerulea, be my shaman? Gold, formed in a supernovae, strewn across solar systems. Elements in my blood. How did blood types evolve? Why, I mean? Part of me is mad at the high unemployment rate here, but can’t we leverage that to create an economy of our own? One based on gift giving, generosity, solar power, and tribal trust? Who am I kidding? I’m a dreamer. Wasn’t being called a dreamer once considered a compliment? It still should be. It still is. I will make it so. But I gotta live in order to do that. I want to correspond with Ibn al-Haytham. Or maybe Bertha Von Suttner? Maybe both. My history teacher in Montana said the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 led to the U.S. Civil War. Well I say the 2002 AUMF was our Kansas-Nebraska Act. Am I losing my mind? Probably. Though there’s no denying that more people will die in Iraq when it’s all said and done than died in the U.S. Civil War. In some sense, I admire the conviction the religious have. In another sense, I hate their horseshit. My religion? Love. Though with*
death around every corner, it’s pretty tempting to embrace organized religion right now.

“Never forget to be kind to my fellow citizens,” Majid reminded himself, invoking Munir’s wisdom. He patted the manuscript.

Love, it’ll crown you and dethrone you, all in the same breath. A breath, sometimes years apart. Where have I heard this before? Bleed readily, freely, Majid affirmed, though not yet ready to accept the full fate of such conclusions.

Andrea sat cross-legged on one of the three leather swivel chairs in her boss’ office. Still waiting for Charles’ initiative, Andrea reclined, engaging her back muscles and cracking her thoracic vertebrae.

“Ahhhh,” Andrea released. She leaned back farther, testing the chair’s range.

Nearly horizontal, Andrea rolled her head left and right, working out some knots. She locked eyes with Saddam during her third neck rotation. Charles had inherited the picture from his predecessor. It was one of Saddam’s ‘words of wisdom’ portraits. Designed in the 1980s to encourage cult of personality and hype Saddam’s legend, the pictures became quite commonplace. This picture featured Saddam overseeing completion of a large cable-stayed bridge. Andrea laughed to herself. They remind me of those stupid motivational posters so common in offices Stateside. Just about as useful, too.

Charles piped up. “I grabbed a beer with the JSOC aide last night. Turns out he was the one who froze the Government Travel Card site.”

“Did he ever fess up to the higher ups?”

“Negative. You get any feedback from Langley regarding overlap between the incoming ODNI subject matter experts and… those… fuckin’… within our existing directorates?” Charles often spaced out in the middle of sentences.

“Nothing yet, sir.”
Andrea sat up and spun towards her bank of three monitors. She scanned the barrage of intelligence feeds – some raw, some in the initial stages of processing.

*Nisour Square – Greyriver PMCs kill at least twelve.*
*Raids – Ten conducted against suspected terrorists overnight.*
*Fallujah – Radiation levels, elevated.*

She clicked on the third tab.

*radiation levels, air samples (62%+ standard), Kasra wa Atash, abutting Sadr City NE, possible leverage; Ministry stopped counting complaints; highest levels, soil samples indicate: central Iraq, immediate south of Baghdad*  
*Fallujah: congenital birth defects rampant  
Basra: cancer deaths, radiation ~70%, conservative estimate culpability*  
*No progress on 280+ sites identified in UN study; Recommendation: downplay U.S. Forces’ use of depleted uranium; highlight Saddam manufacturing plants as cause, primary focus on Babylon.*

A fourth tab marked FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY popped up, baiting Andrea.

She hesitated, knowing from its title – *DSCA approves FMS to Israel* – that reading it would not be easy. But she clicked it anyway.

*The Defense Security Cooperation Agency has made a determination approving a Foreign Military Sale to Israel. The Government of Israel has requested 14,500 KMU-556C/B JDAM tail kits; 3,500 Mk-82 bombs; 4,500 Mk-83 bombs; 50 BLU-113 bombs; 4,100 GBU-39 Small Diameter bombs; 1,500 Mk-83 kits; 700 BLU-109 kits; 3,000 AGM-114K/R missiles, 250 AIM-120C missiles; and 500 DSU-38A/B kits. The total estimated cost is $1.879 billion. This sale will provide Israel the ability to support its self-defense needs.*

The concept for Joint Direct Attack Munitions – guidance kits that bolted onto standard corn-fed bombs – was
born in the waning days of Desert Storm. During descent, JDAM’s inertial clock calculated the bomb’s location using the Global Positioning System, and sent data to the tail kit, which adjusted the fins in order to guide the bomb on target. GPS was a U.S. military product, best known for enhancing aircraft navigation capabilities. GPS’ inclusion in this process allowed the war industry to market JDAM as able to hit targets in low-visibility conditions. Initial requirements of thirteen-meter accuracy had recently been refined, and most JDAM kits were now held to a higher standard. Technology had matured. Facilities in and around St. Louis, Missouri were producing over forty JDAM guidance kits per day. JDAM larvae were piping hot batches of material and instrumentation. JDAM pupa, a completed kit, soon reached chrysalis as it tucked into crates to be shipped east on I-70. War profiteer’s progeny soon shed this swaddle and wrapped itself on a general-purpose bomb. Flightline paparazzi, also known as boom operators, often found the kits clinging to 225-, 450- and even 900-kilogram bombs. Andrea frowned. She predicted the official Israeli response: “These munitions will enable us to maintain the operational capability of existing systems while enhancing interoperability with our good friends in the United States.”

Andrea spun around. She dragged her toe along the carpet to slow her rotation. She inhaled, stood up, and rolled her shoulders.

“We must pay,” Nguyen stated bluntly, leaning back against the cool concrete lip that ran along the roof’s north side. The sun’s steady arc tracked pink along Nguyen’s eyelids.

Ignacio had heard whispers and read about the contracting practices in and around U.S. overseas bases. He knew major corporations subcontracted work to companies willing to break the rules and deal with some shady characters in order to obtain cheap labor. Anything to keep profits high, Ignacio thought.
Nguyen confirmed that anonymous and unregistered agents from recruitment agencies searched for cheap labor on behalf of subcontractors. Agents guaranteed decent salaries, but once laborers arrived in Iraq they were paid roughly half of the amount they had been promised.

“Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam,” Nguyen said, answering Ignacio’s question regarding his recruiter’s favorite countries. “But most recruiters like India and surrounding countries.”

“Why don’t the U.S. corporations employ Iraqis?” Ignacio asked.

“Cheaper, people from South and Southeast Asia,” Nguyen said. He fiddled with a rock in his right hand. “So you basically pay for the chance to work?” Ignacio asked.

Nguyen explained how DOD subcontractors and recruiters worked together, charged hefty fees to job applicants, and made a killing in the process. A worker’s first year of wages often went towards paying back debts incurred with recruiters. That didn’t even include the additional time it took to pay back the loans they had taken out to pay the initial recruitment fee. Ignacio learned that a recent decision from the Executive Branch to outlaw recruitment fees had not changed anything.

All Ignacio could think about was how money and kickbacks greased capitalism’s chutes and ladders – corporation-subcontractor-recruiter-laborer and laborer-recruiter-subcontractor-corporation – a trade honed well in the Gulf, especially since the construction boom in the early 2000s.

“Look at it in eyes of war,” Nguyen advised. With his right thumb, he rubbed a portion of the rock over and over again.

Ignacio didn’t understand. “You’re excusing U.S. Empire’s behavior because it’s wartime?”

“No,” Nguyen said patiently. “Wrong war.”

“Wrong war?” Ignacio asked. “Like, we never should have invaded?”

“No,” Nguyen said. He sighed almost imperceptibly. “You think about wrong war. Think early.”
“Another unjust war?”
“Wars... Your wars are all unjust,” Nguyen affirmed with hushed tenacity.
“Vietnam?” Ignacio asked.
“Yes. French attack us. Americans attack us.
Poison our land with chemicals. Generations have problems in their bodies at birth.”
“And now you’re recruited to work for the very Empire that destroyed your country.”
“Like your Natives. U.S. military helped clear land of Natives, then these days dozens of Native companies work for your Pentagon.”
Ignacio breathed heavily, acknowledging the truth in Nguyen’s words.
“They confiscate my passport? You know?”
“Yes.”
“They do to all us.”
“So you stay? So you can't leave?”
“Yes.” Nguyen sniffed. “I was recruited with friend. Promised same work, same place but he is in Qatar and I am here.”
“And you’re the lucky ones.”
Nguyen closed his eyes. “Yes. Some don’t even...”
His words fell below a whisper.
Ignacio nodded and waited. The sun’s reassuring warmth struck him as disappointed in humanity.
“... ânh hương, ânh hương ...” Nguyen repeated the words several times.
“What is that?” Ignacio asked.
Nguyen looked mad. “I don’t know,” he said after several moments.
“What does it mean?” Ignacio rephrased.
“I don’t know.”
They discussed it in context until... “Power!”
Nguyen stated far louder than his normally quiet tones.
His brow furrowed. “So simple word,” he admonished himself.
“Don't be so hard on yourself. Your English skills are excellent,” Ignacio encouraged genuinely.
Nguyen looked Ignacio in the eye. Ignacio looked away.
“Why did you mention it? Power, that is.” He mustered the courage to meet Nguyen’s gaze once more. Nguyen explained. Corporations and subcontractors hid behind that simple word. They claimed discussing work arrangements would compromise worker-employer confidentiality. Other times, corporate spokespeople declared company rules prevented any discussion about sensitive employee information. That was power.

So Nguyen told him.
Any lingering uncertainty gave way to acceptance, as if the sun’s wise rays were coaxing Ignacio on the right path. He let these ideas stew.

_They call me a ‘terrorist facilitator,’ but the only crime I’ve committed is LWA, Living While Arab_, Munir thought.

His hands felt like lead, though his arms felt like burning noodles. He looked up. Looking up momentarily eased the strain on his neck. His arms were bound, hanging from a hook suspended from the ceiling. The ties looked plastic. A lone bulb glowed stubbornly. The walls looked a lot like plywood. He looked down. The floor was concrete and dirt. Everything felt damp. He felt damp. He glimpsed a shadow sitting in the corner. *But I didn’t hear the door open or close.*

“You’re correct, you know,” the shadow spoke measuredly.

“Where are my friends?” Munir asked, his vocal cords struggling to coordinate.

“Easy,” the shadow ordered. “You’re correct.”

“How’s that?” Munir replied cautiously, confused.

“They don’t raid your home at night and violate the sanctity of your family and friends. They conduct village stability operations. You, their loot, are thrown not in solitary confinement, but rather placed in administrative detention. Others aren’t kidnapped, merely subjected to extraordinary rendition.” The
shadow’s voice struck the prisoner like soft waves churning pebbles along a placid shore.

“What you’re experiencing now at the hands of capital’s finest war machine isn’t torture. It’s an isolated case of abuse, sometimes called enhanced interrogation. Your friends weren’t murdered. They were the byproduct of a targeted operation. Innocent victims are simply damage, of the collateral brand.”

“How do I shut you up?” Munir asked despite the soothing voice. “Where’s Majid?”

The shadow ignored him. He floated a bit towards Munir. “Some are held at a defensive staging post, a contingency operating site, or a forward operating location, certainly not floundering at an imperial base. Whenever Empire moves on, they’ll call it ‘troop re-posturing’ instead of ‘withdrawal.’”

“You work for them?” Munir asked the shadow.

The shadow replied by emerging fully from the corner. The room’s lone bulb illuminated him, an elderly gentleman cloaked in purple, hunched over like a question mark, cane bearing all the weight. “Tell me, then. How did you end up here?” the elderly shadow asked.

Munir felt eager to respond, noting that the pain in his arms subsided whenever he spoke to this man.

“Well… Majid had left early. Nabil arrived late and then wandered off around three in the morning after the party had died down.”

“They got him,” the shadow said with a swift interruption.

Munir burst into tears, but no tears came. Through dry whimpers, Munir wailed, “I thought he’d at least get away.”

“Tell me, did Sara make it? Is Mohammed still alive?”

“One is alive, though not for much longer. The other is dead.”

A wail thrashed through Munir’s body. The shadow gave Munir space to compose himself.
“Khalid? Noora? Ka... Nevermind! I don’t want to know.”

“As you wish,” the shadow soothed. The shadow waited.

Munir began again, his words slogging through a blubbering tongue. “The electricity cut out, so Rawya, best DJ this side of the Dijla, grabbed a flashlight to check outside the courtyard.”

“All she found were green eyes and a laser scope,” the shadow stated plainly.

Munir broke down once more.

The shadow clarified, “They dropped her without hesitation.”

The content of the shadow’s words pained Munir, though Munir relished how he felt when spoken words exited the shadow. Munir didn’t quite understand it himself, though he understood intuitively that the shadow was a salve of sorts.

Munir spasmed to free himself, but his hands remained locked firmly to the hook above him.

“It is like a lousy horror movie,” the shadow continued, “complete with people of color dying first.”

“Soon they stormed our flat,” Munir recalled.

“Panic ensued. None of us even had weapons, but that didn’t matter. I guess you know the rest.”

The elderly shadow spoke up as he edged away from light. “If the intel says you’re guilty, then you’re guilty. Case closed. Analyst adjourned. Oversight over.”

*He looks like an aged willow tree.*

Acerbic memory zapped Munir’s vision. Rosy smog blotched any attempts at lucid recollection. *I tried to tell them that my uncle had worked for Bremer’s junior staff, but that only seemed to enrage the invaders. No, I didn’t even think about mentioning Order 12 and Order 39. One of them even made a wise crack. My type of humor, but I’d never give him the generosity of a laugh. As I sat scrunched up against the wall, I sneaked a peek to my left and saw one of the men digging a bullet out of someone’s back.*

“Fares, you know,” the shadow clarified.
Munir’s lip trembled. He bit it until he tasted blood.

“You feel it, right?” the elderly gentleman asked, emphasizing the interrogative with a tap of his cane on the dusty floor.

_Blood flushed my right eye as one of them smashed my face against the wall. I guess sneaking peeks was a no-no. They covered me with heavy earmuffs and a stank hood, which smelled like sour milk and feet._


“Allow me in and I’ll explain,” the old shadow smiled.

Munir thought about Majid, about holding his hand while reading together. He ached to see his best friend again. “The door is open,” Munir said, summoning the strength to nod.

The elderly man stepped forward and poured forth an archaic tongue. Only with great focus could Munir’s mind interpret each word.

FEED INTO THE FANTASY, IMMIGRATE TO OLD GLORY, LAND OF WEALTH AND PILLAGE, MILLION MERCENARIES UNDERWRITE DOMESTIC OPULENCE, AS NATIONALISM’S SOMBER CAST STRUMS KEY’S DEFENSE OF McHENRY, TO A DRONESOME CADENCE. ABLE TO STOP BREEZE, THEY ADOPT CORPORATE CANT, EMPLOYING A MAESTRO RANGE, SLED DOGS TO GOON SQUADS, TIME LESS THAN TIME.

DIVORCED FROM ULULATING RETREAT, AS WHITE GLOVES TYPE COMPREHENSIVE NATSEC PRETEXTS, STEADY TIMPANIS ROLL THROUGH HANGING MIST, ARRANGING BOOTS, DANCING UPON STICKY FACES, AN AUTHENTIC TALENT – DROPPING SCALDING TEARS OF JOY ON CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE COARSELY AWARE OF CBU-105’S ENGLISH.
mental runoff, a streaming English pub, sculpted wooden ideas bump, thoughts following the curvature of a Latin script. paper tablecloths buffer damp suds of a foregone thought.

He quickly shakes himself back to the boardroom. Stuttering Command & Control, gloating pleasure of a vagabond empire, the acronym accretes and 4I joins its host, bobbing obligingly to the mimetic poly-alloy.

“What is that?” Munir asked.
“It seems you have a friend on the inside,” the elderly man soothed.
“I don’t want a friend. I want out,” Munir stated tightly.

He gazed upwards, still squinting. His head exploded with each heartbeat, like he was next to one of Slash’s amps in Buenos Aires ’93. After summoning the courage, he looked upwards again. He was hanging by his cuffs, now metal ones, from a meat hook. The room was dark, except for a blue table in the corner. Was it blue? He couldn’t tell in the dim light. It might have been plain aluminum. The air was stuffy, but at least the hood was gone. When was it on? The Appetite riff had now moved to where his neck met the base of his skull. He had no idea when he had blacked out.

Once again, his arms were completely numb beyond the shoulders. He hung for hours. The elder returned.

will we flow together like a reader, reunited with 48 of 246, time no cork? a voice, novel to kin. Once a young man’s arrogating gruff, striving for assurance, is now a churrido’s twang, a retrograde of adolescent jactitation, untuned banjo beaten against the salty gates of Basra’s minaret.
riparian hunger cramming, neoliberal policies
arrange the stomachs
while razing her lungs, reefs of the land,
cracking polymer for his amusement, flares bleed
off pressure,
swapping hardwood growth with refinery's
nurdles,
mo' hazards, no problems.
scooping no floodlight, but ripping thousands of
walking urns,
draining souls through routers, routing souls to
cruciform drains,
a Plymouth Blitz, courtesy of Plymouth Rock,
he loosens profit's belaying pin, he obliges burning
air,
into native lung, iron contacts isomers, a
hemisphere
removed from daemon's foamy shriek, slicing
through native memory's rueful air.
pocket all profit, socialize all cost, slapping tender
bellies
with cold blades, appraising. muffling one radical
in a
pawful of activists, one care in a mitten of radicals,
shared humanity plucking liminal space,
writing human burial on fell tree, for when we go,
shroud us, inter us, tree us, against fossildom's
stab of wavy EBOV. a slather of embalming
whiskey
transecting his grey matter.

The elder's cane met Munir's eyes. It seemed pure white,
like driftwood bleached smooth from seasons rocking in
the tidal zone. Knots dotted the cane. They blinked at
Munir regularly, always one second after Munir blinked.
Every time. The faint light cast cratered shadows across
the bottom third of the cane.

the prickly eye spades, as loamy soil yearns,
a scarecrow skirts the parasite syphon’s field
while notes sow unaware saplings
across broadcast’s reach, concentric rings bleed
and overlap,
they yack against powdered bonemeal’s potential
to reinvigorate gory soil.

boreal wilderness moats
in a formerly leafy quilt,
meeting the centripetal dietary demands of
entropic wreckage,
voids filled with contented fear
coil around hot kinks of cost,
declining necessary centrality of the margins,
raining greenbacks to pop verdant stacks –
mountains, by another name.

snagging mom’s innards, irradiating azure
resistance’s thinking supply… as her last synapse
attempts slaloming through mazes of gentrified bellicosity.

drink the pierce, revert to migratory traps, freon
protection
to our own demise. polished with pumice, the
wretched comedian
stoops over the pedestal. Only tufts of élan remain. The soil recalls us.

Munir didn’t hear a sound, except the occasional contact
between toes and dusty concrete.
“You make sense, whoever you are.”

ransacked searches, security’s gland,
dark heeds none
of our bleating in this random swirl,
pulp, juicy bits to some,
special relationship defined,
space shuttle’s white crust,
inquiry is lost
as
somewhere along Pennsylvania
an official asks what dialect of Arabic is spoken in Afghanistan.

scanned causally closed consciousness’ pitter-patter along uptight analysis, eyes wide in attentive, fresh glaze like learning word count in untried tongue. vigilantes scouring stadia of illiteracy, hood up, protection fees flight free factions, born dislocated, raised disenchanted, pulp’s corners as a refuge. treating eraser shavings with laced disdain, tarps covering synapses’ crops.

Munir couldn’t see the old man anymore, but he knew the old man was present. He probably slunk back to the corner when my eyes were closed, Munir considered.

“They invaded during the springtime. It’s now years later, yet they’re still here. Oil, yes, but my friends and I feel like our land is a laboratory for so many imperial designs... designs in the works for decades,” Munir affirmed. He saw two sharp eyes blink assent in the corner.

“This wasn’t just a Cheney/Wolfowitz tag-team against our Strongbow/White Wolf,” Munir continued, pulling on his potent pop culture reservoir.

“White Wolf, my ass,” the shadow interjected. “Adnan will always be Iraqi. After all, he succeeded where others failed: defeating Andre the Giant in Baghdad in ’71.”

“Yes,” Munir said. “Yes.” The pain grew and grew. He spoke to chimney the pain. “Occupation is the culmination of decades of corporate greed, capitalism’s endless thirst, bipartisan ignorance, and Israeli finesse. The Authorization for the Use of Military Force of 2001 – or was it 2002? – was the most recent in a long line of legalese constructed to further imperial aims. Successive administrations claim it works within the confines of the law. True, but you craft the law to meet your aims. It’s
your law. And like that, we’re gone. Rolled up and tucked away in one of Saddam’s old dungeons. Is that where I am?”

The elderly man stepped forward. “I think you know exactly where you are!” he hooted.

Dim light shined on the man’s body. The man’s hunch was remarkable. He looked as if he had two heads: one – the hunch – bundled astern under a purple blazer, and another set forward from the body, a bow to break all headlong passage. The man’s blazer, a purple deeper than a moribund sunset, fit the elderly man snugly. A lone button held the yawning lapels together. It looks incredibly comfy, Munir pouted, allowing himself a drizzle of self-pity.

tentative exploration now dusk’s elation, 
consecration or curse, 
and the front stoop becons, bypassing direct pressure 
in favor of rebellion’s chafing tourniquet, the corporate apotheosis 
plucks lives from 11,393 kilometers. 
Till gazes astern; Vernon Bowman blazes afore, 
dragging capacity, memoranda, the skunk’s webbing 
clad in personalities, he stomps her breath. mere assurance 
against the bubbling netherworld, of her countervailing cemetery 
sipping his sparkling water, setting his timepiece down on the vault’s cold shelf, tucked away behind the only copy 
of Sahar Khalifeh’s first novel, 
bi-curious KBA on Betamax, and JJA’s Institute notes. 
and the corporate H7N9 evolves to hunt again, 
strategic incompetence pounding casket tacks, 
amorphous emotion fueling crosshairs, 
ghoulish dissolves into common blissquil, 
discriminatory void, a hound twitching in dream’s cavern,
panning rented minds, leave no weapon behind,
syncopated thefts, the complex taps, fighting lepcis magna as it froths,
an act of volition commands to break streams’ slaughter,
clippered grasses of integrated monolith, beyond varnished dissonance,
UAS pilots of USA, unwilling to face horrendous verity
squashing in a blink, denial’s scaffolding, splashed wraith, sways
NSDD 221 fucks 18, birthing a morass of discipline’s mayhem
familial bonds weathered, sniff obligatory pavement,
elder disinfectant razing the price tag.
outsourcing liability on sleek coin, an angry scramble to blindaje’s cloud
wind’s tenure.

The elder looked up from his hunch as he poured forth, giving him look of a wolf paused mid-stride; the whites of his eyes trod out while dim lighting glinted off his incisors.

“Where’s Majid?!” Munir rasped.
“Rest,” the elder replied.

slither seeps to pulver-
-eyes awash in glutinous residue, grasp at DIRNSA straws, roll the moist mouse,
energy drinks feel the servers’ hum
during hour eight in dress blues, as hunted are hunted casually,
drowsy strains fortify unblinking cowardice,
encased in stone.

Crutch-less clarity thrust forward.

baked mannequins fill her tactile up-gaze, those legacies
of acid panting – a million shards,
smell the naked melt, some spare, medium-rared, roaming hearse of a dead society, forces stillness from unaware bone. A torrential orphanage.

flap of lone skin quivers against acrid smoke, dangling precariously on the vagaries of ambition’s explosions, one ping, a lone bell, acute in its self-consciousness. pounding morning claret, a fresh batch of double tap’s detritus, the warm blend sliding down eagle’s gullet, as it does with panache. a matted forearm wipes the gray from his cheek, checkmark, while the other, simply receives tacks from disposition.

congregation of parabolas against your color of troposphere, bewildered butterflies cuddle power and, hands, our mothy mouths, a gap in the board

Electricity cut out, promptly returned, and the guitar riffs started up again.

bandaging media’s placenta for one more round, he inhales raw air, nourishing a new thought. live feeds overwhelming finite fools, imported grit, exporting grim space, massaging untruths ‘cross the grain, a limited knowledge rotates border’s pluck, twang blue on green, slow man’s wane, captive patrol scaring sacred scars, fall on the splinter’s haft, wriggle of twitchy occupation, scream of lapping flames, stifle gutter-dipped professionals, retroactively astute, twenty years and two think tanks later,
enriched walkabout played by coteries licking worsted soles, 
among duopoly’s consensus, detached casual patois, 
arrogant, even in withdrawal, conceit’s 
unashamed isometrics, 
vanity rolls insecurity downhill. 
imprison the builders 
in that curious gait of a militant walrus, turning to thank the bygone trail, 
in forlorn butter-lipped thought, laundering perky flesh as 
moonlight’s pure pond clashes indigent indigenous.

standing armies piss meaning, less 
bitter crunch denoting typical early squeaks, real 
education, embraced, 
fortune forays a glimpse, to the beauty of pal’s 
soul, and the splendor of sumud. 
a blind plume abets, his list flicking tiny hors d’oeuvres, 
indoctrination’s brutal warlord, repast widening past 1600, mark of cliché’s divisive rudiment, 
site of a crisp pour, insulated to history’s swath. 
Apparition of makeshift missionaries, euphoria’s mixture, chewing up 
bruta’s horizon, landscapes case former friends in 
fiat’s flat outpost, 
free rule of thumb’s reign, rigging, tight ships chortle at the sight 
of rotting leviathan sloth. 
vague blood, Investor Relations, clods ripple out, 
gnarling Rayheed Code of Conduct, garden of earthly delights, 
unconscionable wealth imitates picking lice, with only 
the slightest feign. 
emotions of ventilating gossamer. early Ho, the 
original Harlem renaissance. 
preferential window’s smudge, planted thumbs growing sprouts,
bastion of carotids, Mahogany reed, clean incision, eliding accuracy to fit comfort, warped wood’s underbite. clean countenance of tubercular dollars, vacuum at the v/pillage level, mandarins of slavery’s aerie, veinless hands on serrated tusks. Cerulean blue pusher, lips ajar his focus perspires nonchalance, ebb to putrid flow, collapsed ferocity hears only tendons pop, misty revenge paring his malicious chortle, our hypnogogic receipt abetting, ‘sites forged within corporate ovenhood. in some remote passage a pale hoard stumbles awake, teasing eyes open, the turret responds, all in[sidious], sheets of ardor wrap his pallid castle, steady victory once conscious, looming plains pumping brittle legs, ruling years wasted, like reading three paragraphs and absorbing none of it, puffy roof, no match, infrared afoot, lowly’s hoop tracking all, imposed tatters flooding obscure secrets, once known, now osedax silt, assault n’ peppering to fuel’s baron, adobe soundscapes, pittance, saliva v. lacrima, injunction denied. no flawed distinction to scratch more attentive spines, those who scribe of traitor chic, chips off lofty pane, shall, lung to courtyard, drain alongside his northbound craters, their cradles sway, one day’s ferry ride on the river pricks, cheap brandy nestled in the velvet swarm, amassing in support of the right to arm burdens.
real freedom, the daughter of Sinh Huy and Kerouac, bowed legs dragging knowledgeable folds, earlobe dimples, vane nodes to recognition’s wink, neural connections flourish among husks, layered clogs. anticipating function like sensing imminent gloom as your eyes suck the wrinkles of a good novel. pneumatic blonde aleboarding over eager minds strapped to circus’ board, corruption’s portmanteau. pageantry leaning against stuccoed façade, on knees and delinquent payments of palsy policy, propagated through grating squawks of complacent charlatans, give me your wretched refuse, but keep crawling, send these to me, on paper, but the dreamsicle shall never drip aside, from his golden door

What’s this? Munir commanded his tongue to feel around for damage to his mouth. Only one loose tooth, as far as he could tell. His tongue dislodged some rice he had eaten at the party. Late night, he and his friends had overcooked some timmam wa marga. Decades of ‘humanitarian’ sanctions and war hadn’t succeeded in pestling their mood.

Hours gave way to fits of dozing. The elderly man came and went. Munir had great difficulty separating the man’s voice from his own. The hard truth soothes like the running trail. Do not fight the trail. Rather, take what the trail offers you. As you repeat the advice of your know-it-all neighbor (easy, light, easy, light), you’re grateful when his words slip away to reveal an effortless serenity. Smooth pace and rapidity are a reinvigorating rinse, unforeseen with your eyes locked on the pavement. We embrace the runner’s contractions, encouraging connection between empathy and struggle. Giving Resistance a new name throughout the struggling world, we hug fatigue, and march towards liberation.
Majid battered himself on a street corner he had never seen before. *I will return soon and ask – no, demand! – that the neighbors help me.* Such thoughts provided hope with the effectiveness of white bread. A rapid release of simple energy and then crash, drop. Reality.

*What is happiness? Getting the job done? I am physically incapable of challenging the invaders. But how do I know which authority to trust? They’ve all got horrible track records. What is authority? Unoriginal asses, like a pile of life experts who equate a million dollars with success.*

He sank lower.

*The only forces with far-reaching influence are gravity and magnetism, right? And the Occupation is neither of these. Is this intuition? Maybe intuition is wrong. We preserve and expand scientific knowledge throughout the ages. Hope in the seen. Hundreds of billions of stars in our galaxy, billions of galaxies in sky’s iris, a vastness beyond vision, beyond my understanding. Subordinate bilingual, he looked inward when words miscarried. Words lose me, I lose them. And we’ll do it again.*

He sank lower. *Munir is so much better than I am at evading the Occupation’s hordes. How many universes are there? Will light from most of them ever reach us? Is it only a deception? The U.S. government, a universe unto itself. Existing in inflated, lavish perception. USA, the vulnerable narcissist. It lies to itself, lying to paint a good picture. Just like USA is emotionally incapable of controlling the nuclear weapon technology it has created, so too will humans, us, kill ourselves. Or will there be a last minute rescue? Like Sacajawea saving Lewis’ journal, someone will help pull the imperial plug at the last minute? Dumbass. That comparison doesn’t make sense. Empire itself, convoluted administration, destined only to get bigger and thicker, killing people the decision-makers can’t see, according to rules we aren’t allowed to access. This. Is. Kafka.*

He sank lower, the sink a novel direction. *We will harden. Elephants survive drought when they’re young,*
recognize signs of onset of drought later in adulthood. Likewise, we Iraqis will survive these times; encode our experiences not subconsciously in mere synapses and neurons, but through oral histories and perhaps local traditions. We will harden. We will rise.

The more I read, the more I view the universe with awe. That alone is why I can’t entertain you, suicide. Perhaps some other time.

Greyriver Six had told the story a hundred times. Each time, he honed the delivery and added some flavor. He eyed Bennett who was seated across the sticky round table.

He’s digging it, Greyriver Six thought.

The cookie cutter break room reminded Bennett of a doctor’s office. He looked around as Greyriver Six eased back in his chair. A fresh flat screen television adorned the wall, a slide show of one unit’s fitness schedule snailing across.

“I was nine stories up,” he continued. Here’s where his story differed depending on the audience. When he told the story to members of the armed forces, DOD contractors, civilians, or anyone else he wanted to impress, he usually started with the truth: six Asymmetric Warfare Group members had placed IED components around town the night before, then they waited in their perches to see who would pick up the parts. ‘If you place it, they will come’ was their spirited motto. Those who picked up segments, wires, or casings were immediately shot dead. Since his break room company was an impassive Israeli veteran of 2006’s July War, Greyriver Six embellished a bit.

Greyriver Six continued. “So this sand-nig on a moped was working transportation for some of the local jihadi fuckers. He would ferry dudes and supplies around. We relayed to the Creech folk who operated the UAVs above so they could mark him early on.”

This guy sucks, Bennett judged. “You know we pioneered a lot of that?” Bennett asked as he stood up.
The back of his knees deftly parked his chair in the corner.

“A lotta what?” Greyriver Six asked, tossing his Styrofoam cup in the trash.

Bennett grabbed a dark blue envelope off the table.

“Unmanned aircraft. We were the first,” the Israeli clarified, permitting himself a humble brag as they walked out of the break room.

“For real? I had no idea.”

“Do you know much about our conflict?” Bennett asked.

“With the Pakistanis?”

“The Palestinians,” corrected Bennett.

“Not really,” Greyriver Six replied, letting Bennett walk ahead as they rounded a bend.

Bennett paused in the hallway, stepping aside so more foot traffic could pass. “Tell me more,” he encouraged, instinctively hoping Six would let some useful nugget slip that Bennett could use to build a clearer picture of Greyriver operations. The easier to manipulate you, my dear.

“There’s not much more to it. I eliminated Moped Mike once we had mapped his routes and Gordon had cracked his cell,” said Greyriver Six, trying to appear as cool as possible.

“How far was the shot?” Bennett asked.

“Couldn’t have been more than seven hundred yards,” Greyriver said, leaning against the wall.

“Did you collect any bodies?” Bennett probed.

“Yeah, we sent a Humvee to the kill site about an hour later. Had eyes on the whole time. Nobody had disturbed the area in the meantime.”

Bennett weighed the accuracy of his profile of Greyriver Six as the mercenary spoke. Let’s see. Deep down he fears he has gotten out of the Marine Corp too early, that his peak days are behind him. He took part in the 2004 assaults on Fallujah and a fleeting few weeks leading the Asymmetric Warfare Group in the same city during 2005. Accurate so far. What can I add? More importantly, how can I leverage what I know to pressure
“Find anything noteworthy?” Bennett asked.

“It was about two-thirty in the morning. We were exhausted. We were bumping across an alley when an IED went off. We lost three men. I still keep in touch with one of the wives. Anyway, it was a mess. Three of us couldn’t fit in the evac, so we piled into a two-seater compact, some European shitbox, and did our best to get back to base,” Greyriver Six regaled. He made a mental note to use the same phrasing when he told the story next.

“Any update on Nisour Square?” Bennett asked.

A gaggle of in-processing uniformed military members, mostly airmen and seamen, walked past.

“No,” Greyriver Six said, hanging his head. “I volunteered to go as part of our reinforcements, but headquarters denied my request.”

“You guys are pretty sensitive about causing civilian deaths, huh?”

“Tell me about it.”

“It’ll pass.”

Bennett paused and stared down at the wall socket. He seemed to be a thousand miles away. Greyriver Six coughed to get Bennett’s attention, and decided to amp up his tale.

“Problem was, we were packed in like sardines. And the driver, my buddy Terry, had no fucking clue how to drive stick shift. I think we were in third gear the whole time. Fine by me, though. We got back to base safe,” Greyriver Six concluded.

Bennett smiled politely.

Greyriver hit the story’s finale. “There were a couple of times I drove with my left leg while Terry applied a tourniquet to his right.”

Bennett patted him on the meaty shoulder in approval.

“You ever make it to the west coast?” Greyriver Six asked. He thought about his favorite bar back home, McR’s, and the final night he had spent there before this deployment. He recalled his favorite female bartender,
whose politics happened to rest outside the narrow Democrat/Republican paradigm, questioning him gently about his beliefs. Six had felt cornered and reacted instinctively by pointing to his physical prowess, once proven on Onslow Beach, and his military sacrifice. These shields, very respectable in U.S. society, stifled any further questions. He had taken note.


“I am fortunate to have solid support back home. My wife and kid are champs. I couldn’t have done it without them. They’ve dealt with my issues and always stuck beside...” Greyriver Six stopped this line of thought abruptly when he saw Ignacio walking down the hall towards him.

“Hey puss-bag!” Greyriver Six’s voice filled the hallway. “Paperwork came back. Your request to build a faggoty community garden was approved.” Greyriver Six tossed a shoulder into Ignacio as he walked by.

Calmly registering the man’s big brown eyes and buzz cut, Ignacio appraised his foe. A product of mass production of special operations forces. He never could’ve contended with my generation. Their matching grey polo shirts made no difference to Greyriver Six. Ignacio nodded politely to the unbearable Israeli liaison, carrying a dark blue envelope, strutting alongside Six. Bennett was still snickering indulgently at Six’s comment. It felt like a month since Ignacio had picked Bennett up from the airport. How is that prick even allowed in here? Ignacio wondered. I thought the SCIF was only for TS/SCI squirrels and a few Greyriver staff. Ignacio met Six’s stare. I know I’m underplaying my skills and masking my past, but even so, he’s pretty oblivious, Ignacio glimmered inside.

The Israeli stated, “Let’s go.”

Greyriver Six followed like a puppy. His gait – exaggerated swagger and lats spread like eagle wings – immediately disrupted hallway traffic.

As he walked in the opposite direction, Ignacio considered his place in today’s saga.
We always count on military power. We? Who am I kidding? The U.S. government always counts on military power. They fall back on the most convenient double standard: their political violence is legit, but non-state political violence is not.

You interfere in the affairs of a nation thousands of miles away? That’s political, you fuck. You’re gonna get violence shoved right back in your face.

Yet our government doubled down again and again. Opting for preemptory war, we remove whomever we want from power and flood the place with our neoliberal economic bullshit. And so they slog along sending more and more of our sons and daughters to die abroad, killing thousands more than we lose.

We don’t have the wisdom – or don’t listen to the wisdom – to control the region. Now they’re pushing COIN. What bullshit. It’s more of a PR coup than a strategy. It will just extend the drag. Even if it were an effective strategy, do they really think some of Uncle Sam’s misguided children can pull that off? The generals will continue to claim progress, repeating the word over and over again, dressing up any ounce of good news in fancy stockings.

They leap at the chance to attack regional gangs who claim allegiance to bigger credibility. Why not implement policies that provide jobs and keep youth employed? Neoliberalism’s demand for outsourcing, automation, privatization, and so-called market solutions sure as hell won’t help.

Why not deal with our own extremists first? We act as if racism, rapacious capitalists, pollution, our own religious extremism, and mass poverty are not existential threats at home.

“Our entire presence here is bullshit!” Ignacio proclaimed loudly in the hallway. A few passersby laughed. No one thought he was serious.

Ignacio marched, almost pranced, on his way. He paused in the corner, put his back on the wall, and looked through a bubbly window into the SCIF’s center workspace. He looked down at his t-shirt, the standard-issue Greyriver polo. He flicked a stray hair that was
clinging to the company’s ashen logo, ironed carefully on the left breast.

“So simple, yet so grave,” Ignacio said. Where’s Andrea?

Chapter Seven

What is that creepy crawly? Majid thought. Dry air pushing and pulling at his lips, Majid tried to distract himself by focusing on a tiny worm wiggling patiently between the cracks of the bakery’s flooring.

The baker, Mr. Khabbaz, appreciated his craft. He took his time preparing each order, no matter how simple or routine. Take your time, Majid thought. What an expression. How can anyone take time? Majid nodded, silently thanking the kind apprentice who had taken his order; the baker’s diligence had afforded him the headspace to slink back into earlier thoughts, to try and cope with hopelessness.

If I don’t think of time as relative, then billions of our years could make me feel pretty hopeless about life’s possibilities. But then Majid countered, Yes, but all life is connected across the universe and billions of our years could be the blink of an eye or a quick breeze across a different dent in the universal map. Definitely a welcomed relief. Majid stepped back. The queue outside bled into a disorderly herd of customers inside.

Mr. Khabbaz looked up from his current task, kneading the thinnest strand of dough. His attention to the littlest detail usually seemed wasteful and whimsical to Majid’s untrained eye, but today Majid allowed himself to soak in Mr. Khabbaz’s subtle leadership. Majid didn’t know much about Khabbaz, but he knew he was a hell of a leader. Majid didn’t know that a Zionist militia had kicked Khabbaz out of his home in January 1947; the Khabbaz family (and all of their neighbors) was marched out of town at gunpoint, given barely enough time to grab the deed to their home, some Mandate paperwork, and a pocketful of coins. He didn’t know about the grief that rested deeply in the silt of Khabbaz’ soul; the baker’s newborn sister had not survived the journey to Baghdad.
from their village south of Haifa. Khabbaz’ aunt who lived in central Baghdad had gladly opened her doors to the refugees. Not wanting to become a burden on his relatives, Khabbaz, père, a doctor by trade, immediately went to work as a baker’s apprentice. Humbling, indeed, but he was one of the lucky ones; many hadn’t survived the Zionist onslaught. His new bedroom in Baghdad, his cousin’s studio a week earlier, had shared a wall with their Jewish neighbors. The neighbors condemned Ben-Gurion’s actions and refused to immigrate to the nascent Zionist state. Out of innate generosity, the neighbors invited the Khabbaz family over for dinner every week.

Majid knew none of this; all he knew was Khabbaz, fils, loved his job. Mr. Khabbaz found pleasure everywhere he looked: a customer’s “thank you”; the morning shams peeking through the opposing alleyway as he opened up shop; the privilege of good health; the knowledge he picked up from each and every customer; and the accomplishment of a hard day’s work. But mostly Khabbaz loved being a bright light in the average person’s day.

Majid watched Khabbaz get to work on a simple kanafa recipe. The baker’s assistants fluttered back and forth. Khabbaz, content knowing he’d never match the kanafa he tasted one summer in Nablus, settled into a groove as two customers began arguing near the entrance. Professionals across trades – engineering, law, poetry, and medicine – stood poised to interject.

“The left hasn’t even tried resisting neoliberalism.”

“Yes, neoliberalism is unrelenting. So must, too, be our resistance.”

“The status quo is all about style over substance, ego and pomp over actual groundwork.”

“You’re right. It’s a draining performance.”

“Helps a few careers along the way, too.”

“Yes. Neoliberal capitalism provides some people with career opportunities. Jobs for frauds, if you will.”

_We’re let down by the left, crushed by the right_, Majid told himself as he listened. _Didn’t Professor Griff say that? The last to find a place and race... unite to fight for_
peace in every race. Did I say that correctly? Majid asked himself. Didn’t I? I dunno. Munir would know...

“There are only two amazing parts of the Occupation’s stateside war machine: its impressive logistics and its unmatched ability to convince the majority of U.S. Americans that it is a global force of good, as the Pentagon’s public relations partners might say.” The man’s verbal parade left a few of his peers speechless.

Majid locked eyes with the familiar face.

“Majid?”

“Doctor Hassan?”

“My, how you’ve grown!”

“Thank you, Professor. Long time, no see!” Majid remembered him fondly. A generous but mopey man, Professor Hassan, former chair of the Engineering Department at Baghdad University, was one of Munir’s old advisors. Almost half a century ago, Iraq’s university system was arguably one of the finest in southwest Asia, but decades of U.S. sanctions and wars had decimated its staff, faculty, and infrastructure. Majid had often accompanied Munir to the University, which sat at the western end of Al-Jadriya – an hour’s walk at a leisurely pace.

“How’s Munir? Still dragging that skateboard around everywhere?”

Majid nodded and smiled, putting up his best façade to avoid discussing Munir’s potential fate with Professor Hassan. He glanced left. Khabbaz’s kanafa was gleaming.

“Still one of the smartest students I’ve ever had.”

“Thank you,” Majid replied, immediately wishing he had chosen different words. Munir had started his dissertation on how U.S. government bureaucracy – signs, paperwork, road markings, insignia, and so on – are a direct byproduct of the country’s imperial roots. In his view, not only did imperialism provide huge, direct economic benefits, but it also refined procedures, record keeping, and visual indexes needed to keep subjugated populations in line. The Professor best remembered
Munir for his essay comparing the Occupation of Iraq to advertisements’ occupation of the American mind.

“You’re troubled,” Professor Hassan said with a flare of his nostrils.

Majid opened his mouth to object, but Hassan cut him off.

“I’ll just say this and then depart. It’s never too late to change your mind about your journey. Your actions and thoughts can transform any experience, no matter how rough. I know the Occupation has shredded much of our community, but don’t hesitate to reach out. To me and others. We are here.”

With a tame, almost vacant look – halfway between pale fright and stifling a yawn – Hassan left the bakery and quickly vanished into the city’s bustle.

Majid stood there, alone. What just happened?

“Hard work, groundwork, needs to seriously damage those in power, otherwise nothing will change.”

Majid soon realized the customers were not arguing. Rather, they were speaking to demonstrate their knowledge and ruin their perceived inability to positively affect change.

“While empowering the downtrodden...”

“Yes, while empowering the downtrodden...”

“In the meantime, the left is just treading water.”

Majid adjusted the papers between his elbow and torso.

“Shit, neoliberalism is pretty fucking resilient. It’s an uphill battle,” one observer chimed in.

“More. It’s a necessity. It’s a mandatory war.”

“Corporations and their ferocious public relations have won the first battles. They've successfully convinced most people that capitalism benefits them, even though it makes them miserable, compensates them poorly, convines them to work non-stop, to buy products they don’t need...”

“...to spend their best years in a cubicle or a humble job,” the shorter man cut in. “To distract them with corporate-owned sports spectacles, to soak them in mindless entertainment, to disconnect them from nature
and the one planet they've got, to use corporate talking points in their daily life...”

“Curse them...”

“Welcome to profit-over-people governance.”

These last words dashed into Majid’s ears as he grabbed his order, thanked Mr. Khabbaz tenderly, and left the shop. He took four steps when explosions rocked.

“You belong here,” Andrea whispered to herself as she glided across the carpet into the humming amalgamation of staff and bureaucrats, coats and ties, khaki slacks and polo shirts, headsets and coffee mugs, and recycled jokes and tired eyes. The inescapable lingo hit Andrea like a ton of buffoonery: acquisition, advise & assist, agile development, assault support, branding, burn bag, CODEL, customer relationship, dust-off, embed, force projection, hardened site, high demand asset, high speed, high value target, kinetic, surge, sunsetting, voluntold. Transient pawns flexed and nudged around pseudo-intellectual turf, trying to feel relevant to the machinery of war.

“Hey, Bob,” she said with a nod. Bob, an analyst who worked directly under the Station Chief, was reclining in his black ergonomic chair, tapping his computer monitor with a giant eraser, and whistling along to the opening theme of a local Arabic news station. Andrea liked Bob because he was a rare breed, an analyst actually fluent in his target’s language. CIA’s last internal audit had noted that most analysts didn’t speak a second language, and those who did were rarely fluent.

Andrea dragged her fingers along the cubicles’ fibrous dividers as she waded deeper into the den. Bob smiled and waved as she passed in front of his desk. His whistle’s pitch jumped and dropped in synch with the rise and fall of his hand.

She paused near the room’s core – three concentric circles of filing cabinets. She looked around quickly. Everyone was either bullshitting in small groups or focusing on the screens in front of them. Could it be this easy? It should. I work here, she encouraged. I’ll go for...
the root copies later, she planned silently as she pointed her toes outward, rotated her hips back, and bent her knees. The cabinet file markers ticked off in front of her eyes as she lowered herself down.

All muscles engaged – back, gluts, obliques, quads, hammies – she paused. Hips lower than knees, she hovered, eased opened the targeted drawer, and pinched a couple folders. The hanging files looked lonely as Andrea secured the cabinet, drove through her heels, and stood up fully. The folders were already tucked away. She leaned over an empty workstation and looked busy. After a moment, she glanced around, unable to notice any change in the grist’s behavior.

She turned to walk out. She managed to tune out the swell of lingo from the SCIF chatterboxes. She passed Bob’s desk again. She waved. He was glaring at a stack of files next to him. He unplugged his headset, waved back, and turned up the newscast:

“... At least seventeen killed, twenty injured. Women and children are among the dead. Our initial investigation concludes that machine guns, sniper rifles, and grenade launchers were among the mercenaries’ weapons. A spokesperson for the company has claimed the convoy didn’t stop when ordered. Our correspondent is on the scene.”

Bob grabbed the top file from the stack and opened it dreadfully slowly.

“Thank you, Zaina. I’m here with eyewitnesses to yesterday’s massacre.
Let’s hear what they have to say.”
Voices of the people surged.
“They beat us, they run us over.”
“They ram our cars. They shoot us randomly. This is no different.”
“What would the Americans do in our shoes? What if a foreign country invaded Washington D.C. and behaved the same way? They’d fight.”
“They’ll never allow these monsters to enter our courts. You wait and see.”
“Self-defense? How can invading mercenaries ever be acting in self-defense?!”

Harsh certainty and gentle steps guided Andrea out of the SCIF. Bob’s head faced the file in front of him, but his eyes followed Andrea all the way to the exit.

Lieutenant Colonel Metzger entered the main conference room without a sound. He sat down quietly in the back of the room. Senator Reed didn’t notice Metzger enter. The Senator was sitting on the table’s left side, one chair back from the front, eyes forward. Eight-ounce plastic water bottles were scattered about the broad mahogany conference table. Lieutenant General Malcolm Keaton paced powerfully along the front wall in his Army Service Uniform. A digital slideshow presentation glowed behind him, just above the Multi-National Force-Iraq seal. He loomed tall and rigid. His face shined a pasty pink whenever he walked into the projector’s glow. His gelled comb-over would also light up, but his impeccable uniform never budged.

Metzger scooted his chair to abut the corner snugly. He placed a thick grey folder on his lap and drew a black pen from his sleeve. He looked up in time to see the General’s ribbon rack flash a rainbow soup of decorations. Three silver stars nestled comfortably on each shoulder, craving a fourth companion.

“Mine is a question of strategy, not tactics,” Senator Reed said, reclining slightly in his stately chair.

“I’m all ears,” General Keaton said, slowing his pace to a friendly stroll.

“This surge in troop numbers, how is it, how much longer do you think it’ll last?” Reed stammered.

Having twice read the profile his PSYOPS team had prepared on Senator Reed, General Keaton was ready with an agreeable response. “This commitment, our commitment, is not open ended, Senator,” General Keaton began. He knew Reed supported the surge and had a powerful position on the relevant appropriations committee. He told Reed what Reed wanted to hear.

“First of all, I credit the troops and the sacrifice they’ve
made to get us to where we are today. I can honestly say we have the finest fighting force in the history of warfare,” General Keaton proclaimed.

“I need specifics, General,” Senator Reed replied formulaically. Some of the financing for his last Senatorial campaign had come from the U.S. war industry, so he didn’t have too much wiggle room. He did, however, need to make a show of deep concern.

“The increase in troop levels is working, and it’s working well,” the General continued, his left eye wider than his right. “Our numbers are making a huge difference in multiple provinces.” He ignored how CIA and the Pentagon had been paying off Sunni tribes to stop shooting U.S. troops and to start fighting USA’s enemy-of-the-day.

Lieutenant Colonel Metzger finished writing a comment in the margins of his copy of Reed’s profile and then looked up. Two other PSYOPS officers and one senior enlisted soldier sat around the room, away from the conference table. They had received their orders to create a profile on Senator Reed one week ago. Verbal orders, never leaving a paper trail. It had been a tough assignment, but Metzger felt they had succeeded.

“And how far along are the negotiations for the next Status of Forces Agreement?” Reed piped up, interrupting Keaton.

Lieutenant General Keaton was ready. He knew his audience, so he hit the word “progress” on the head twelve times in one long slide-filled answer. “Progress,” the General asserted, “is being made.” His grey blue eyes pricked coldly around the room.

“The patience of the United States Congress is not limitless,” Reed noted. “At some point local forces will have to take the lead.”

Via unscrupulous means, the soldiers who had compiled Reed’s PSYOPS profile had gathered that the Senator was preparing to retire from public service soon and not run for re-election next fall, information the Senator had only shared with his wife. No matter. Armed with this information, General Keaton promised Senator Reed what he wanted: a timetable for phased
withdrawal. “We agree, Senator. And thank you for bringing that up,” General Keaton stated with a smile. “We very much appreciate the patience of the Senate, the House, and all your constituents back home. We are a grateful fighting force and we know you are a grateful nation. Our troop strength in Iraq will peak this month and we will begin withdrawing combat forces this winter. That we promise you,” the General crooned. “All we need is your commitment to giving the troops what they need to get the job done.”

“Time?”

“Time, funding, and opportunity, respectfully,” General Keaton said, quick with his prepackaged responses.

Lieutenant Colonel Metzger thought, We’re getting pretty good at this. Senator Reed’s sessions have gone much smoother than the last Representative, not to mention those pesky NATO officials and the think tank crowd earlier this month.

Thanks to the work of Lieutenant Colonel Metzger, Major Cook, and others, General Keaton knew that troop morale was one of Senator Reed’s priority issues. Keaton concluded, “I want to assure you, Senator, that we’ve done everything in our power to provide the men and women who serve our country so selflessly here in Iraq with the highest quality of life while they’re over here.”

Senator Reed nodded. Keaton explained the latest and greatest Morale, Welfare, and Recreation provisions. Reed’s eyes perked up when Keaton mentioned salsa night at Balad Air Base.

“Oh, we’ve got it here too!” Keaton said, reeling Reed in.

“Nice work, Major Cook,” Metzger whispered to himself, knowing the Major had put in many extra hours combing open source and even a bit of classified information in order to refine their profile of Senator Reed.

Metzger made one final notation, slipped his pen back into his sleeve, closed his folder, and stood up.
Mission success, he thought with a loud crack of his neck. We’ve got Reed’s backing. Funding incoming.

Reed affirmed, “Well, you’ve got my support, General.” He extended his right hand.

“That’s great news, sir. Great news. Let’s meet again, Senator, before you leave,” General Keaton said, accepting Senator Reed’s warm handshake. Reed rose from his chair as they shook hands vigorously.

“Absolutely, General. How about tomorrow morning?” They walked together toward the conference room door. “I’ve got a few more meetings in the afternoon before I fly out tomorrow night.”

Metzger positioned himself by the door.

“Sounds great, Senator,” the General replied, continuing to shake Reed’s hand. “Same location if you don’t mind.”

“Excellent,” Senator Reed stated.

“Right this war, sir,” Lieutenant Colonel Metzger said, taking the reins from the General. He stepped in to guide the Senator and his two aides down to the courtyard. “Right this way.”

Senator Reed didn’t notice Metzger’s slip of the tongue. Apparently General Keaton didn’t notice either. The conference room door closed quietly behind the delegation.

A car bomb two blocks away isn’t going to stop me.

Majid dipped across the street clutching his box of date cookies in one hand, manuscript tucked under his armpit, while warding off cars with his other hand. A U.S. Army HMMWV ground by. Majid averted his gaze like a bruised wolf.

He reached the other side of the street and sat down on one of two plastic chairs set up outside a desolate shop. He looked inside. No sign of the shop owner. He could never tell what the store sold, could never discern what type of product was on the dusty shelves.
Across from him, his opponent wiggled back and forth – left, right, left – bending unnaturally in the middle of his spine, grinning widely.

Majid’s eyebrows partially obscured his opponent’s smile. Head down, Majid had forced his gaze through his brow, challenging his foe. Majid felt physically comfortable, but mentally... his best chess performance was nowhere to be seen. His mind was focused on Munir and how to find him.

```
e4      Nc6
Nf3     d5
Bd3     Nf6
```

His opponent, an eternally patient, elderly cotton-ball of a man named Yahia, stopped smiling as soon as Majid made eye contact. This playful discursion – maintaining opposing demeanors – was one of the many inside jokes they had developed over many matches.

A brief breeze greeted them both. That unexpected hello and the canopy’s generous shade cooled Majid’s body.

Curling his foot underneath the plastic chair, Majid left the patient sun alone, contemplated his next move, and asked, “What would you do if you—?”

“Who have you lost?” Yahia inquired slowly, assertively.

“Pardon me?”
“You’ve lost someone. Someone dear.”
Majid nodded. He rolled up the manuscript and placed it under his right thigh.
Yahia nodded back.

```
exd5     Qxd5
```

Majid glanced up, caught the elderly man nibbling his ghutra, and tucked his head toward the board – scruffy neck to damp chest.

Mutual respect for their shared peace had brought Yahia and Majid closer over months of matches.
They let shared peace settle once more. Honks and horns detoured around their bubble as the minutes flew. Majid opened his box of date cookies. “Treat?” he offered.

Yahia plucked a date cookie in the blink of an eye.

\[
\begin{align*}
Nc3 & \quad Qh5 \\
O-0 & \quad Bg4
\end{align*}
\]

Majid turned left, cracking his back slightly.

\[
\begin{align*}
h3 & \quad Ne5
\end{align*}
\]

Another HMMWV ground by, taking a parked car’s sideview mirror with it.

“Them?” Yahia asked, gesturing slightly, almost indiscernibly, to the grimy vehicle.

\[
\begin{align*}
hxg4 & \quad Nfxg4 \\
Nxe5 & \quad Qh2#
\end{align*}
\]

Majid nodded. He blinked rapidly in an attempt to forestall any flood.

Majid’s shah fell.

“Damn, we had a hell of a time, didn’t we?!” the elderly man exclaimed, catching Majid off guard.

Majid leaned back in exaggerated sluggishness.

“We had a damn good time, didn’t we?” Yahia repeated.

He pounded Majid on the shoulder, a hard knock for any age. Majid smiled, dimmed his eyelids, and pounded the elderly man back at comparable strength, not wanting to offend him by undercompensating.

“Great time,” Majid replied. He meant it, too.

Whenever they played, it drew out nothing but smiles.

“Look,” Yahia began, suddenly serious. “What do you know about the U.S. war in Vietnam?”

Majid cocked his head.

“What do you know about the Americans’ war in Vietnam?” he repeated. He motioned for Majid to surrender the box of date cookies.
Majid handed over the box. He thought first, then spoke. “I know the bombing of Laos was a war crime. I know—”.

“Was the bombing of North Vietnam not a war crime?” Yahia interrupted.

“Yes,” Majid responded, drawing out the vowel in a slow drawl.

“You don't sound very sure,” Yahia observed.

“No, by any definition it was a war crime,” Majid said, throwing some confidence into his voice.

“Tell me,” Yahia guided, between bites.

“They bomb from above, sometimes launching missiles from the horizon. These weapons, the political use of violence, is classic terrorism,” Majid noted.

Yahia clicked his tongue.

“What?” Majid asked.

“What will their response be?”

“To what?”

“To your assertions,” Yahia clarified.

“Hmm,” Majid said. He placed his right arm in front of his chest and pulled his upper arm towards his body, stretching the shoulder muscles. “They’d laugh me out of the room. They’d claim states cannot commit terrorism.”

“So about all the dead? All those they murder?”

Majid exhaled and switched arms, stretching his left shoulder.

Yahia tossed a pillow at Majid, who cut his stretch short in order to catch the pillow.

Where the hell did he get a pillow from?

“It’s one of my favorites,” Yahia said, forehead bowing to the fluffy green cube. “Do any of their political statements in support of their violence differ today?”

Yahia asked, offering the conversation a course correction.

“Not really,” Majid said. “Although I haven’t really been paying attention to their press conferences or public relations.”

“What else do you know about the U.S. presence in southwest Asia?” Yahia questioned.

“Southwest?” Majid asked.
“Pardon,” Yahia said with a chuckle. “Southeast,” he corrected.

Majid smiled. “I know the U.S. government supported the French effort long before Dien Bien Phu.”

“Liberty, equality, fraternity,” Yahia said, a smirk forcing its way forth. Majid frowned out of habit.

Majid leaned to the side, testing the might of the plastic chair. The green pillow disappeared under his left flank.

Yahia leaned forward and began resetting the chessboard. Majid took care of his half.

“What is this place?” Majid asked. For the first time in his dealings with Yahia, Majid was happy to break the silence.

Yahia chewed his lower lip. He finished arranging his side of the chessboard, leaving the queen’s square empty. He cracked his knuckles loudly, the queen appearing in his palms.

“Seven million,” Yahia said. He coughed.

Majid adjusted his rook. “Gotta face forward,” he said. “What’s seven million?”

“Guess.”

“U.S. tax dollars spent in Iraq every hour?” Majid suggested without a thought. He then looked for the box of dates, but couldn’t locate its hiding place.

“Perhaps, but not the figure I had in mind,” Yahia noted.

“Does it have something to do with the Zionist Entity? Isn’t their population around there?”

“Perhaps, but still not what I was aiming for,” Yahia said, adjusting his nibble to a different portion of his lower lip.

“I don’t know,” Majid said, curiosity taking hold.

“Tons of bombs dropped.”

“On Vietnam?”

“During USA’s open involvement, yes.”

“Does that include Laos? Cambodia?”

“I don’t think so.” Yahia coughed. “Another game?” He tossed his queen into Majid’s lap.

“No, thank you. I should get going.” He pictured Munir dancing, baggy sweatpants swinging wildly. Majid
began to stand up, pausing as he leaned forward, before he even was able to push off the plastic chair. “How...?”
“Yes?”
Majid leaned back a bit. “How do we convince them? Empire, I mean. How do we convince them to get out?”
Yahia smiled, leaving his lip in the lurch. “Do we?”
Majid didn’t move, still hovering halfway off the chair.
“How do you negotiate with your oppressor, let alone convince him of...” Yahia trailed off, content letting screeching brakes drown out his words.
Majid sat back, straighter. The green pillow popped out. He tugged it behind him, cushioning the manuscript.
“How do you normally convince someone?” Yahia asked.
Majid thought of his arguments with Munir.
“I dunno,” Majid said. “I’m usually the asshole in most arguments.”
“Then how does your counterpart convince you?”
Majid considered Munir’s patience. More patient than I ever gave him credit for.
“Well, he never attacks me. He always listens carefully. I guess he always shows me respect, even when my argument sucks.”
“He keeps emotions out of it,” Yahia suggested.
“Indeed,” Majid confirmed. “He always made sure to...” Majid cleared his throat. “He always made sure to let me know that my opinions were not under attack.”
“He made sure not to attack your underlying worldview,” Yahia rephrased.
“Exactly.” Majid could see where Yahia was headed.
“Do you think these techniques will work on an Empire that ignores its own history?” Yahia asked.
Majid shifted his feet and looked down at the queen in his lap.
Yahia rose and entered the store. “Bathroom!” he yelled from inside.

He stopped there. That was enough. He knew the answer. He inhaled and tried to clear his mind. He sat higher in his chair. Inhale, exhale. He sat higher, doing his best to engage muscles of which he was unaware. Inhale, exhale.

Yahia returned quietly. He sat down, nibbling on his ghutra once more.


“They only understand violence,” Majid said with a sigh.

Yahia smiled, genuinely. Majid smiled, beginning to envision a clear, kind fate.

“They often draw the wrong lessons from defeat.” Majid sighed again. “But they only understand violence.” Yahia nodded. He adjusted his agal and placed the wet portion of his ghutra on his right shoulder.

“So what are the lessons?” Yahia prodded.

“As I see it? In no particular order, they use pretexts to help them enter their wars and they use brutality throughout,” Majid said, wading hesitantly around the core issue.

“But what does all of this behavior point to?” Yahia corralled.

“The industry,” Majid bullseyed.

“Exactly,” Yahia said, unable to control a sigh of exhilaration.

“They’ll never kick the war habit until they dismantle the enormous U.S. war industry.”

“And?”

“ Their experts will blame everything under the sun to avoid blaming the war industry,” Majid said, rolling. *Surely, many others have come to a similar conclusion.*

“More,” Yahia demanded.
“Hmmm. Short-sighted politicians roaming the capital have full confidence in military measures or at least they pretend to, sometimes claiming that military action helps preserve U.S. credibility.”

“Yes!” Yahia shouted, jumping up like he had just defeated a grandmaster in chess. “And I’ll tell you what. U.S. fighters in general never know anything about the culture or history of the country they invade. Use this to your advantage.”

“Send lawyers, money, and guns,” Majid sang, unintentionally botching some lyrics he had heard the night before.

“Give me the final lesson,” Yahia ordered, sitting back down. His hip popped as he eased into the plastic seat.

“We cannot negotiate our way out from under their oppression,” Majid declared.

“Yes. Close.”

“They’ll never kick the war habit until they kick out their entrenched war industry.”

“Jackpot!” Yahia announced.

Majid laughed. “I already mentioned that. Checkmate,” Majid corrected, taking the reins. “Resistance works. Vietnam was a country with a relatively underdeveloped economy, ‘backward’ as Empire would say. With their tattered armed forces, the Vietnamese defeated the biggest and maddest military on the planet.”

“How?” Yahia said, trimming the sails for the final time.

“Because the people wanted it.”

Yahia mouthed, “We’re done here.”

Majid tossed the queen back in Yahia’s lap.

“When was the last time you visited the Vet?” Yahia inquired, his right eyebrow rising slowly.

“It’s been a while,” Majid said.

“Go again,” Yahia ordered, placing the queen back on the chessboard.

“I don’t even know anything about him. Plus, last time I went, he just rambled on and on about the merits of collecting aluminum cans every night before bed. How’s that going to help recover what I’ve lost?”
“Do you trust me?” Yahia said. “I mean, how many games have we played? Have I ever led you off course? Go.”


Majid leaned forward, astounded, as Yahia described an awesome life. The Vet, as he is now known, moved from Ba’qubah to Baghdad after high school in search of work. He parlayed his mother’s music lessons – she had taught him how to play ‘oud and tabla, providing synchronizing scaffolding for future diversity – into a nightly gig playing guitar in the lobby of the Palestine Hotel. Simple musical training had united different areas of his brain. Intra-sensory communication had flourished, pulsed, and cohered. Gray matter had thickened cortex’s path. White matter had buttressed corpus callosum. The book, the balm, and the banquet all benefitted. His caress and compass conjured some of the best orgasms between Isfahan and Damascus. A chance encounter with a kind benefactor, an Armenian ex-pat named Vark, encouraged the Vet to pursue university studies. The Vet’s natural flair for showmanship blended well with his love for books. Perceptual illusions held no sway over him. A teacher was born.

“God…” was all Majid could manage. Yahia smiled. “That’s only the tip of the iceberg.” “But he’s so… now,” Majid said, unsure of how to characterize the Vet’s demeanor. “He’s mellow, that’s for sure,” Yahia said, trying to fill in the blank.

Sunny forks had reached Majid’s other foot. He tucked it, too, underneath the plastic chair. Silence percolated Majid’s personal obligations.

“We had a damn good time,” Yahia stated, finally.

“Think of how many times a day you try to communicate something to people, they don’t understand it, and you’re forced to repeat yourself. Maybe that’s just what’s happening now in my brain? Like I could be a good chess player, but nobody up there is talking to each other,” Majid offered, pretending his random amiable excuse had any resonance.

Yahia smiled and leaned in for a hug.

Lost in the middle of his own music video en route to the Vet’s humble abode, Majid skipped over a puddle and scowled at its benzene sheen. *Fuckin’ fossil fuels,* his mind breathed. Landing a fairly impressive one-eighty on the puddle’s opposing bank, Majid straightened up, and stepped forward into three shadows.

“Oh, fuck,” Majid sighed. *Just keep your trap shut!* Majid’s mind yelped, freezing all other cerebral traffic. Majid whispered to himself, half pleading, half begging, “OK! OK?”

“Your sister has been slacking lately!” the first figure boomed.

Majid looked away, trying to find a pebble or a stray bottle cap on which he might fix his senses. A lone bead of sweat lunged down Majid’s spine, as if fleeing from his beet-red grey matter.


“Next time she comes home before sunrise, you kick her ass back out there. The dicks aren’t going to suck themselves.”

Majid blinked, feeling his chest turn to boney vomit. Two glooms ground forward, stalling the sun’s touch.

“What’s that?” the bulkiest gloom gestured to the manuscript tucked under Majid’s left arm.
Majid pivoted, rotating the left side of his body away from the dark. The three glooms reared up. Majid stiffened, bracing for impact. The cool ground rooted upwards to support him. A friend, indeed. Majid eased his eyes open, and reached unconsciously for Munir’s hand. “What just happened?” Majid wondered aloud. No glooms were in sight, only a U.S. military patrol squatting on the corner. 

Damn it! The tears ran gently down his cheeks. I miss him so fucking much! He longed for Munir’s firm grip. He’d even settle for the soft cotton of his t-shirt. Munir always did know how to pick the coziest tees. Majid stood, rooted, as the city swept by. His mind searched for Munir under the mid-day sun. No response.

Two utterances, among the words pinballing along Majid’s golden neuron bridge, pinged again and again: occupation and invasion, invasion and occupation, occupation and invasion, 01101111 01100011 01100011 01110101 01110000 01111001 and 01101001 01101110 0110110 01100001 01100100 01100101.

Majid’s Earth senses returned, snapping open. The afternoon sun burned around him.

CRACK!

The unforgiving butt of an M16A2 rifle slammed into Majid’s sternum. “You didn’t hear me, punk?!” a U.S. Marine sergeant screamed in Majid’s face. Majid fell to the ground. He looked up. He stared back, resigned to accept the incoming assault. “Get up, piece of shit haji!” Majid stared at the Marine’s weapon. They gave you those in Vietnam. How many of them jammed on you in the jungle? How many fellow Marine lives were lost? Still think the war industry cares about you?
“I said 'get up!’” the Marine sergeant screamed, motioning for his corporal to join him. The rest of his fire team took up defensive positions along the street. Majid eyed them quickly. One of them was black. Majid thought sullenly, *Oppressed stateside, exploited overseas.*

The sergeant and his corporal grabbed Majid by the armpits, lifting him far higher than necessary.

Majid coughed. His chest pulsed with each throb.

“They're everywhere. That’s what an occupation is. They’re in the government, the institutions, the legal system, the streets, the—” he muttered in Arabic.

The Marines threw Majid against a locksmith’s storefront.

“And here you are,” Majid commented. “What if I could summon and dismiss them at will?” Majid asked himself, hoping fantasy would provide him further distraction until the Marines let him go.

“Where are you headed?”

Majid shook his head.

“Where are you headed?!”

Majid followed his routine – *pretend you don’t know English, head down, submit.*

“Do you have any weapons on you?” the sergeant asked, patting him down.

The zip-ties seized Majid’s wrists before he could mutter something back in Arabic. He looked down and mouthed a few words to the friendly earth.

A HMMWV screeched to a halt. Two Marines dismounted and took up positions around the vehicle. A third with an enormous antennae dismounted and walked his domineering air over to the corporal.

“Who’s this haj?” the radioman asked in a deep southern brogue. He walked over to Majid, swept Majid’s knees out from under him, and set Majid efficiently on the ground. The soft landing surprised Majid. He wanted to inform the Marine that the corporal and sergeant had just picked him up, but he let that thought go.

Too late. The Marine had read the dissent written on Majid’s face.

“We’re here to spread democracy to this shithole, guy!”
Majid cringed as the Marine’s words uppercut him in the chin.
“You fucking owe us, bud,” a nearby sergeant yelled over, busy corralling two elderly Iraqi men away from the scene.
Majid retreated.
*People have dealt with far worse.*
*What’s that on my leg? I live in a zoo within a zoo.*
“It’s not that bad,” Majid tried to convince himself. He closed his eyes tighter. “Some people still have it worse. It’s all relative.”
The Marines’ boots stomped around him.
*Why was I born here at this time? What’s the purpose?*
*How many infants have been born and died while I’ve been here? Quit your bitching, Majid.*
Majid tried counting to ten, running out of tactics to remain in control. ... *nine ... ten ... one ... two ... What happened to using violence against them?*
A mitt grabbed him by the back of the neck.
“You’re free to go,” a stocky soldier told him, slapping him in the middle of the chest. His sternum ached. His heart ached more.

“Come in! Come in!” the Vet said.
“Thank you,” Majid said softly, happy to leave the damp staircase and enter the Vet’s tiny apartment.
“Been a while since I traveled this far west,” Majid said. He grabbed the bottom hem of his t-shirt and began airing out his sweaty chest and belly.
The Vet looked him up and down, learning much from Majid’s bloody lip, unkempt hair, and shabby clothes.
“How long did it take you to get here?” the Vet asked, shuffling behind Majid, grabbing him by the shoulders, and ushering him into the sitting area next to an open window overlooking the street.
*Pillows everywhere,* Majid observed.
The Vet’s apartment had no bed, stove, or electricity as far as Majid could tell. Just pillows.

“Almost an hour on foot.”

“In this heat? Impressive,” the Vet said. “Please. Sit.”

Majid took a seat among the flock of rainbow pillows. The Vet sat down across from Majid and lit a tiny cone of incense.

*Where’d the match come from?* Majid asked himself. He hadn’t seen a book of matches.

“You have a lovely home,” Majid said. “You’ve added some finishing touches since I was here last.”

Tapestries displaying multicolored fractal art covered the walls. Blues, greens, and reds splattered the ceiling, lending the tiny apartment an indescribable vastness. A thin wooden ladder rested against the wall by the door.

The Vet smiled. “I’d offer you some tea, but I just spent my last dinar on that pillow.”

Majid followed the Vet’s eyes to a brilliant crimson pillow resting in the nearest corner.

The Vet removed his prosthetic leg, reached his arm inside the hollow cavity, and pulled out a plastic bag.

“They don’t make ‘em like this anymore,” he wheezed, tapping his middle finger up and down the prosthetic.

_Faint echoes and friendly rhythms,* Majid vibed, picking up on the Vet’s infectious positivity. The Vet smiled at a pedestrian who walked past on the street below. The pedestrian looked up. The Vet’s smile widened.

_Like a flower constantly blooming,* Majid mused. Majid’s hippocampus wiggled cozily, suggesting the Vet resembled more of a beaming bud, ripe with purple flavonoids and inquisitive trichome.

“How be you?” the vet asked Majid.

“I am well.” Majid wanted to hug his rare soul.

“How are you, my friend?” Majid lofted the question back to the Vet.

The Vet ignored Majid’s question and instead asked about Majid’s health, family, and reading list. Music
bubbled up from the shop below. As he answered the Vet’s questions, Majid placed his palm on the dark purple rug that covered the tiny apartment, wall to wall. Cold, Majid felt. Chilled.

The Vet appraised the untouched chessboard built into the center of the table in front of them while rummaging around in his deep bag of proverbs. “In school they teach you the lesson, then test you. In life they test you, then teach the lesson,” the Vet finally stated.

“Truth,” Majid concurred. “You can say that again.”

The Vet arched his back and placed the knuckles of his right hand along his spine. He applied pressure slowly until a ripple of cracks spread up and down his vertebrae.

“Unnngh!” the Vet moaned pleasurably. I like this guy, Majid thought. “What’s your real—?” Majid stopped short.

The Vet was staring at him. Majid stared back. The Vet’s smile started from scratch and began to grow again. Has he lost his train of thought? Forgotten what he was going to say? Majid wondered, letting the silence fall like a cushion.

The Vet grabbed a pillow and fluffed it in his hands. He stopped and weighed it, balancing it on one finger.

“I presume you’re here for some life changing advice, eh? You show up, I guide you, and you leave enlightened. Is that it? That’s how it goes?”

Majid laughed sharply. He didn’t know what else to do.


The Vet stared out the window, waiting for someone to look up and meet his eyes. She did. Majid noticed a pattern. The longer the Vet made eye contact, the wider his smile became.

“Ahhh,” the Vet said, relaxing. He turned his sights on Majid. “For starters, before we pin down your
true purpose, we must pave the way with some general advice.”

Majid nodded. The hackles on his neck began to perk up.

“Be alert and present. Listen, reflect, and meditate. Do what you can to keep an eye on your mind. Be present and analyze, without freaking out.”

Majid continued to nod.

“Be kind to those who talk trash. Do your best to reinforce their positive traits. This will take time.”

“We’re talking locals, right? This doesn’t apply to the Occupation, right?”

“Right. Locals. That piece of advice helps particularly when rebuilding our shredded society.”

Majid’s nodding slowed.

“Do your best to keep an eye on what is brewing in your mind. This is extremely difficult. We’re all bad at this to some extent.”

Majid leaned in, elbows on knees and head on hands.

“Tame your own anger and wait. Wait like a lion in the grass.”

“Or like the Count of Monte Cristo,” Majid offered.

“Excellent. That’s even better, ya ibni.”

“Some of this is fairly specific to my case,” Majid observed.

The Vet said, “We paved quickly. Your specific circumstances, our circumstances in many ways, are intriguing.” The words rolled off his tongue. “But beware of the good news,” he advised.

“What do you mean?” Majid asked.

“It’s going to take work.”

“I know that,” Majid replied.

“I mean a lot of work. Years, patience, organizing, community,” the Vet clarified.

“Tell me. I’ve had a rough day. Tell me. Stop beating around the bush.”

The Vet straightened up. He appreciated Majid’s assertiveness. “Long war favors the people,” he instructed.
“Let me guess. I camouflage among the people. I remain flexible, light, and mobile.” Majid barely disguised his impatience. He longed for a revelatory piece of advice, and so far the Vet’s wisdom had not met his expectations.

“You do,” the Vet said with a hearty laugh.

Majid didn’t see the humor, although the mention of flexible mobility reminded him of Munir’s one-time obsession with Batman’s Hellbat armor. Frustrated, his mind digressed. The armor drains Batman’s metabolism, potentially killing him if he wears it too long. The U.S. war industry has drained U.S. society. Eventually they’ll rip it out? You’re reaching. Nothing makes sense anymore. Why haven’t they risen? No willpower? Lack of awareness? Slackers?

“Why haven’t you told me?” the Vet asked, bringing Majid’s attention home.

“What do you mean?”

“Balad Air Base. 2004.”

“2003.” Majid hung his head. “I didn’t think you knew about it.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Majid kept his head down. “Well, I’m not particularly proud of it.”

“Why not?”

“What do you mean ‘why not?’”

“You’ll figure it out,” came the Vet’s reply.

“Figure what out?” This guy is more riddler than sage.

“You’ll figure it out,” the Vet repeated, smiling wider.

Majid inhaled to berate the Vet for his circuitous advice, when –

“The Empire is in decline,” the Vet noted. “A decline of their choosing. We have the unique opportunity to speed up their descent.”

Majid put a momentary brake on his anger.

“Their public education is narrow and atrocious. Their national debt is through the roof. Their infrastructure is neglected. Their federal policies continuously harm the working class. Poverty is rampant and underreported.”
“Mmm,” Majid said, pleased. “The consensus in Washington, D.C., and across Empire’s inner core—”. “White America?” “In part, yeah. Is a refusal to fix the sinking ship.” “And?” “No ‘and.’ Wall Street will plunder their Treasury as soon as crisis shows up. Meanwhile, the war against us is being used to crush progressive movements inside the U.S. It’s happening right now.” Majid felt underwhelmed. *These are important lessons and I’ve learned a lot, but nothing here is revelatory. Maybe he’s just warming up.*

Coronal rain drizzled. Hot plasma cooled over mind’s rebel camp. Footprints lit up corrugated revelry. *Focus!* Majid battled his thoughts. Early days, predawn open ranks, chow, march, repeat. A gory horizon swayed to chants of “Fuck Empire! Fuck, fuck Empire!” *They can never take my thoughts.* No retreat. Not here. *My own pedagogy waits patiently. There’s a Boss lyric in there somewhere. My mind will shapeshift, adapt. I see Granma drifting away from Túxpam. May the cool breeze come for a visit? Her footprints think not.*

“What are you reading these days?” The Vet’s gentle voice drew Majid’s attention back home. The Vet recognized Majid would need a different kind of guidance. “I… I’m reading…” It took Majid a second to regain focus. “I’m reading a history of Harlem, the northern part of Manhattan.”

The Vet’s smile stayed fixed while his eyebrows capered. Majid felt obliged to explain. “Pretty solid account. Covers the history, especially colonialism, through today. I’m almost done.” He thought of a different book he had lent Seneen. “I’m borrowing it when you finish?” the Vet spoke up, which seemed to calm his eyebrows momentarily. “Absolutely,” Majid confirmed.

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“Why doesn’t your Ka’ki eat kleicha?” the Vet asked. His splattering concentration kept Majid on his toes.

“My Ka’ki?” Majid asked for clarification. The Vet nodded. His whole torso soon joined his head in confirmation. Majid was a little confused but he did his best to answer the question.

“Maybe he does?” Majid suggested. “He chows on those cookies so fast, maybe there are some kleicha in those handfuls.”

The Vet laughed heartily. His laugh soon warped into a cheery cough. He picked up the prosthetic and used its laminated frame as a makeshift handkerchief, blocking his cough’s spray.

Majid laughed and briefly wondered what it would be like to fly along the Vet’s tireless facial nerve.

“Damn leaders,” the Vet launched. “Do they ever have your welfare in mind?”

Majid recognized the Vet’s varied register. Majid thought for a second. “No. They just care about themselves, you know?”

“Can you think of one western government that has become more responsive to the needs of its citizens over the last twenty years, say?”

“Same shit today. Nothing changes,” Majid replied, recalling Munir’s wisdom.

The Vet blew gently on the inner rim of his prosthetic’s socket. “Does this apply everywhere?” he asked.

Majid paused again. “Indeed. The U.S. government is not prioritizing care for its own people when bombing country after country.”

“You are far wiser than your years. You—”.

A taxi driver leaned on the horn outside, drowning out chunks of the Vet’s knowledge. When the honking subsided, Majid was able to hear, “… hustle allllll day.”

*How did he hop there?* Majid wondered. Majid nodded to show he was still engaged.

“It’s not just the U.S. weapon trade that fuels wars. It, they’re bartering,” the Vet stuttered, “in
nationalism and holy fervor...” The horn returned, closer than before.

_Nationalist commerce, huh?_ Majid had never thought of it that way before.

“Look, Saddam was no Hitler. And he sure as hell was no Stalin. He was a despot and an asshole, but he was no Hitler,” the Vet affirmed. “Still, Saddam and Hitler... what did they have in common?”

“Both were terrible military strategists,” Majid suggested.

“And they both always interfered in battle plans,” the Vet said.

The Vet’s smile eased into a nod.

“I thought you didn’t speak about the war,” Majid reminded the Vet, giving him another opportunity to reconsider. Instead of refastening his prosthetic, he gently laid it across his lap like a napping baby.

“Have you heard of Jumra Battle?” Before Majid could even respond in the negative, the Vet said, “Senior commanders thought launching an attack then and there was a horrible choice, but Saddam overruled...” The Vet’s voice died abruptly.

No horn arrived.

Majid recognized that shrapnel had stolen a lot from the Vet; the City of Blood’s dusty alleyways still bashed his senses. These days, he was content relaxing among the pillows, reading, and sometimes wandering downstairs to guard the entrance to his friend’s convenient store. Music still played a prominent part in his life, but mostly just as salutary background tunes emanating from the back of the store. Therapy. Valuable therapy.

“Who started the war?” Majid broke the silence within their bubble.

“We did,” the Vet stated pointedly.

“Huh?” Majid was confused. He had heard Iranian officials cite an Iraqi air raid along the border as formal _casus belli_. He had also heard Iraqi officials cite Iranian military raids over the border into Diyala as the spark for war.
“We did,” the Vet reaffirmed. His permanent smile washed away. “We can blame our leaders all day, but we, the people, are the ones who let them gain power, let them act aggressively. We are to blame. We in Iraq. We in Iran. We are to blame.”

Majid’s friend and counselor paused. He looked up at the ceiling, pushed back his sleeves, which promptly fell back down to his wrists, and cracked his jaw. “I’ll return to it,” he began again. “The U.S. government is in for a huge change. It’s already underway. A slow motion sinking,” the Vet explained.

“What do you see here?”

“We see it sputter and flail. Insatiable capitalist greed is crashing head-on with the people, the people who’ve been oppressed and marginalized for decades and decades,” the Vet continued.

“Marginalized?” Majid asked. His thumb leafed through the manuscript.

“They’re unemployed, and corporate CEOs refuse to pay them a living wage.”

“They’re ripe,” Majid concluded, eager. “At some point, their oppressors, their system, will take on too much water and sink rapidly.”

“Let’s bring that on,” the Vet suggested.

Majid’s spine perked up. “So what does that have to do with me? What does that have to do with Baghdad?” Majid asked, trying to be patient, Munir’s absence rattling his mind.

“What do you think?” the Vet lobbed back at Majid.

Majid sat there weighing the ingredients.

“Well...” he paused, then began again. “I think revolution is coming. I think it’s inevitable, especially given—”.

“Coming to the United States?”

“Yes. Acts of durable,” Majid paused, considering his word choice. “Yeah, acts of durable civil disobedience will break out, regardless of which capitalist party is in
power. The president and legislature will crush this dissent, which will only lead to more fury.”
“Justifiable fury,” the Vet added. He looked out the window.
“Of course. So how does this tie into our options here?”
“Well, what do you think?”
“Oh, for god’s sake!” Majid burst, surprised at his eruption. “Why can’t you just answer the question?”
The Vet straightened up, cracked his neck, and looked at Majid. He didn’t seem phased. He didn’t even miss a blink.
Majid met his gaze. The Vet held his breath. “Because you know the answers,” the Vet said finally, cracking his neck in the opposite direction. “So, what do we do?”
“I think...we play the long game.”
“Good! Good! How?”
“Here? Camouflage in broad daylight.”
“And?”
“Use the night carefully.”
“And?”
“Infiltrate. Pretend to ally and then sabotage at a time and place of our choosing,” Majid suggested.
“There we go! And?”
Majid chuckled. “How many more ideas are you looking for?”
“Rejection.”
“Of what?”
“Complete rejection of their media, Hollywood horseshit included,” Majid offered.
“I’m listening.” The Vet was genuinely intrigued. “We can’t reject their militarism but then accept their blockbuster action movies that are made in cooperation with the Pentagon.” As Majid spoke, he could see the Vet’s enthusiasm reveal itself.
The Vet nodded quickly, his eyes widening.
“Eventually we need to ally overtly and covertly with those who struggle against injustice stateside.”
The Vet nodded like he was attending an Acrassicauda concert. “Yeah! Why covertly though?”
“Covertly because the State will monitor all our overt communications.”
The Vet’s heavy bobs showed no sign of slowing.
Majid poured out what he believed to be his concluding idea. “Unending pursuit of justice here and there. That’s what it’s all about.”
“Most importantly?”
“People power. No cliché, no bullshit.” Majid tried to seal his wisdom, full stop.
The Vet stopped swaying abruptly. He yawned.
Majid caught the yawn and let it fly. He ruminated: All of their technology can’t beat our familiarity with the terrain. All of their technology can’t beat us, unless we collaborate with them to some extent. We’ve got to end that collaboration.
“What tools have they left out?” the Vet guided.
“Like, what can I use against them? I’ve got a bit—”
“Dig deep,” the Vet encouraged.
Majid closed his eyes.
“You’ve helped them?”
Majid grimaced in admission.
“It’s OK. We know that,” the Vet said softly.
“They’ve helped you too, in a way. Yes. You’ve seen it from the inside.” The Vet pursed his lips and started chewing on the inside of his cheek.
“There’s more?”
“Just a final thought.”
“Please,” Majid asked, ruing his earlier impatience.
“When you’re able to visualize how it finally ends—,” the Vet began.
“How what ends?” Majid interrupted, still struggling with the basics of patience.
“How Empire falls... When you’re finally able to visualize how Empire falls, then and only then will you be free,” the Vet whispered.
“We need to get you on television,” Majid said, offering levity where none was required.
“My kind is not welcome there.” The Vet’s lips ignited a new smile. “So what are you reading?” The Vet often repeated himself.

Majid rose and went in for a hug.

Chapter Eight

Majid had long suppressed the role he had played during the early days of the Occupation.

Majid’s right hand rested on the HMMWV window, a world apart. He smelled dirt, sweat, burnt permethrin, and diesel – a blended stench that had hitchhiked into the country in the spring of 2003.

A young sergeant – U.S. Army, 35N – sat to his left. The sergeant was a decent linguist, much better than the others Majid had seen. Overall, U.S. military linguists were atrocious at Arabic, no matter how long they spent at the Defense Language Institute. Majid’s previous battle buddy had been granted a waiver and allowed to deploy after failing consecutive language proficiency exams. This was standard practice. The young sergeant, Majid’s current battle buddy, was proving very proficient with the SIGINT equipment while Majid’s native tongue helped the E-5 out of several sticky situations.

His right hand adjusted his tactical glasses, allowing him to focus better on the sergeant’s eyes. Over time, Majid had developed a decent rapport with the sergeant, but his boss, a butter-bar named Hart, was a disaster. The type of guy who pounded Creatine and whey protein by the barrel but couldn’t complete a proper push-up to save his ass, Lieutenant Hart clashed with almost everyone. Majid just nodded whenever Hart spoke. Thankfully, Hart was now twenty meters northeast, checking in with a squad at the northern edge of the Interior Ministry.

Working as an interpreter for the invading forces, Majid went where the U.S. Army ordered him to go. Word had come down from the U.S. military chain of command to guard the Ministries of Oil and Interior. All other ministries – including Education, Industry, and Trade – were deliberately left unprotected. “Orders are orders.”
Majid cringed, as he heard those words repeated often over the course of weeks. Meanwhile, the National Museum, the Baghdad Archaeological Museum, and dozens of other cultural and historical troves were pillaged. His platoon had personally witnessed the Ministry of Irrigation and the Ministry of Culture getting looted. Disgruntled mobs looted universities, libraries, and hospitals, in addition to government buildings.

Majid’s right hand twitched in furious frustration. *And I’m sitting here in front of the fucking Interior Ministry,* he complained.

His right hand tapped the windowsill. He stopped momentarily to press his thumb against the door’s exposed metal. He pressed harder, trying to find an outlet for his frustration. Nothing.

“Why are we here?” Majid asked.

“Where?” the sergeant responded eventually.

“Here in Iraq or here at the Interior Ministry?”

“The Ministry. Why are we here?”

The sergeant inhaled deeply. “You were at the briefing,” he noted. Majid couldn’t tell whether the sergeant was exasperated with the mission or with Majid’s questions. Perhaps both. “This place is packed with good intel,” the sergeant offered. “They’re going through the files right now inside.”

Majid wanted to ask who ‘they’ were. Two Army grunts – a private and a corporal – were perched outside the vehicle, trying their best to look the part. Majid turned to his wingman. The sergeant preferred the term ‘wingman’ over ‘battle buddy.’

“What’re you writing?” Majid asked, trying to forget the insanity around him, if only for a few minutes.

“Filling out my DA Form 31,” the sergeant answered.

“And what’s that?”

“It allows me to take leave,” the sergeant stated.

The motion of his chin flung a bead of sweat onto the paper in his lap.

“Leave?”

“Vacation,” the sergeant clarified.

“Nice. Where do you want to go?”

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“Home.”
Majid had grown to appreciate the sergeant’s laconic nature.
“Where’s home?”
“New Jersey,” the sergeant said slowly. In one swift movement, he adjusted his helmet, wiped sweat from his brow, and drew a new pen from his sleeve pocket.
The sergeant thought about Majid’s question for a while, smiling wider and wider with each passing minute.
“I’d have to say... I don’t really know,” the sergeant responded finally.
“I heard a guest on Letterman once refer to it as the United States’ Arm Pit.”

The sergeant laughed. *He sounds like a toddler teething*, Majid thought, filing this moment away so it could be shared with Munir the following day.
“You guys get Letterman here?”
“Satellite,” Majid explained.

Majid laughed too, saluting mentally the relief that accompanied slight movements of laughter. With each chuckle, a pinch of cooler air eased under his t-shirt. Armed with this minutia, Majid laughed longer than necessary. His U.S. military sponsors, if he could call them that, had issued him the standard ACU t-shirt. Claims it was ‘moisture wicking’ fell flat in front of Baghdad’s deaf heat.
“Can you turn that fucking thing off?” the sergeant asked.
“Gladly,” Majid replied. He leaned into the front seat and lowered the volume on their primary communications equipment.
“I’m tired of hearing General Sanchez reaming out that poor one-star,” the sergeant said with disgust.

Majid briefly considered asking a couple questions, but decided against it.
“You know who’s from New Jersey?” the sergeant asked while Majid’s right index finger tapped his right
patella. Majid was almost shocked; the sergeant rarely initiated conversation.

“Who?” Majid replied.

“General Karpinski... in charge of the eight-hundredth MPB. We work with a lot of their guys.”
“Never heard of her,” Majid thought aloud.
“Sergeant, she’s basically in charge of U.S.-run prisons here,” the sergeant noted.

Majid nodded.

“She grew up in my neighborhood,” the sergeant continued. “Right down the road from me.”

Looking across the backseat out the sergeant’s window, Majid caught view of an up-armored HMMWV driving by blasting country music. A tank, which Majid couldn’t identify, followed five meters behind.

“Who is that?”

“What d’ya mean?” the sergeant asked.

“Who’s singing?” Majid clarified.

“I think that’s Merle Haggard... Could be George Strait, I don’t know. We don’t jam to much country back in my part of Jersey.”

Majid observed a few youngsters running after the tank. One of the kids kept throwing up two-handed peace signs, much like a jowly U.S. president whose name escaped him.

“You know that Hummer gets about eight miles to the gallon?” the sergeant spoke up, asserting some knowledge he had picked up when home last.

*Again he’s initiating conversation,* Majid noted.

“That’s good?” Majid wondered aloud.

“Nah, it’s pretty shitty. Better fuel economy than most of our equipment, though.”

Majid still tapped his right patella. *dit dit dah dit, dit dit dah, dah dit dah dit, dah dit dah.*

The sergeant wasn’t like most soldiers Majid had met. Given some of the ignorant (at best) or racist (at worst) members of the U.S. Armed Forces with whom Majid had come in contact, Majid felt quite fortunate to work most days with the sergeant. When they had some downtime, which wasn’t often, Majid could usually find
the sergeant buried deep in a book, leaning on his ruck in a dim corner.

“You see,” the sergeant continued, “that Abrams there gets about point six miles per gallon. And a fully loaded C-5 cargo plane gets only point oh seven em-pee-pee-pee.” The sergeant swooped his jaw low with each syllable uttered.

“The amount of fuel burned during unnecessary wars is insane,” Majid muttered rapidly in Iraqi dialect, so the sergeant wouldn’t understand.

“What was that?” the sergeant asked.

“What’s more insane is nobody thinks about this shit,” Majid replied in English.

The sergeant nodded, staring out the window through the nearest building. His thoughts landed at home with his infant daughter.

“What the fucks is a guy like you doing in the military?” Majid asked, immediately recognizing his incorrect English. He blushed.

The sergeant told him the truth about his financial difficulties back home, after which Majid sat in respectful silence for several minutes. He watched the private and corporal move positions outside the vehicle.

Majid couldn’t help but chuckle as the HMMWV and Abrams returned, this time blasting choppy Arabic in a Beirut accent over the loudspeakers:

See, people of Iraq, we weren’t fooling you. We told you we would liberate you, and we have kept our word. We have no quarrel with you. You are our brothers and sisters. The United States is not waging a war against the people of Iraq. We only fight the terrorists who try to enslave you. We want no war with y—

The country music picked up, drowning out the last few words. Not wanting to seem insensitive for chuckling, Majid asked the sergeant the first question that came to mind. “So what do you listen to?”

“Me? Usually some classic hip-hop, the likes of Eric B, Rakim, Public Enemy, Chubb Rock.”
Chuck D’s wisdom surged immediately and began to flow across Majid’s mind. *All I want is peace and love on this planet. Ain’t how that god planned it?* This seed, which Chuck D had planted over a decade prior, would continue to germinate in minds across the globe for centuries to come. *Hearts and minds.*

“Who’s Chubb Rock?” Majid asked as the sergeant began mentally filing his future plans.

“One of the most underrated artists in my opinion. Super fucking smart. I’ll play him for you when we get back to Balad,” the sergeant offered.

The sergeant patted Majid’s knee quickly, indicating it was time to get back to work. The two leaned into the SIGINT instrument panel and looked busy.

“Did you hear the one about the vegan and the sheikh?” Lieutenant Hart snorted, startling Majid as he walked up to the HMMWV.

Majid just nodded.

Hearts and minds, like those inside countless sergeants. How many would eventually rally, shake off Empire’s mental shackles, and resist in intricate and creative ways? How many would double down and bury themselves like bear ticks in crude nationalism? Some were already using the G.I. Bill to obtain formal education – Empire educating those who would eventually knock it down.

“You’re remembering,” the Vet observed.

Intrigued about the possibilities, Majid said, “So I am. So I am.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Better,” Majid admitted. “But there’s a lot of work to be done.”

“Don’t forget what I said about patience,” the Vet advised.

“Thank you,” Majid said, standing up and walking over to shake the Vet’s hand.

The Vet sprang up on his one good leg to meet Majid’s farewell.

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“Come back any time. I mean that.”
“I will.”
“Maybe I’ll even have some tea for you next time,”
the Vet said.
Majid laughed lightly. “Your company is enough. Your company is enough.” He walked to the door.
“Before you go…” the Vet said.
“Yes?” Majid paused in the doorway.
“Family first.”
“Of course,” Majid replied.
“Let me be clearer. Above all else, protect your family. Don’t put yourself in a position where achieving the greater good would require the sacrifice of a loved one.”
Majid said, “I understand,” even though he didn’t.
The Vet’s advice was still sinking in. Seneen. Good thing I’m headed home, Majid thought. “Thanks again!” he said, crossing the threshold and heading up the damp staircase towards the tangled street.

The door unlocked. Munir’s shadowy guest vanished, his cane clunked to the ground, eyes closed. The shadow’s counsel reverberated. Munir reflected.

Today’s humans are an interesting species. Arrogant beyond all other animals, they rarely question anything. This is their fatal disease. Capable though they are, humans have become inured to openness. As a matter of custom, they avoid questioning authority… until the latter hours arrive. Portions obsess over accumulation indicative of a desired perception. This fashion fails humans when the Event occurs. Bleeding the inky crime scene, sputtering a guttural project. Lost, like Abenaki; extinct, like humanity.

Had someone entered? Why would they unlock the door and not enter? I don’t hear anyone talking outside. Munir thanked the woman upstairs for the one survival item
without which he would have surrendered a long time
ago: humor. I’d love to meet a musician who can play the
drums or the guitar without distorting their face. Also, can
you imagine an orchestra conductor in any other social
situation? At the bank, conductor asks for a withdrawal
with brash gesticulations and wild enthusiasm. In traffic,
conductor flips an exaggerated bird to other drivers. In
bed, conductor rocks the world’s worst o-face, and sweats
profusely, much to partner’s discontent.

The door opened. Munir dropped his grin. A short
white soldier with a neat beard and veiny arms entered.
He stepped right through the shadow’s cane as he
approached. Munir felt the shadow wince. The short
soldier placed a cup on the table, winked at Munir, exited,
and slammed the door. Hours dragged on. No one
returned. The door remained firm and the corner
remained quiet. Munir tried to force himself to sleep, but
he could only think about his blackened hands. Points of
pain flooded Munir’s mind.

_Strive to obtain vacuity, a palette of nuance,
immersed in noxious fog, looking within a syllable’s
curve,
but even this paper is nature’s marrow, so don
rhythm’s red cross,
reaffirming platitudes teem with smug clatter,
rotary’s lard pings off
in centrifugal spree. Hop to a wilderness of
intentional living,
wielding diversity’s creative tension._

The smack seemed distant and deadened. Oddly,
slapping was a welcomed relief. Munir longed for any
change of pace. The short soldier slapped him again.
Munir turned attention to him. Sweaty sheens covered
the soldier’s blotchy skin. _He doesn’t seem happy or sad. Is
he enjoying his deployment?_

“How are we feeling today?” the soldier asked
with casual indifference, mid-punch. The soldier’s voice
alternated between a scream and a whisper. A _peculiar
pair_, Munir thought, mind floating away.
Uniting scraped torsos around commonality, 
culo arriba on natives’ white cotton, 
as a horn berates, face ourselves, 
desks askew, creed’s hangover lingering, 
deluge, smoking such a forlorn parasite.

Abi snoring through the wall, his cadence, once 
guarded the nest, 
the familiar’s lull, once the humdrum, now the 
ached, 
out of the rubble, presidential libraries sprout, 
ducks and wolves, oboes and French horns, 
countershading with the best of them, reaction and 
decay, 
grabbing hold of involuntary branch, 
nay, wired to the juvenile’s outpost, a garrison’s 
shop of horrors, 
to cure dimona’s fumes, heed a 180ulbright call, 
mentally incapable of surmounting invitation’s 
 cynsis

I fear I am running out of world in my head.

Guests disdain our discipline, deeper cuts are due, 
I cover my gashes with ribbons 
Joint Meritorious Massacre Award, Army Superior 
Butcher Award, 
Iraq Campaign Medal, Armed Gang Expeditionary 
Medal, 
National Offensive Service Medal.

Parlay invokes simply syrup, yet sacks of men 
cannot be honest 
with themselves. Blink into a waning rack. 
Groaning through cardinal sins, jaws delineate a 
refugee’s track, 
coaxing my confessional bliss, cellar to cellar, 
humanity’s penultimate failure. There is no home.
Remote gibberish, as the critic flies.
They soak in the cilia of access, but a citizen snores
and the
charade tramples without and within
riding that cymbal as long as possible, afraid.
Sign of a job well-done, per FM-
2.71828oneohgofuckyourself,
toss wind and some cloud at them, but the virus
spreads,
you tout the unconventional and you lick the green residue,
you euphemize charred corpses, your camera pans away. Beat drops
as cinema’s sweet dew rolls out game
plan for citizen laps, quenched and content,
belief retains the proverbial high ground,
Pac died before AFRICOM pissed in the vat, light ‘em up
devastating Orwell’s macabre instrumentalist, just classify,
generation before chance brinks the dark of day.

The shadow traced more lines for Munir.

How elite can they be if they willingly gobble propaganda? pages
from a ‘nam playbook stick together, and the song won’t stop. Go ahead,
refurbish Chabelley Airfield while the Motor City’s crumble cake can jive,
off, nope, no rain among SWCC’s spray, and the good girls, complicit still,
are home with broken hearts. petty [officer] adjourns.
occupation began with the first droop, good to the last
fodder for gate’s orbit, heedless mausolea terminated with severe Alabama,
nationalist heads nod, recipient heads taste his volatile tarmac, cubicles’ stench braids accomplices linked to his collective demise, pushing dearth’s horn again, he sifts a century of imperial ash, slithering back and forth, crusty pen springing warlords, the whores of war frost coat gossamer logic, launching irregulars, a witless mangonel’s ambition, revenue streams garner tributaries’ plush death-tide, raiding wagon’s incise, washed gold deforming consent. Too many mistakes, a pattern of excellence. Mere saboteurs tickling musket’s nape, while old timers rant about Souda Bay heydays, you’re granted the trappings of independence, shoot, move, and polluticate, fall back, fall in line, and seasons spin apace, a Nuremberg refrain, accenting all blessings of a peace candidate, cloaking large bribes from weapon and earthen boundary, making the world a divot too late, send the uninformed uniformed, perishable chits pulpless psychologies and refined tropes, always complicit to de-soul and re-sole, sold to the lowest circused public. a graffiti slip coats my lonely plodding, facing visitors to a war interesting no one, another world, embraced within the jungles swallow, a barely audible hive suppressed, already come, gone, fear befalls tranquility, my only crime, arising amid state violence.
I never thought a palm could break bone. But then again, I never thought someone would have seven attempts at my cheek. Through the ferocious headache, perhaps despite it, Munir tiptoed across the soldier’s skull.

Is he buying the ‘tip of the spear’ bullshit that his unit commander serves? No. Part of him doesn’t even want to be here. He is looking forward to going home in six weeks. That is, unless the unit commander orders him to extend. He’s got many goals to tackle when he goes home, which I commend. He wants to embrace a cause and go for broke, whether that means engaging in acts of solidarity with environmental activists, of whom he’s ever fond, or diving into enjoyable research to hone understanding of the world around him. He longs to immerse in groups other than military types. I admire his passion. He wants to shed confines. He has felt corralled and cornered within the strictures of rank and authority, even as part of a so-called ‘elite’ unit where he gets the ‘privilege’ of calling higher ranks by their first name. Although useful for close quarter battle, faux informality is nothing to write home about. Civilian life offers much more. He knows the military mindset stifles innovation, diversity, and individuality. He wants to live without a boss. Release. He strives for an independence of thought. Part of him loathes conformity, celebrity worship, advertisements, and myopic political parties. To him, they simply restrain vision. He wants to get into a routine of reading, writing, exercising, and daily development. He wants to recycle antiquated concepts and question allegiances. Yet here he is. Munir found the soldier’s mind fascinating.

CRACK! Munir’s vision pixilated.

Pull by true books, my favorite part of the song, mellifluous terrain, every day, resistance, supple pleasure,
joy in a sister’s rhythm, parallel to his destructive rein, no fear,
dense assets expend varicose media, shortly crippled,
spiny education, one tactician’s demise, gall born
of minutiae’s
bodyguard. swimsuit goes the weasel, lounging
in precise exposure, grain’s circumstance,
aberrant bloom, devious wallop, drowsy look of a
dying maid’s cast,
but stifled streams may breathe again, blooms to
throb return stroke,
a lone coyote trots graceful span, reminded of
smirking potency,
verdant drops, mammary’s butterscotch,
slow growth diluting alkaline basin, jolting
slavery’s export crop,
bloodlets strew dollar toxodonic plains,
ignorance stubborn, like an academic attaching
career to obsolescence,
carrying poisoned womb’s screech, filling control’s
twilight with
iridescent mutation,
‘neath bombs’ swaying paradiddle, home team
landscape gets tuggy,
scrubbed for admittance,
Vandenberg’s moons shall protect unelected
interest,
under thin guise: providing access,
survival’s resolve trumps writ, flora surges through
barcodes,
licking the beauty of her instincts, packs of wild
dogs flee
as empire crumbles, finally unable to staunch red’s
metallic taste,
monotony’s puddle, toes seared first within a
colonial blink,
youth gurgle over a distant hum.

Despite all, he continues to beat me. Am I in the ass-angle?
Where the FUCK am I? Early in the war, Munir and Majid
had begun calling the scalene triangle that connected
Abu Ghraib, Balad Air Base, and the Green Zone the ‘ass-
angle’ after the Pentagon and U.S media had begun
calling the area connecting Ar-Ramadi, Tikrit, and
Baghdad the ‘Sunni Triangle.’ I don’t think I’m in Abu
Ghraib prison, once a vat of Saddam’s unwanted and
unrequired. That place is has meaty walls and creepy, imposing watchtowers. This place has more of a plywood and plastic feel. Plus, I hear aircraft regularly. Munir passed out.

Talking to himself as well as Munir, Majid debated, “Well, I can't go home, but the authorities don’t want to help me. OK, I'll go home, but I won't bother her. No, I'll stay here, wander, and find a way. Who am I kidding? I'm no superhero. I'm not even a sheikh. My U.S. Army contacts rotated stateside a long time ago, or could they be back on another deployment?” The thought hadn't occurred to him before.

“No, no, I'll go home. Maybe she’ll be …”
He looked up. He was two blocks from his apartment.

The door eased open without a sound, a rarity in Majid's experience. From the doorway, he looked around, even behind the door, but saw no sign of his sister. Five steps, tattered socks shed, and he was on the bed. He tucked the manuscript under the foot of the mattress. His head had barely sunk into the antique cushions when Seneen entered carrying a few belongings. She coughed into her elbow as she kicked the door closed with her heel.

She always traveled lightly, a skill her father had instilled in her years ago. Seneen tossed her scarf on the pillow and collapsed on the bed, the belongings already gone, tucked away. The scarf slid to the floor, encouraged by the energy of Seneen's fall. Her flop, of which an elderly man smoking narjileh would be jealous, caused Majid to stir from a moment of scheming.

Majid sat up and retrieved Seneen's scarf from the floor. He dusted it off and laid it across her legs.

“Thank you,” she said, half whisper, half croak.
“You were out,” Majid noted.
“Yeah,” Seneen said. “It actually felt really good to be out during the day.”
“What were you up to?”
“Just running a few errands,” Seneen said. She cleared her throat. “I’ve still got time to nap before work.”

Majid yawned. “Want me to wake you?”
“No thanks. The muezzin will wake me.”
The siblings laid like autumn leaves, listening to the sounds of the street below.
“You’re like Ashraf to my Mohammad Reza,” Seneen creaked.
"That makes zero sense,” Majid laughed.
"I know. I’m tired,” Seneen smiled, out of place.
"My son was killed, her son was killed...”
Majid held his breath. Don’t bring that up now. "I thought we don’t talk about these things. I like it better that way." He tried to bring the conversation to a soft place.
"I see,” Seneen rasped.
"Plus, we’re the good guys, remember? Maybe we’d be more like Farid and Asmahan?” Majid forced a smile to meet her smile, in the processes unfurling freshly laundered hope. Assuring warmth floated down, coating the room from ceiling to bed. A job well done.
"Even though I hate parts of my job, in a way it’s pleasant. At least I’m not alone with my thoughts. When arranged precisely, words kill more efficiently than any bullet—”.
“And revive more efficiently than any healer,” Majid finished. “You don’t mean that, though.”
“I know,” Seneen admitted. “These are better days than Kamaliyah, at least.”
“Yeah, the east was pretty harsh. Longer hours there, to say the least,” Majid trailed to a whisper. “I’m just thankful you’re here... when you’re here.” Majid was surprised he had mustered enough strength to talk about the subject.

Water’s drip, qatr, drip, qatr qatr pinged off the room’s walls, loaning it, at least in the generous imagination between Majid’s ears, the spacious feel of an old, stony sanitarium. He welcomed this fantastic relief. For a moment, he considered trying to articulate it to his sister, and then he heard her snore. Light ears, deep
concerns, Mother Nature was guiding her gently across time.

History arrived first. She watched humans, which she considered an indicator species for imminent death, looming ominously. She flew low over Saffuriya, Palestine. She flitted to and fro, swatting Zionist barrel bombs with a chocolate bar. Aileron rolling across time, hundreds of thousands of Zionism’s victims from many nations joined her flock. Seneen saw the scars of Zionist terror among the assembly: first drops in the 1880s, the Irgun deluge of 1931, and Lehi bloodbath of Deir Yassin gushed into one continuous memory of slaughter.

All the while, Zionism oozed eastward and entrenched. She saw many Palestinians cherish the first few seconds of morning consciousness, before the sick burden of Zionist colonialism slugged their souls with leaden rot.

Seneen flitted forward. Zionist forces used armed drones, ground and naval artillery, and manned aircraft to crush and grind Gaza City to death. Morgues popped at the seams.

Seneen materialized beneath an Israeli sniper. From his perch, he watched a few families return home tentatively. They stepped lightly among the rubble, their neighborhood only hours prior. Wispy feet were wise not to twist an ankle or crush a loved one beneath. *Moonscape*, Seneen’s bleary vision characterized the terrain.

The Zionist sniper loved these ceasefires. Seneen read it on his face. The lull allowed him to pick off the slowpokes and those he deemed dumb enough to return home. Meanwhile, Israel public relations gained points with the U.S. audience by highlighting how the Israeli military had unilaterally initiated the ‘operational pause.’

The sniper watched a family of five fan out methodically. He waited, grinding his teeth to dissuade impatience. Seneen saw him blink hard and return his eye to his scope. His finger flexed steadily. Seneen flitted in front of his barrel. Too late. A mother fell on loose
rubble. Drones’ buzzing overhead muted her cry. Then the sound of his weapon’s discharge arrived on scene. Seneen’s heart shrieked, sending fragile ripples across her wraith-like figure.

The sniper loved the independence this job granted him. While some of his peers radioed in requests to shoot, he never asked for permission. He was never reprimanded either. He bucked other trends too, preferring to carry less gear than his peers. He liked being light, mobile, and free. He relished the complete support Israeli society gave him; as far as Seneen could tell, domestic media, religious figures, and academia all approved of this military operation.

F100 engines tore through the air above. The sniper smiled slyly. Seneen pried into his reminiscing. He recalled touring Tel Nof Air Base, where his dad was once stationed as a Baz pilot. A daydream within a dream? Seneen wondered. Or a reality within a vision? The sniper remembered looking up his dad’s arm, which he had held tightly as they walked on the tarmac. The major beamed down at his son. The sniper remembered eleventh grade, when his entire class flew to Warsaw and rode a bus to Auschwitz-Birkenau. They learned of the necessity to join the Israeli military. Joining prevents a second holocaust, they were told repeatedly. He remembered his father’s voice on the phone when learning his son had passed the advanced reconnaissance phase of training. Such pride helped sustain the sniper’s conviction today.

What a solid guy, the sniper thought gratefully as he scanned the neighborhood for another target. Dad’s last sortie before transitioning to a staff job was during 1996’s Operation Grapes of Wrath. Seneen witnessed the father bomb Lebanese power stations, bridges, and even a few hospitals. “There were no rules,” Seneen heard the dad relay over the rim of a cold beer. “We had the green light from Washington.” The same green light they’ve got today. Seneen nodded. Dad later worked for an electronics firm located in Hayfa as part of a government effort to rejuvenate the aging F-15 fleet, some of which had been donated by the Louisiana Air National Guard to
Israel in the early 1990s. Dad worked for three years on a new F-15 cockpit display interface and then retired.  

They’re all fucking Khamas anyway, the sniper affirmed as he left his recollections behind, slowed his breathing, and steadied his heart. He didn’t even register the rifle’s boorish discharge. Seneen shuddered. The sniper chambered another round, momentarily put his weapon on safe, and used his free hand to crack his lower back, stretch his quads and adjust his vest. His eye never left the scope. For professional and personal reasons, he liked to watch the aftermath of each shot. Seneen saw one first responder flee, but one stayed to tend to fresh death. She screamed to warn him, but all that came out of her mouth was a puff of cold vapor.

“Hmph,” the sniper grumbled. He adjusted his scope, marked distances, calculated wind strength, and scanned for potential enemy sniper locations, all tasks he would normally share with his observer. Fortunately, he thought, I do not have such a burden today. Seneen saw his rifle barrel turn eastward. A small group of youth approached from the east. Seneen fuzzed upwards. She was now even with the tallest building in the Gaza Strip. She saw the sniper glance down at his watch. It would be dusk soon. Echad, shnayim, shiosha, … he counted only four children. The group seemed larger a moment ago. Hydrate, his memory commanded. Realizing it had been over three hours since he had drank water, he felt around for his drink tube. Eye pressed against scope, he opened his shoulder tab and began hydrating. I don’t like this, he shuddered, partially from the reinvigorating water and partially from solitude’s intermittent nerves. Weren’t there five earlier? As that question surfaced, the sniper tracked a short, middle-aged man ascending a distant pile of rubble, which had been a pharmacy eighteen hours prior. PRESS flew past the sniper’s eye during a quick pass of the ocular lens. He steadied the scope and swept back across the man’s chest. Fuckin’ journalists. Why don’t they just fuck off?

The sniper briefly contemplated the pros and cons of neutralizing the journalist. Seneen floated over to the sniper’s hide. She reached for his weapon, but her
foggy hand passed right through the rifle butt. This new proximity allowed his thoughts to penetrate her mind rapidly. On one hand, eliminating the journalist would herd the youths toward level ground, which would enhance his overall surveillance picture. It would also eliminate a witness and a threat that might expose his tactical position. On the other hand... *ughakh!* The discharge howled through the sniper’s right ear. Seneen noticed his right earpiece was dangling beside his neck. He made a note to emphasize ear protection during his next mental checklist.

Seneen tried to close her eyes, but they only widened. The children scrambled away. They lay prone for a few minutes before rising and testing the air. The fifth youth, who had trailed behind to rest on the other side of a pile of collapsed cinder, now peered at the journalist’s corpse. The boy had lost his family during a morning air raid and had been wandering the streets since. Everyone he had ever known in his neighborhood had been displaced or murdered. With nowhere to turn, the boy had followed the avuncular journalist since sunrise, in tune with his most embryonic instincts. He tapped the journalist’s vest. Seneen refused to look at the splintered skull, its gory panes a blank, drab, brumal façade. The journalist, once a staple of Baghdad’s evening broadcasts, had just made his way up from Khan Yunis on freelance assignment. Upon completion of this assignment, he would have earned enough money to return to Iraq and pay for his daughter’s remaining schooling.

*I want out!* Seneen roared. Dreamland would not yet comply.

The sniper slid his body one meter to the rear, broke prone, stretched his abdominal muscles, and radioed in for permission to move location. The unit commander’s radioman informed the sniper Israel was about to formally break the ceasefire by ‘responding’ to ‘terror provocations.’

Two checks, freelance stipends zipped neatly in the journalist’s billfold, laid snug against his inner vest pocket. He favored this layer of protection as practical
security when traveling. It prevented accidental loss and posed no bait for a potential thief, while still providing comfort and easy access. He enjoyed sharing travel tips like this with loved ones. *A bomb does not heed such sober boundaries.* Seneen wept. An Israeli F-16 released the bomb with a routine flick, incinerating the children, the journalist’s corpse, and his two checks.

*I’ll let her doze for a bit,* Majid mused. These moments were his favorite part of the day. Just being. Just being, savoring their essence and the indomitable gravity of his sister’s aura.

One snort rose above her soothing shakhir, as she rolled over on her side, facing Majid. Baba’s Orwell Prize hung lightly on the wall, watching and smiling.

Majid gazed at Seneen’s furrowed face, riding time’s circle, pleased at how well tranquil skin belied her resolute will, forged in the early days of Occupation and Resistance when she was just a young teen. *What is her mind working on now?* He wondered how she’d cope with his intention to resist.

“Einshtein used to place an image in his mind. He’d tinker, feel, and manipulate it. He’d look at it from different approaches, different angles. He’d take it apart, put it back together again, and pull from other schools of thought to find a solution.”

*Did she just speak?* Majid asked himself. He could see Seneen’s eyes were still closed, but he refused to lift his head, out of fear he might puncture the gentle vibe blanketing the room.

*Drip, qatr, drip, qatr qatr...*  
For the first time in months, Seneen was aware of the interval between sleep and consciousness. She recognized that she was in dreamland when a young boy named Saleem, once murdered on the Gaza coast, stood up and walked freely. As he ascended towards her, he wiped away the horror and guided her eyes open.

She felt Majid next to her. She kept her eyes closed for many breaths in order to compose herself. Each breath processed her father’s death. Each breath,
deeper than the last. The final breaths helped her wall off her grief, to be dealt with shortly.

Seneen’s eyes eased open as salat al-‘asr rode the sun’s rays around the room.

“That is what I will do,” Seneen soothed. “I will think openly and creatively, I will be flexible and agile... and I will pull us out of this shithole.”

Majid was oddly at ease until the alveolar might inherent to the letter T of “shithole” succeeded in popping the room’s pleasant ambiance. Baghdad’s mudslide of pain encumbered his spine and stomach once more.

“Promise me something?” Majid asked. What’s that sound?

“I can't promise until I know what it is,” Seneen replied cautiously. She thought she heard a few muffled rings of her obsolete cellphone coming from her bag.

“Promise me you’ll leave as soon as you can.”

Seneen pursed her lips, rolled over, and breathed heavily into the mattress.

Majid waited.

She rolled back, her eyes locked on the ceiling once more. With a beet-red face, she whispered, “I promise.”

Sensing a shift in Majid’s energy, Seneen instinctively reached out, playfully wrapping her arms around Majid’s right calf. Neither sibling wanted to move.

“Don't worry,” Seneen assured. “Munir can come with us.”

Majid’s heart sank, mining somewhere in the vicinity of his empty stomach. He swallowed hard. He refused to burden Seneen with news about Munir’s disappearance. I'll handle it myself, he promised.

“Thank you, Seneen. Thank you.”

“You’re a good friend, Majid. A good friend.”

Majid smiled, knowing sometimes people, even the great ones, speak out of hope rather than fact. His eyelids smiled, optimistic that the next time he dreamed he might return to the Conch Republic of western lore. He rubbed his bruised sternum and recoiled at his own coarse touch.
“I am going to meditate before work,” Seneen stated blandly. “I’ll be in the hallway.” Shoring up her defenses, she rose from the bed. *Bracing once more to enter the fray of oppressed, pious penis, confused militia cock, and insecure affluent dick.* Chuckling to herself, embracing humor as powerful ordnance, she leaned against the hallway wall and began to exhale into oblivion.

Majid sat up. He pulled his trusty pen and notepad from his pocket. “Time to convert dreams to reality,” he whispered with a confident smile.

Majid tiptoed across the room and eased open Seneen’s handbag, which was leaning against the corner wall. He ripped the note off his pad and tucked it where Seneen had left off in *The Second Oldest Profession.* He loved leaving goodies to brighten people’s days. He believed in the power of positive ripples. But today’s note was different. *Today’s will have a different sort of positive vibe,* he hoped. *I will rise, and I need her to understand my reasons.*

He threw a 70’s classic on his mental jukebox, grabbed Munir’s manuscript from under the mattress, and rallied to tackle the streets once more. He tiptoed past his sister in the hallway, glided down the staircase, and exited into the evening’s streets.

Majid roamed the city, imagining what it must have been like in the 1970s and appreciating what vestiges remained. He walked and walked and walked. A plan was forming.

As Seneen meditated in the hallway, the screen on her obsolete cellphone lit up briefly, an unintended effect of Unit 8200 monitoring that particular model.

“Understood, Greyriver Two?!?” Ignacio’s boss screamed. “We got enough dirtbags around here. You’re not one of them.” The boss – grey hair, buzz cut, beet red forearms – rearranged, almost threw, stacks of papers on his desk.

Ignacio stood still, hands clasped behind his back. His years in the military had taught him how to take a reaming well.
“If I had any qualified guys in the pipeline, I’d have sent your ass home two weeks ago!” The boss moved a stack from one corner of the desk to the other.

Ignacio kept his face stern.

“Finish out your days here, stay off the fucking roof, keep your mouth shut, and go home. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.” Ignacio noticed there was no fire extinguisher in the office.

“Now get outta here,” the boss ordered, looking up from his desk for the first time.

Ignacio turned and exited the office, careful to close the door so softly that the blinds didn’t move.

“Iggy, I gotta talk to you.”

Ignacio turned. Andrea was leaning against the wall next to the water fountain two meters to his right. She nudged her shoulder against the wall, the force of which propelled her into a commanding stride. She approached Ignacio head on.


Andrea grabbed Ignacio’s forearm. “Roof. Three minutes.”

“Where are you going?” Ignacio asked. He yanked his forearm towards his body, but Andrea’s cold grip didn’t budge.

“I gotta swing by the office first,” Andrea whispered. “Three minutes!” She tore down the hallway and wheeled around the corner.

Ignacio rubbed his forearm.

“Evening is coming fast,” Ignacio said to the Tigris, still waiting for Andrea to arrive. He heard the familiar squeal of the bottom hinge as the door to the roof opened.

The late afternoon heat blasted Andrea, whirling around her face the stray hairs that were not in her ponytail. The wind died down as the door closed behind her. She blinked hard.

“I prefer this to the air conditioning inside,” Andrea said as she walked around to Ignacio’s hiding spot. Tucked between two monstrous air vents, the door
shed, and the ledge’s lip, Ignacio was standing in the ideal vantage point.

Ignacio greeted her with a hug for the first time ever. She smiled on the inside.

“This is a good spot,” she said. “You can see the river’s banks, the airport road, and the rest of the Green Zone.” She gestured when mentioning each site. Her eyes were still watering a bit from the sudden sunlight.

“And most of the city,” Ignacio added, looking out over the compound’s sand and stone.

“While still staying sheltered from the sun and prying eyes,” Andrea deduced, content to ease into imminent chaos.

Ignacio and Andrea each took a minute to survey the scene.

Andrea wiped her eyes and thwapped Ignacio’s chest with a red and white file.

Ignacio slowly unwound the string at the top, his eyes never leaving the river’s affection. He stepped back from the ledge and looked down at the documents. “Where’d you get these?” he asked after a minute, shuffling back to the first page.

“I’m CIA,” Andrea admitted.

“I had a hunch,” Ignacio said with a chuckle, eyes still glued on the documents. “But where’d you get them?”

“Boss’ office. Yesterday. Almost got interrupted. I went again today and was finally able to snag some SCIF copies. Two more are out there.”

Ignacio flipped back to the third page, examining it closely. “Jesus Christ,” he muttered.

“Yup,” Andrea said, keeping it casual to mask her fear.

“So it wasn’t just loose talk in a SCIF,” he noted.

“What?”

“Earlier in the south hallway, I overheard the Station Chief talking a little bit about these assholes,” Ignacio explained. His index finger pointed to the word MOSSAD.

Andrea hesitated and then said, “Should we be worried?”

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“About?”
“That he’d be so cavalier with that information as to drop it in the hallway,” she concluded.
“I don’t know.”
“Wilderness of mirrors,” Andrea said, recalling a phrase she had heard many times at Camp Peary.
“More like wilderness of shattered mirrors in a god damned dust storm,” Ignacio amended. “I don’t know. He seemed pretty serious, pretty focused. I don’t think he’s got the acting chops to pull something like that off.” He looked up. “Just the tip of the iceberg – what the public knows,” Ignacio commenced, “is enough to cut ties: using U.S. identification when recruiting Iranian dissidents, spying relentlessly on U.S. Congress and businesses, coordinating with AIPAC—”.
“Basically an agent of a foreign power,” Andrea interrupted.
“Exactly. Israel is a spoiled child, a rogue nuclear state, and a vicious ethnic cleanser,” Ignacio concluded. He inhaled deeply, catching up on lost breath. “And now this.” Ignacio’s rebellious thoughts crystalized.
“I think context is important here,” Andrea said. “Consider the Lavon Affair, the attack on the USS Liberty, smuggling nuclear triggers out of the States, the assassinations of Thomas Wasson, and—”.
“Folk Bernadotte,” Ignacio added.
“True. Even the Swedes are fair game, I guess.”
“Furkan Dogan, Rachel Corrie, we could go on all day,”
Andrea stepped closer.
“Do we know where they’ve placed the explosives?” Ignacio asked.
“Last page,” Andrea replied.
Ignacio turned to the final page in the file. The fingernail on his thumb flicked the folder’s corrugated edge.
Andrea pointed to the files in Ignacio’s hands. “This is just a continuation of Plan Dalet…” While Andrea searched for words, Ignacio placed a slip of paper in Andrea’s breast pocket.
“A cyphertext?” Andrea asked, examining the sheet.

Ignacio nodded.

“How do I—?” Andrea followed up.

“You’ve got a one-time pad in your possession,” Ignacio answered quickly.

“A one-time pad? I do?”

“Check the back of your ‘best lays’ sheet.”

Andrea touched one of her trouser cargo pockets and smirked. The one-time pad rested under the thin weave. “You’ve planned for the worst while behaving at your best,” she observed.

“It’s the gardener in me,” Ignacio said with a sly shrug. “Always design your garden for the hardest of times. Arrange the layout so you can sow easily and harvest easily.”

Andrea adjusted her ponytail.

“How confident are we?” Ignacio asked, feeling a stony countenance lower over his face like a patriotic portcullis.

“It’s solid,” replied Andrea, pupils locked. “One katsa and three sayanim chirped hard after we rolled them up in Huntsville, Alabama.”

“How long has Charles been involved?” Ignacio asked, wanting to arm himself with as many details as possible.

“I think they got him when he was posted in Brussels,” Andrea speculated. “Mossad does a ton of work in Europe.”

“And we can’t just report him to counterintel?” Ignacio shifted the documents in his hands.

“No,” Andrea said firmly. “For starters, we don’t know how many of them are compromised. Secondly, this network is over their heads. Even if they crack the case, their superiors are all political appointees or politicians themselves. They’ll just quietly wrap up the situation like Chertoff did six years ago.”

“We’ve gotta take care of this ourselves,” Ignacio said. With each word, the gravity of the situation sunk in. “A roll-up like this... We’d need months to plan.”
“We’ve got sixteen hours, according to those files,” Andrea said, counting the last four hours on her fingers. “The fuses are set. Sixteen hours until Dalet Two Point Oh begins.”

Ignacio reviewed the files once more. “Sixteen hours until they attack.” He closed the folder in his hands. “So what’s our response?” he said after a moment of reflection. The need to rebel aligned smoothly with the need to stop a nominal ally.

Andrea leaned in and whispered firmly. Ignacio steadied himself with a clenched fist against the shed. He thought of all the bureaucrats, suits, officials, and contractors passing in the halls below them. *Most worker bees, most mean well.*

Andrea stood back after relaying her concise instructions. Unintentionally breathing in unison, Ignacio and Andrea stared at each other as they felt the seconds tick down.

*She’s even more radical than I thought,* Ignacio mused. He kept the smile off his face. He refocused on the city below. The confidence in Andrea’s eyes was both thrilling and intimidating.

**Chapter Nine**

Majid walked briskly along the sidewalk through the flocks. *Cowardly ram and idle ewe,* he grumbled, his mood sinking by the second. *To hell with us. Enablers, all.* Mind on determined cruise control, Majid maneuvered off the main road and slipped down an alley. His right arm extended, an unconscious habit from a youth spent wandering with his friend.

“OK,” Majid said to himself. “A Kalashnikov. Something simple.” He ducked between two industrial crates, his head even with a filthy window. He rubbed a patch on the windowpane with his wrist and the meaty part of his thumb, but this only seemed to spread the ruddy grime around.

Through the smudge, he observed the building’s basement. He itemized what he knew about the obstacles before him.
Ex-Ba'ths? How many? Six, he counted.
Suni, but largely staying away from today’s sectarian horseshit.
Still have access to party funds? Definitely laundering money.
Smuggling goods, their bread and butter. Best routes through Jordan.
A rusty sedan backed up quietly in the basement.
No lorry? How did they get that down there? You didn’t even recon the entire exterior, dumbass, Majid berated himself.
Probably got their start smuggling in collusion with Saddam to break USA’s sanctions.
He widened the windowpane’s eyehole with a few more swipes of his wrist. Angling his head to the left, he noted the rest of the underground workroom: open crates to the right, closest to me; clunky machinery, a press of sorts, in the back; racks of small arms to the left. What is that? The north side of the building? Yeah, north.
He watched the gang detach the sedan’s doors, boot, and hood. They picked small parcels out of the sedan’s appendages with the intensity of a Marine private disassembling an M16.
These days? With no state control over the borders, these guys probably dominate Highways One, Ten, and Eleven.
What of their—CRACK!
Majid slumped to the ground.

He squinted through bloody swells. The back of his head throbbed. The front of his head ached unevenly. He tried to open his jaw, but his jaw muscles didn’t respond.
“Are you kidding me?” a tall, fair-skinned man asked. He was sitting on the back of a beige compact car.
Majid opened his lips and muttered an incomprehensible reply. His mind felt for his arms. Pinned behind him, they registered a cold prickle. A peeling pipe, perhaps.
“I mean, are you KIDDING me?!” the tall man asked. Arms draped at his sides, the man moved his
fingers rapidly, playing the boot of the car like an unseen piano. His prominent forearm muscles heaved like a stormy sea.

Majid opened his eyes a little more. His left eye flushed with blood. He closed it again. Majid’s right eye was able to weigh the rest of the man – crisp white t-shirt and neat, stone washed jeans, but dirty hands.

“My men beat you up a little too much, huh?”

Majid groaned. His cracked lip from earlier in the day had opened up again. He tried to wet his lips but saliva was not forthcoming.

“I guess it’s hard for you to answer my questions when you’re in that kind of shape,” the man speculated.


“So what should we do with you? My men seem to think you’ve learned your lesson, but I’m not so sure.” The man hopped off the trunk and approached Majid with an indomitable, inquisitive face. He walked up to Majid, bent over and examined him like an exterminator might examine an infestation.

Majid closed his eyes. Why didn’t he kill me? What’s another murder to him? Would one more death even attract enough additional scrutiny? What’s his angle? Maybe he’s just preoccupied? Majid heard shuffling behind him. He opened his eyes. The gang leader was upright, directing whatever was going on behind Majid’s back with a maestro’s precision.

“Here’s how it’s going to go. I’m going to release you,” the gang leader said slowly.

The twine around Majid’s wrists went slack.

“But if I see you around here again, I’m going to kill you. Understand?”

Majid groaned and threw in a nauseating nod for good measure.

“You return, you die,” the leader said, scratching his neck.

Majid coughed, but didn’t try to move his hands.

“You can’t be a part of this,” the leader said, walking back to the car’s boot. “Unfortunately,” he added. He opened the boot with a pop.
Munir awoke with a shudder. Damp, arctic chill stabbed at him, ensuring he remained in place. Only these assholes would travel halfway around the world to my hot-ass country, and pull a Sayyid Freeze on innocents. How many days has it been?

Red – the name Munir had begun to call his captor, a nod to the man’s blotchy skin – eased the hood and heavy earmuffs off of Munir’s head with surprising care. Hell, he’d probably take it as a compliment – something to do with the red, white and blue.

At least I got to sleep for a while. When was that? A week, a day, a month? No clue. Definitely more than a day, right? Why is Red staring at me blankly?

Red walked behind Munir, and after a few seconds Munir heard him drag something along the floor. Can I wriggle around? But Munir’s mind no longer registered his abused arms, so that was out of the question. His body dangled, and he waited. Then it came. At first he thought it was a siren or an attack on the compound. He soon realized it was another guitar riff.

those wide eyes, reading the word count, again, vigilantes lower barriers, as they bend to practiced will,
threatening materiel rain in apple pie tones,
tons of black toes, without an addict’s raiment.
here, have a leg.
more than one hundred Sami words for snow,
more than one hundred DOD words for ‘this corporate product will kill you.’
sentinels belch streaks of rubble, lick shards of queasy disparity,
ascending to grim offices by marble ramparts,
bristling with ego’s bustling censorship.

“I must get going. I’m a traveler of sorts, you see,” the elderly man smiled, tapping his right breast pocket thrice with the cane. As far as Munir could tell, nothing
happened upon the third tap. The elderly man waited. Was Munir supposed to say something? After a moment of patience, the elderly man offered Munir a salute of sorts – he kowtowed fully, then patted his own forehead, patted Munir’s, and bowed again. The dim bulb highlighted Jabraa‘il’s timeworn, velvet covered pedicles as he retreated to the corner’s dark embrace for the final time. The compassionate seraph left Munir with one final flow. Munir took the reins from there.

good chokes, contorts, all signs pointing to contrary’s rupture,
she masturbates to Vangelis, he shuns frank discussions,
yet profit’s exploitation flips hoary switch,
go ahead, throw away, use and abuse daily, as corporate climb is paramount,
environment postponed then expunged,
to Later, when air, aquifers, and asphalt
even this will soon collect dust, if ever sustaining slight sway.

alternatives,
built, physically, in obligatory structural suffocation,
read, bob & weave in your cozy coy recess
while the world burns. Root for the bane, as you wish.
extrapolate and we have ourselves a winner. Focus,
on foot, and we all lose.
jester’s grave, ashes tender,
the climate change, slimy trade, game of thrones.

How long has that cup been sitting there? Looks like ground onions, Munir thought as he gazed over the rim. Tastes like cherries? Probably some GMO shit, some perverse amalgamation indicative of corporate reign. Munir considered military excess and genetically modified organisms to be symptoms of the capitalist leviathan, oozing along at consumerism’s cadence. A jur‘a
of junk. Red returned and fed Munir a few sips from the cup. Munir gulped it down, embracing haywire.

The U.S. forces, based out of a walled compound within Fort Bragg, had been informed a ‘high value target’ would be among the guests at the party. After the dust settled, the U.S. military realized the five dead and two detained had no military value whatsoever. The U.S. forces – elite, some might say – were tricked. The tip-off they had acted on came from a disgruntled neighbor who had long feuded with Munir’s father over ownership of a tract of land outside the city. The neighbor had read about this happening in Afghanistan, where rival clans would feed the U.S. false information in order for U.S. forces to eliminate local adversaries. The neighbor had decided to give it a try. If pressed about the specific night raid on Munir’s party, a U.S. military spokesperson, most likely Lieutenant Colonel Metzger, would decline to comment, citing the need for security surrounding ongoing operations.

A young man entered the room. He was in his early twenties by Munir’s blurry estimate. Red nodded to the man, who introduced himself as a soldier from the Army’s Criminal Investigations Division. Munir passed out, never to see him again. Would he report Munir’s condition to the upper brass? Would he even care? Fritz. Pure fritz. Or pure bliss amidst torment?

Welts rose. Some soldiers yelled. Others divvied out stripes along devious paths. Some focused repeatedly on one patch of flesh, as if no one had told them this was a free-for-all. There were no rules. Take your freedom and wail away.

_They’ve all grown beards for this deployment, as if facial hair and camouflage confuse us simple Baghdadis._

_Oh, you took a twenty-four-week Arabic course during SFQC? Forgive me. You possess no bare standard of judgment, nor do your actions reduce the frictions of war._

Although Munir’s right ear had quit working hours ago, he was able to hear most of their random questions:
“What do you do for a living?”
   I tutor high school.
“How do you know Muntaser Faqih?!”
   Who? Who the hell is that?
“How long were you in Fallujah for?!”
   I’ve never been to Fallujah.
“What were you doing in Fallujah?!”
   What are you talking about?

Enunciating the ‘T’ in ‘talking’ felt like lightning striking his face. The front roof of his mouth felt like it had been cracked down the center. *When did that happen?*

   *God, I’m a selfish prick. I haven’t thought about Majid in hours.*

   His ears felt like they were inside a big bathtub. Pitch blackness throbbed against the sides of his head. He heard what sounded like someone shoveling gravel. *I know these sounds should be coming from outside the door, but it feels like they’re right next to me.* This subtle sensory quark was infuriating. *I shouldn’t let this little bullshit get to me, especially after all I’ve gone through.* *But I can’t help it.* *What if my senses are permanently messed up?* Munir thought again and again. *Will this swamp boogie wannabe place the blood-crusted bullet on his mantle back in the States? Does he even care that his unit killed innocents? Does he believe the intel was solid? How many years until he starts to analyze this deployment in a dive bar at noon on a Wednesday? I want to sleep through this. All of this.* Munir’s mind repeated one loathsome line: *Wake me when this is over.* And the woozy rotations washed over him.

   *[S]he hops into decommodification’s hoppy draught  
the IPA of our ideal, obtainable, social environs. 
Direct, without transaction, billboards, or patronage. 
How niche is your vampire? Syndication on rinse. 
Resisting tangential consumption’s exploitation, without commodity, we thrive, 
relying
in on un
ourselves
and peers of all peers, All peers, piers of the brew’s fjord.

Limp and light as nakhla, Munir was dragged to and fro. One staff sergeant walked past Munir carrying a stack of paperwork. He spit in Munir’s face. Munir mocked the man.

“Administrative detention, right?!” Munir yelled. But the man didn’t understand.

To and fro, mudpit to hooks, hooks to pit. At times, the hose was a welcomed relief. At times, he fought an internal struggle – smother versus stifle – to find relief in each warped step. At times, mental resistance claimed small victories. At times, he broke down, puddled. Left as crust on the edge of Empire’s urinal. At times. Create daily, as it is our purpose. I smile. Finally. I inhale all the simple pleasure, knowing well Mother Earth shall recover soon. Very soon, post-Sapiens.

Is it the dust? The cold water? The mud-to-AC circuit? Turnpike for my toad. The lack of food? Sleep deprivation? No idea, but my cough is getting worse. Waking up on hooks, dealing with guitar riffs and group beatings, and now facing a cough. I don’t know the medical definition of whooping cough, but I’ll call my affliction by this name. Pleas for medical treatment fell on ignorant ears. Deliberate ignorance, the saddest of all illiteracy.

epaulet novae inundating empathetic slack
played on baroque strings, finest camou’
designs clambering amid bound rungs,
hostile cramps buoy miraculous trawling,
the numb executive wallpapers alien dermis
in D.C.’s penthouse, testifying meridian, shiny package,
crisp brand, tight symbol.
a continuity of policy,
full-spectrum spectacle of shrouded dignitaries,
the twelfth root of two 4-star failures.
Munir dreamed. The explosion echoed for miles, vibrating through crisp air. Perversely positive vibes. This detonation was, after all, the world’s last cluster bomb. Nighttime, humans used to call it.

I feel someone else with me among these shelves kitted up with books,
couch beeking in our star’s gaze,
inhaling ah lone page’s genes.
Her bespectacled lantern, a couplet addresses.

Bennett stepped out into the crisp Baghdad night, pure vice on his mind – a brief vacation, a reward for all his hard work. He tapped the lanyard beneath his undershirt. He wondered how many other Israeli case officers were working in Baghdad. He only knew of three. Mount Harmon’s latest communiqué told him to stay away from the Embassy for most of tomorrow. Only two more devices to plant, he thought.

Relishing the sexual anticipation, Bennett discarded deliberation about the mission and allowed himself to indulge in the possibilities. A new woman – fresh face, new body. All his, for a modest price. Thoughts, illicit in most countries, plowed through his mind as he exited the Embassy compound. He motioned to the Marine guards, tipping a non-existent hat in their direction, marveling at their oblivious nature; little did they know how well the Corps would be manipulated after he completed his primary mission.

With his guard down, the brief walk to Zawra’ Park, where he planned to hail a cab, would have been a prime opportunity for someone to mess with him or pick him off. But he, beyond cocky, knew nothing would happen. He disregarded his training, foregoing the mandatory hour of planned wandering; no need to lose a tail today. His Zayouna hooker awaited, and nothing would stand in his way. Inhaling the smell of burning garbage, never pausing to consider why he loved it so much, Bennett set off, strolling casually, almost frolicking along the sidewalk.
Baghdad’s night coated its citizens. USA’s bombings had leveled infrastructure and terrified the populace. Many still feared the night, feared the Occupation’s indiscriminate rain as well as its precise self-exoneration.

Majid licked his wounds. *How long have I been lying here?* He rolled over, content staying in the ditch as he assessed his situation. *Discarded, yes. Underestimated, perhaps. What hurts? Face. Shoulders. What else?* He tried moving his legs. They responded well, though his left hip socket felt a bit rusty.

Shattered, beyond tears, Majid considered sitting up, but instead rolled to his other side. The fetal position beckoned and Majid accepted.

Advice rumbled in the back of his mind. *Use their own instruments against them. Use any knowledge you’ve learned on the inside. I don’t even have a weapon. Or do I?* Majid weighed his expertise. *What do I know? What do I know? Patrol routes, some comms stuff, vulnerabilities. Yes, vulnerabilities. Soldiers wanting to go home, missing family and girlfriends.*

*I’m in no shape to think.*

The cut on his right index knuckle bled more than he expected. He straightened out the index finger and stuck the knuckle in his mouth. His lips wrapped around the loose skin. He bit down gently.

With his right heel he tapped his left pant leg. *Good, it’s still there.* The manuscript was tucked into the resilient elastic of his tattered sock. *I don’t know what I would do if they had taken it.*

*Aegypius monachus* squawked patiently above.

“That can’t be a good sign,” Majid noted with weak humor. He put his forehead in the muck, embracing the cool void. The shaded muck gladly eased a bit of his headache.

Majid tried to walk away, but for the first seconds he stumbled more than walked.

Majid paused. The nook in the crumbled wall beckoned.
“I should’ve paid more attention to Munir when he was alive. Stop thinking like that! He’s still here! Not just his writing, but his thoughts and originality. But I was a lousy friend.” These words – tough and unfair as they were – hit Majid hard.

Majid stumbled, shook his head, and stood up taller.

“That’s all behind me now. What lessons can I learn from it? What can I learn from my mistakes? What can I learn from my behavior?”

I must preserve and propagate Munir’s voice. Writing was his therapy – is his therapy? The journey of writing, his only solace. Majid pictured Munir writing. Candlelight illuminated the desk while GBU-28 fell outside. Munir wrote through the pain and the joy. He wrote until he bled, until his blood washed away the cheap pencil’s thin coating. Little flecks of yellow mingled in the red smears. Bloodshot words still suffered from postpartum despair.

Majid missed Munir – heart, spirit, and core.

Time to read, Majid embraced. He looked down, pulled up his pant leg, and retrieved Munir’s manuscript from inside the rags he called socks. It was already pretty beat up after a few rough hours in his hands. He flipped to the first page.

Read! he told himself. He scooted closer to a nearby streetlight, the only constant light around, all the while suckling his knuckle.

Read! he repeated.

Majid smiled and nodded to himself.

“May it please the Tribunal, I would like to call Michael as a witness for the prosecution,” Ms. Khalidi led off, eyes on the jury.

Michael rose and walked stiffly to the stand.

The judge swiveled in his oak perch. “Michael, will you repeat this oath, please? I swear by the laws of nature that I will speak the pure truth and I will withhold nothing in my testimony.” Each word flew off the judge’s tongue crisply and clearly.
Michael repeated the oath calmly.
“Thank you, your honor,” Khalidi nodded to the judge as Michael sat down.
“Michael, do you mind if we establish some basics for the jury?”
“Not at all, ma’am.”
“Thank you,” Khalidi said, mentally mapping the next twenty minutes. She smiled to the jury. “Where were you born?”
“I was born in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.”

An explosion ripped through the air, uprooting Majid’s eyes from the 26X37 depths.
Majid felt no heat from the explosion and saw no smoke, but he knew from the rending roar it was close.
“Time to move,” he stated. He rolled up the manuscript and pulled it into his body like Monte the mascot once demonstrated – one end snug in his palm, the other end smothered in his elbow and tucked against his torso.

Majid swung his legs over the ledge and hopped down from his nook. Munir always used to spin like a champ whenever dismounting from the nook. Majid smiled. Even in his current state – dead or alive – Munir’s still making a difference. Maybe that’s the lesson, Majid postulated, realizing for the first time how truly higher Munir had lived his life. Vestiges of humanity can benefit from his original thought. Mama Earth repeated the word ‘humanity’ with the same stunned rancidity as a sergeant who just woke up with stank mouth on his first morning deployed.

“My country is not my country. And I will do something about it. I am thankful for my wandering, but it’s time to act.” A wry air surfaced. “Patience and misdirection,” he muttered.
The svelte madam looked emaciated in this light. Bennett wondered if she had once worked the streets before wheeling into management, no doubt through some hard choices and vicious compromises. Bennett watched the madam survey an array of lipstick. He assumed she stayed young inside by infusing a touchy-feely approach into mundane administrative tasks. *And by eating only one meal a day*, he added to his assessment. She ducked her head into the hallway and bumped into an older woman. He heard her inquire about tidiness, and assumed the older woman was cleaning up the room. He surveyed the waiting area in giddy anticipation. The walls were covered in blue and pink gossamer.

Back at the front desk, the madam closed her lipstick case, satisfied with her choice of red hue. She swiftly tucked the lipstick tube inside her bra. It felt cold on her skin.

Bennett had never seen such fabric before, and he couldn’t tell how exactly it was tacked to the wall. He ran the nearest fabric between his thumb and index finger. It looked like silk, but it felt like cotton. He looked up. The madam smiled. She motioned for him to proceed down the hallway. It was time. His woman was ready. As he passed the madam, she leaned in for the customary light kiss.

The electronic snoop inside her lipstick tube read the magstripe alignment on the badge, tucked inside Bennett’s undershirt, but the only thought on his mind was whether the pre-cum oozing out his tumid tool might show through his slacks.

**Chapter Ten**

Their corner of the dining facility whirred with electric vibes, barely contained.

“Roof tomorrow?” Andrea asked sarcastically, her nerves still firing.

“In a way, yes.”

Andrea chuckled.

“No, actually.” Ignacio corrected. “My boss told me it’s immature to hang out on the roof so much.”
“What did you say?”
“I told him to get out of my blanket fort,” Ignacio joked.
Andrea laughed. “I miss forts.”
“The good old days,” Ignacio said.
“Hey, why do cows wear bells?” Andrea asked.
She squinted, still hating the DFAC lights.
Ignacio remained silent. He didn’t exactly know where Andrea was going with this question.
“Because their horns don’t work,” Andrea answered.
Ignacio laughed. “A joke,” he noted. “I wasn’t sure what you were up to.”
Andrea laughed, louder this time. She placed her second juicebox of the night on the wooden ledge to her right. The inflatable palm tree next to the ledge blew toward Andrea, tickling her neck, whenever anyone opened the nearest DFAC doors.
“You’re awfully peppy tonight,” Ignacio said.
Andrea smiled the biggest smile Ignacio had ever seen.
“What?” Ignacio asked, curiosity rising.
“It’s like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders,” Andrea detailed.
Ignacio opened his mouth slightly, a gesture of curiosity.
“Come here,” Andrea ordered, patting the seat to her left, swatting the plastic palm to her right.
Ignacio obeyed.
With Ignacio now closer, Andrea whispered effectively, “I guess I always knew.”
“Knew what?”
Andrea inhaled.
“What?” Ignacio asked again.
Andrea glanced around the sterile dining facility. Ignacio softly punched Andrea’s left leg.
“I always knew intuitively that our – pardon me – Washington, D.C.’s policies ruin countries.” She paused, waiting to see how Ignacio would react to her unconventional statement.
He met her stare. “Go on,” he encouraged.
Buoyed, she continued. “Well... the U.S. economy profits from markets opened up after war.”

Ignacio smiled, pleased with Andrea’s words. She paused. He breathed. She breathed.

“What put you over the edge?” Ignacio prodded.

Eagerly, Andrea replied, “I don’t know if it was any one event or moment in particular,” rolling her final ‘R’.

Ignacio stretched. He raised his arms over his head, yawned, and looked over his left shoulder at the rest of the dining facility. A few mercenaries – shirts tucked in and weapons tucked away – were standing at the entrance.

“You?” Andrea asked.

“Me?”

She nodded.

“What about me?”

“Thoughts?”

“I mean, I agree,” Ignacio said.

She waited.

“Completely,” he affirmed.

Andrea smiled broadly, showing all teeth.

“Care to elaborate?” she asked, punching him hard in the right thigh. She smiled throughout the windup and contact.

“To me, wars are the profit. The war industry profits across the board. Destroy the country? Profit. Occupy? Profit. Try to rebuild certain parts? Profit. Train the country’s officials and provide some security? Profit. Sell the new leaders weaponry? Profit.”

Andrea sat back, relishing the words of a similar mind. “And what put you over the edge?” she inquired.

“I think that realization was what put me over the edge.”

“Then what got you started questioning in the first place?”

Ignacio turned away, ready to share but afraid he’d break down if he made eye contact. “I was here years ago as part of a different U.S. invasion. I had a great mentor of sorts. A local who worked for the coalition. The kindest man I’ve ever met.” Ignacio trailed off.
Andrea waited respectfully.
“He died.”
Out of the corner of her eye, Andrea noticed more people filing into the dining facility, third country nationals, mostly, she guessed. She kept her eyes trained on the side of Ignacio’s buzzed head.
“BGM-71 blast. Took him right out.”
“Friendly fire?” Andrea asked.
Ignacio didn’t answer. He scooted his chair away from the fruitless table. He leaned closer to Andrea. He shook his head. “I guess they’d call it collateral damage.”
Andrea considered offering her condolences, but she knew Ignacio. Her words would ultimately make no difference. He would want concrete restitution.
“So now with our allegiance severed,” Ignacio began.
“And let’s be clear, they severed it – the unaccountable sitting back in D.C., that is – severed it when they put profit over people,” Andrea interrupted.
“Agreed. What is the responsibility of those who recognize Empire’s violence?”
“Dismantle it,” she whispered, realizing she and Ignacio had been aligned in belief all along.
Ignacio nodded. “So I agree with your plan. I think it’s great, but I want to clarify something.”
Andrea gestured with a fresh juicebox for him to proceed.
“You say we should stop Dalet Two Point Oh, and I agree,” Ignacio said.
“Mmmhmmm,” Andrea replied, straw in mouth.
“But can’t we, at the same time, help dismantle Empire?” Ignacio suggested.
“I’m listening,” Andrea stated, placing her juicebox on the table.
“I just think Empire and Zionism speak the same language. They only know violence, and they only respond to violence.”
Nguyen slipped through a metallic door, which led to the walk-in freezers, and entered the dining area. Ignacio tracked him out of the corner of his eye.
“So?”
“So we can stop Dalet Two Point Oh and make Empire bleed at the same time.”

“Maim a part of Empire while defusing a Zionist plot.” Andrea looked down at the table. Her eyes moved rapidly from left to right, like she was reading an invisible newspaper column. “It's a tall order.” She looked Ignacio in the eyes. “I'll have to adjust our plans a bit. Expect instructions before dawn.”

“Understood,” Ignacio said, rubbing the calcified webbing between his thumb and index finger. He was ready to wrap up the conversation as more and more people were arriving for dinner. “Be right back.” He stood up and walked up to Nguyen, who was washing a nearby table.

“I'll do what I can. I promise,” Ignacio declared, smiling modestly.

“Thank you, thank you,” Nguyen began to repeat continuously. He only stopped when Ignacio firmly grabbed both of his shoulders. Nguyen closed his mouth with a timpano’s timbre, smiled, and grabbed Ignacio’s shoulders in turn. After a moment of peace and mutual admiration, the two friends readied to depart, knowing they each had to get back to work.

Ignacio whispered a few questions. Nguyen glanced around and then replied quickly.

“Thank you, brother,” Ignacio said, shaking Nguyen’s hand firmly. Nguyen seemed unsteady. Ignacio worried that something he had done or said was disrespectful to the man’s Vietnamese customs or courtesies.

“Brothers and sisters are...” the man paused, considering his words carefully, “... close as hands and feet.”

At that moment, Ignacio realized he had mistaken Nguyen’s reticence for aversion. He now fully accepted that their friendship thrived without the need for many words. Nguyen would be friends with Ignacio anywhere, anytime. Nguyen recognized Ignacio was a gentleman, especially rare among U.S. Forces – Iraq.

“What was that all about?” Andrea asked as Ignacio returned to the table.
“His employer confiscated his passport.”
“So he can’t leave?”
“Exactly.”
Andrea looked at the ledge of the fake window next to the table and nibbled her lower lip. “What’s his name?”
Ignacio told her.
“Some people, from outside the wire, will help us tomorrow,” she said after a moment.
Ignacio’s right eyebrow rippled upwards.
“I trust them,” Andrea added.
Her tone instructed Ignacio to hold his questions until she mentioned the subject again.
Andrea stood up, grinning. Ignacio saw her grin and tried to outdo her with his own smile. They walked out of the dining facility together.
“First thing first,” she led on, appreciating the fresh heat.
Ignacio yawned despite his excitement.
“Take out their cog here,” she continued.
“They’ve got more,” Ignacio said. He gently rubbed the top of his right ear with his middle finger.
_Sunburned._
“Every little bit helps.”
“OK. Your boss?”
She nodded once and walked closer to Ignacio.
“Should I be worried about access tomorrow?”
Ignacio said leaning back.
“Negative,” Andrea assured. “The container itself is impenetrable, but the contents are completely accessible.”
Ignacio’s chin rose in quiet confusion. After a moment he said, “Can we involve anyone else?”
“Not on my end,” Andrea replied, _shway_ softer. The ground crunched cheerfully under their boots.
“Get some sleep,” Andrea ordered, opening the ground floor door to their dormitory.
“You got your hijab?” Ignacio asked, still obsessing over every detail.
“Oh four hundred,” Andrea replied. “Expect instructions.” She shot Ignacio a look that said, “Don’t worry about my end.”

Major Cook felt refreshed after a warm shower and a hot meal at the dining facility. The weight of the psychological operation against Reed was off his shoulders, too. Success. Major Cook was riding high. Per their arrangement, Major Cook met Senator Reed in the courtyard and escorted him to the VIP dormitory. Cook applied a few final PSYOPS touches on the Senator as they walked. Senator Reed stopped outside the VIP dormitory and thanked Major Cook.

“I admit, given some of the press coverage, especially the foreign press, I had my doubts before coming here,” Senator Reed confessed.

“Understandable,” Major Cook sympathized, his Murfreesboro accent surfacing hard in the middle of the word.

“But now I see,” Reed continued, “just how much progress has been made.”

“It is impressive,” Cook agreed, and then reminded himself to ease up on the ass kissing.

Reed concluded, “This afternoon’s demonstration of Iraqi Special Operations Forces was especially impressive.”

Major Cook nodded with a firm smile.

“Goodnight, Major,” Senator Reed said, swiping his guest badge and opening the door.

“Goodnight, sir,” Major Cook said. They shook hands – two quick pumps – and then went their separate ways.

Two kilometers away, a young man collapsed in an abandoned lot. His name was Abdullah. He felt a searing heat between his eyes. His mouth would no longer open. Dried shut, it felt. His skin had turned the color of a briny tide pool on the Al-Faw coast. He looked up with sunken eyes and tried to focus on the road. He crawled slowly almost imperceptibly ahead, dragging his wrinkled bare feet behind him.
Jesus Christ this guy is a mess. Dick is slightly below average, but that’s no problem. My usual customers are insecure or sexually frustrated, but this guy – what did he say his name was? – is more self-assured... Too self-assured, as if he had never heard ‘no’ from family or friend. He fucks like an arthritic camel, though. Bad back, judging by his thrust. No, he fucks like Mothra is digesting a thousand valium in his lower lumbar, Seneen snickered.

On the outside, her sexual spectacle raged on.

Eh, I gotta pick up more coffee on the walk home. The prices are through the roof these days, but what can I do? I’ll catch the opening of Souq Ash-Shorja if I time it right. Tattered, bloody canvas flapped through her memories, reminding her of the near miss during her last visit. Three more months until I can afford the next online class. I bet this clown would like a more aggressive approach. Seneen grabbed the base of his penis, and scooted toward the wall, forcing him out. She quickly flipped over on her chest, breathed through her spine, sunk her stomach, and raised her ass in the air. I was right, Seneen mused while he entered her again. Face in the pillow, doggy always lets me concentrate better. Oh, we need bread too! See! Thank you, doggy.

Seneen turned her neck to the right to catch a fresh breath of air. She eyed one of her favorite scarfs draped over the bedside lamp. I can’t believe that last asshole grabbed my scarf as a cum-rag. Good thing I noticed before he could do some permanent damage. Yes, it’d wash out, but the psychological harm would’ve been too much, she giggled.

I’d love to design headscarfs one day. Seneen wasn’t pious in the traditional sense, but she adored Islamic fashion. Well... she hated the term ‘fashion,’ but she loved playing with textiles and patterns. Diverse styles within Islam offered her endless paths. I’ll pull from assorted influences – Rabat to Tehran to Jakarta. Many companies in the industry insisted that manufacturers treat their workers well, which blended seamlessly with Seneen’s holistic outlook. Individuality
and self-love, pillars of my clothing line, will help break down borders better than any weapon, she said to herself, letting her thoughts drift lazily.

Routine took hold again in the aftermath of her client’s dull finish.

“Fucking shit, you’re unreal. Where’d you learn to fuck like that?” Seneen cooed.

“Where’d you learn to speak English like that?” he replied.

“Part of the job,” she deflected.

Her guest dressed quickly and efficiently. He left without saying goodbye. Seneen sighed deeply when he closed the door – a great relief. After a rapid cleanup, she buried her face in Knightley’s book while waiting for the madam to send in her next client.

From day one, Seneen’s parents bathed her in eclectic music and plush literary fare. By sixteen months, Seneen learned how to work Baba’s old record player. This kept her entertained for hours. Her parents gave free rein to her early independence. She moved the stylus cartridge towards the center spindle four or five times over the course of any given afternoon, replaying her favorite sections of Chopin’s nocturnes and early Naseer Shamma.

Her parents radiated limitless patience, always pausing to answer any question that popped into Seneen’s head and burst out of her mouth. Ten pages of a children’s book could engross half an hour, detouring through distinct cultures, recondite cosmos, and creatures unforeseen. Her hundred billion neurons savored each page and delighted in the sensory flood. Baba just considered it good parenting, but the effects were dramatic. With glee, she devoured tales about drumming monkeys, frog princes, and talking shoes. Then her mom brought home Dr. Eliot’s Five Foot Shelf. Henceforth, her parents insisted she study English every day. Reticent at first, Seneen pointed out the absurdity of Volume Sixteen, *The Thousand and One Nights*. She never saw her Baba laugh so hard. “That’s my daughter,” he hiccupped between gasps. He hugged her and told her
she didn’t have to read that portion of the collection if she didn’t want to.  

She soon developed a capacity to absorb new vocabulary and languages rapidly. Her abilities to plan, anticipate, reason, and recognize patterns advanced swiftly, stably. Her family’s modest means did not provide many toys, so she improvised every day. Her stable – an old teddy bear, a stained abacus, a wooden Hypacrosaurus, and a dusty chalkboard – cultivated neural fabric. Kisses, hugs, encouragement, and admiration reinforced these nascent circuits. 

Seneen stifled a tenacious smile while she thought of Baba lounging among books in the corner of their old living room, Mama flickering between the kitchenette and Seneen’s terrene. The sound of classical organs resonated warmth. 

As her next client called, she re-read Majid’s note and then placed *The Second Oldest Profession* beside her tote bag, careful to avoid the sheet’s hem. She never let her books touch the bedspread or any blanket. Small barriers between work and play helped Seneen maintain her sanity.

Bennett’s frayed pant leg skimmed lightly across the top of a tainted puddle. Mute semen, spit in the puddle thirteen hours prior, now rode high along the worn fabric. Reflections of the waxing moon lolled along the ensuing ripples.

As Bennett strolled to the corner to catch a taxi, he left more than footprints in his wake. Waves of hatred radiated outward as well. *How could I be so stupid?!* he barked inside. *How many darkies had fucked her previously? Filthy.* He longed to speak his mind among attuned patriots over a glass of sweet Rosé in his local Lilienblum Street bar. *Soon enough.* 

Mere sight of an Iraqi of African origin had been enough to spur Bennett on his current internal rant. Hatred of miscegenation was quite common in his hometown of Tel Aviv, where Israeli ethnocracy continued to free-dive into racism and historical
ignorance, refusing to surface. Bennett rarely thought about his own racist tendencies, since Zionism finds shelter in racism’s abode. In the aftermath of Israel’s 2006 bombing of Patrol Base Khiyam, he had actually taken a few moments to reflect when UN Secretary General Kofi Annan had suggested questions still remained regarding why Israel had targeted the UN observers. *Nigger better mind his own business,* Bennett had thought. The casual delivery, not the content, had momentarily bothered Bennett. His brief trip into self-reflection did not last more than twenty seconds and left without a trace.

Majid took one step out of the shadows before jumping back behind the dumpster. He crouched down, tuning out his sore muscles. A woman – light skin, hijab, fiery eyes, protruding jaw – rounded the bend. Majid squinted. *Something’s not right.* He studied her bearing and stride. *She’s not local,* he determined. He sat back on his heels. She paused outside an unadorned doorway leading to a dark staircase. Two beefy men stood up and pushed their stools aside. The three exchanged words and one of the men sat back down. The other gestured for her to walk up the stairs. He followed behind her.

Majid waited. He didn’t want to step out prematurely again. The second man returned, adjusted his stool, and sat back down.

Foot traffic on the street was minimal. Litter, strewn everywhere, loafed colorfully beneath the lone streetlight. Majid set forth, leaving the shadows behind. The streetlight flickered goodbye. He pattered across the asphalt and nodded to the men outside the nondescript staircase.

They nodded back, one firm nod each. Majid entered the darkness and walked up the flight of stairs, hitting all his favorite steps on the way up.

“Do you have it?” Andrea asked from the entranceway.

The Madam smiled. “All business, as usual.”
“These are trying days,” Andrea replied. She walked into the room. The Madam slid out from behind the desk and met her with a hug.

The Madam pulled back a bit. “How’d you get in here? Your friend just left,” she said sarcastically. Andrea kissed the Madam on both cheeks and then went in for another hug.

The Madam’s natural energy rippled into Andrea. “Do you have it?” Andrea repeated, politely but quickly.

“I do,” the Madam affirmed. “Just a sec.” She shuffled over to her desk, paused, and ran her fingers over the zinc lock on the top right drawer. A key appeared in her hand, having descended from somewhere up her sleeve. The drawer opened smoothly, its slides and mounts well cared for.

Andrea heard a cheap sneaker strike an old nail. She backed up to within a meter of the hallway with all the rooms.

Majid stepped slowly, softly into the room. Andrea weighed her options – head for the front exit, and through the new arrival, or stay put. She stayed put, merely taking one more step back. An M1911 pistol sat coolly against her lower back. She placed her palm on her left hip. The new arrival took a tender step sideways. Andrea eyed him knowingly, the direction and intensity of her stare alerting the Madam.

“Majid!” the Madam exclaimed. A manila blur shot up her sleeve. She glided towards him. Her tackle riveted him into the wall, gossamer threads catching on his collar.

“You always did give the best hugs,” he complimented, stabilizing against her desk. His gentle laugh echoed wearily against Andrea’s presence.

The Madam looked up, eying his bruised cheeks, cracked lips, and swollen eyes.

“Think you could calm down your enforcers?” Majid asked, responding to the Madam’s barely-disguised gawk.

“They did all that? No way.”
“No, they didn’t. But they are pretty brutal,” he said of the glooms.

The Madam buried the left side of her face into his chest. “They’re beyond my control. I just run this part.” She gestured to the colorful room with a free hand.

“I understand,” he said, giving her a final squeeze.

“How long has it been?” the Madam asked, reluctantly ending their embrace.

“Long,” Seneen said. Seneen was leaning against the doorframe at the beginning of the hallway that was lined with rooms. She was wearing jeans and a black hoodie. Her hair was wet.

“I can only stay for a bit,” Majid said. He walked over to embrace his sister. With each step Majid took, Andrea moved closer to the top of the staircase.

The siblings hugged, their shoulders perpendicular to the line between Andrea and the Madam – the Madam at her desk, and the exit framing Andrea’s figure. Seneen unclasped her hands behind her brother’s back. They turned to face the waiting room from the hallway door. Nobody said a word. Majid shivered.

Andrea looked Majid up and down.

The Madam cracked her lowest thumb knuckle repeatedly, an old habit that cropped up from time to time.

Majid reached for his sister’s hand.

*I trust Seneen and Majid, and I trust Andrea. My business, our business*, the Madam thought, assuming the risk to break the cautious mood.

“Here.” The Madam walked over to Andrea and placed a crisp policy envelope in her hands.

Andrea looked at Majid. His battered eyes remained defiantly steady. She shook the envelope to hear the fresh keycard inside.

“Th—”.

“There’s no need to thank me,” the Madam interrupted. “This is Andrea,” she said, addressing Seneen with a pivot of her neck, aiding the introduction with an assuring smile and an open palm pointed in Andrea’s direction.
Andrea looked at the siblings. Seneen blinked and squeezed Majid’s hand. Majid nodded slowly. *An American in Baghdad out at this time of night? A deadly combination,* he concluded.

Andrea swallowed. *Is a friend of the Madam’s a friend of mine?* She stepped back fully onto the top step. *They’d be great assets,* Andrea said before catching herself. *No, I gotta stop thinking like a Langley slideshow.*

*These two are not pawns for exploitation, they’re allies to learn from and work with.*

“One moment, if you please,” the Madam said, hoping Andrea would stay a little longer.

Andrea glanced down the dark stairwell, ears searching for the slightest sound of a footfall’s ambush. Seneen let go of her brother’s hand and stepped forward, a step submitting tentative trust.

“You two have much in common,” the Madam certified.

“Who?” Seneen asked. Her eyes never left Andrea. Andrea raised the envelope and tapped its corner against her lower jaw.

Seneen thought about the back exit and the location of her bag in her room, and wondered if the alleyway was clear of rubbish.

“Here.” Andrea walked toward Majid and handed him the envelope. He looked down at Seneen.

Seneen made no move discernible to Andrea. Majid looked at Andrea and accepted the envelope slowly. *She smells like roses,* he thought.

Seneen read a familiar look on Andrea’s face, the look of someone refining a plan as they spoke.

“I was going to use this for other purposes,” Andrea said.

The Madam smiled.

“What is it?” Majid asked.

“It’s a keycard,” Seneen interjected. Looking at the Madam, Seneen continued. “I always knew you were working for American Intelligence. Now we know who your case officer is.”
The Madam laughed. “Well, we all have our reasons,” she said elusively, picturing the Agency’s hefty stipends yet doubting the promises of asylum.

“The card will help you pass through the outer perimeter of the Green Zone,” Andrea clarified.

Majid nodded. He shivered and goosebumps stormed his forearms.

“I’ll get you on the access roster to pass the next layer of security,” Andrea said. “But after that you’re on your own.”

“Why?” Majid shook his head violently. The rush of blood momentarily strengthened his clarity of thought.

“Like, why help me?”

“You move well in the shadows,” Andrea complimented. *Better than any instructor at The Farm.* Majid didn’t know how to respond. He folded the envelope.

A car horn screamed outside, breaking the still night.

In a spark, Majid tucked the envelope beneath his t-shirt.

“I’m headed home soon,” Seneen said. “We’ll talk about your face later.” She looked at him with the strict concern that only a big sister would understand. She coughed softly. She understood her brother had chosen a righteous path.

“I won’t ask about your face, but I will ask about your day,” the Madam said to Majid. She walked to the chairs along the near wall and started aligning them.

Majid explained his run-in with the smuggler.

Seneen held her breath twice during his brief story. “You shoulda seen these guys’ setup,” he concluded.

Seneen raised an eyebrow, doing her best to adjust to her brother’s fresh defiance.

“Cars with hidden compartments, a printing press, forgery equipment, the whole works,” Majid recounted. He recognized his enthusiasm and shifted on his feet.

“Printing press?” Andrea inquired.

One of the burly guards yelled up the stairs.

“Client!”
All eyes turned to the Madam, who, at the first syllable of the guard’s warning, had glided over to a battered binder.

“Nobody on the books for another twenty,” the Madam stated.
“Could be a walk-in,” Majid offered.

Andrea looked at Seneen. Seneen nodded. The Madam smiled at Majid and Seneen, boggy eyes offering the siblings a protective valediction.

“Can you find something out for me?” Majid asked Andrea abruptly.
“Sure,” Andrea replied, eying the front staircase.
Seneen motioned for Andrea and Majid to follow her down the hallway.
“Do you have access to SIPRNet?” Majid asked Andrea. Their steps aligned, playing the old floorboards like pipe organ pedals.
“Everyone’s got access to SIPR these days,” she replied.

Majid thought he heard a chuckle in her words.
“Can you find out which units are deployed to Iraq right now?” he asked, looking down at her.
“I think so, yeah,” Andrea replied, recognizing the hearth of Resistance in his eyes.

“Personnel, too?” He returned his look forward, focusing on their mission. He shoved one particular thought aside: *Which room is Seneen’s?*
“I don’t know about that. I’ll check though,” Andrea promised. “I’ll do it first thing when I get back.” She pulled a delicate cloth out of her pocket.

They rounded a shallow bend.

The three humans stopped at the top of a narrow yellow staircase. Seneen turned and hugged Majid once more. “Thank you.” Majid’s chest muffled Seneen’s words.

Both Majid and Andrea wondered whom Seneen was addressing.
“I have a few more errands to run before daybreak, otherwise I’d walk home with you,” Majid said softly.

Seneen appreciated his gentle fib. “I understand,” she said, really meaning to say be careful. She turned around and trod the familiar hallway towards the waiting area, leaving Majid and Andrea in peace. She wiped away a lone tear and sniffed in sync with a particular squeaky floorboard that she usually avoided.

Majid stared at Andrea. She stared back. They broke into symbiotic smiles.

Bennett looked up to encounter the first layer of security at the Embassy compound’s outermost gate: two U.S. Marines.

Crisp uniforms stood out. Serious on duty, follow instructions well, hard partiers, not too bright, Bennett appraised the Marines.

One stepped out from behind the bulletproof glass as Bennett approached. The other stayed behind, weapon on safe at low-ready.

“My safe word is P-five-plus-one,” the sergeant remarked, ego pleased when his inferior didn’t understand the reference.

“My safe word is MAG-TAF,” the corporal blurted out quickly, hoping to impress. The sergeant failed to stifle his reaction; his nostrils flared and a chortle escaped his lips none the worse. His M4 carbine plinked lightly against a dress button.

“Morning, Marines,” Bennett greeted the guards, disappointed that a little Tel Aviv accent had cropped up in both words. He preferred to keep it subdued, opting instead to emphasize the New England accent he had once worked so hard to acquire during his college years abroad.

“Morning, Major,” the Marine sergeant replied, commencing the formal process of readmitting the Israeli liaison to the U.S. Embassy. “Who’s your sponsor, again?”

Bennett dug under his shirt collar and looped the lanyard around his index finger. His watch scraped his
chest as he withdraw his hand from inside his shirt. He brandished his Embassy credentials. “Charles Corrente, Third Secretary.” He swiped his badge in the electronic reader that jutted from the metal barrier like a necrotic boil.

Many moons ago, when chopped to SIGINT duty during a JINSA junket, Bennett had overheard some great advice from a Rear Admiral from Tacoma named Eric: *Surround yourself with the penguins you soon wish to exploit. Learn by knowing when to keep your head down and seizing any opportunity to converse.* This counsel sounded almost absurd out of context, and even worse given Eric’s pathetic language skills, but Bennett swore he’d follow the man’s advice when his upcoming assignment got approved.

The Marine sergeant checked Bennett’s name off of a list while another patted him down. A third perused Bennett’s credentials on a screen inside a bulletproof stall.

“Good to go,” the sergeant approved.

Bennett thanked the Marines, navigated around the gate and through two turnstiles, and walked briskly to the next stage of security: two more fresh Marine sergeants behind a desk.

**Chapter Eleven**

“He’s dead,” Red reported nonchalantly.

“What are we going to do about it?” the Commander of the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force challenged.

Red nodded, understanding the Commander’s tacit orders in their entirety.

“Don’t forget his personal belongings,” the Commander reminded Red, who was already exiting the makeshift office.

Red entered the chamber where Munir’s cold corpse glowed reverberations unseen.

Munir flopped, earthbound as Red freed his mangled arms from the meat hook. Neither arm nor leg halted his descent. Face-first, jaw contact. In all the ice,
shock and deaf agony, Munir’s spirit found this to be the greatest of injuries: Red hadn’t even tried to ease his fall.

You know, it’s not that I’m afraid to die. I just don’t want to be aware of it when it happens, Red thought.

Munir’s spirit replied, “When we don’t realize life, how can we know about death?”

Red’s good buddy, a blonde master sergeant, a Cleveland native sporting wavy bangs, pulled up in a white van outside the walled compound within the base. He hopped out of the driver’s seat, leaving the engine running.

“Sorry I’m late!” he yelled over the sound of a C-130 aircraft taking off on the distant runway. “Had to grease the Reserve MPs working the rear gate.” The master sergeant liked the Army Reserve Military Police; they were easier to bribe than a Seventh Fleet captain.

“No worries!” Red replied. He jogged around to the back of van. “Help me remove the base decal, will you?”

The white minivan eased to a crawl north of the Dora Refinery. The sliding door opened. The lifeless body crumpled headfirst into roadside sludge. The minivan accelerated slowly, leaving its excreta in the dust. Muck penetrated the seams and joints of Munir’s cheap watch, soon stopping it short of twelve.

Like any good recipe, playlists take time. Munir had often shared those words with anyone willing to listen, but most of the time people dodged his message to their own detriment. Majid, finally heeding his friend’s advice, built his playlist with care. The playlist paid him back eagerly. Music, saving him from much of life’s scrawl.

Music revived, protected, soothed, and healed. Majid found an indescribable flow of energy in the rhythmic balm. Tapping into some of Seneen’s principles of mantra mediation, Majid began to confront the day’s little obstacles with a personalized breath and sound.
Majid felt the music deflate anxiety’s swelling and help disperse some of his nagging depression. The melodic wisdom of Marcel Khalife, Roger Waters, Dmar hip-hop, and hundreds of others guided him. Eyes closed, he learned how to zoom out. Music’s perspective slowed his heart rate, moderated his blood pressure, and diffused his stress. Munir had tried to show him how music’s patience could enhance his ability to communicate, moderate his anger, slow his brain’s aging process, and tighten his community. Now Majid was finally listening.

With his earbuds in, Majid’s soles hit a vivace cruise control. Jam sessions flew from once celebrated, layered maps, spitting out philosophy, poetry, and mathematics – all in one tune. Feet followed ears, wrestling with a garbled texture dampened by air pollution, city haze, and Dijla’s watery sedative. Taillight red rippled, headlight white shocked, and streetlight gray blurred. Majid, mapping the underbelly, scanned and assessed. Consonance rose among sedan’s French horn, footnote’s triangle, and taxi’s incessant trumpet. Cymbal’s fender bender called upon laughter’s flute. The balls of Majid’s feet acknowledged allegro. Lorry’s tuba and bulldozer’s bassoon ganged up on moped’s coughing clarinet staccato. Majid laughed. Airplane’s ascent and timpani’s crescendo, a beautiful resolution. Life drowned out the Occupation’s attempts at instituting a western order to their jazz. Sirens tried to applaud between each movement, but the people’s enduring tempo would not allow such flagrant disregard of custom.

Majid now lived for those moments, when the beat dropped and anticipation overwhelmed. The palace softened and blew away, standing little chance in the face of hounding winds. Death was sound asleep in his hammock, hands resting behind his head, a content grin hogging his whole face. *Fuck that.* Majid flew. He flew like a rebel whale breaching above all the bullshit. The beat dropped on ARY’s next episode and Majid soared.

A blink brought him back in order to hum along to some of his eclectic favorites: Julia Boutros, Little Feat, and A Tribe Called Quest. He could never afford a digital music player or a cellphone, so the earbuds’ input plug
jangled casually inside his right jeans’ pocket. He didn’t mind, either. Like Dufresne, a character in a movie Munir once made him watch, Majid had all the best songs queued up in his mind. Whether doing hard time or a soft stroll, the tunes were always around for companionship. Does everyone have a counterpart somewhere in the world? Is there just one out there for everyone? Anyone? Do they even have to be in this solar system? Is there anyone in this galaxy who feels the way I do? Munir? Munir?

Every person is permitted a stretch and a daydream. Sometimes the daydream and the stretch are one and the same. All the other sentient beings that share our galaxy, let alone our universe, must have wildly different motivations. Shoot, look at humans. We’ve got many motivations, and we’re just one species. He wished he could zip up to one of their worlds, hopefully a more accepting world than what humanity had created. Zip like a match reviving a wick from centimeters away, traveling through unburned hydrocarbons. To what extent can extraterrestrial spacecraft exploit fields of gravity? How would open contact with them change our lives? Would U.S. Empire continue pursuing its parochial designs? Would it continue to vomit across our land? Damn it! I should have been kinder to Munir’s observations. Majid’s heart dripped. So would U.S. Empire respond violently, as it does to so many other issues? How would various extraterrestrial agendas conflict and converge on Earth? Are they capable of leveraging influence and deceit like humans do so casually? Will they take advantage of our ignorance? Will they play to our religious beliefs? Do they have their own forms of religion? After contact, will chaos ensue? What existing infrastructure might they repurpose to oppress or liberate? How many extraterrestrial species even care about us? What do they look like? Could they be our seeds? Did they seed us? Are they a branch of us? Have they nurtured any of us? How has their atmosphere and environment affected their evolution? Do their physical
features naturally differ within species depending on their function in society? Can they play with our senses? Can they help us achieve new senses? Like tuning an old radio dial, might they be able to flicker among realities or dimensions? Or are they just as primitive as we are in that regard?

Majid stopped. He looked down.
“No,” he said simply. “No.”

Majid closed his eyes and brought his hand up to his face slowly, robotically. Opening his clenched fist, he placed his index finger and thumb on his left and right eyelids, respectively. Majid rotated his frozen fingers in small circles over his lids, thrice clockwise, twice counterclockwise. He ignored the growing discomfort of an itchy inner thigh in order to complete his third and final rotation.

Majid plopped down next to his best friend. The tears flowed silently, steadily. Majid placed his palm on Munir’s forehead. The bruised skin seemed a splattered patchwork of miniature flowers along the dusty roadside.

Majid scooted closer. He did his best to dust off Munir’s sweatpants and t-shirt, though he hardly made any difference.


He paused. He searched for the sun, taking many minutes before realizing it was the middle of the night. He wiped away some tears and looked down at his friend.

He waited for Munir to smile. He blinked again and again, hoping each time he opened his eyes there would be a smile waiting for him.

“I learned how to ...” Majid paused again. “It’s not the time for words.”

He looked around. No cars in sight. Nobody approached this abandoned part of the industrial zone.

Majid waited.

He thought about how, hours before, he would have at least tried to control his breathing. Now he didn’t care; with his best friend by his side, Majid let his breath flow erratically.
He grabbed Munir’s bony shoulders and rotated Munir’s body so it rested in his lap.
They sat together and let the cosmos blanket them without a word.

The manuscript fell from Majid’s armpit, its most recent roost.
Majid nodded, a veiled vacancy taking hold. “I will,” Majid responded. “It’s time.” He opened the manuscript and began reading, pausing frequently to brush the hair out of Munir’s face.

“May it please the Tribunal, I would like to call Michael as a witness for the prosecution,” Ms. Khalidi led off, eyes on the jury.
Michael rose and walked stiffly to the stand.
Decades of a sedentary military profession had left his body feeble and achy.
The judge swiveled in his perch. “Michael, will you repeat this oath, please? I swear by the laws of nature that I will speak the pure truth and I will withhold nothing in my testimony.” Each word flew off the judge’s tongue crisply and clearly.
Michael repeated the oath calmly.
“Thank you, your honor.” Khalidi nodded to the judge as Michael sat down.
“Michael, do you mind if we establish some basics for the jury?”
“Not at all, ma’am.”
“Thank you,” Khalidi said, mentally mapping the next twenty minutes. She smiled to the jury. “Where were you born?”
“I was born in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.”
“In what year?”
Body still as the Washington Monument, Michael’s eyes swooped towards Khalidi. “Nineteen forty-eight.”
“When, if ever, did you become a member of the U.S. Armed Forces?”
“If my memory serves me correctly, I entered active duty in 1969.”
“And when, if ever, did you become Director of CIA?”

Michael thought for a few seconds. “I believe my first days on the job were towards the end of May 2006.”
“And when, if ever, did you become Director of NSA, DIRNSA as it were?”
“Prior to that. In 1999.”

The judge interrupted, “Please, for the record, CIA is the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and NSA is the National Security Agency. Both are defunct espionage agencies of the former U.S. Empire, certain intelligence functions of which now fall under the purview of the Department of Foreign Affairs.”

“Thank you, your honor.” Khalidi turned her attention back to the witness box. “When, if ever, did you authorize collection, targeting, selection, tracking, or any sort of compilation or pooling of domestic communications of U.S. citizens?”
“You’re talking about my time at NSA?”

Khalidi caught a whiff of haughtiness in his words, a bearing common among Empire’s old cognoscenti. “Yes,” Khalidi confirmed.
“What you describe was occurring prior to my arrival at NSA in the spring of 1999,” Michael enunciated slowly.

“And did you order immediate cessation of the aforementioned activities?”

Michael scrunched his lips inward. He did not seem to be collecting his thoughts or trying to fabricate deceitful phrasing. Khalidi appraised him as thoughtful and introspective, not necessarily contrite.
“No. No I did not.”

“Michael, you led NSA during a period of remarkable technological progress. Is that correct?”
“Yes, ma’am.”

“We’re still trying to ascertain the revolutionary technological developments, which took place during your tenure. Now, did you direct any of this newfound technology against the U.S. populace?”
“U.S. citizens?”
“Yes, Michael. Did you use this technology to target, collect, track, compile information on, select, or pool information on U.S. citizens during your time leading NSA?”
Michael’s grey eyes glinted sharply.
“I apologize for the cumbersome wording,” Khalidi added abruptly.
“Yes,” Michael said.
“What about the Fourth Amendment?” Khalidi asked.
“What about it?”
“Did the protection against unwarranted search of private property ever arise in your decision making?”
“We were at war, ma’am,” Michael responded dryly.
“I’ll tell you what,” Khalidi smiled. “We’ll return to this topic momentarily. I ask all present to turn now to this chart.” Khalidi pointed to a series of cloth diagrams draped over easels between the jury box and Michael’s seat. “Please, Michael, explain to the Tribunal the significance of the terms collect, target, and select.”
“These terms and several others were NSA staples.” Michael began measuredly. He proceeded to describe the differences in terminology and how legal nuance was used to respond mendaciously to light congressional inquiry while simultaneously deepening mass domestic espionage.
A lone beam of moonlight graced the courtroom floor.
“What corporations aided NSA in these endeavors?” Khalidi persisted gently.
“A variety. Every Fortune 500 computer or software corporation was on our team. Their efforts ranged from provision of hardware and surveillance software to collaborating by building backdoors for NSA into their code.”
“And how many war corporations were there?” Khalidi cut Michael off.
“How many capital conglomerates built their portfolios around permanent war?”
“Dozens and dozens. We had an... intricate relationship with Wall Street.”
“And do you recall any of their names?” Khalidi encouraged.
Michael quietly listed eight corporations and then trailed off.
“Any others?” Khalidi questioned.
“Yes, I’m sure. But I can’t recall any more at this time.”
“And this is in addition to—”. 
“In addition to the powerhouses,” Michael proceeded.
“The powerhouses?”
“Yes, the major corporations that promoted war while supplying weaponry to the Pentagon. They were headquartered mostly in northeast Virginia, parts of Maryland, San Diego, and—”.
“According to our records, some operated out of St. Louis, Missouri; Hartford, Connecticut; Waltham, Massachusetts; and Colorado Springs, Colorado,” Khalidi noted.
“In truth, they were everywhere,” Michael explained. “Yes, Virginia and California were major hubs, but the war industry was spread fairly evenly around the nation.”
“What were some others?” Khalidi guided.
“Hundreds more.”
“And what was their role?”
“Profit. Pure and simple,” Michael answered.
Khalidi noticed Michael’s face sag slightly, suddenly. Her heart told her that his heart was reviving.
Michael continued. “Of course they euphemized participation as something like an expansive process where advisers strategize about how to create and nurture companies with global reach.” Michael’s hands crumpled into his lap. “It got to point where the entire economy was tied into war funding. These were just the most powerful beneficiaries, er, rather, the most powerful instigators.”
“Instigators?” Khalidi questioned Michael’s choice of words.
“Yes, instigators. When the economy runs on war, corporate bosses will always find war, even instigating it,” asserted Michael.
“How were military campaigns decided upon during your time?”
“Well, I can only speak in an educated manner about the military intelligence side of matters, but here’s how I understand it.” Michael inhaled deeply, paused with lungs filled, and exhaled slowly. “The war corporations, to use your phrasing, decided.”
“How?”
“Pentagon and the Intelligence Community merely responded. How?” Michael continued in the same breath. “War corporations controlled the discourse, funded Congress, lobbied the Executive and Legislative, and bought the think tanks. The rest followed down the chain of command.”
“Michael. You expect us all to believe that the entire—”
“Yes. It was a war economy. Its fate, its direction, was decided regularly in boardrooms. I’m not even sure the CEOs were totally aware, at least on a daily basis, of their power... Maybe some of them were,” Michael appended.
“Corporate entities steered Pentagon and intelligence agencies and U.S. policy toward war, which inevitably resulted in increased profit?”
“Yes. I even once wrote a column deriding so-called Democrat politicization of intel, but I had missed the whole point. The system itself was politicized. It wasn’t these micro-anomalies, as I thought at the time, like Republican neocons doctoring intel to go after Iraq or Democrats whining about CIA spying on their computers. The whole system was politicized from the get-go on a much broader scale,” Michael clarified.
Feeling somewhat fortified by energy that had returned to his veins during this discussion, Michael jumped to a tangent. “And there was no accountability. Costly projects were the norm. Their relative effectiveness was
not priority number one. Profit was. JSF, Comanche, the Future Combat System, the LCS, the Ballistic Missile Defense System, Sea-Based X-Band Radar, JLENS—”.

“I see,” Khalidi interrupted. She would eventually progress to war profiteering and waste, but she wanted to stick to the precise order of her planned questioning.

“The list goes on and on,” Michael said while adjusting his seat slightly. “These were symptoms of the inherent waste of the war economy,” he concluded.

“Thank you,” Khalidi said while tapping her pen to her temple. “We’ll return to this topic momentarily.”

Michael took this moment to admire his surroundings, which struck him as more of a gymnasium than a courtroom. His later compositions, penned during rehabilitation, would use the words ‘forum’ and ‘amphitheater’ to describe the setting. Three hundred journalists and families, not including the baker’s dozen of officials on trial, their legal teams, and a dash of their kin, looked sparse in the lofty seating. After rolling his neck one rotation, Michael grinned meekly at the moonlight wading through the clerestory.

“How much advance notice, if any, did you have of military campaigns decided in boardrooms?” Khalidi’s strong chords brought Michael back to ground level.

“Not much. Chain of command helped war corporations in this regard. Most within the Beltway followed their bosses’ lead. Not just those in uniform. Those in suits, in addition to Agency desk-jockeys taking the lead from the seventh floor and NSA/CSS apex.”

“And they didn’t object or doubt?” Khalidi asked, genuinely wondering how Michael would respond.

“I’m sure they thought they were acting on behalf of patriotic reasons or national security objectives.”

“At any point, did any soldier, sailor, airman, or Marine object?” Khalidi specified.

“Not really. As far as I know, about a handful objected forcefully over the duration of hostilities,” Michael asserted, though unsure of the specifics.

“And what happened to them?”

“The system took care of them. Order is the key to life, you know. One of my local handlers recently told
me that those words are written on the walls somewhere around here,” Michael drifted.

“The system?” Khalidi repeated, trying to keep the witness focused.

“They’d be silenced through a combination of legal prosecution, peer pressure, hidebound non-disclosure agreements, abuse within the chain of command, and threats to career progression,” Michael recounted. “The vast majority of service members—”

“Michael, we refrain from using that term now, as they were not performing a service in the purest sense of the word.”

Michael corrected himself. “The vast majority of uniformed military members did not object to such orders. You must understand, since the order was issued by the superior authorities, the question of legality did not arise in the minds of these individuals, for they believed they had sworn obedience to the nation and flag and service which issued these orders.”

“When in reality?”

“When in reality none of the wars protected the U.S.” A cold pallor rolled down Michael’s face as he spilled these words. “They were designed and prosecuted for the sole purpose of corporate profit. Ancillary benefits came and went.”

“Can you give us some examples?” the chief prosecutor of the South-South nexus asked, tapping pen to temple once more.

“The fate of one North African nation, for example, was decided within a seventy-two hour period. Makers of aircraft, aircraft parts, missiles, rockets, bombs, and aircraft carriers lined up in agreement. Fossil fuel boardrooms gave their green light. It was prime time for the country to fall. Oh, and don’t forget maintenance on all that equipment, not to mention sustainment and modification contracts. People often overlook all that.”

“What people?”

“The few who cared,” Michael said, worrying his utterance sounded more like a whimper.
“Did you ever target, collect, compile information on, select, track, or pool information on ‘the few who cared’?” Khalidi asked.

“Of course. NSA and CIA liaised mostly with FBI on that one.” Michael’s voice nearly trembled, but he caught himself.

“That’s the Federal Bureau of Investigation, for the record,” the judge stated into the vocal amplifier. “Their awareness was a threat to the status quo,” Michael continued.

“They?”

“Yes. The few who cared,” Michael explained.

“I see. Can you explain why the U.S. government waited a while before invading certain countries?”

Michael murmured to himself.

“Michael?”

“War corporations decided it would be more profitable, long-term, to funnel arms and training contracts, and to support sorties, instead of a direct ground invasion. Understand, they looked at multiple ongoing conflicts as a portfolio of sorts. Direct ground invasion every time would have been bad for business. Sometimes discord itself is the goal. Constant strife benefitted war corporations.”

“Can you clarify for the Tribunal, how many separate intelligence organizations were there during your time at the helm of various agencies?”

“I guess that depends on the year and how you count. Sixteen, as I figure. But it’s not about that. There could have been two or two hundred. The number didn’t matter. What mattered was the entrenched bureaucracy – spanning military and intelligence fields – working ultimately for the benefit of corporate profit,” Michael elucidated.

Khalidi briefly stood in shock at this level of candor.

Michael realized his mouth was ajar.

“Can you give us an idea of where some of these agencies focused?” She relished the moment as Michael described vast overlapping bureaucracies. She cherished her command of this solemn prosecution. Her
examination was yielding more cogently arranged information and historical ore than she had expected during her months of preparation.

“Will you describe in more detail the nature and extent of the areas in which NSA, for example, operated or targeted? Can you name cities or territories?” Khalidi asked.

Michael paused. He looked down at his knees. He was never a physically strong man, but his legs seemed particularly fragile under the courtroom’s vaulted roof. “Perhaps I wasn’t clear. It was total.”

“All-encompassing.” He looked up. “By the end of my time in uniform, NSA was collecting it all. Sorting became our main problem. And geographically? I’d say Antarctica was the only locale we didn’t focus on regularly. But I do recall grabbing Russian scientific comms from there on several occasions.”

“And what did you do with that information?”

“I don’t remember,” Michael muttered, looking downward once more. “You have to understand the mentality of the times,” he pled gently.

“Michael, we discussed this in the opening procedurals. Leaning on zeitgeist is not a valid excuse for deviant, egregious, or unlawful behavior.”

“I’m merely framing the mentality for the jury. You see, we collected it all. We collected it all, and sorted it later. There were nominal protections built in for U.S. citizens, but even those were easily circumvented with the appropriate legalese – United States Signals Intelligence Directives for example, blanket waivers, or even rank. At the end of the day, even USSID eighteen wasn’t worth the paper it was written on.”

“Feeble FISA courts as well?” Khalidi submitted.

“Yes, ma’am. They were just the rubber stamp.”

“Thank you, Michael.” Khalidi appreciated Michael’s fleeting embrace of looser language. “Did NSA support liquidation of civilians across the globe?”

Michael wondered what Khalidi’s reason was for the seemingly random order of questions. “In a word? Yes. We often provided signals intelligence and
cryptologic support to units across the Pentagon, CIA Special Activities Division, Joint Special Operations Command, and even private mercenary contractors,” Michael stated candidly.

“Does that include signals support to ground control stations operating armed unmanned aerial vehicles?”

“Yes, as part of both CIA’s program and the Pentagon’s.”

Ms. Khalidi motioned to her deputy to take over the line of questioning. Khalidi seized the brief respite to drink two glasses of water and shed her outer threads. She tuned back to the plaintiff’s table as Michael said, “Actually, at Aspen we networked and exchanged ideas.”

“Who was present at that conference?” Khalidi’s deputy asked Michael while handing Khalidi a clipboard.

“Corporate sponsors galore, think tanks, high ranking Pentagon brass and civilians, war lobbyists, including AIPAC representatives—”.

“Thank you,” a refreshed Khalidi smiled at her deputy who gladly relinquished history’s heavy reins.

“Did you, personally, have any conversation with the Chief Commanders in War regarding operational constraints or enduring protection for global citizens?” Khalidi asked dutifully.

“With all due respect to the Tribunal, I politely disagree with your characterization of those men as Chief Commanders in War.”

Khalidi had anticipated Michael’s opposition, so she peppered him with questions. “Did they not frequently invoke the title of Commander in Chief when asserting leadership? Did they not often utilize Executive overreach to ease corporate access to decision-makers?”

“All true, ma’am,” Michael conceded.

“Did they not even go so far as to wear military attire, including flight suits and bomber jackets, I believe they’re called, in addition to sundry military regalia? This, by the way, was hitherto unheard of behavior for Presidents to exhibit.”

“I understand.”
“So did you, personally, have any conversation with the Chief Commanders in War regarding building lasting protection for global citizens or establishing durable constraints on the war machinery?”

“No. If we did, I certainly can’t recall. If we did, it was probably only in passing.” Michael’s ashen jowls briefly regained a hopeful hue.

“How often did you meet with the Chief War Commanders?”

“Weekly at most and monthly at least. I would say it depended on the global operational tempo.”

“Which was always high,” Khalidi offered.

“Which was always high,” Michael repeated in assent.

“Can you testify that the Joint Chiefs and assorted agency directors had been similarly informed of orders to waive or decline restraints when prosecuting liquidation of global civilians?” Khalidi asked.

“I don’t think it is quite correct to put it in that form, though nominally, yes, such orders were passed. We’d sprinkle limitations on paper and we attended similar lip service in public pronouncements and official statements, but in practice? No, not in practice,” Michael stated.

“Did you have any other conversation with War Chiefs concerning this type of order?”

“Yes. At the end of my tenure as Director of CIA, the President was preparing for a European tour. He assembled military and intel leaders, and repeated the order to them. He clarified publically a few rhetorical changes. For example, we were to henceforth call our maneuvers and global activities ‘Overseas Contingency Operations.’ He pointed out that the leaders and men who were taking part in unbridled liquidation bore no personal responsibility for the execution of this order. The responsibility was his, alone.”

“You heard those words uttered?” Khalidi requested.

“Behind closed doors, yes. It might have been what he perceived to be sound leadership, but I definitely heard him say that,” Michael corroborated.
“Are you sure about this?” Khalidi doubted.
“Yes,” Michael uttered softly. “Yes.”
“Did you appraise this to be a change in policy from his predecessor?”
“Not really, no. Certain presidents just had better public relations. Publicly, he took less heat, even while he ramped up operations in AFRICOM, SOUTHCOM, and PACOM. Not just intel ops. More military.”
Khalidi reflected while Michael talked. She was writing – no, walking – through history and appreciating all who went before her in order to make this day possible. So many sacrifices I’ll never know, she bowed internally.
“Did you ever get figures on the number of dead as a result of U.S. Empire’s global militancy?” Khalidi inquired.
“Our policy was... we don’t do body counts,” Michael affirmed.
“But?”
“But, yes. We did count. The Chief War Commander who led the United States into Iraq in 2003 actively sought out such numbers. His successor, not so much; he preferred a more ‘out of sight, out of mind’ approach,” Michael expounded.
“Were those reports submitted to you?”
“Yes.”
“And you saw them and read them?”
“I beg your pardon?”
“And you saw and read those reports personally?”
“Yes.”
“Can you give this Tribunal a sense of the numbers?”
“A sense?”
“I’m not asking for an exact number,” Khalidi simplified, “as I am sure no one on this planet has any possible comprehension of such devastation. But can you ballpark the number for the Tribunal? Are we talking hundreds of thousands? Millions?”
“As a direct result of U.S. actions, all the way through last year, I would put the number higher than three million.”

Khalidi refrained from comment. She let that number sit in the tranquil air while the judge’s minutero worked its way around his mental dial.

“I think my colleagues can testify to those numbers with greater accuracy than I,” Michael noted.

“Oh we’ll get to that shortly,” Khalidi interjected. “We have seventeen more U.S. officials to question. Many of your former colleagues will be sitting here over the next couple weeks.”

Michael nodded subtly.

“How many acts of state terror did U.S. Empire commit during your time in uniform?” Khalidi inquired.

“During my entire time in uniform? Or during my time as DCIA and DIRNSA and as a deputy at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence?”

“The latter three.”

“Conservative estimate? Over one hundred and thirty thousand. The number will never be known fully, since terror is subjective. I mean we raided thousands and thousands of homes in Iraq and Afghanistan, but I’m not including that. If you call that ‘terror,’ then the number goes up. And living under drones in northwest Pakistan. I imagine that is pure terror, but I’m not including them in my calculations. The psychological toll of our political violence is... was... unfathomable, and... unquantifiable. This doesn't even factor in bombs, missiles, bullets, mortars, rockets...” Michael droned on.

Khalidi would spend much of her life trying to figure out how men like this, who were apparently capable of some degree of remorse, led Empire’s charge while in office.

Michael continued. “The databases started with individuals in Afghanistan and Iraq. Wherever we could, we recorded their information – date of birth, if known, identifying marks, height – but we quickly started gathering fingerprints and retinal scans. That expanded into electronic data, including cell phone numbers and social media accounts, if applicable.”
“This registration, did it expand to other nations?”
“Yes, of course. And, as you know, it was used domest—”.
“We know,” Khalidi interrupted, knowing her theatrics kept the Tribunal attentive. “Moving on. Referring to your previous testimony, will you explain to the Tribunal why you believe the type of execution ordered by you, namely, via military or CIA drone, was preferable to capturing the suspects?”
“I... I am unable to answer that question.”
“Try,” Khalidi demanded more than encouraged. Michael blinked rapidly. “Ease,” he conceded. “It was just easier. Remember, some local elites made a stink in public when we interfered in their countries, but most assented or were silent behind closed doors. Their concessions really helped us. An empire can’t dominate without the leaders of other nations bowing or allowing it to happen.”
“And what organization furnished most of the personnel supporting this empire, U.S. Empire?” Khalidi said, riding Michael’s honesty to a new line of questioning. “I do not understand the question.”
“Where did you get most of your recruits?” Khalidi rephrased.
“We hired many Wall Street practices and Madison Avenue public relations firms to target all sorts of local communities across the U.S.”
“Thank you for your honesty,” Khalidi appreciated, winding down her first act. “May it please the Tribunal, as a matter of procedure, I thought perhaps now would be a good time as any to yield a portion of my examination to any member or members of the Tribunal who wish to ask the witness direct questions on relevant matters.” Khalidi inhaled slowly through her nose.
The judge tallied up color-coded information on the screen in front of him and then looked Khalidi in the eyes. “The Tribunal does not think that it is necessary to go further into the organizational questions at this stage, but that is ultimately your decision, because you are
most familiar with the evidence being considered,” the judge advised.

A slim woman in the third row behind the primary jury box rose. Her light frock settled evenly along her chest, pelvis, and thighs. “As far as section three of the Tribunal is concerned,” she began, “we are satisfied at the present stage to leave the matter where it stands, but there is one aspect about the evidence which the Tribunal would like to investigate.” Her voice gained strength as she spoke. A throaty rumble punctuated her final words, taking everyone aback. Pleased with her initial impression, she slowly made her way down the stairs and onto the courtroom floor.

Khalidi walked over to her deputy who pulled out the chair for her. He knew she hated such gestures, but he did it regardless. As she sat down, she spoke. “May it please the Tribunal, the witness is now available to other prosecutors. I understand that the legal emissary from Uruguay, Paulina, has some questions that she wishes to ask,” Khalidi noted.

“You may yield ten minutes of your time to Uruguay’s legal scholar,” the judge approved, nodding to the courtroom’s newest professional.

“Can you clarify for how long the practices of interminable global war that you have described continued?” the Uruguayan specialist asked rapidly as she walked into the well.

“Global war was our enduring policy. It lasted until the total collapse of U.S. Empire,” Michael stated bluntly, acclimating to his new custodian. “May I say something?” Michael asked, hopeful the Uruguayan counsel would grant permission.

“Yes,” she stated plainly.

“I want to return briefly to corporate involvement in my former craft.” Michael swallowed and continued. “Part of our job, implemented only at the highest levels, was tipping off U.S. corporations to provide them with a competitive global advantage. I want you to know about this now, because it seemed to me like the prosecution was not going to touch upon this subject.”
“Thank you, Michael,” the Uruguayan professional acknowledged. “Please continue. How did you tip off the corporations?”

“Simply. Sometimes by anonymous letters, sometimes by formal letter, and sometimes we’d arrange discrete business luncheons with corporate executives. In all cases, we provided them with information gleaned from spying on foreign companies,” Michael confessed.

“What kind of companies,” the lawyer asked.

“All. Tech companies, aircraft manufacturers, oil magnates... any and all, although we usually stuck to Fortune 500 entities.”

“And this includes war corporations?”

“Of course. That goes without saying. But much of the apparatus existed to benefit broad U.S. corporate interest. War corporations were a part, sure. But our tips, NSA especially, provided competitive advantage to all sorts of U.S. corporations.”

“Many public officials disagreed with that assessment during the waning years of U.S. Empire,” she reminded Michael.

“I understand. They either weren’t privy to the information I saw, or they were well intentioned but misguided. Remember, the average worker bee, even those with the highest TS/SCI clearance, didn’t have the policy access or the general clout of my position,” Michael concluded firmly.

“Thank you,” said the Montevideana. “I wish to read some of your previous statements and afford you the opportunity to set the record straight. Do you mind?”

“Okay,” Michael agreed.

“Targeted killing using drones has become part of the American way of war,” she read.

“I had doubts when I wrote that, but I submitted it nonetheless.”

“So you believe it now?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. It was part of our portfolio, if you will.”

“In reference to the U.S. drone program, you once wrote it was ‘not perfect’ but ‘it works.’ Comments?”

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“No. It didn’t ‘work’ in the sense I attempted to convey.”

“You wrote that the drone program was ‘the most precise and effective application of firepower in the history of armed conflict’. End quote,” she punctuated verbally.

“Ma’am, I was incorrect in both those statements,” Michael admitted.

She continued relentlessly. _He can suffer through some minor bureaucratic inconveniences_, she thought. _It is nothing in comparison..._ Her thoughts drifted slightly as she sustained her examination. Bit by bit, she allowed Michael to debunk his former opinions regarding proportionality, civilian deaths, the accuracy of U.S. intelligence, the status of the enemy-of-the-day, and Michael’s frequent embellishment of threats to the so-called homeland.

“Michael.” Paulina, the delegate from Uruguay, stared at the witness. “Michael, what other options did you have to remove perceived enemies from the stated battlefield?”

“At the time, aside from unmanned aerial vehicle strikes? We sometimes conducted cruise missile strikes. Other times we used gunships or ground vehicles. But those were traditionally part of formal battlefields. On occasion we employed joint special operations task forces.”

“What do you mean by ‘on occasion’?”

“Frequently.” Michael sniffed.

Paulina refused to permit Michael the luxury of a smile. “In drone strikes, were children and other civilians murdered?”

“Technically, no.”

“Technically?”

“Well, in drone strikes, for example, we just classified military age males, and even some females, as enemy combatants. That solved any messy legal problems that might have arisen. Not solved. Postponed, I guess,” Michael qualified grimly.

“Clearly,” Paulina noted. “So... physically, yes. Technically, no?”
“That is correct,” Michael nodded, with his chin settling snugly into his collar.

“And how, today, do you appraise such legerdemain?”

Michael refused to look up. Paulina gave him a few moments of reprieve, but his gaze remained locked to the floor.

“Michael?”

“Disgraceful,” he whispered.

“Pardon me?”

“Atrocious,” he projected more forcefully.

“Were you involved in those decisions? Did you ever sign off on that?” Paulina persisted.

“Yes. Others did as well. But, yes.”

“We’ll get to the others in due time,” assured Paulina.

“We had a robust legal team.”

“I understand. Most of them, as you know, have already been prosecuted and found guilty, at a minimum, of conspiracy to commit murder. At a maximum, life in rehabilitation for murder in the first degree,” Paulina noted. Michael’s vacant eyes met her gaze.

Khalidi shifted in her seat. She thoroughly enjoyed watching and learning from Paulina’s excellent command of the courtroom. While her mind absorbed Paulina’s brilliance, her body progressed through a series of its own. Khalidi started to subtly engage her core. She figured all eyes were on Paulina grilling the former imperial general, so she proceeded slowly, discretely.

Inhale, arch back, lift chin, navel forward, tailbone back. Exhale, round spine, gaze down, and examine paperwork intensely. Breath and body moved together, refreshing Khalidi thoroughly. She stifled a chuckle when she noticed her colleague’s eyebrow rise as her adductor stretched under the table. As far as she could tell, nobody else noticed.

“There may have been other details that I no longer remember. At any rate, all ill treatment, whether physical or mental, was to be prevented through these measures,” Michael affirmed.
The Uruguayan prosecutor yielded to the Namibian legal team, which asked about indefinite detention. They yielded back to Khalidi after thoroughly threshing out the fraud, waste, and abuse inherent to massive Pentagon bureaucracies and funding sources.

“Michael, did NSA or CIA under your leadership ever aid Israel in its colonial aggression against the Palestinian people?” Khalidi asked, stepping forward once more. “Specifically, Israeli apartheid and ethnic cleansing against Palestinians.”

“Yes, my colleague over there. Front row, third to the left—”.

“Let the record show that Michael is gesturing towards Keith.” The judge’s voice echoed off the stone walls.

“He provided robust SIGINT support to the Israelis while I was CIA Director. In my capacity as DCIA, we implemented several measures to sow civil strife in the Gaza Strip and the West Banks.”

“The West Bank?”

“Yes, thank you. The West Bank.” Michael continued, “My old colleague, Robert, can speak to the volumes of IMINT we gave.”

“Do you have any idea how many civilians Israel murdered during your tenure?”

“In my latter days as DCIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency commissioned a study in tandem with the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency to assess casualties. I believe their internal estimates hovered around two thousand civilians during one winter assault.” Michael looked like he was about to return his gaze to his knees, but he jolted up once more. “They killed far more civilians during an operation that took place five years later,” Michael added. He sat back for a moment, apparently surprised at his own acknowledgment.

“Independent human rights organizations have estimated similar numbers. Do you know how many Israeli civilians died then, Michael?”

“I don’t know. Fifty? Seventy?” Michael offered.

“Five,” Khalidi stated flatly.
Michael blinked.
“Five,” Khalidi repeated.
“Michael, did you ever approve of sharing raw SIGINT with Israel without minimizing, that is, first removing certain information regarding U.S. citizens?”
“Yes, ma’am. We first hammered out a tentative agreement with the Israeli regime under my watch at NSA during early two thousand and five. My successor, Keith, can provide you more details, as the final agreement was formalized during his DIRNSA tenure. He gave them the haystacks and the needles.”
“It didn’t concern you that Mossad or Unit 8200, two notorious human rights violators, might use NSA’s raw SIGINT for nefarious purposes or purposes contrary to the principles of democracy and freedom, which your nation claimed to hold so dearly?”
“I…” Michael fell silent.
“Michael?”
“It was a political decision. We felt…”
“We?” Khalidi pushed.
“I felt, I determined which way the wind was blowing, and I bowed, I conformed.”
“Do you know how many U.S. citizens, let alone U.S. persons, were affected negatively by that decision?”
“No.”
“How would you characterize Israel’s relative… well… relationship with U.S. Empire at the time you made that decision?”
“Now or then? My assessment now is that Israel was a strategic burden to U.S. Empire. My assessment then was moot. I made a tactical, political decision, you could say,” Michael suggested.
“Did any of your colleagues share your view?”
Michael’s response lurched forward in bursts. “I believe David, when he was in charge of CENTCOM, which would have been about a year after I retired from DCIA, made similar statements.”
“Yes, I have it right here,” Khalidi hurried. “He testified that the Israel-Palestine conflict ‘foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel.’ Justifiable anger ‘limits the strength
and depth of U.S. partnerships' in the region. While various groups are able to ‘exploit’—”.

“Please stay on task, Ms. Khalidi,” the judge interrupted. “You'll have ample time to ask David when he is summoned tomorrow afternoon.”

“I apologize, your honor,” Khalidi conceded. “Michael,” she said turning to the witness stand, “is that a fair assessment?”

“Fair, yes. Perhaps... perhaps it doesn’t go far enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean it doesn’t factor in the political and financial burden of Israel on U.S. Empire,” Michael clarified.

“Continue, please.”

“Well, the U.S. gave Israel over three billion dollars each year, gratis. And that didn’t include supplementary war funding, like contributions to missile technology. U.S. Empire also protected Israel dozens of times on the UN Security Council, so...”

“So...?”

“So, the U.S.—”.

“U.S. Empire,” Khalidi corrected.

“U.S. Empire,” Michael murmured, “didn’t get much in return.”

“What, if anything, did U.S. Empire receive in return?” Khalidi asked.

“Look, as a matter of policy, which came down from the top, Israel’s needs came first nine times out of ten,” Michael added.

“And what did U.S. Empire receive in return?” Khalidi insisted.

“Well,” Michael breathed deeply. “U.S. corporations, both martial and technical, benefitted from frequent weapons purchases by the Israeli government. But Israel then always would copy that technology or weaponry illegally, feeding the knowledge back into its own military lab, and then test those weapons on the populations of the West Bank, Gaza, and Lebanon.” Michael began to stare at Khalidi blankly as the penultimate ‘and’ exited his mouth.
“Thank you for your candor, Michael.”
“Anything else?” Michael offered quietly.
“Yes—”.
“Let me just remind the Tribunal,” Michael interrupted, “of some advice for future comportment as a country or individual states. George Washington warned us in his farewell address, and I’m paraphrasing here…” Michael’s puny chest rose beneath his drab garb. “He noted that any nation that indulges habitual fondness towards another nation is a certain type of slave. General Washington warned such behavior could result in war and direct harm to U.S. interest.” Michael’s chest rested. The judge was the only one close enough to hear Michael’s concluding remarks: “Should have taken his advice.”

“Michael, as you know, we’re here today to prosecute war crimes, human rights violations, and militant gluttony of the former U.S. Empire,” Khalidi stated, hoping to center the inquiry.

Michael blinked, pursed his lips, and nodded slowly in synch with Khalidi’s cadence.

“Is there any action or prior bureaucratic pursuit you wish to mention today? Any crime committed under your leadership you wish to disclose? Any human rights violations or war crimes, which we have not yet covered, you wish to divulge? Any—”.

“Yes!” Michael blurted out. He closed his eyes tightly, furrowing his entire forehead. “I apologize.” He patted the soft wooden rail in front of him. “Yes, as a matter of fact, I wish to discuss a few points. Firstly, I’m sure you’re aware of the incidents at Bluffdale.”

“Yes. Until fairly recently, NSA’s data center in Bluffdale, Utah, housed zettabytes, I believe is the technical term, of data on U.S. and global civilians,” Khalidi said.

“Correct. Yottabytes, actually. We—”.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I have a statement here…” Khalidi’s deputy flipped through a purple binder, stopped, popped open the rings, and handed Khalidi the appropriate section. “…from an NSA spokesperson, stating, ‘One of the biggest misconceptions about NSA is
that we are unlawfully listening in on, or reading emails of, U.S. citizens. This is simply not the case.” Placing the documents gently in front of her deputy, Khalidi turned to Michael and asked, “What about that spokesperson’s assurances?”

“Nothing but smoke and mirrors, courtesy of our legal team. Look, she used the word ‘unlawfully’ to make you sleep soundly at night. The truth of the matter is that NSA, more often than not, was in full compliance with the law because our legal team crafted the law to suit our needs.”

“Is that what you wanted to address?”

“No,” Michael mustered.

“Please proceed. Thank you for indulging my digression.” Khalidi smiled.

Michael glanced up at the judge and then looked back down at his frail knees. “While the uprising managed to overrun the Bluffdale facility, there are three more similar structures located within the continental United States that, as far as I know, have yet to be confronted,” Michael divulged.

“We received that information from some of your colleagues during their initial processing, initial interrogation, and pre-trial arraignment. Those facilities are already cordoned off,” Khalidi assured Michael.

Michael looked up at the judge like a confused lion cub. The judge stared straight ahead in anticipation of Khalidi’s next question. The courtroom stenographers, scribes, and journalists all appreciated her tactical, dulcet pause.

Michael broke Khalidi's four-measure rest.

“Please understand,” Michael proceeded. Weakness propelled his stiff interruption. “Industry directors crafted the PATRIOT Act long before the events of nine-eleven. How do you think such a weighty document was plopped on desks across Washington on nine-twelve?”

“Michael, we must stay on track right now. There will be a time for important contributions like that. For now, I must ask you about the order concerning the annihilation of global citizens across multiple communities. Were such orders in accordance with the
policy of the U.S. government or the Democrat and Republican parties, or did such orders contradict U.S. policy?”

Michael looked momentarily confused.

“Do you understand the question?” Khalidi asked.

“I understand the question,” Michael replied, fed by dying batteries of withering conviction. “Yes, both Republicans and Democrats, factions of the same corporate party, approved wholeheartedly of unending global war.”

“Any what role did U.S. citizens play?”

“Role in what?” Michael sighed hoarsely.

“In determining policy,” Khalidi explained.

“None. No role, that is.” Michael trembled, honestly. “Most of the country was disengaged from daily politics. And about half the country didn’t vote. The other half was so dulled down from corporate television, Hollywood entertainment, and professional sports that they served an essentially aerarian function, essentially,” Michael repeated, nerves overwhelming syntax.

“How do—”.

“I must add,” Michael continued, “that public opinion sometimes was the exact opposite of our policies.”

“In which case...” Khalidi led. She took a step back, tucking her thumb under a fist of fingers, and cracking her thumb knuckle.

“In which case, we’d just disregard what the people wanted. We’d pursue our own designs.”

“How do you reconcile U.S. Empire’s frequent use of terms like ‘freedom’ and ‘liberty’ with its inhumane behavior, like drone strikes, invasions, occupation, and insatiable corporate greed?” Khalidi hoped to end on this line of questioning.

“Certain public relations firms advised us in the fall of two thousand and one to use those terms, since they’re flexible ideals to which we all can aspire, but which hold no true weight to the extent that they can be manipulated to serve imperial aims.”

“I see. Would you like to name those PR firms?”
“I believe they were submitted in my pre-trial written testimony, ma’am.” Michael blinked rapidly, eyes on the center of the courtroom.

“Thank you. We’ll review that and get back to you.” Khalidi paused, shuffled a few files, and placed them on her table.

“Is there anything else you’d like to add at this point? Any topics we haven’t covered? Anything you’d like to broach?” Khalid offered.

“We were just… following orders.” Michael stuttered the portly words.


“Are you suggesting that a subordinate leader, like me, refrain from carrying out orders given by the state’s leadership?” Michael questioned, the final veneer of imperial dogma slipping away.

Paulina broke formality and stood up. Michael would later describe her behavior as curt, but there was no denying how well she emphasized the pertinent legality of disobeying unlawful orders. Michael’s weaseling was promptly silenced. Paulina sat back down.

“Your honor,” Ms. Khalidi’s voice boomed. “If it pleases the Tribunal, I wish to call a witness for the prosecution, a man who lived through the U.S. occupation of Iraq.” Her request roared through the courtroom. She blinked back elated tears as Majid al-‘Awda pivoted around the jury and bee-lined towards the witness box.

“So that is how Empire falls. I can picture it, thanks to you.” Majid smiled as he realized speaking was no longer necessary.

Munir’s spirit blinked agreement.

Majid wiped away their last tear. He lay down fully, prone next to Munir’s corpse. The best friends
stared at the daub in the cosmos known as the Milky Way.

“So it’s possible.” Majid smiled wider, almost laughing.
“Resistance is possible,” Munir’s spirit affirmed. The Milky Way blurred away.
“Possible and prioritized.” Majid’s smile grew. Munir’s spirit hugged him tenderly.
“Possible, prioritized, and more important than comfort,” Majid affirmed. He scratched his thigh.

The Milk Way yasrou’a-ed across the blanket above.

Something akin to spiritual adrenaline rushed throughout Majid’s veins. “Time to get up,” he said to Munir. To respect Munir’s death is to learn from his life. He leaned over, grabbed Munir by the right arm and right leg, and tried to hoist him onto his shoulders.
“Oh God, let me help you,” a young woman cried through the passenger window as she slowed her rusty car to a halt, her hijab waving with the inertia.

Chapter Twelve

Majid stepped gently into the corpse washer’s office. Cold, teal blue met him with a routine stare. He balked.

“You’re the first one to ever show up carrying the body that way,” the mighsalchi said gently, moving out of the doorway and helping to carry Munir.

“Please, let me,” Majid offered. “He’s my friend. I should be the—”.

But it was too late. With one fell swoop of delicate proficiency, the corpse washer glided Munir into the air and set him down gently on the table. A macabre ballerina, Majid appraised.

“Come,” the corpse washer said, stepping towards Majid, arms open.
Majid found himself in a healing embrace before he could take a step.
“Rest.” The corpse washer’s second order.
Majid, still panting, slumped against the wall. He looked up. The domed room reminded him of the inside of a bathtub. Incense flicked his nose. He closed his eyes, though he wanted to watch. He felt the corpse washer incant, wash, and shroud, still far from done when Majid opened his eyes again.

He walked over and looked into the corpse washer’s eyes. He sensed the man hadn’t slept in days. Majid looked deeper. The man was psychologically destroyed – making plenty of money, but a relentless stream of corpses had disheveled the man’s mind.

The corpse washer noticed Majid’s blank stare, interpreting it as discomfort and hesitancy. “My apologies,” he said, and lit another candle. Now three candles flickered: one at the imposing entrance, one suspended from the ceiling, and one in a niche in the wall next to the table.

The table. It grew out of the ground like a magical mushroom, rubbed smooth from waves of transient cadavers, so many of the recent ones young and mangled.

“What now?” the corpse washer asked him, closing a cupboard filled with needles, thread, cotton balls, and something resembling glue. He ignored Munir’s bruises, which the candlelight churned like a dark sea.

Majid raised an eyebrow.
“I apologize. I usually don’t ask. You’re right. It’s none of my business,” the corpse washer said apologetically.

“No, no,” Majid replied. “I’m happy to—I mean, I don’t know what I’m going to do now.”

The corpse washer patted him lightly on the arm, his scrunched palm brimming with cotton balls.

“Maybe I’ll go on a walkabout,” Majid suggested.
“Ah what?”
“A walkabout,” Majid said chuckling, embracing peace of purpose. Munir had sometimes mentioned walkabouts. It was a movie reference, Majid was sure. Though now he hung his head, torn between honoring Munir’s penchant for U.S. cinema and his own newfound
want to reject all forms of U.S. cultural domination that had inundated the world.

“Think they'll ever listen to us?” the corpse washer asked, continuing his march away from ceremonial professionalism.

“Who?”

“The West? I mean really listen to us.”

“What do you mean?”

“Listen.”

“Yes they will,” Majid affirmed. “We can make them listen.”

The corpse washer blinked in agreement. “Say hi to Seneen for me.”

“Of course, 3amo.”

The corpse washer recognized his friend was on a mission. He stepped forward to hug the young man.

“If I don’t come back by tomorrow night, please–”

“Bury him where?” the corpse washer interrupted, gently.

Majid gave the corpse washer the instructions.

Majid turned right down a dark alley. He halted in front of a grey, knob-less door in the middle of a lone puddle, glossy with rain’s wisdom. He turned his back to the door, looked up, and genuflected under the universe’s broad plasma vault. He ignored his soppy knees as the sky throbbed lower and lower with each slick rumble:

“As I report to you, air attacks are under way against military targets in Iraq.” George H.W. Bush’s teeth grinded amid nasally speech.

“... Strike military and security targets in Iraq... Their mission is to attack Iraq’s nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs and its military capacity to threaten its neighbors. Their purpose is to protect the national interests of the United States, and indeed the interests of the people throughout the Middle East and around the world,” William J. Clinton clanged.

“At this hour, American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq,
to free its people, and to defend the world from grave danger,” George W. Bush whirred.

“We will conduct a systematic campaign of air strikes... I will not hesitate to take action,” Barack H. Obama drivel.

Majid witnessed the final two menacing faces unite under the banner of corporate profit. Majid rose, turned around, and stepped through the grey door. He foresaw a daunting reconstruction process; PSYOPS’ pall of poison and dank distrust would linger for decades.

Majid (fariq awal, in charge of resisting any invaders) welcomed the fog and began his lecture.

“You’ll never win. You’ll never win,” he addressed the packed house calmly. The Joint Chiefs of Staff sat motionless, hogging the second row, resting their legs on the shoulders of those in the front row: Franks, Sanchez, Casey, Petraeus, Odierno, Austin, and two bodies whose faces remained blurred. Legacy Occupation, past present and future.

The stadium-style seating – overflowing with everyone from academy cadets, to senior non-commissioned officers, to career Senior Executive Service sycophants – would have intimidated any other orator. But, swords crossed and two stars perched, Majid’s shoulders felt buoyant, his posture rigid.

“You’ll never win, because you’ll never take the time to learn the culture and language.”

The audience blinked at him.

“You’ll never get the best and brightest, because you require recruits smart enough to run the equipment or, at most, to learn the language, but dumb enough to fall for nationalism.”

The brood growled as its cognitive dissonance sparked, grated, and creaked.

“Most of you signed up for economic reasons, even if you cough such action in patriotic terms. Delusion is a powerful ally.” Smoke and mirrors, Majid thought, recalling a quote about theatricality he once learned from Munir’s favorite superhero movie.

“You’ll never win, even though you spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year on recruitment
and advertising...” Majid paused, breathed deeply, and stared out into the camouflage sea: MARPAT, ABU, ACU, and the purple Navy Working Uniform. *Those sailors look like the lovechild of Violet Beauregarde and Russian OMON*, Majid thought.

Majid exhaled to conclude his thought, “...because you defend the indefensible: neoliberal economic policies, empire, dictatorships, and Occupation.”

No one moved. No one clapped. No one even glanced at the exits. Majid figured everyone was waiting for leadership to make a call, but no decision ever came.

Majid blinked and the audience froze. He blinked again and they started to melt. Sundry waxy camouflage patterns pooled together, ran down the aisles, and drained beneath the stage, murmuring rote objections.

“No, you don’t get to talk,” Majid directed. “*We do protest peacefully,*” Majid said, addressing one of the complaints, “but your corporate media do not cover it. We demand jobs, clean water, and electricity. You ignore this systematically while the power structures you installed in Baghdad brutally suppress our demonstrations.”

Majid let his lecture off the leash. “Sure. Cripple our country with sanctions and continuously bomb us; invade once, twice, thrice; guard oil fields, but not our cultural treasures; terrorize families; and create divides in our communities that entrench sectarian politics. Design our presidency as nothing but a supervisory position, ensuring multinational corporations forever own our economy and exploit the people. Give some local elites a little taste of the bounty so they’ll help you out along the way. You call any and all resistance to these plans ‘terrorism.’” Majid tried to inhale, only to find his lungs were already full of air. His ribbon rack bulged.

“I anticipate none of this will sound familiar to you, for your mental confines are tight. The center of the flame is darker. It looks hollow to passersby. Wax travels up wick through capillary attraction. So too does conformity route to U.S. Empire’s ignorance.”
Chapter Thirteen

A large ant crawled over Majid’s sneaker. He waited until the ant had moved on before taking a step. The alleyway felt more comfortable this time around. “Somebody’s learning,” Majid joked to himself. “And I’m not waiting around outside.” He eyed the rickety scaffolding next to him. “You look like you’ve been here since the days of Ahmed Al-Bakr.” He tapped it softly with a grubby knuckle. It promised to hold up. Majid climbed on top of a crate, with two hands grabbed ahold of a horizontal bar, and put his right foot on a parallel piece of wood two meters off the ground. The entire structure shuddered. Majid put his left foot on the wood and paused. The shakes died down. He climbed the rest of the scaffolding calmly and quickly. It swayed like a languid Brant’s Oak, but never buckled.

*Weaponry and passports, weaponry and passports,* Majid repeated.

His battered sternum complained as he wiggled from the scaffolding to the nearest sill. Three wide skips propelled him along adjoining ledge. He landed softly on the roof and waited. The city’s usual cacophony seemed suspended in the air. *Munir, did you see that landing?* Majid chuckled. A chill washed over his body. He eyed the surface of the roof of the smugglers’ warehouse. It sank towards the middle. *Maybe rukh sat there.*

Majid waited.

The roof vent gave Majid a nod, and the city’s noise resumed its usual rhythms and paces. Majid crawled over on his stomach. He eased the grate open and looked in. *No way. Too narrow.* “Thanks though,” he whispered respectfully.

Never rising above a low crawl, Majid methodically prodded the cityscape.

Majid dropped into the southeast corner of the warehouse, clunky machinery affording his body cover and concealment. He scooted forward to catch his breath
in the shadow of a large crate. He dusted off his hands on his shirt.

“Are you kidding me?” The familiar voice hit Majid from all sides.

Majid froze.

“I mean, are you kidding me?” Laughter minced the words.

Majid stood up slowly and walked out from behind the machinery. The chief smuggler’s fresh white t-shirt stood out among a sea of crates.

“Come,” the chief smuggler said plainly.

Majid followed. Dread seized his steps. His mind started to detach, a preparatory step to brace for the next beating.

“What did I say?” the chief smuggler asked, leading Majid through the wooden maze.

Majid didn’t reply. He just followed the white t-shirt out into the open floor. A few bulbs of soft light smeared the concrete floor with medicinal, ferric hues.

“What did I say?” the chief smuggler asked again, politely. He leaned against the back of a grey sedan, slightly larger than the one Majid had seen yesterday. Four more, all shades of blue, sat in a row to the smuggler’s left. Majid stood a few meters away. A little running space, he dreamed.

Majid tried to control his breath, but failed miserably. “I...” he began. A tremor rattled up and down his left leg, its epicenter somewhere deep in the knee.

“I’d... you’d kill me, if I ever came back.”

The smuggler nodded and then smiled. His teeth were brighter than the bulbs above.

Footsteps strummed the dusty concrete behind Majid. He didn’t turn around. He didn’t want to see the beating coming.

“Anan,” the head smuggler said, hand extended.

Majid stepped back.

“I’m all bark,” Anan joked. Majid knew that wasn’t true.

Majid took another step back. He bumped into sweaty fabric. Fetid breath exhaled on Majid’s neck. He
didn’t turn around. He stepped forward. *Maybe that’s my way out.*

“You’re a steadfast kid,” Anan said closing in on Majid.

Majid did his best to stand tall.

“Really. Your resolve is impressive,” Anan continued.

“Thanks?” was all Majid could utter.

Anan put a delicate arm around Majid’s shoulders. “Those wounds are healing well,” he joked.

Majid laughed through the cold shudder that was scuttling each of his vertebrae. Anan started walking.

Majid followed at his side as they roamed around the open floor of the warehouse. Though taller than Anan, Majid still felt shorter.

“What... do you want?” Majid asked.

“What do you want?” Anan countered.

“A weapon and—.” Majid said.

“That can be arranged,” Anan interrupted.

They looked at each other. Anan squinted, almost closing his eyes.

“And you?” Majid asked.

“Nothing. Nothing at all,” Anan replied, opening his eyes slowly, like he had just woken up.

Majid believed him.

“You’re not the enemy,” Anan observed. “Fellow Arabs are not the enemy.”

“OK.”

“Honestly.” Anan stopped walking. “My beef is not with you.” He scrunched Majid’s shoulders. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Majid leaned away from him.

“Let me rephrase. I am not going to hurt you. You’re free to go whenever you want,” Anan stated firmly.

Majid rotated his left shoulder. It popped twice.

“Then why’d you beat me up last time?” Majid winced.

“I didn’t. My colleagues, let’s call them, got to you first. They were following the standing order I had given them.”
“I see,” Majid replied as Anan started walking again around the warehouse. “We’ve all got an enemy, and it’s not each other,” Anan said.

“Agreed,” Majid said, stretching out the word. “Where’s the nearest exit?” Majid knew the answer from his previous reconnaissance, but he wanted to see if Anan would answer truthfully.

“Over there,” Anan said, gesturing to the nearest corner, which was concealed by an aspiring mnara of wooden pallets.

Correct, Majid confirmed. He wiggled out of the smuggler’s clutch and walked toward the door. Anan watched as Majid boldly plucked a black assault rifle from an open crate. He shouldered the rifle and then leaned over the crate. He scooped up a magazine and three handfuls of bullets.

“There’re bigger magazines in the crate to your left,” Anan said loudly.

Majid nodded softly to Anan and turned to the door.

“God bless,” Anan yelled after him. His posse of seven bruisers moved out of the way as Majid passed. More are surely lurking nearby, Majid thought. Majid paused and looked once more over his shoulder, eyebrow raised.

“I will not let the Occupation turn us against each other,” Anan affirmed.

“No more Arab against Arab?” Majid asked.

“Well, not here at least,” Anan replied.

“It’s a start,” Majid said, turning around fully. He backed up the remaining way toward the exit.

“It’s a start,” Anan echoed. “I did some research on you, ya know?” A genuine smile bloomed. Those brilliant teeth shined again. “We have a few friends in common.”

Majid felt for the handle, a rusty lever repurposed from a bygone era. The butt of his rifle clanged against the metal door.

“You know Yahia?” Anan’s words cast about the walls.
Majid nodded. He yanked up on the door’s handle. It didn’t budge. Anan’s bruisers watched from the sidelines. Rust grated against his palm as he tried again.

Anan strode towards Majid. “He guards one of my distribution points.” In five paces, Anan arrived. Anan reared up. Majid braced for impact. Anan lunged, tossing his full body weight against the lever. CLANK! “You gotta push down a bit before lifting up,” Anan instructed. He flexed his sinewy forearms and shook out his wrists.

Majid stepped back. Anan opened the door a crack. The cluttered alleyway waited under a struggling darkness.

Majid put his hand on the door's iron strike and took a big look around the warehouse. His gaze fell on the clunky machinery along the far wall.

“One more thing?” Majid requested optimistically. Anan nodded.

“Is that what I think it is?” Majid gestured to the corner.

Anan nodded.

“I have someone you should meet,” Majid said, laughing with energy.

THUMP THUMP THUMP! Someone pounded on the door. Majid and Anan looked at each other, neither one moving.

“Right on time,” Majid said, opening the door. A familiar female figure slipped inside. The light smell of roses wafted ahead of her.

Seneen frolicked around the kitchen, allowing herself to be genuinely happy for the first time in months. Acknowledging and shedding tonight’s events – *Majid is a man who sets his own intentions* – Seneen bounced from burner to cupboard to oven and sprang back to burner as whispers of dawn snuck into the kitchen through the airy shutters.

Yalanji. How can one word summon so much saliva? *I’m drooling like a famished mastiff,* she giggled.

A Farid Al-Atrash classic coaxed her eyes closed. She swayed to the *oud.* Tenderly inhaling the crescendo,
Seneen felt for the onions and began to dice. Master of her own world, she crisply merged tomatoes into the feed beneath her blade.

She arranged tasks like a chess prodigy thinking many moves ahead. Rice boiled and grape leaves rinsed off while salt and pepper swam with oil. Parsley caroused with onion and tomato. Mint refereed, splashing offenders with a sluice of citrus.

*Being vegan is a moral decision, but it doesn’t make you moral.* Her mom’s words swelled through her chest, tickled her spine, and enchanted her knees.

Mom’s kitchen secrets guided her not only in tackling culinary guiles, but also in life. Observing, asking, imitating – Seneen could roast hearts and simmer souls with the best of them. She recalled teenage years in mom’s kitchen. The dusty invaders’ sweat, snarls, and shadows bounced off mom’s minty mirth, floured hands, and gorgeous smile. No matter how many explosions shook the building, mom had stayed firm; her smile had powered the family through the ignorant furnace.

Mom’s sieved secrets had fallen into Seneen’s mind where they pooled, grew, and calibrated. Mom’s basic rules – drink plenty of water, read every day, be nice to assholes, and don’t pollute – still guided Seneen, who tried daily to share these gems with her fellow citizens. She blushed thinking of mom’s more innovative nuggets.

The secret ingredient stood aside and observed the controlled confusion. Its golden honey hue winked at Seneen while she worked, but snapped to attention whenever she glanced its way.

Rolling yalanji proficiently took practice and patience.

Seneen focused first on controlling her heart rate; she knew she needed to smooth out her ruffled soul before rolling the grape leaves well.

*Be delicate yet firm,* advice understood only to those who’ve tried the task.

“Always roll from the bottom to the top,” she whispered. Her mother’s words resonated off the walls and out into the cosmos. *Don’t be afraid to trim the leaves*
a little. Razor blades and brushes are your friend in the kitchen. Offset the leaf a bit and embrace angles. Don’t roll too tightly at first. You can always smooth it out and firm it up later.

As Seneen swung her neck to the right, hoping to catch the secret ingredient off guard, one tooth of a spiny cactus – ‘ammat al-qaadii – fell from her bosom into the pot below. Seneen did not see the furtive plunge. Her attention had already turned back, at an awkward lean, to mincing the remaining centimeter of a fist of parsley.

Heart warm yet cold, discolored yet durable. How? she wondered while placing thin strips of potato at the bottom of her oiled pot. Will we ever heal? How long until we’re free?

Seneen tucked one rolled leaf into the warm cradle.

Will it take decades? Centuries? Her mind drifted farther. What herbs and spices can help us heal as a community? What role will parsley, garlic, thyme, oregano, and cannabis play?

One by one, Seneen placed the remaining rolled leaves into the pot.

Seneen gently placed the sliced tomatoes on top of the wrapped grape leaves. Touching tomato’s thin skin jogged her memory, recalling the loose skin of an elderly man who had visited her one moon ago. He had said no more than two words during their entire encounter, but he had left her with more questions than specks of pepper in her dish. He was gentle, kind, and endearing. The skin on his back was soft and fuzzy. It slid faintly above a plank of firm muscle. She had dug her nails in slightly, just enough to remind him he was still alive. He smelled of old leaves and his breath was mouthwash fresh. She appreciated the time and care he had spent in preparation for his visit. He never perspired throughout. His only signs of ageing were the careful wheezes he released as he ascended towards the summit. She had genuinely regretted his sudden departure.

Where did he come from? How many wars has he seen? How has this war affected him? Is he grieving a loss? What was he like in his prime? Do my instincts deceive me,
or was he once a great man – mentally as well as physically? What was his former profession? Where is he at this very moment? Is he at home with extended family? Or is he alone in a rented room, sitting on a cot, staring at a bare well?

Seneen exhaled these thoughts, making a note to revisit them on her next walk. She glanced to her right, hoping to catch the secret ingredient slacking, but no jar was to be found. She welcomed such spirited shenanigans.

She refocused and gazed into the pot’s abyss, deciding more could be done. She buttressed the yalanji hive with another layer of tomatoes – this batch sliced thinner, truly testing the skin’s elasticity – and lemons cut like ethereal reeds.

The secret ingredient returned, exhausted from his illicit jaunt, just in time for Seneen to pour him over the entire gathering. He was grateful, as was she. Sometimes events align nicely.

She adjusted the burner slightly, making sure to hone the perfect simmer. She rumbled a deep cough into her sleeve. With no money to spare for a kitchen timer or wristwatch, Seneen leaned out the second-story window and peered at the waxing moon aloft on dawn’s rosy fingers. She would check the simmering pot again in one hour and thirty-two minutes. The old man returned to her, briefly appearing across the lunar surface. Why did his tears taste like rosemary?

Ignacio lay on his bed, arms crossed on his chest like a tanned vampire. He looked up and eyed the moon. She was awash in dawn’s crib. Progress is endless.

How did I get to this point? Ignacio wondered. He was happy. For the first time in his life, he had purpose, a good purpose. He was ready and willing to confront the true enemies of humanity. Up to this point, he had seen the devastation in pieces: his mentor’s death; years witnessing the expansion of U.S. Empire abroad; the Pentagon’s pernicious bureaucracy; the militarization of the United States’ populace; the destruction of Iraqi
society; the whores of war sucking from the Pentagon’s teat; the endless propaganda on U.S. corporate media ...

Where will it end? Where will all the death and destruction end?

Now, having pieced it all together, he was ready for concrete action.

Am I willing to risk my life? Yes. Yes, I am. It’s a small price to pay. My actions will help out. Someway, somehow, my actions will ripple outward. Maybe they’ll inspire other members of U.S. Empire to take some initiative, or maybe they’ll provide resistance with a little wiggle room. Maybe.

A faint cloud floated in front of the moon. It reminded Ignacio of Earth’s cyclical nature.

Sprite footsteps pattered in the hallway, paused, and then hastened away from his door.

Ignacio smiled. My purpose, life’s purpose, is to contemplate, to be. He embraced the philosophical mindset, knowing it would help him confront the day.

He sat up fully and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He rotated to his right and left, part of his morning routine. He eyed the door. The hallway’s glow sneaked under the bottom, haloing a piece of paper that sat there patiently.

Instructions, he surmised. Cold shower. Let’s go.

Unsheathing his ladle soothed the empty dining facility. The hollow galley embraced the echo. A simple poison, a chemical weapon if you will, dissolved quickly into the piping hot broth. The stirrer knew the broth was destined for intel personnel, mercenaries, and boots on the ground. He acknowledged his poison was a mere drop when compared to the barrels of misery Empire had unleashed in Southeast Asia; nothing compared to asthma, blind infants, miscarriages, deafened babies, shades of cancer, paralysis, septic scabs, canopies of death, stumps where hands should be, undiagnosed mental disabilities, webbed fingers, and wretched spines. It was just personal revenge – plain and old-fashioned – for decades of war crimes. His improvised act of sabotage
wouldn’t achieve immediate effects. It didn’t matter. His patience surpassed any hasty plans that Empire batted around.

**Chapter Fourteen**

“I had miscalculated. I thought I needed more money, but I don’t. We’ve got enough, my dear. We’ve got enough to pay for my final class and cover the visa fees!” Seneen squealed with delight.

She stepped back to admire her younger brother. “What?” Majid asked after wondering for a few seconds what her look meant.

“Nothing. It’s just... You’re so tall,” she whispered. “Dad couldn’t be more than a meter and a half.”

The _oud_ faded away.

Majid smiled broadly, revealing pointed bicuspids and gleaming molars alike. They outshined his bruises. Seneen yanked an old scarf out of thin air, licked its end, and began dabbing a cut around Majid’s right eye.

Majid proclaimed suddenly, “This calls for some tunes!” He peeled away from Seneen.

Purple conscience urged Seneen to tell Majid how Baba had died, how he wasn’t in Egypt. She stifled this impulse, put a bow on it, and allowed herself to enjoy the moment’s bliss. That’s what Baba would have wanted.

“Surprise me!” Seneen yelled, pivoting on her soles and refocusing on the gastronomic tango at hand.

Majid walked to the door and picked up a cloth bag. He removed a tape player, knowing exactly what to play. He stifled an anticipatory hiccups while fast-forwarding the tape. Majid stopped the tape expertly and hit PLAY.

“Springsteen?!” Seneen asked, slightly puzzled, thinking it sounded like the beginning of the Glory Days music video. She enjoyed a good Boss song as much as the next fan, but she thought Majid would have selected something else for this occasion.

“Nope, guess again!” Majid grinned, knowing Seneen was a sucker for sappy, classic eighties music. “I think this song came out a year or two later.”
“Another hard day...” the speakers blared. “Ha! Robert Tepper?!” Seneen roared, head thrown back, eyes alight.
“Nailed it!” Majid confirmed. “Well d—".
Seneen pushed him playfully, encouraging him to dance his face off.
And they did.
And when they finished dancing, they ate like humans, free and sovereign, alive in the moment.
Neither spoke while eating, but silence did not reign. Sounds of the two relishing the meal held sway over a subdued Cyndi Lauper, who, courtesy of Majid’s mixtape, was serenading Seneen’s inner kid. Majid thought of a scene from a Bill Murray movie Munir once made him watch. Mr. Murray was a chowing down on his host’s food, making the exact sounds Seneen and Majid were making now.

This is the beauty of kin, Majid smiled. We can be ourselves fully and completely. The siblings were all smiles.

Despite all the tragedy that drowned their lives, Seneen and Majid gave thanks. They counted their blessings and bowed their heads in appreciation, grateful to be together.
The smell of yalanji, zayt and za’tar, and tabbouleh had mingled with fresh bread and quickly filled the quaint apartment. A covered dish lay on the counter closest to the door for Seneen to give to her favorite street family (a daughter with serene jade eyes and a lively mom with grand birthmarks framing her sandswept face) along today’s walk. Satiated and appreciative, the brother and sister collapsed – Seneen on the apartment’s only bed, and Majid on the floor next to her. It didn’t take much for Majid to get comfortable; he yanked one old pillow out from under Seneen’s calf. He bunched it up and placed it under his neck.

Majid shuffled over to the door and picked up the cloth bag. Seneen watched him lug it back to the bed. She followed his eyes as he shuffled across the floor. Down
and to the right, his gaze conveyed a connection to another time and place. *He’s looking through the floor. His eyes aren’t even tracking objects in front of him.*

Majid upended the bag. Its contents poured softly on his spot of the mattress.

“What’s that?” she asked quietly.

“Some of Munir’s work,” Majid said, organizing the papers according to an unseen taxonomy. “I stopped by his apartment before coming here.”

“I thought he doesn’t share his writing with people.” Knowing she was missing a piece of the puzzle, she eyed the works respectfully. One of them was in significantly worse shape than the others. Cover torn and pages frayed, it boasted more dirt and blood than specs of white.

“He had a change of heart, I guess.” *You are him – ideas and life,* Majid rejoiced.

“Bring him around one day,” Seneen said, testing. “I’d love to see him.”

“He’d love to see you.” Seneen got up and walked over to Majid quietly. She hugged him hard, arms yanking his ribs into her face. He winced; his sternum throbbed. She released.

“You OK?”

“It’s nothing,” Majid insisted.

“No, I mean in general. Upstairs,” Seneen said, pointing to her temple.

Majid laughed. “Honestly? I’ve never been better.” He hugged her back, just as hard. She surrendered.

“Look. Do me a favor?”

“You know me,” Seneen said rapidly. “I gotta know what the favor is before I commit.”

“Leave. Leave tonight. Go to Amman and hunker down there. I’ll meet you a—”. “I read your note. Say no more.”

“You can tackle our visa situation there,” Majid continued.

“Majid. I heard you. I will go. I will leave today.” Majid asked, “Got time for a little meditation?”
He stepped out into the morning air.
“Smells fresher than normal,” he said.
“That’s because you never leave the apartment,”
he knew Munir would respond.
He laughed. Munir would always be with him,
and Majid knew it.
“The day is young,” Majid said with a nod. He
stretched his quads as if preparing for a jog, and then set
off eastward at a brisk pace.

“Hey,” Andrea said softly as she climbed into the
passenger seat.
Ignacio nodded, doing his best to unclench the
steering wheel.
“Let’s move,” Charles said from the backseat.
“Roger,” Ignacio replied, accelerating gently.
“You know the route?” Charles said without
looking up from his briefcase.
“Yes, sir,” Ignacio said. “I’ve actually driven you
before.” He smiled at Charles in the rearview mirror.
Charles looked up and caught Ignacio’s eyes.
Smiling, Charles said, “Oh, yes. Good to see you again.”
Ignacio nodded, eyes front.
“You Greyriver folk are always professionals,”
Charles complimented.
“Thank you,” Ignacio replied, weaving routinely
through the exit road.
The Baghdad morning greeted their HMMWV
kindly. Ignacio pressed the gas pedal with precise timing.
Traffic moved like warm syrup. Ignacio expertly
navigated the current.
Small talk was sparse; all passengers focused
intently on their upcoming maneuvers. Andrea,
comfortable with the plan, mentally reviewed her
knowledge of small remotely piloted vehicles in case
Charles asked any questions en route. Charles had
demanded her presence precisely because she could talk
specifics. He wanted to sell a new modular drone
package to a militia that was loyal to one of CIA’s
preferred candidates in the upcoming legislative elections. Charles rifled through the stack of folders in his lap. He flipped back and forth between the English specifications and the Arabic translation, though his mediocre Arabic skills prevented him from conducting a deep analysis. Ignacio’s mind was elsewhere. He was reviewing the final logistics required to pull off his role in the attack.

A particularly rough bump in the road brought everyone’s eyes up.

“First time in ages I’ve left the Green Zone without a full armed escort,” Charles said, perhaps trying to spark a little chitchat.

Ignacio didn’t bite.

Andrea summoned a “Yeah?”

“Yeah, I had to put in some extra paperwork to get additional Greyriver SUVs off my back, but they accepted.”

“What about protocol?” Andrea asked.

“It’s all good,” Charles said nonchalantly.

“There’s a cooler in the well behind you if you get thirsty,” Ignacio informed Charles.

Charles unbuckled his seatbelt. It orbited around his belly. “The Language Officer is meeting us at the site, yes?” he asked as he reached over the seat behind him. He grabbed three bottles of water, all cold and wet from the melting ice.

“Correct,” Andrea confirmed.

Charles leaned forward and gave two bottles to Andrea, who kept one and passed one to Ignacio.

“Thanks,” Andrea said.

Ignacio placed his between his legs and kept his eyes on the road. The bottle cooled his thighs. He checked his watch and stated, “Nine minutes out.”

Charles heard Andrea open her water bottle. He opened his and chugged loudly. “That’s some good ale,” he joked.

Morning sunrays flooded the right side of the vehicle as Ignacio merged northwest on Omar Bin Al-Khatab Street. What would the man himself do if alive
today? What type of leader would he be? How well would he resist the Occupation?

“Mind cracking a window?” Charles asked Ignacio.

“Negative,” Ignacio replied. “Against the rules.”

“I’ll turn up the AC,” Andrea offered.

“Thanks,” Charles said. He wiped his brow and then pulled up his pant legs a bit. *Anything to help. I’m roasting back here.* He looked away from the sun. He tried distracting himself with some more chitchat. “Any truth to the rumors that they’re serving lobster tonight at the DFAC?”

Andrea laughed. “I don’t know.”

“We’ll see,” Ignacio snapped. Andrea flashed him a look demanding patience.

Perspiration drenched Charles’ eyebrows. He felt his forehead melt. His heavy eyebrows pushed down into his eyelids, forcing his eyes shut. With no time to think about the consequences, he embraced the lotus’ lull.

His vision returned in stages. At first Charles could only make out distant greys and close-by shades of pink. Then he could discern shoes and trousers passing in front of him. Squinting helped to restore his vision a bit, but time was the best remedy.

He dozed on the stony floor.

He opened fatigued eyes again. The picture in front of him – his right arm, chained; a pair of feet waiting – decomposed, returned, and then steadied. A few deep blinks restored his curiosity. He looked up.

The back of his neck felt raw, like a cheese grater had attacked his bones. Eyes closed once more, he tried to turn his head to the left, but pumping pain forced him to stop. He didn’t even try turning it back to the right; his cervical lymph nodes felt inflated and soggy. *Like they’re filled with rice,* he observed.

His arms were spread out like a cross, each hand pulled in opposite corners of the room. The binding on his wrists felt warmer than metal. He pulled at his hands but nothing budged.
“You were hallucinating there for a bit,” Andrea said.

He heard someone stifle a laugh. “That’s my bad,” the driver’s voice confessed. “I’ll adjust the dosage next time.”

“You better, Ignacio. It kicked in way too fast.” Addressing Charles, she said, “Your fever will continue for a while, but it’ll pass eventually.”

“If you scoot back, you might be able to sit up a bit,” Ignacio advised.

Charles pushed his heels into the ground only to realize that his boots and socks were gone. After a little more pushing, he was able to sit up a half meter against the wall. His belly flopped forward as he leaned back. Charles looked up at his captors: three young Arab men he didn’t recognize sat back against the right wall; Andrea leaned on a stubby piece of scrap wood; and Ignacio stood there, looking dog-tired.

“What did Mossad have on you?” Ignacio asked him bluntly.

Charles’ heart sank. *How’d they know?* He dropped his head commensurate with his heart; he stared at his own feet.

“Who are you?” he asked Ignacio without looking up.

“What did they have on you?!” Andrea shouted. She ran towards him. He looked up in time for the two-by-four to come smacking across his shoulder.

“Jesus, FUCK!” Charles screamed.

“Nobody will come to your rescue in this part of town, so scream all you want,” Ignacio said patiently. “Ask him again.”

Andrea opened her mouth, but Charles cut her off. “Alright.” He took a deep breath. “Alright.”

“We’ve got time,” Ignacio coaxed.

A realist, Charles weighed his options, appraised his captor’s mettle, and spilled his guts. “They had me nailed decades ago, right after I returned from The Farm.”
Andrea wanted to interrupt with a barrage of questions, but Ignacio, sensing her impatience, took a step forward and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Sex tape and compromising conversations. I doubt she was with Mossad, she, her…” Charles fumbled. “The woman. I doubt she was with Mossad. Who knows. Maybe she was. Anyway, they approached me – a careful series of them, in retrospect – and sunk me, hook, line, and sinker.”

Ignacio crouched in front of Charles. Charles looked at his captors again, paused between Andrea and Ignacio, and looked past them to the distant wall. Some sort of garage door. I could be anywhere right now. Sounds of the city seemed faint, almost dampened. “They didn't act on it right away,” Charles stated. “Like I said, it was decades ago. I wished they had forgotten about it. I almost thought they did, until winter of 2000.”

“They were getting their ducks in a row,” Ignacio narrated.

“You can say that again. They had another sex tape of me too. A different one. Who would've thought?” Charles’ levity fell flat.

“Fuck, they’re thorough.” He tested his shackles again. They clanked a healthy reply in the negative.

Ignacio stood up and walked to the corner. He leaned over and inspected a pile. Charles’ possessions. He selected a dark green lanyard.

“Honest, I’m just a cog in their plan!”

“We know you are,” Andrea said in a soothing voice. It terrified Charles.

Chapter Fifteen

Dusk, the great set director, settled the arena. History guided the guerillas: from John Brown raiding a federal armory, to Irish protestors capitalizing on Downing Street’s distraction abroad; from Nat Turner gaining momentum in Virginia, to Mahdi Al-Khalissi guiding revolt. On the evening of the uprising, most of the intelligence personnel operating out of the Embassy
compound were cramming slide-based presentations in order to pass mandatory computer-based training that had been developed at a joint project office in the basement of the Harry S. Truman Building. Cushioned by air conditioning and full bellies, most personnel grudgingly clocked away at the tired information. Some dilly-dallied. Meanwhile, men and women of historic conviction lurked patiently.

Persistent study and careful dissection of the compound’s structural sinews paved the way for guerilla success. The internal insurgents, a moniker corporate media would later use to defame the guerillas, knew the best place to regroup was the gym; it was always open, centrally located, and stocked with water. They knew the north staircase in the eastern most diplomatic building offered the swiftest roof access. They knew the best place to hide a document was the random three-by-eight library bookshelves along a fifth floor hallway next door. They knew the compound’s backup generators were frequently overstressed and susceptible to stalling in the afternoon. They knew State’s obsession with cyber had moved valuable, finite assets away from traditional security methods. They knew all the DFAC doors could be easily jammed from the outside. They knew the weakest non-hardened exit point was located along the soccer field’s far corner. They knew the first five minutes of force protection drills offered gaping vulnerabilities, since evacuation’s mobile defenses, which were based on depth and a particular Greyriver expertise, were yet to fan out and reach staggered robustness. They also knew where to find landscaping uniforms and keys to the maintenance vehicles. The internal insurgents exploited some of these steps, but others they never needed to consider. After the shock of rebel victory passed and perspective settled in, a military historian would fondly note, “At a time of their choosing, the internal insurgents sowed chaos at weak points and then seized the initiative as bedlam hit its peak.”
A hairy hand yanked the first toggle on a bank of industrial switches. Heavy-duty gloves bloomed from his back pocket. The lights died. The insurgent waited. His breath echoed damply against the hum of the mechanized panel. The emergency lighting kicked in with a crackly purr. He could hear the generators surge under the sudden demand. He clipped two wires and frayed a third. He donned gloves and gently removed a one-dram glass vial from his vest pocket. The vial glowed amber in the utility closet’s low light. He applied one dab from the dropper to the frayed wire, and then tucked away his tools, nearly fumbling the vial with his thick gloves. He breathed deeply. Step one completed. The words *fann attamalluq* hit the insurgent out of the blue like a ton of *tooba* as he exited the utility closet and closed the door. “That’s how to get your way!”

While the insurgents downplayed certain aspects of guerilla warfare, like demolitions and establishment of temporary bases, other phases they readily embraced. One aspect, in particular, was on an insurgent’s mind as she closed an office door behind her. She estimated the average senior U.S. Embassy employee had to keep track of more than eight computer passwords. She knew from experience that most used the same password or versions of that password across all accounts. This made the insurgent’s job much easier in case Charles had lied. Under duress, Charles had coughed up the password’s location: a sticky note in the center drawer, clinging to the desktop’s underside. Splayed lightly in the insurgent’s hands, it read $taTe17&6.

“Jackpot,” the insurgent murmured. “Time to eyewash, motherfuckers.” With her index and middle fingers, she withdrew a crinkled, deciphered document from her breast pocket. She laid it on the desk next to the password and began typing quickly. Her plan was a new twist on a classic ploy. Her first email, to a relatively large group of twelve intelligence community employees, contained no false information. Her second memo to a smaller subset of the group contained subtle layers of
disinformation, which were intended to disrupt any post-
operation coordination within the Dalet 2.0 cabal.

Both memoranda were written in Charles’
characteristically terse form: no ‘clientitis,’ one joke
maximum, and blunt. The smaller subset consisted of
only five Agency employees. They happened to be
separated geographically across continents: two in
Langley, one in Riyadh, one (former Baghdad Deputy
Station Chief) in Baku, and a senior analyst on temporary
duty assignment to Fort Gordon. She believed that this
subset’s inability to physically verify certain key aspects
of the insurgent’s disinformation would complement her
team’s guerrilla actions taken inside the U.S. Embassy
Compound.

If all went well, the guerillas would excise the
relevant contamination – the explosives as well as those
involved in implementing Dalet 2.0 – and be gone by
midnight. The insurgent had considered bcc’ing an
Agency employee who was stationed in Tel Aviv, but
decided against it. It’s too risky considering Unit 8200 has
the U.S. Embassy bugged, tapped, and on lock, the
insurgent thought. This decision would prove prescient.
The insurgent made sure to include a brief postscript
discouraging recipients from replying “due to the
sensitive nature of the matter.” Agency boilerplate works
wonders.

The insurgent looked up from the desk at the
drawn curtains. I’ll risk it, she thought. She removed a
thick degaussing wand from her trouser pocket and
waved it aside the tower containing the computer’s hard
drive. Once more for good measure.

A guerilla hopped into the southeast staircase, boots’
amusement ringing off the ramparts, and ran straight to
CBRN panel, which indicated the status, location, and
range of any chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear
material in the compound. He paused at one of the few
windows in the stairwell. A fine composite mesh
crisscrossed its thick pane. He strained to see a fellow
guerilla. She was walking casually on the outside of the
footpath hugging the southeast wall. She dropped dummy munitions, two in total, with carefully timed strides. Her pace looked fluid from his vantage point. Her courage motivated him.

The discolored wall loomed to the guerilla’s right as he arrived at the panel. Personnel – some stragglers who had ignored the initial power outage – hustled past in the low emergency lighting. None paid any attention to the guerilla; he was wearing appropriate attire. He finished placing three orange cones around his position to mark his troubleshooting domain. The walls flexed as the guerilla activated the distinct alarm, about which all staff and contractors had learned when they first in-processed at the compound. The siren’s obnoxious warble began immediately. The guerilla tapped the screen, expanding the CBRN warning to cover several buildings, two of which he knew were primary targets of Mossad’s plan.

The wall to the guerilla’s right started moving. The CBRN alarm dampened the whoosh of the wall unsealing and the grind of it sliding on virgin tracks. Three distinct plies of malleable, reinforced fabric sealed the underground bunker’s walls. Each layer provided redundant protection against external CBRN attack. If an attack occurred outside the bunker, personnel seeking shelter inside would enjoy 16°C climate control, full auxiliary power, and access to robust decontamination procedures. The manufacturer called it a self-contained collective protection integration system – military lingo for ‘giant bubble space where people can walk around without wearing biohazard suits.’ The main corridor leading to the bunker was low-hanging fruit. When prompted to enter HAZARD LOCATION, Ignacio sited the main corridor on the map. CONFIRM? Ignacio tapped YES.

An insurgent stood patiently in a private military corporation project office on the fourth floor. The PMC boss wiped his brow and tried to clear a spot on his desk for a stack of flak jackets.
“What’s the count?” he asked brusquely, feigning command while secretly relieved that someone competent had shown up to help manage the day’s emergency.

“All accounted for, all in position,” the insurgent replied.

“Good, better safe than sorry,” he said, assuring himself. “Better safe than sorry,” he repeated. “Supply status?”

“Your inventory is a go,” the insurgent replied. “Fortunately, all signs indicate this is just a false alarm.”

“Better safe than sorry,” the PMC boss said once more. “Have they locked down all rally points?”

“Adams is on it,” the insurgent lied. “He’ll contact you if he hits any kinks.”

The emergency lights over the doorway flickered and dimmed.

“I gotta run,” the boss said quickly as he grabbed a flak jacket and danced around the desk. “D’ya mind giving these fellas their assignments?” he asked, gesturing to the mercenaries standing along the wall.

“No problem,” the insurgent said.

“Get these downstairs,” the PMC boss yelled to the mercenary closest to the door, pointing to the flak jackets that bridged two stacks of folders on his desk. The hem of the PMC boss’ polo shirt caught the sharp door latch as he blustered out of the office. “God damn it!” he yelled as he thundered forward. The ripped remains of his shirt fluttered in his wake.

The insurgent smiled, ready to order subordinates on different tasks, some conflicting, some isolated, some worthless. “I’ll take care of the flak jackets.” The insurgent grabbed a clipboard off a hook on the wall. “Stanfield and Bucyk, I want you two covering the northwest corner of the compound.”

They double-timed it down the hall.

“Green and Cheevers, supplement General Keaton’s detail.”

They grabbed two portable headsets off the top of a filing cabinet without testing them and hustled off.
“McKenzie, I want you to task anyone not already tied down and head to the motor pool. Get every available vehicle up and running. And I want extra rations loaded into the lead cars.”

“Where’d the boss go?” the cherub-faced mercenary named McKenzie asked.

“Frying bigger fish, and these are his orders,” the insurgent replied quickly.

“Roger,” the mercenary replied as he trotted off.

“Boss wants you in Stretch Climate Reversible External Warrior attire!” the insurgent yelled, knowing the bulky heat-resistant material would slow down even the toughest pawn.

The mercenary gave a thumbs up as he turned the corner.

Alone in the office at last, the insurgent turned to the SATCOM Mobile Emergency Response Kit that hogged the corner table. Within half a minute, the insurgent made contact with the lone protection detail still outside the compound’s walls.

“Negative!” she commanded the mercenaries passing through a particularly recalcitrant part of town.

“Sit tight and wait for further orders!”

“RO-ger,” crackled a hesitant baritone.

The insurgent gave thanks to the siren as the transmission ended; its undulating lament added a certain sense of urgency to the insurgent’s dispatch. The disinformation just relayed would play a small but crucial role in the day’s success. For kicks and efficacy, the insurgent also made sure to shuffle and blend the stacks of folders on the boss’ desk before shutting the door and heading off to the next objective. Better safe than sorry, the insurgent thought.

A guerilla bounced down the stairwell, almost skipping. He had just deactivated three of Mossad’s explosive devices. He paused to adopt a stern demeanor prior to exiting onto the ground floor.

“Twentieth see-burn concurs!” the guerilla heard upon exit.
It took the guerilla under ten seconds to spy the second highest rank present, a Marine Security Guard Lieutenant Colonel. *Never go for the highest rank – too much ego and too little knowledge.* The guerilla nodded to this wisdom and proceeded according to plan.

“Colonel!” The guerilla got the Marine Lieutenant Colonel’s attention. *They always love it when you address them like a full bird.* “How can I help?” the guerilla asked.

“You’re out of my chain,” the Lieutenant Colonel responded sternly, “but I could sure as hell use some assistance implementing the shelter-in-place order.” His stern mien covered his nerves well. He was still on edge from the V-22 incident and daily car bombs.

*There’s a shelter-in-place order?* The guerilla chuckled on the inside. *Conflicting orders are already causing problems.* Personnel of all stripes were streaming out of the center stairwells.

“Roger. Where should I position?” the guerilla asked. He assessed the MSG Lieutenant Colonel as the man spoke. The officer’s transfer to become an assistant regional commander in Abu Dhabi had been approved only seventy-two hours prior. *He’ll play today completely by the book,* the guerilla appraised. *Nothing’ll jeopardize his pending move to greener pastures.*

“Pardon me,” the MSG Lieutenant Colonel stated. His aide had returned with news: the Embassy had not received any SIGINT mentioning an attack within the Green Zone – chemical, biological, or otherwise.

“We’ve blinded ourselves relying too much on SIGINT,” the MSG Lieutenant Colonel snarled. “Don’t we have any HUMINT assets out there?”

The officer’s aide shook his head.

Returning his focus to the guerilla, the Marine officer said, “Check in with your AIC and, if he’s got no use for you, head around back and help my guys set up shop there.”

The officer turned back to his aide. “Send the senior staff to the underground bunker.”

“We can’t, sir,” the aide explained. “That’s where some of the CBRN contamination originated.”
Tactics from Marine Security Guard School rolled fresh in the sergeant’s mind as he stared at the clock on the wall. His shift as watch-stander in the downstairs response room was almost up. *Everyone’s gotta do this job, and I’m no different,* he consoled himself. *Why no word on the alarm next door, though?* He shook that thought out of his mind. “They pack a shit-ton of stuff in here,” the sergeant said with a wide-eyed glaze as he opened up another box of gas mask filters. The response room was about the size of a couple walk-in closets. He looked up to locate the filters’ proper locker.

“B-two… B-two… B-two…” the sergeant muttered as he strolled along the row. “B-two!” He lifted the lock’s plastic loop and opened the locker’s grate door. He placed twelve gas mask filters in their proper location. “Fit perfectly,” he commended. He closed the door and walked back to the front of the room.

His sharp brown eyes scanned racks of assault rifles, shotguns, pistols, body armor, batons, and many more treats that most Marines would salivate over.

“One more box,” he said as he hefted a crate marked *PERMETHRIN* onto the industrial workbench that jutted out from the wall near the main door. He used the box to nudge the communications equipment out of the way. He opened the box with a swift swipe of his carbon steel utility knife, and leaned over to collect handfuls of the stock.

The initial clink of the NICO BTV-1 flash bang grenade against the ground didn’t really sound like a falling case of M4 magazines, but that’s what the sergeant’s brain registered.

After the explosion, the guerilla quickly knocked the sergeant unconscious.

“Needs of the service,” the guerilla stated plainly, scanning the racks of weaponry now at her disposal.

Sweating profusely within the air-conditioned lobby, the Marine Lieutenant Colonel made multiple foolish decisions, which aided the guerillas in the long run.
Consider the case of the rapid response task force from Morón Air Base. They were visiting Aviano Air Base for a week of combined-joint military training and five nights of chasing skirt at Il Santo Bevitore. (They are not allowed back to Caffè Florian after a sergeant first class broke a mirror and warrant officer urinated in the bar area. The expensive velvet stool never recovered.) Flustered, the Marine Lieutenant Colonel failed to notify his supervisor about the task force’s temporary training location, thereby delaying optimal response time by an additional forty-five minutes.

Hiding in plain sight, a guerilla picked up a sniper rifle from one location, placed it on the roof, and walked back downstairs. Returning to the Lieutenant Colonel’s side, the guerilla said, “Colonel, we’ve got unexploded ordnance at two separate locations near the center-east wall.”

“You had visual confirmation?”
“Yes, sir!”

Exasperated and bound by his own conformity, the Lieutenant Colonel responded, “We’ve got UXO!” His audience, a major and a captain who had been lining the lobby wall quite nicely, trotted in his direction. “Get EOD online,” the Marine Security Guard commander ordered. “And get Lieutenant General Keaton out of his nest and on the phone.” The major and captain scurried away.

The MSG commander was proud of being an excellent multi-tasker. He told anyone who cared to listen. Unable to effectively juggle tasks and lacking the introspective skills to identify his own weaknesses, he looked busy but underperformed at every turn.

“Sir, I think it’s time to elevate the force protection level to FPCON Charlie,” the guerilla suggested.

The Lieutenant Colonel initially looked offended at the guerilla’s suggestion, but his face soon melted into an approving pucker. “Agreed,” the Lieutenant Colonel stated. He turned to his aide and issued the order through splintered concentration. The guerilla knew that FPCON Charlie would rout a large portion of the embassy’s uniformed personnel to the gates as
reinforcements for additional vehicle inspections. The guerilla also knew that FPCON Charlie would require company grade officers and idle enlisted ranks to perform supplementary guard duties. This would liberate the guerillas’ planned canals of movement and line up imperial pawns like wooden *balshooniyyaat*.

The MSG commander’s aide shook his head. “Greyriver are requesting a preliminary evacuation of four senior staff to an offsite location,” the aide said rapidly.

“With a multi-pronged attack underway,” the MSG officer prefaced, “approved.”

The guerilla discerned something flash across the officer's face. *Fret*, the guerilla affirmed.

A contractor walked authoritatively towards a ground control station located on the barren outskirts of Creech Air Force Base in southern Nevada. A dry, light wind cooled his back as rocky earth crunched under foot. He opened the door with a swipe of his badge and entered quickly. He flexed his pectoral muscles with the proficiency of a professional wrestler and walked toward the far wall. Nine display monitors looked back at him.

“Thanks for being early,” the Air Force captain said sarcastically. Pilots and sensor operators were supposed to arrive thirty minutes prior to shift change. The contractor had only eight minutes to spare before his shift started.

“Sorry,” the contractor said casually. “What’ve we got?”

“The Major’s pissed. You missed the weather and mission parameters briefings,” the captain said, knowing the contractor didn’t care.

“Fuck the Major,” the contractor said under his breath. “Where’s your replacement?” he said aloud.

“I am the replacement,” the captain replied. “I just relieved Captain Schreiber.”

“I see,” the contractor stated. He was staring at the bottom screens.
“We’re just monitoring so far,” the captain informed. “There’s almost no lag today.”
“She’s behaving well,” the contractor observed, referring to the RQ-4 remotely piloted aircraft and its state-of-the-art sensor suite. He turned to the sensor operator one seat over.

The sensor operator, a lowly enlisted airman, spoke up. “I’ve got an embassy guard, aide to the Marine Security commander, on IRC.” Internet Relay Chat was one way the Creech ground control station stayed in touch with Multi-National Force-Iraq. The disgruntled airman stood up and pushed a wad of papers against the contractor’s chest. “Briefing notes," he said.

Nguyen inserted the thin key into the left portion of the horizontal bar and rotated his wrist. The door’s emergency alarm deactivated with a smooth click. He cracked open the exit and peered outside through the vertical slit. A bank of generators roared to his left. The compound’s interior wall stood three paces in front of him. The door obscured the rest of his field of view, but he knew a maintenance shed hugged the building, five paces to his right. He slipped his hand through the slit and reached down, allowing his forearm to expand the gap as he pushed forth. The rock was right where he had left it yesterday. It was the perfect shape to prop the door open; its natural perpendicular groove fit snugly into the doorframe. He shut the door quietly. A passing patrol wouldn’t be able to tell that the door was open. He paused for a moment to assess his progression. Satisfied all bases had been covered, he ascended to the roof. A fresh sniper rifle waited for him, tucked behind NSA's northern-most antennae array.

Dealing with UXO within the Embassy compound was always a time-consuming process. First, the Explosive Ordnance Disposal techs had to be called in. As thorough as black honey is thick, EOD assessed the situation. Can the ordnance be moved? Or is it too sensitive? Is it in a
position deemed precarious enough to necessitate disposal on site? What type of fusing system does it use? There are as many fuses out there as freckles on Stanley Allen’s ass. Is it a dud? Duds can explode at any moment.

“I want the cordon farther back!” the lieutenant junior grade yelled. “Farther!”

EOD always took their time, and justifiably so. The guerilla, back among the population, watched while standing in line for unit accountability. He caught sight of an EOD tech marking the area around the device with what looked like a hockey stick. *Great stall,* he reckoned.

“It looks like an old ass M-13,” one technician reported.

“I doubt it,” his superior responded, “but we’ll take a good look. For now, we need help cordoning that area off. Grab Murray and Rudd and take the south.”

“But evacuees are headed this—,” the petty officer protested, shielding his eyes from the compound’s harsh exterior spotlights.

“Negative. Not here they aren’t,” the lieutenant junior grade affirmed, ending the conversation.

The petty officer spun around to carry out his orders.

A fever of personnel was exiting the dorms and heading his way.

Ensembles under the tutelage of James Newton Howard and early Majida Al-Roumi contended with the cityscapes. The night’s streets effervesced in a controlled cacophony while the greatest hits of agitation and joy tuned patiently into the center of urban design’s benevolent pitch. Al-Mansur’s warm timbre echoed forward through his cultural watershed, so Majid bounced along the city of peace, feeling historic energy ache for the liberation of Karrada Maryam.

A slight puff nipped at the terrain exactly where Majid had calculated it would detonate.

“Shit,” Majid said, initially thinking his mortars didn't pack enough punch. Even in night’s arena, the
explosion was much smaller than he had imagined it would be.

Majid’s laughter skipped off the water. He was happy the narrator hadn't followed him during his portion of the initial attack. His resistance was nobody’s business but his.

Heat and flash spread around the compound. Comfortable in her bark, a lone palm, the same shade as the tan ground and walls, smiled throughout.


The RQ-4 circled at 16,200 meters above Baghdad along a pre-planned flight path. The contractor and captain made a few adjustments here and there, but mostly sat back and watched.

“What mode is your—”.

“Synthetic aperture radar,” the contractor interrupted. He cracked open a green carbonated energy drink, his third of the shift.

The captain nodded. “Thank you,” he mustered through tight teeth.

“This shift sucks,” the contractor grumbled. “Imma ask the Major to put me back on swings.”

The pilot checked three monitors to his right. He tuned out the contractor’s complaints.

Gradually, he observed a pattern developing within the chaos. *CBRN alarm drives them out of certain buildings, while unexploded ordnance and mortars herd them into the desired area.* The pilot’s stomach suddenly felt like it was caving in on itself:

“You going to catch the pay-per-view tomorrow night?” the contractor asked, oblivious.

“Oh, god,” the pilot whispered, as the scene thousands of kilometers away played out crisply on his screens.
“How’re the consulates in Basra and Irbil doing? Anyone in contact with them?” asked the person behind him in line. The voice came across as calm, despite the mortars going off twenty meters northeast.

The guerilla ignored the person and the comment, knowing both consulates were heavily involved in CIA weapon trafficking. Instead, he peeled away from a flock of uniforms and headed back into his stomping grounds through a door discreetly propped ajar by an unseen ally.

Hunting prey long overdue, the guerilla stretched his shoulders – arms in front – as he marched towards the staircase. Then he raised his arms above his head for a triceps stretch. Appreciating the desolation, he picked up a tan rucksack from beneath the ground floor stairs. He zipped up the staircase and wheeled around the corner through the airlock and onto the third floor. He rolled his neck as he stowed his badge and eased into the SCIF. He placed the tan rucksack on the ground. The tear gas canisters clinked inside as the bag settled.

He could taste the stale air as he caught his breath and settled into his heart rate. He looked around. Empty. He reached into his back pocket and took out CBRN markers – yellow, blue, and white pennants. He placed the markers around the doorway and along adjacent hallways in order to report conflicting information. He set down his final CBRN marker and stood up slowly, tuning out the alarm’s wails. He took one step and paused. Locked monitors glowed reds and greys in the SCIF’s center workspace. He looked down the hallway on the left. The lights flickered. The door to temporary Greyriver offices was wide open.

The guerilla stalked the hallway, making sure all his tasks were complete. He turned the next bend when CRACK! a blunt object splintered his vision. Ignacio staggered backward. Meaty paws grabbed him and threw him down the hallway. Ignacio stumbled and collapsed hard. Through pixilated vision he saw his enemy strut over to the water fountain.
“I guess the thin veneer of professional courtesy has fallen by the wayside,” Ignacio said. He chuckled and got to his feet.

Greyriver Six didn’t answer. He was happy with the circumstances; the evacuated building’s pleasant desolation was now their arena, a showground on which they’d settle things decisively. He bent over the water fountain and took a loud sip. He stood up and let the water dribble onto his shirt. He grabbed the end of his kufiya and unwrapped it slowly from his neck. He tossed it aside. He took another sip, keeping one eye on Ignacio the whole time.

Ignacio waited. He wouldn’t cheapshot Six, even though Six had done so to him. Seeing that Six was ready, Ignacio ran at Six, who, in turn, hulked himself up before hopping into an aggressive canter. Ignacio had expected him to flash his feathers, but Ignacio refused to grant him a similar display. Better to let him overestimate himself. They measured each other, eying for weaknesses as they darted faster and faster towards one another.

Ignacio slowed down almost imperceptibly before they struck, timing the collision to work in his favor. This second of hesitation allowed Ignacio to sink slightly into his stance. As Six lunged shoulder-first with pure power, Ignacio stabbed his right hip into Six’s waist, careful to place his final step between Six’s legs. Ignacio rocketed left using Six’s arm as a lever. Momentum took care of the rest. Ignacio’s hip-toss sent Six up and over, the man’s bones soon nailing the floor.

Ignacio blinked. Greyriver Six was back up, winded and ferocious.

Ignacio pounced. Six charged with a low shoulder. He hit Ignacio below the ribcage, wrapping his arms around Ignacio’s legs. Six thrust upwards with his hip.

Ignacio tried to push down. He leaned in, locked his hips, and did his best to slide his feet behind him. Too late. His sprawl had failed. Six’s upward thrust launched Ignacio off his feet. Ignacio’s head cracked the thin carpet and his right ribs took the bunt of the tackle. The pain
was crippling. With no wind to move and no vision to see, Ignacio was completely defenseless.

Six assaulted Ignacio’s face with diamond knuckles.

They rolled around on the floor, a pool unto themselves. Only strikes and blocks stood out from the blur of matching uniforms. Six rolled out of their scrum on top.

Ignacio pawed the ground trying to find leverage. Six snarled as he drove his meaty shoulder into Ignacio’s chin. Ignacio grunted. The choral warfare continued as Six ground Ignacio’s face into the scouring pad of a carpet. A series of elbows peppered Ignacio’s temple. He had trouble discerning flashes of white pain from the blinking alarm. Blood flooded Ignacio’s eyes.

But he could sense Six weakening – breaths hastened, face flushed, strikes rained at wider intervals.

Six sunk slightly, quickly, to gain power for another drive into Ignacio’s chin. Ignacio exhaled, dipped below Six’s assault, and used Six’s momentum to knock him forward. Guard lost, Six sputtered. He flailed back to regain control. Ignacio punched Six’s armpit, and sunk down a few centimeters, enough to get a leg over Six’s shoulder. In a flash, Ignacio wrapped his left leg around the back of Six’s neck, crossing right leg over left ankle. With more will than might, Ignacio tore Six’s head downward. Pulled. Locked. Six’s carotid arteries kinked.

Ignacio tossed Greyriver Six’s limp body to the side. Six quickly shook back to lucidity as Ignacio did his best to regain some semblance of controlled breath.

Ignacio assessed his own damage: chipped tooth, bloody lip, possible concussion, black eyes. *And on and on,* he mused, content in victory.

He looked to his right. Greyriver Six was also on his hands and knees.

Ignacio panted. “Word will soon leak about your collusion with Mossad.” Ignacio stood up slowly, still reining in his gasps. He offered Six a hand. Six smiled, got to one knee and showed his left hand. He overextended and grabbed Ignacio’s wrist firmly.
Six lit up. Ignacio recognized the menacing grin too late. Six pushed off with his right leg, rotated his hips slightly, and struck with his shinbone. Six followed it up with an overhead punch. Ignacio reeled. Through the fog, he grabbed Six’s leaden wrist, leaned back slightly, and sunk a bit. He primed his thigh, rotated his hips, and flew off his back foot.

Six’s lower rib snapped upon impact. He collapsed.

The rusty, old Delta vet had defeated one of today’s mass-produced special operations forces. Greyriver Six’s punches had hit harder than anything Ignacio could have marshaled, but Ignacio’s grit and classic, old-school training had come out on top.

Ignacio grunted loudly as he got one knee up. He could practically hear his hip flexor creak. He reached down and picked up Six’s *kufiya.* He used it to dry his palms and pat his brow before placing it gently on the carpet. He put his right elbow on his knee and pushed off, stumbling a bit before catching himself on the bug-eyed window. He righted himself. His back cracked as he stood up fully. He briefly considered flashing his own glamor, but quickly dismissed that idea. He checked Greyriver Six’s vital signs, turned him onto his side, and left him with an easy pat on the shoulder.

He returned to the main hallway and picked up his rucksack. He reached inside. The tear gas canister felt cool to the touch.

Bruised but joyous, Ignacio walked down the hallway towards the liaison quarters. The shrill evacuation alarm died along with the emergency lighting.

The Marine Security Guard commander fumed, “Where the hell are my Marines?!”

A lone Marine rounded the bend in full Mission Oriented Protective Posture level four gear, mandatory garb for anyone headed to tackle the presumed chemical or biological attack underway.
“Sir, I...” He collapsed at the MSG commander’s feet. A large caliber hole smoldered clean through the Marine’s chest.

Shadows of an oval pate slunk along the third floor SCIF’s rear wall. A lone desk chair swiveled in the peace. The guerilla stopped abruptly in front of a filing cabinet, the seventh in a row of eight. With a small flashlight in hand, she scanned the alphanumeric labels in a rote but focused manner, heart ticking faster upon finding the desired label. The odds – for this part of the takhreeb, at least – were on her side. (Even the combination to the SCIF’s only entry point – unlocked every morning at 0545 and passable with a green badge until 2300 – had not changed in over two months. The Embassy Security Officer would later claim compliance with all existing standards, but a professional review board would end up punishing him with two weeks of home confinement and early retirement.) The filing cabinet’s layered security seemed daunting: three-quarter inch door; Triple Oath guarantee; polybed, hermetic seal reinforced with diatomaceous earth; four left, three right, two left, passing 08 only one ti-CLICK! Already inside.

Nodding to the correct drawer, she squatted – wide stance, feet flush with the ground, knees apart, body weight centered – and flipped through the hanging folders. The cabinet’s contents were remarkably sparse, a testament to standing preference in multiple agencies for digital records. She plucked the two files of interest – URBAN MOVING 33 and Het TNG VV4 – and re-secured the drawer inaudibly. A corresponding digital copy, a slim USB flash drive, hung snugly in a plastic case inside each folder. The emergency lights came back on timidly.

“To the roof!” she whisper-shouted, genuinely enjoying the good taste of rebellion.

Bob peered over his cubicle’s partition, timing his ascent perfectly to see Andrea’s shadow exit the SCIF. He finished raising his chair to the highest notch and tapped his pen against his cheek. It made a hollow sound with each strike. “Fuck it,” he muttered as he lashed out and
leveled the nearest stack of folders. He swiveled around, adjusted his two monitors, and powered up his computer.

Nguyen hadn't handled a rifle in over thirty years. This M40A3 bolt-action sniper rifle was very different from the Kalashnikov he had grown up with. It felt a few kilograms heavier, but Nguyen respected its fiberglass stock and polished scope. The rifle fit snugly on the ledge. At peace, Nguyen lined up his second uniform.

A friendly hand came to rest on his shoulder. He put his weapon on safe, laid it down, and turned around. One guerilla handed him some extra ammunition. Another guerilla divvied out tear gas canisters.

The guerillas spread out across the roof, tossing the tear gas canisters in front of the buildings nearby, which the guerillas knew Mossad had targeted; keeping civilians away from areas of potential ruin was integral to the guerillas' plan.

“Nice toss!” Ignacio yelled.

Andrea turned around but couldn't see Ignacio anywhere. She threw her final canister and jogged over to Ignacio's favorite spot. She rounded the door shed and skidded to a stop between two large air vents. Ignacio placed a fistful of wires on the ledge.

“Gotta stay light,” he explained, his bloody smile shining.

Staying focused, Andrea looked out over the embassy grounds. She reached into her bulkiest cargo pocket, removed a plastic red cuboid, and placed it on the ledge. She flicked a switch on the smooth right side of the device.

“Armed,” Andrea noted, adjusting the jammer’s position a few degrees northeast.

“Good redundancy,” Ignacio applauded.

“Did you defuse your batch?”

“All but one,” Ignacio said. “I’m getting it on the way down.”
Type-A personalities – Greyriver mercenaries – pretended to be calm by adopting a nonchalant gait as they headed towards the motor pool. Senior staff whose bureaucratic excellence enabled and expanded Empire – two D.C. appointees, and two CIA covers (Counselor for Public Affairs and a Deputy Chief of Mission) – piled into a HMMWV with their designer wheeled luggage.

“Scuffed my Louis Vuitton,” a short man complained. He burnished the bag with his right cuff as he closed his left pant leg in the door.

The HMMWV fled the Embassy compound enveloped in eventide’s hush. It slalomed through a cloudy maze of jersey barriers, narrowly missing a falling 60mm mortar. The driver, a Greyriver partisan, followed paths designed to maximize speed and minimize exposure to areas where ambush was feasible or where resistance activity was common. All those hours at Lank Industries’ High Risk Driver training had taught him well. He tightened his grip on the sweaty steering wheel, and improvised a bit, since he didn’t have the customary support vehicles. He implemented a series – turning, accelerating, and decelerating – that greatly reduced the chances of being followed effectively. The driver assessed his vehicle’s position, blinked long and deeply, and then accelerated faster than a Saudi refrigerator truck hauling corpses on 80 West.

“Hit the gas, ya prick!” he yelled at himself, disregarding tactical obligations.

His lighthearted choice of words fell flat.

A CIA case officer sitting behind the driver adjusted his restraints. All other evacuees fiddled with their mobile devices.

Two Greyriver shooters, one a former Navy hospital corpsman, scanned aft while poised over the rear wheel well.

Bob hummed happily as he typed, hoping the emergency power would last a few more minutes. Having spent his entire intel career in the comfort of a chair, he was unfamiliar with proper tactical language for this type of
incident. “Situation under control,” he typed. “Evac green.”

Creech replied “Affirm” in shorthand receipt. Bob was far more proficient in the next step: blocking the Embassy’s ability to issue a classified Signals Intelligence report known as a Kleiglight. Spiking the Kleiglight only took sixteen keystrokes and two clicks of his mouse. He sat back. He was utterly content with his spontaneous decision to contribute to subversion. He quickly tipped forward in his chair and returned to the keyboard. *Time to cover my tracks.*

With a fresh wrist, the RQ-4 pilot directed the aircraft to climb to 16,800 meters, doing his part to de-conflict the airspace. The contractor typed two commands, and the forward-looking infrared displayed a crisp HMMWV rounding a sharp turn. The vehicle dug in and accelerated to forty-five kilometers per hour.

The reinforced suspension caused the rear shooters to feel the bump more than the rest of the passengers. Greyriver Ten’s head grazed the ceiling as a body passed beneath the tires. The body’s left arm flopped awkwardly and came to a rest in the dusty night.

Not one Greyriver mercenary said a word inside the vehicle. The CIA officials and imperial minions took the hint and feigned deeper immersion in their mobile devices. One of the D.C. appointees summoned enough courage to look up for a few moments, but settled for picking at the plastic that encased the bulky electromagnetic countermeasures device next to him. The HMMWV driver thought about how he would broach the incident at an upcoming reunion at McR’s pub. He longed to drown his emotion in a pint of Point Loma witbier.

The RQ-4 pilot and sensor operator watched the HMMWV tires grind the last life out of the young man. All of their technology couldn’t pick up the *Vibrio cholerae* running rampant in corpse’s intestines.

Twenty meters to the HMMWV’s northeast, an improvised explosive device snarled up.
“Missed!” the Greyriver driver said with a noticeable tremor as he pressed the gas pedal. The radio babble picked up. “We need to recall these datasets in the next debrief,” the RQ-4 contractor said, adjusting a few sensors. “We didn’t catch that IED being planted.” “Maybe INSCOM or those NGA boys snagged something,” the pilot suggested. The contractor stared at the screen. “Maybe.” Shreds of asphalt, dirt, rubber, and metal rained down casually. The HMMWV lunged through the cloud of dust and stink. The accelerator whirred like a cheap vacuum, masking its true power. Small arms fire plinked off the up-armored SUV when a second IED howled through the vehicle’s interior. “Flushed out and destroyed,” Majid observed calmly.

Evacuees from fourteen of the compound’s twenty-seven buildings flooded towards the rally point, the courtyard adjacent to the Chancellery building. Stupefied chaos clashed with the rigid bureaucracy of cantankerous militancy. “You can’t assemble here!” “This is our rallying point!” “Unexploded ordnance!” “Fuckin’, back off!” Bouncing off the bureaucrats, the mob of Empire’s employees headed for the soccer fields, the secondary rally point. A massive explosion rumbled up from northwest corner of the compound, sending personnel into a clustered frenzy. Local uncoordinated Resistance seized the moment and stormed the Embassy compound along six points of attack. Small arms fire snapped the night’s air. U.S. militants, partisans of Empire, fell en masse. “Stand down!” Majid screamed near the main gates. He shoved one local insurgent out of the way. Majid’s efforts created a gap just wide enough through
which the Station Chief’s up-armored sedan could exit. Dust caked Majid’s tear duct and lashes. In the vehicle’s wake, the swarming Resistance took on its own life. Decades of oppression rose hard.

Kingly advice hit Ignacio as he jogged along the inner wall. *The initiative to stop this war must be ours.*

A rocket-propelled grenade fought hard and won against the bulletproof glass protecting the Marine Security Guards’ outer entry point. The shatter was lost among the bedlam. Grey shirts tumbled in clumps.

Ignacio picked up his pace, jogging toward the far wall beyond which the Dijla meandered.

A figure – handsome but bloody face, dirty blue jeans, smiling spirit – ran up beside Ignacio, a black Czech-made Kalashnikov jangling against the man’s back. For a second, Ignacio was hesitant amid the chaos. *Why is this man keeping pace with me? Does he know I’m a guerilla? Has he been watching me?* But the kind smile and curious disposition disarmed Ignacio’s caution. He quickly recognized a natural ally.

“Majid,” the man said, winded.

“Huh?” Ignacio yelled, gesturing for the new arrival to run closer to the wall.

5.56 and 7.62 rounds flew past at hundreds of meters per second.

The duo approached a gaping hole in the wall. Rubble spilled out into the compound like entrails into a halal butcher shop. With a gentle push, Majid indicated that Ignacio should ascend first.

“Thanks.” The surrounding mayhem swallowed Ignacio's reply. He offered his hand after climbing a few meters and establishing a sound foothold. Together Majid and Ignacio scrambled up the rest of the rubble, now one of three mounds that had been part of the southeast wall just moments ago.

“Lower!” Ignacio yelled at Majid.

Majid ducked, amazed at his own coordination and ability to scamper four limbs up and down the rocky gradients.

*The rubble blends well with the riverbank,* Majid thought, eying the shore.
“I’m Nguyen!” said a man beside the rowboat, delighted at the diversity of those fighting Empire.

“I’m Majid!” he yelled as he climbed aboard. Up to his knees in water beside the rowboat, Nguyen helped Majid steady himself. Once in the craft, Majid lunged at Nguyen with a bear hug. The rowboat rocked. Nguyen took it in stride and steadied the craft.

“I had to guess at the spelling of your last name!” Andrea bellowed, approaching from the south. She pulled a flat felt pouch out of her left thigh cargo pocket. She handed Nguyen the pouch and then readied the oars.

Nguyen ran his fingers over the outline of the passport that rested snugly between the gentle folds. He disappeared the pouch into his garb and managed to stand his ground amid the emotions. He mouthed his sincere thanks in Andrea’s direction. He wanted to speak, but words were weak.

“Major Bennett’s not here!” Majid yelled to Andrea over the small arms fire.

“Fuck! We gotta go! Time’s up!” Andrea ordered. “We gotta go!” she repeated, reading indecision on Majid’s face.

“Roger,” Ignacio acceded, bailing a little water with cupped hands.

“Let’s go,” Andrea said amid a break in the small arms fire, doing her best to respect those present while expediting their escape.

Nguyen nodded and helped Andrea push off from the bank. Andrea counted heads as she hopped into the rowboat.

“Stay down,” Ignacio ordered the occupants, mission first. He waved to Nguyen, but Nguyen was already zigzagging up the rubble and dipping back into the compound. This pained Ignacio, but he made no time for sadness as their launch drifted into the night’s mist.

“One, two, three,” Andrea said again. She rowed fiercely. Counting heads soon conformed to counting strokes.

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“All is well, all is well,” Ignacio said to Andrea, hoping to calm her down.
Dijla’s misty narcotic muted much of the violence on land.
Majid pursed his lips to stifle a smile.
Andrea appreciated his discipline. “One, two, three.”
Ignacio smacked Majid on the shoulder as they crouched close to the hull, the most appropriate show of affection he could muster. *It all happened so fast*, he reflected.
As they rowed away, Majid wondered how the elements would affect the rubble pile over time. *Who will crawl on it next year?*

The Pentagon’s stagnant leadership and inert bureaucracy – propelled by entrenched corporate war profiteers – responded to the Baghdad Sedition with overwhelming force. Frazzled Pentagon bureaucrats sitting in Arlington overruled the U.S. commanders at Balad Air Base, insisting that they scramble fifth-generation fighters, which according to the manufacturer offered ‘unparalleled tactical airpower’, instead of reliable fourth-generation workhorses.

The first of these fighter aircraft caught fire while taxiing to the runway. A bracket in the weapons bay popped off, allowing a lock of wires to fall loose and rub against hydraulic lines, sparking flames in no time. Crash Fire Rescue stormed the scene.

The second fighter aircraft waited patiently on the perpendicular taxiway. Looking through his peripheral from inside his state-of-the-art helmet, the pilot saw flames spilling out the bottom of the lead aircraft. The pamphlet advertising his $500,000 helmet assured the Pentagon brass of ‘unprecedented situational awareness’, even allowing the pilot to ‘look through the airframe’ below him once airborne, as imagery from embedded cameras around the plane would be projected onto the helmet’s visor. Like a good wingman, the pilot radioed the air traffic controllers in order to provide
them with his play-by-play. He tried to turn his head to get a better look at the flaming aircraft, but the back of his helmet kept clanging against the canopy. He tried again, but he simply couldn’t turn the clunky helmet the necessary forty-five degrees. Blurry images – data on his heads-up display – ticked choppily in front of his eyes. He strained and struggled, knowing his wingman might already be roasting alive.

The third of these fifth-generation aircraft sat in the hangar. Weapons loaders with the 666th Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron attached the final Mk 82 bomb beneath the aircraft’s left wing. A massive engine and endless hardware had shrunk the size of the weapons bay during aircraft production. The weapons bay could now only carry two bombs and two missiles, hence the extra four bombs under the wings. Unbeknownst to the pilot, a faulty igniter-spark in the engine turbine nearly forestalled the mission entirely. The automatic software, which was designed to inform pilot and ground maintainers alike of aircraft glitches, hadn’t picked up on this problem and therefore the aircraft was cleared for flight. Ordered to ignore the fire on the flight line, the pilot taxied quickly to the runway along an alternate route. As soon as the aircraft was airborne, most radars in the region picked up its signature; the extra bombs under the wings had eliminated its so-called ‘stealth’ profile. The pilot was over Baghdad in no time. He banked left in order to target insurgents disembarking on the southeast lip of the Tigris, but the flight control system frizzled. The weapon would not release. He circled for an hour, managed only one strafing run, and then was recalled to base.

The internal insurgents had targeted areas, equipment, and instruments that caused the greatest disruption to Dalet 2.0’s most critical nodes – treasonous government officials, explosives, and certain private mercenaries – while sparing genuine diplomatic activity from long-term damage. Their tactics employed vigilance, mobility, and a barrage of demiurgic resistance. Selected waves of chaos had provided distraction,
concealment, and space for the guerillas to carry out their objectives and flee. Historic self-awareness plied deeply as the local Resistance took the lead. The locals suffered some losses at first; AH-64 helicopters were a wily foe. But the insurrection expanded numerically and evolved tactically. Numbers and steadfastness ruled the days.

Chapter Sixteen

Dawn’s early shades pinched the horizon as Andrea and Ignacio fled north.

“Where to, chief?” Ignacio joked, waging humor to stifle his fear.
“Can’t go south,” Andrea tossed out.
“West?”
“Maybe,” Andrea considered.
“East?” Ignacio offered.
Silence. Silence. Dirt and pebbles rang the bottom of their 1976 Peugeot, echoing throughout the cab.
“Well? Still got that buddy in Golestan National Park?” Ignacio asked, entertaining fantasy.
“Arezoo?”
“Yeah,” Ignacio chuckled. “Why? How many other people d’you know there?”
“Good point,” Andrea laughed. “I haven’t seen Arezoo since... well...” Ignacio couldn’t tell if the road was getting rougher or Andrea was deliberately hushing up.

Andrea eased into the accelerator, appreciating the twin barrel carburetor and the XL5 power. She thought about her friend, Arezoo, and tried to picture how she might have aged since their last encounter. Arezoo was once a wealthy poacher, but she now worked as part of an eco-tourism team, taking visitors on hikes and guiding them around the gorgeous nature reserve.

“What about Turkey?”
“A possibility,” Ignacio speculated.
“But neither one of us knows Turkish.”
“Then let’s look at it as a good learning opportunity,” Ignacio suggested.
Andrea smiled, enjoying Ignacio’s motivation. “I want to call my neighbor when we get a chance.”

“The old vet from South Africa?” Andrea asked. “Probably not a good idea.”

“Yeah,” Ignacio said quietly. “I don’t know how he’ll react. Maybe I won’t tell him the whole story.”

“He’ll find out sooner or later,” Andrea noted. “True.”

Silence.

“I hear Istanbul is battling urbanization like wild,” Ignacio stated, intending to broach a light subject, but landing on a depressing one instead.

“I’ve read similar accounts. The Agency detachment in the Consulate there is following events closely on behalf of U.S. corporate interests,” Andrea said plainly.

“Do you know if there’re any urban farmers left within the city limits?”

“A handful,” Andrea sighed. “I think the city authorities are in the process of tearing up the Yedikule Bostanları as we speak.”

“How? Under what pretext?” Ignacio asked. “You know what? Never mind. Since when do municipalities adhere to reason? They’ll frame the farmers as an eyesore or claim the farmers are squatters who hinder some new development project.”

“Same old shit.” Andrea adjusted her seat, but overshot the most comfortable setting. “The battle’s not over though. I know Turkey has plenty of environmentalists and youth tired of urbanization.” She sniffed and tinkered with the rusty lever.

“If they can act in solidarity and combine their forces…”

“They could pull it off,” Andrea finished, appreciating being able to talk freely.

“At a time when humanity needs farming knowledge more than ever, humans trample the very people who know how to cultivate crops efficiently within tight confines.”
Ignacio pictured Andrea rising above the crowds at Speakers’ Corner.

“Capitalism... ruining everything once again.”

Ignacio delivered ‘again’ as the car dinged a pothole, granting the word a more sensual tenor than expected.

“Think we’ve helped at all? Something? Anything?”

“I dunno. It’s gonna be a hell of a pop when it comes,” Ignacio fantasized.

“And then what?”

“Then? Then the cycle starts all over again.”

Ignacio stated confidently.

“Not if the people finally keep an eye on whatever so-called leaders take a go at exploitation.”

“Precisely. If we even need leaders...”

Andrea’s mind’s eye returned to Golestan possibilities. She envisioned brewing patriotic operations in the park, but kept that thought close to her chest. She knew Iraq was where they’d dig in and continue the fight.

“What’ll we call it?” Andrea asked.

“What?”

“Whatever operation we set up in Golestan.”

“Ha! You’re dreaming.”

“What about timsaah?” Ignacio proposed.

“Crocodile?” Majid asked, piping up from the back seat.

“Damn it, I wanted to say ‘dragon’. What’s dragon?” Ignacio chuckled, slightly grumpy at his error.

Majid yawned.

“Taneen, I think,” Andrea posited. “I don’t know what it is in Farsi, though.” Suddenly animated, Andrea turned around to look at Majid. “Jesus, both of you look like shit,” she said. “And you! Asshole...” she yelled suddenly, punching Ignacio on the leg.

He laughed. His laughter soon faded as a burkaan of introspection surged forth. *Patience has paid off. Over the course of months, she absorbed the terrain and imbibed all the nooks and crannies.*

Andrea noted the silence and also reflected. *In an era of militarized foreign policy, the U.S. Embassy compound in Baghdad was the State Department’s crown*
jewel. It boasted all the bells and whistles of a hardened, high-tech, diplomatic fortress. But those perks came with the stiff rules and regulations of a rigid bureaucracy. Just like we predicted, the bureaucratic machinery reacted according to the book and frowned upon any deviation. We thrived off this basic, invaluable truth.

“That name… It doesn’t really fit,” Ignacio observed.

“Huh?” Andrea said. Fatigue had caught up with her.

“Dalet. It doesn’t really fit the operation.”

“How so?” Andrea asked. “Dalet was a terrorist plan to ethnically cleanse Palestine and establish a Zionist regime.”

“Yes,” Ignacio said. “And what we’ve called Dalet Two Point Oh was about the Zionists attacking U.S. installations and blaming it on the Resistance situated north of Israel. They’d use this supposed attack to force a major U.S. military intervention in Lebanon. We’d then be fighting another war for Israel.”

“I guess both the original plan as well as this week’s sequel fit into the Greater Israel project,” Andrea offered.

Ignacio nodded in understanding.

Exhausted and ragged, the trio let silence do the talking.

Andrea pulled off the road and tucked their vehicle behind a forsaken benzine station. Dawn’s diaphanous shroud covered them kindly.

“At least it looks abandoned,” Andrea noted ominously, turning the car off.

“Yeah, but where are the gas tanks?” Majid wondered.

“Let’s get some sleep,” encouraged Andrea as she leaned into the door for added comfort, not daring to fiddle with the seat’s levers.

Ignacio stared at the faded whitewash outside his window, feeling for the first time the full magnitude of his choices. As the Boston Tea Party once set the
standard for direct action against a high-value imperial target, so too did their Baghdad Sedition, as it would become known, change history. Both catalysts achieved similar results: a decisive triumph then used to advance psychological operations. Popular awakening – featuring collective sloughing of nationalist lethargy, and allied Resistance against Empire’s lethal vestiges – would rapidly follow.

Andrea awoke with a start, immediately puzzled by her bright surroundings. She turned to check on Ignacio.

Ignacio had reclined the seat at some point during the night, and was now hugging his knees, facing the center console. Andrea nudged him awake. Ignacio muttered contentedly.

“How come you’re grinning like an idiot?” Andrea wondered aloud. She rolled down her window.

Ignacio replied with another gratified sigh. Andrea laughed.

_We’re going to be okay_, he affirmed. They switched seats and set sail once more.

“How long was I out for?” Swerving a bit on the road, he looked up at the postmeridian sun.

Andrea replied on a different tack. “Did I tell you I barricaded General Keaton and the Senator in the conference room together?”

Ignacio surprised himself with a high-pitched laugh. Still leaning forward and looking up at the sun with his hairy chest brushing against the wheel, he asked, “How’d you get them together? I thought the Senator was supposed to leave yesterday. Or is it today?”

Andrea’s sly grin massaged the general thrill inside the car.

“You love your secrets, huh?” he stated. He leaned back in his seat and eyed Andrea.

“I can picture them simmering together.” Andrea envisioned the cabin fever breaking Lieutenant General Keaton very quickly.

“It’s been hours! Where in gosh darn is everybody?!” Ignacio said, mocking the General’s voice.
“Tell me more about your story?” Majid asked Andrea. He sat up in the backseat, restless.

Andrea gave Majid the overview, spending more time on her latter years.

“Sounds like that scene in Chris Nolan’s second installment,” Majid remarked when hearing about the Creech ground control stations.

“Not quite, but you’re a hell of a cinephile,” Andrea said.

Majid quickly commented on Andrea’s experiences. “They spearhead militant science and technology about which the majority of their population knows nothing.”

Ignacio: “Perhaps that is one way the complex grows and grows.”

Andrea: “Ignorance?”

Ignacio: “Precisely.”

Andrea: “Hmmm. Ignorance permitting the proliferation of military technology—”.

“An informed public wouldn’t allow that to happen,” Majid interrupted. “They’d rally and force the government to allocate sufficient funds for education, for housing, for the only environment we have, and for peaceful scientific pursuits.”

“Indeed. An informed public,” Andrea continued, “could direct science and technology to beneficial uses.”

“Beneficial for all,” Ignacio said.

“Exactly.”

“Maybe that’s why the centers of power encourage and attract the unaware and the witless,” Ignacio speculated.

“How?” Majid asked.

Andrea described discretionary spending priorities of the federal government, nearly two-thirds of which was allocated directly to war.

“And that’s not even including some nuclear projects, which are filed away in the Department of Energy budget,” Ignacio chimed in.

“Not to mention your Homeland, FBI, and other militarized departments and organizations that suckle at the war corporation teat,” Majid riffed.
“What about those who point to the benefits the U.S. military industrial complex have given humanity?” Andrea asked, enjoying the moment but feeling like she had just had this discussion with someone else.

“Like?”

“Like parts of the space program, radar, early Internet, airplane tech—”.

“I’d tell them, look... Look!” Majid shouted, working the backseat into a fury. Anger tripped up his tongue. “You really believe the only or best way to make human creativity is through the military endeavors? Bullshit.”

“You can also tell them that military industry has harmed humanity far more than it has helped,” Ignacio added. “Not just through the ingrained promotion of endless war, but also through opportunity cost and rampant pollution.”

“I think we should focus on where to go from here,” Andrea suggested.

Majid’s mind rumbled off in another direction.

“Opportunity cost?” Andrea asked, still curious.

“Yeah. The millions of men and women who work daily within the war machine could be spending their time helping humanity.”

“Like the soccer mom who commutes from the Baltimore suburbs to her job at Fort Meade,” Andrea stated.

“Yes, and many, many more.”

Majid fought with himself: *I can meet her in Jordan or return to Baghdad and fight.*

“I’m also talking about the mathematicians and scientists whose minds are clustered or sequestered on military projects that ultimately provide no help to mankind,” Ignacio continued.

“True. Imagine what they could be working on instead.”

“It’s all about practicing education on a daily basis. Getting out there, engaging, and taking responsibility.”

“Speaking of responsibility,” Andrea said. She pulled out a perfectly creased map from a cargo pocket.
She unfolded it with a pop and examined seven red circles spread out across the cradle of civilization. “Disable a few of these on our way?” Ignacio suggested, glancing at the map while keeping most of his attention on the road.

Andrea pulled out the lanyard from around her neck. She flipped open a chipped compass and glanced out the window. “Agreed,” she said simply.

Ignacio felt a sudden longing for rain.

Tapping a red X with her pinky finger, Andrea said, “I took out two of these Unit 8200 relays in the Green Zone.”

*She never ceases to amaze me.* “Two down, a few more to go,” Ignacio encouraged.

“So where do we go from here?” Andrea asked, eager to include her partner in the decision-making process.

“One backpack!” Seneen stated triumphantly, giving Baba’s Orwell Prize a wink and a nod. She eyed her few possessions before zipping up the bag and then skipped over to the square on the wall behind her. She brushed the certificate commemorating Baba’s Orwell Prize with her fingertips, and then framed it with two hands. The webbing between her thumbs and forefingers cupped the bottom. She let out a sigh verging on a whimper, excited about her imminent departure, ready to deal with the unforeseen obstacles that might lie in front of her.

“My lady that did change this house of mine, into a heaven when that she dwelt therein,” the prize spoke.

Seneen pulled up the collar of her shirt so it covered her mouth snugly.

“From head to foot an angel’s grace divine enwrapped her; pure she was, spotless of sin,” the prize recited so tenderly as to be almost imperceptible. “Fair as the moon her countenance, and wise; lords of the kind and tender glance, her eyes with an abounding loveliness did shine.”

“Who is that?” Seneen whispered through the hem of her shirt.
“Hafez. An old poet.”
“Before mom’s days?”
“Long before.”
Minutes ticked by like seconds, faster than NROL-42’s discerning saccade.
Baba’s Orwell Prize jumped to the ground through her fingers, but its tocsin was too late.
“Damn.” Seneen began to fantasize about her future, as she bent over to pick up her father’s award.
“For the first night, I’ll chill, watching re-runs of Yeomiaaat Mudir ‘Am—”.
A passing neighbor would have easily mistaken the forty-five caliber’s spit for Seneen’s cough. No one had heard Bennett enter. He threw her flailing limbs onto the ancient mattress; Majid’s favorite pillow blotted Seneen’s basis pontis. The Israeli’s pale gaze was the last image Seneen processed in this life.
Thankful Mossad headquarters would never know about his choleric detour, Bennett pulled out a rugged, encrypted mobile device from his pocket. One text from Mount Hermon awaited on the dark green screen. Bennett tapped the title, opening the message: Eleven of twelve explosives disarmed. Doctored intel compromised. Mission failure. Proceed to safe house three. Await further instructions.

“So where do we go from here?” Andrea asked again, eying her map.
Majid laid down across the backseat, heart avid, mind tingling. He didn’t rise; stars lowered. His lungs didn’t expand and contract, and his heart didn’t pulse; dark matter flexed. Seneen’s spirit was present, informing him when (that is, what dip in the blanket) to find their parents. Together they flitted, content. Then Majid returned. Andrea and Ignacio were still grappling with the next step.
“That’s what I’m saying.” Ignacio’s vocal cords strained.
“That’s not what you’re saying,” Andrea retorted politely.

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Use what they’ve given you. The Vet’s advice ricocheted off Majid’s history, stirring it awake. “Pull over,” Majid said softly.
The front seat didn’t hear him.
“Pull over,” Majid said tightly.
“Huh?” Andrea said from the passenger’s seat.
“Pull over, please,” Majid said a little louder.
Ignacio took his foot off the gas and let the car slow to a drift. He applied the brake and rolled onto the desolate roadside.
Majid opened the door as the car slid to a stop. He let the heel of his tired sneaker drag along the loose rock and bitumen.
“What are you doing?” Ignacio asked.
“I must go back.”
“You’re kidding. You can’t go back,” Ignacio affirmed. Scrounging for reasons, he said, “They’re going to be out in force.”
“There will be a price on your head,” Andrea added.
“Negative,” Majid said in their lingo. “They know you. There’ll be a price on your heads, not mine. Who saw me?”
Majid placed one foot firmly on the dusty ground. The breaks screeched into the afternoon.
“There’s nothing for miles!” Ignacio yelled. His words echoed off the car’s rusty interior.
“Maybe not. Who saw me? I’ll be good,” Majid said confidently, still arguing his case.
“Let him go,” Andrea said. “He knows what he’s doing. It’s his turf.”
“Do you have what I asked for?” Majid asked. He placed his other foot on the ground, stood up, and walked to Andrea’s window.
“Of course,” she replied. She reached into one of her trousers’ many cargo pockets and whipped out a slit of paper. “I thought you’d forgotten about it.”
He immediately pocketed it.
“You guessed right,” she said.
He smiled.
“Your old unit is back in town,” she said.
He smiled wider. She handed him a canteen. Majid chugged, paused, and chugged again. “I know you two were just playing around, but you’re not going anywhere.”

“Huh?” Ignacio asked.

“You’re not going to Turkey or Iran or anywhere,” Majid ordered, drumming his fingers rapidly on the canteen. “You’re going to stay here.”

Andrea nodded.

“You helped resist, and for that we’re grateful. But you’re not going to bail now.” Majid spoke softly and decisively. “Hide out for a bit, somewhere north maybe, and then come back hard.”

Ignacio swallowed and leaned stiffly across Andrea’s lap. He offered an open palm. Majid shook it firmly. He took one final chug.

“Last chance, my friend,” Ignacio stated with a smile.

Maintaining eye contact with Majid, Andrea put a controlling hand on Ignacio’s shoulder.

“Fate is ...” Majid trailed off. He handed Andrea the canteen.

“What we make,” Ignacio mouthed, fully appreciating Majid’s embrace of an old Hollywood production.

Majid walked slowly to the other side of the road. Ignacio waited in several minutes of silence until Majid was able to hitch a ride back from whence they came.

Stony cold came with the setting sun.

At least we stopped Plan Dalet 2.0, Ignacio thought. Didn’t we?

“We stopped them,” Andrea declared as if reading his thoughts. She rolled over to her other side.

“Stopped or delayed?”

“We made a difference.” The hum of the highway pulled at her eyelids.

“You think we had an impact at all in the long term?” Ignacio asked.

“We took out a key player.”
“They’ll find another one.”
“They’re not a fucking terminator. They can be stopped.”
“Not a terminator, but they are determined. Plus, the Deputy Director is still stateside.”
“Our files will expose him. The world will know his role soon enough.” Andrea leaned forward and checked under her seat. She strummed the edge of the files like they were crisp oud strings.
“I know we’re not outta the woods yet, but I gotta applaud you.”
Andrea floated a raised eyebrow across the stick shift towards Ignacio.
“Seriously, given the time constraints, you put together an excellent plan.”
“I appreciate it, Iggy, but... I appreciate it.”
Andrea laughed softly through her nose.
“My last comment, I promise,” Ignacio teased.
“Oh oh.”
“You struck a tough balance between disrupting a Mossad plot and taking Empire down a peg or two,” Ignacio complimented.
“Thank you, but you were, you are, a huge part of the team,” Andrea said. “I’m just glad we could protect the diplomatic staff.”
In their separate silences, Ignacio and Andrea reflected on the hasty events of the past few days. Files, Charles’ dead body, and white sirens blinked across Andrea’s vision. Fists and a bunker door crossed Ignacio’s.
“Bennett,” he whispered. Where is that guy?
“Think he made it?”
“I’m sure he did. I shoulda taken him out when I had the chance.”
“But he can’t do shit without Charles,” Andrea said comfortingly.
“True...” Ignacio supposed. Where are you?
Rich blues to Ignacio’s left contrasted starkly with the darkness ahead. Ignacio wished they had slowed
down a little more on their way out of town; having only one functional headlight increased his anxiety.

Andrea recalled a book she had checked out of the Embassy's makeshift library. It talked in great length about the role New England taverns had played in sowing radical ideas prior to the Revolutionary War. *Will we do the same wherever we land? I still have a lot to learn.*

“This is some Thelma and Louise shit, you know.” Ignacio broke the silence.

“Hah! Which one of us sleeps with Brad Pitt?”

“You can have him. Ever since his zombie movie portrayed Israel in a favorable light—”.

“The dude suuuucks!” Andrea hollered out the window. The dry air ignored her.

Eucalyptus eyed them as they flew past.

“Think we’ll be able to go home after Empire falls completely?”

“Ahhh, that’d be great. One step at a time, though. Let’s just enjoy the adventure for now, whatever the hell we’ve done.”

“Enjoy the ride. True.”

Andrea dozed. She dreamed of plotting revolution against U.S. Empire within the cozy confines of an old tavern. Brick hearth and hard cider radiated warmth. Deep selection of critical texts – Fanon, Engels, Gramsci, Hedges, Guevara – enriched minds fortified with stout, lager, and assorted ale. Contemporary pamphlets from local authors stirred discussions. Non-hierarchical small units conducted dispersed operations day and night, refueling in taverns and dispensaries. Creativity and individual initiative kept authorities confused and on their toes.

“Who tripped the most throughout history?” Munir’s cozy spirit posed, lifting Majid’s morale.

“Herodotus,” Majid said after a moment, gently stroking his chin.

“Why?” Munir enjoyed his newfound role as guardian.
“Because of his observations about nature?” Majid nudged. *Macrovipera lebetina* hissed hello as Majid walked by.

“Did he spend time in the Hindu Kush?” Munir asked, redirecting the conversation slightly.

“No idea. He did travel east through Pakistan and India, right? I don’t know.” Majid smiled as he answered his own question.

“What we now call Pakistan and India,” Munir pressed, still feeling out the comfort zone of his responsibility. He stroked for the moon.


“Bummer, qamar” Munir paused emphatically.

“What?” Majid walked a little taller. He looked up and met a cirrus cloud’s beaming broadside.

“Amazing question,” Munir praised. “I need a month and couple libraries to answer that. Wait, all professional sports teams in the U.S. or all world national teams?”

“Mmmm,” Majid crooned. “All countries’ national teams in all sports put together.” He made a point to carry nothing and swing his arms openly at his sides as he walked south, knowing a passing AH-64 gunship would seize any pretext to riddle him with 30mm ordnance.

“What’s the training period like? Does the Delian League have access to today’s finest steroids?” Majid laughed. “I have no idea. Did Dumas partake?” he asked, unfolding another layer of conversational bud.

“I’m pretty sure he and Hugo had their own herb club.”

“You’re messing with me. I didn’t even know they lived around the same time.” A tender breeze lifted Majid’s morale higher.

Munir grinned. “I mess with you not,” he said, savoring the deep dive into Majid’s soul. “No, for real. Ever seen a picture of Dumas? He’s high as a kite in every picture.”
“I didn’t know they had pictures back then.”
“Portrait, maybe?”
“All I know is he banged a ton.” Majid was surprised at his words.
“Herb and sex.”
“The name of one of the finest social media accounts, I’m sure,” Majid replied.
A flatbed lorry piled high with pillows and aluminum cans steamed by, straddling the center of the road.

“Any truth to the Shakespeare rumor?”
“No refuge from cosmic change…” Majid obliquely paraphrased another genius.
Munir felt Majid’s mind take a predictable turn into ‘what if’ territory.

“No. Don’t,” Munir insisted. “His superiors ordered him to stay away, five hours prior to the fake attack.”

“Did they? Go off, I mean.”
“None,” Munir comforted. “Your friends deactivated or jammed all of them.”

“Pythagoras! Philosophy, math, traveled a ton.”
*Better to learn from the past – recent and distant – than dwell on loss.*

“Roamin’ for that sage.”
“He knew his tunes, too,” Munir added, cherishing the positive space he saw in front of them.

“Where’d he travel?”
“I’m sure he hit up Greece, Persia…”
“Egypt?”
“Most likely. Can you imagine that dude or one of his followers getting a tetractys tattoo—”.
“At some chill dive in Iskandariyyah!” Majid hollered. The flat countryside was quick to absorb Majid’s yell.

“Yes!”
The friends laughed heartily.

“Who drank the most?” Majid asked.
“Speaking of which, I once read that Pythagoras liked to pound a glass of milk with his cannabis,” Munir said, returning to the earlier flow of thought.
“Whaaaat? Like he distilled THC into the milk? Or he rolled papyrus separately?”
“I bet they had better rolling paper than today,” Munir conjectured.
“Organic before it was trendy, shit.”
“You held your š like Michael Winslow. Remember that space comedy I showed you?” Munir asked.
“They were wiser than us in so many ways,” Majid revered.
“The writers or Dumas and company?” Munir asked.
“Both, I guess.” Majid laughed and shivered at the same time.
“I’d go as far as saying no wondrous European cathedral could’ve been constructed without Pythagoras’ famous theorem.” Munir’s spirit basked Majid in warmth.
“So who drank the most?”
“Maybe we should pull a Pythagoras?” Majid suggested, not intending to ignore Munir’s question again.
“How so?”
“Well, he retired to an island in the Mediterranean when he got old.”
Baghdad’s familiar silhouette flirted with the horizon.
“Yeah, but we’re not old. I guess you could call this retirement, though.” Munir laughed.
“A temporary, self-imposed furlough, maybe? Remind me to tell you about something Graham Hancock once said, will you?”
“About the Herodotus Machine?” Munir asked, clipping to an earlier conversational buoy.
“No. Something else. Related, though.”
“How’d the French start lighting up?” Munir husked history.
“Not sure. I think Napoleon’s troops brought it back with them from their conquests.”
“And their defeats,” Munir tacked on.
“Another benefit of war,” Majid said flippantly.
“What? The introduction of cannabis into different societies?” Munir asked.

“Yup,” Majid popped. “Ha! They’re no better than the clowns who laud the technological advancements brought to us by the U.S. war machine.”

“Truth,” Munir stated. “Or the assholes who think female politicians who promote war are somehow progressive just because they’re female.”

“I wonder what Dumas and Hugo would think of the discord, fear, and animosity that U.S. Empire is built upon.”

“Was built upon,” Munir corrected excitedly. “Dumas would be stoked.” For the first time, Munir considered searching the cosmos for Dumas’ spirit.

The pallid harrier cruised at a comfortable 1,400 meters. The U.S. Embassy compound, a black blemish from this height, exhaled soothing greys.

A faint breeze caught a lone tennis ball, encouraging it to roll southwest off the tennis court’s baseline. The Morale, Welfare, and Recreation sign fell from the chain-link fence to the dusty walkway.

Wind toyed with the screen door to the compound’s post office. Accipiter brevipes screeched back at the creaking hinges.

Ghostly quiet smiled indoors. To the naked human eye, the glassy surface of the U.S. Embassy’s Olympic-sized pool seemed completely undisturbed. Gerridae played pond hockey, rarely daring to look down at the expanse below. Sunlight wormed into a fourth floor lavatory through a crack in the edifice, illuminating a weathered copy of Children at War, which was spread-eagle face down, marking the departed reader’s abandoned progress.

A few embers still glowed in the rafters above the basketball courts, bestowing an eerie ambiance upon the hardwood. Colored party bulbs from Friday night salsa hung lonely from a string. The think before you post! portion of an operational security flyer rustled beneath a water fountain. The ink ran into the frayed turf.

Food service aprons hung in an orderly row along the far wall of the dining facility. A deflated plastic tree kinked grouchily.

A lesser white-toothed shrew peered into the charred liaison office next-door, happy to be a pioneer amid alien terrain. Puzzled, he noticed a lone pentacleura blooming among the ashes.

A counter-battery radar system took its time eroding along the compound’s perimeter wall. A gray wolf yawned and sat down, back against the machine’s cool exterior.

A garden dormouse scrambled out from under a pile of rubble. She froze in the middle of nibbling on a centipede, and then ducked back into the rocks.

A mother of three vesper bats hung in the eaves of the former dormitory. She liked the compound’s new look. She was eager to scan the grounds again at dusk.

Eager grass wiggled up from a small divot at the base of a lone palm tree. Sun ladled silence, sealing a peaceful eternity of Resistance.