

The Contractors

by William Sanders

We were six miles above the North Atlantic when my wrist watch began flashing, a soft pulsing green glow like a mutant firefly. I picked up the earphones from my lap and held one up to my left ear, and a familiar voice said, "Now."

I waited a second but that was all. I thumbed the little button to make the watch stop blinking. A quarter to midnight, it said. Chicago time; I hadn't reset it yet. Three hours later here? Or four? I wasn't sure what zone we were in.

That time, anyway. I laid the earphones on top of the laptop on the seat beside me and unlatched the seat belt and got to my feet, glancing around at the darkened cabin. Up toward the front a couple of lights were showing, and the glow of somebody's laptop screen; over on the far side a woman was trying to quiet a fretful baby. Most of the passengers, though, seemed to be sleeping. Or trying to; now and then you could hear bodies shifting restlessly, and an occasional muffled grunt.

I started down the aisle toward the rear of the cabin, taking the plastic pen from my shirt pocket and holding it down by my side. The lights were on back in the galley but no signs of movement.

I could see my man, though, sitting by the window, two rows ahead of the rear bulkhead. The seat next to him was empty, as were the seats behind him.

It was too dark to see him very clearly, but I'd already had a good look at him back while we were boarding: a skinny, swarthy young man with a thin scrubby beard — or maybe just badly in need of a shave — in a surprisingly decent dark suit without a tie. Now I saw he'd added a yarmulke-like skullcap to his ensemble.

He didn't look up as I approached; I saw now that his eyes were closed. He was rocking slowly to and fro in his seat; he wasn't making any sound but his lips seemed to be moving.

It would have been easier if he'd been on the aisle, but those coach-class seats aren't all that wide. I didn't even have to lean over to reach him. His eyes snapped wide and white when the pen touched the side of his neck and the spring-loaded needle drove home, and his mouth opened, but nothing came out. A little book fell from his hands and slid off his lap to the floor as he sagged back in his seat.

I closed his eyes with my fingertips and moved on down the aisle, not looking back or around; if anybody had seen anything, it was too late to do anything about it now. There were no sounds of surprise or alarm behind me, though. As I came up to the restroom door I saw one of the flight attendants, a slightly chubby redhead, asleep on one of the galley seats.

The restroom was unoccupied. I latched myself in and got a paper towel from the dispenser and wiped the trick pen, being very careful of the needle point, before stuffing it down into the trash disposal. The odds of anybody finding it, let alone checking it for prints, probably approached zero, but why take the chance?

I stood there for a minute exchanging red-eyed stares with my reflection in the mirror above the sink. The sight was less than impressive: lined jowly face, gray hair in need of a trim, overnight whiskers starting to show. I wouldn't have bought a used roller skate from me.

Nobody was looking at me as I started back up the aisle, or at the body by the window. Everything was still dark and quiet; even the crying baby had settled down, leaving no sound but the great soft sigh of

engines and slipstream as the big 747 bored on through the night sky.

I dropped into my seat, buckling up automatically, and sat back and closed my eyes for a moment, letting my pulse slow down a little. Then I reached over and lifted the laptop out of its case and set it on my knees. I stuck the button phones into my ears, took a deep breath, and opened the lid; and there was Himself waiting for me.

And he was doing the whole bit, too: the horns, the pointy goatee, even the reddish skin. Everything but the pitchfork and the flames. I suppose I winced; he laughed.

Grinding my teeth, I reached for the keyboard and typed:

Do you HAVE to do that?

"Sorry," he said, grinning. The screen flickered briefly and he reappeared in his more usual form, minus the horns and the rest of the comic-book look. He'd kept the mustache, though. It made him look a little like Harry Reems.

"Cheap and obvious, I know," he said. "What can I say? For a professional tempter, I'm no good at resisting temptation."

I typed:

It's done.

"Yes," he said. "You did that well. Not that I ever doubted you would."

I think we cut it a little close.

"I'm afraid so. He was definitely getting ready. My fault," Himself admitted. "I was momentarily distracted...at any rate," he said, "you were quick enough. Well done. A very clean bit of work, Major Hackett."

I didn't bother telling him not to call me that. We'd been there before; he was just trying to jerk my chain. I typed:

I don't think anybody saw anything.

"No. You might have noticed that the seats in the immediate area were unoccupied. This," he said, "was not coincidence."

I should have known. I started to ask how he'd managed it and then decided I didn't want to know.

He said, "I wish you'd relax. You need to get some rest. Things are going to get very stressful in a few hours."

If not sooner.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that. Who's going to pay any attention to an unimportant passenger on an overnight flight, apparently asleep in the cheap seats? No," he said, "you'll see. No one will notice anything until shortly before arrival at Heathrow, when they hand out the immigration cards, and find that Mr. Wazir doesn't respond to their efforts to wake him. After a certain amount of consternation and confusion, the young Scottish doctor up in business class will no doubt be summoned."

His teeth flashed. "And almost immediately will discover that the deceased is wearing a belt of Semtex

explosive around his waist; and then for a time things are going to become intense."

No shit.

"Well, it shouldn't be too bad for you. After all, there's no reason anyone should suspect the truth. We've used that formula before," he said. "Even a full autopsy won't show anything but heart failure, no doubt brought on by extreme emotional stress. I tell you, that dear old woman at Johns Hopkins is worth every dollar I pay her...so no one will be thinking in terms of, ah, foul play. They'll be looking for possible accomplices — and," he added, hoisting an eyebrow, "you really don't fit the profile, do you? So lighten up."

Sorry. I just killed a man.

"Thereby saving several hundred lives."

And your concern for humanity is well known.

"Touché." He laughed. "But as I already explained, up on the first class deck are a couple of aging gentlemen who in their dissolute younger days once recorded a song expressing sympathy for me. One feels a certain obligation."

He raised a hand and wiggled it at me. "Bye, now, Major Hackett. Try to get some sleep. It's going to be a long day."

It was that. And it got a lot longer before it got any shorter.

Not that anybody leaned on me, individually. Himself had been right about that; middle-aged security consultants from Albuquerque clearly weren't high on the list of potential terrorists. Early on they pulled a lot of passengers out of the waiting area — people with non-European-sounding names, or passports from Middle Eastern countries, or maybe just a vaguely Levantine appearance — and took them away for special attention; but the rest of us white-bread types mostly got to wait. Especially if we'd been in coach; naturally the first-class passengers were long gone before they even let us off the plane.

(At least there was one bright spot: the news people had of course shown up in battalion force, but the big story was the presence of celebrities on board, so only the rich and famous had to slog through the mikes-and-cameras jungle.)

It was the middle of the afternoon when they finally got around to me. A pleasant, ruddy-faced Scotland Yard inspector, about my age and size but wearing a much better suit, asked me a few questions about my background. Private security consultant, eh? And retired military? Hm, then I must be quite an observant chap. So had I noticed anything unusual during the flight? Any other passengers behaving oddly or suspiciously? Anyone talking with Mr. Wazir? No? Hm, well, too much to hope for, eh? Now where would I be staying in London? And for how long? Yes, well, officially he must warn me that I might be called upon for further questioning, but between us he didn't really think it likely. Sorry about the delay; he hoped I had a pleasant stay.

And that was that. Only of course it wasn't; there were still my possessions to be tracked down and reclaimed, all baggage having been taken away for examination. The young Sikh who brought mine, after another interminable wait, was interested in the laptop; he wanted one, he said, was this a good make? I told him only if he was prepared to make a pact with diabolical powers. When I left he was still chuckling.

The light was starting to fade by the time the cab finally dropped me off in front of the old red-brick building just off King's Road. I knew I should go get something to eat, but I just wasn't up to it. I went on up the steps and unlocked the front door and took the slow German-made elevator up to the fourth floor, feeling the fatigue come down on me like a heavy gray blanket.

The flat was looking good, with none of the musty smell of long disuse; the cleaning people must have been in recently. I dumped the bag and the laptop on the couch and went into the kitchen, wondering if there was anything to eat. I hadn't used the place since last winter, but I seemed to remember leaving a few odds and ends on the shelves.

I found some cans — sorry, *tins* — of soup, and a still-sealed box of some sort of biscuits. Good enough; my stomach was in no state for anything more serious anyway. A few minutes later I had myself a saucepan of cockaleekie heating on the stove. While it warmed I looked around the kitchen, experiencing the usual dislocation at the familiar-yet-alien appliances and switches and plugs. At least the strangeness had a friendly feel, as if things were trying to look right but just couldn't get the hang of it.

The contents of the saucepan began to bubble and I turned off the heat and carried the pot into the front room, not bothering with a bowl. And sat at the table having my cockaleekie — cockaleekie! The names these people hang on perfectly good food! — and watching the street get dark beyond the big front windows.

Halfway through the meal my wrist watch began flashing. I looked at it for a couple of seconds and then pushed the button to turn it off.

A few minutes later it started flashing again.

I stood up and undid the watch and went back into the kitchen and put it in the refrigerator. Then I went back and finished my cockaleekie; and then I got up and stumbled into the bedroom.

While I was taking off my shoes the bedside lamp began flashing on and off. I said a couple of bad words and bent down and yanked the plug out of the wall socket. I wasn't sure that would work — you never know, with Himself — but it did.

I finished undressing and got into bed. Whatever Himself wanted now, it could wait till morning. Or maybe it couldn't, but I didn't care. For the rest of this night, I was no longer a working number.

And, he should pardon the expression, to hell with Himself.

Next morning when I got up the hallway light was flashing. I flipped it a one-finger salute and went into the kitchen and located a jar of instant coffee. While I was waiting for the water to boil the oven light began going off and on.

I said aloud, "All *right*, just hang on, will you?"

The flashing stopped. A few minutes later, carrying my cup of alleged coffee carefully in both hands, I went into the front room and sat down on the couch. The muck was too hot to drink but I held it up to my face and took a couple of tokes of steam before setting it down on the coffee table and turning to unzip the laptop case.

Himself was right there when the screen came on. He didn't look happy. "Good morning," he said in a

voice that could have eaten the armor plate off an M-1 tank. "I trust you had a pleasant night's sleep?"

"Sorry," I said to the face on the screen. At least now we had some privacy, so I could dispense with the typing and just talk normally. If "normally" applied to a conversation like this.

"But I wouldn't have been any use to you last night," I said. "Wouldn't have mattered if you'd been trying to tell me the building was on fire, I couldn't have handled it."

"Yes, of course." He sighed. "It's just that something has come up, requiring my full attention in another part of the world. And contrary to the claims of certain employees of the Opposition, I can't be everywhere at once."

He sounded bitter, as he always did when he talked about the limitations he had to operate under. You'd think he'd have gotten used to it, in a million years or however long it's been. It certainly was a complicated business, from what he'd told me; I'd been amazed at the number of things he couldn't do—not just wasn't allowed to do, by the rules of the treaty or covenant or whatever had been laid on him, but literally *couldn't* do. Couldn't, for one thing, personally kill or even physically injure a living human; couldn't do personal appearances on Earth, except under very special arrangements — which, according to him, didn't include any nonsense with pentagrams; you really didn't want to get him started on pentagrams — and all sorts of other things you'd never suspect.

And this, of course, was why he had to contract out so many of his operations, even simple jobs like last night's. As one of the better-paid contractors, I could hardly complain; but I could see how he might feel a certain resentment.

"And so," he said, "I'm not going to have time to brief you personally on this mission. Unfortunately, because there are certain unusual aspects, but it can't be helped. Instead I've arranged a meeting, where you'll learn the details and meet the people you'll be working with. I suggest you freshen up and get dressed; you're to be there at eleven-thirty this morning."

"Okay," I said. "Where do I go?"

He told me.

I said, "You're kidding."

John Wesley's statue stands in a kind of little garden in back of St. Paul's Cathedral. The church grounds were lively with tourists and school groups, but back here there was nobody around but John and me. He didn't look happy to see me; I was pretty sure he didn't approve of me. But then from all accounts there was a lot he didn't approve of.

It was a mild sort of day, for London in mid-April, but there was enough bite in the wind to make me wish I'd worn a topcoat. It wasn't raining but the gray sky beyond the great dome of St. Paul's looked as if that could change at any time. I turned my back to the breeze and stared back at John Wesley; and a few minutes later a woman's voice behind me said, "Major Hackett?"

She was standing a few feet away, giving me a cautiously inquiring look: a small, compact young woman with dark Mediterranean features and thick curly black hair. Her hands were shoved into the pockets of a long black leather coat that hung open to reveal an attractively packed black knit dress. All in all she was a considerable improvement on John Wesley.

I confessed to being me. She stepped forward and put out a hand. "Leila Aziz."

Which answered a minor question and raised at least one very big one, but this was no time to go there. I gave her back her hand and she said, "Come with me, please."

She led the way over toward the church, where a man was standing beside an open doorway at a spot where I was almost certain there hadn't been a door before. He was a tall, broad-shouldered young guy — or maybe not; he had one of those pale smooth long faces that don't show the years — in a neat white warmup suit, and he was looking at us with an expression that made John Wesley look like a Miss America emcee.

But he said, "Come in, then," and motioned toward the door. Which turned out to open onto a flight of steps that spiraled steeply downward into a brightly-lit well, terminating in a long narrow corridor. "All the way to the end," he called from behind us. "Last room. I'll be right with you."

We walked down the corridor, past an open door through which I got a glimpse of a couple of white-clad figures working on a mainframe, to a low-ceilinged room, maybe thirty feet square. The only furnishings were a big metal desk and some folding chairs, and, sitting on the desk, a computer with a large flat-screen monitor.

I said, "Do you have any idea what this is all about?"

Leila shook her head. "I was told where to meet you, and then him. That's all."

The tall guy came hustling in as we were sitting down. He was holding a CD disk. "My name is Michael," he said. "I've been assigned to work with you."

He didn't look happy about it. He might have been saying, "I've been told I need root canal work."

"As you've no doubt guessed," he went on. "I represent what your master would call 'the Opposition'—"

"Not my master," I interrupted. "Preferred client, maybe."

"Whatever." He made an impatient gesture. "You must find it strange that we should be working together. However, it's not as unprecedented as you might think. From time to time it happens that, um, interests converge. Certain temporary common-cause arrangements are made."

He inserted the disk in the computer and picked up a wireless mouse. "I understand you haven't been briefed—"

He clicked a button and the big screen lit up with a large color photo of a heavy-set, dark-skinned man, maybe about my age, wearing white robes and a turban. It was an outdoor shot, taken on a street somewhere; in the background a couple of blurry figures were holding up a large banner in Arabic script.

"This," Michael said, "is Abdelkader Sayid. Perhaps you've heard of him."

I'd heard the name but I didn't recall any details. "Some kind of militant mullah, isn't he?"

"Yes. He preaches at a mosque here in London." Michael's mouth twisted. "Preaches hate, rage, violence...but of course he's not unique in that, is he? One of the great curses of today's world," he said, "and not confined to Abdelkader's sect, either."

He clicked the mouse again and the photo changed to a closeup of the same man, staring straight into the camera. The eyes were profoundly disturbing; they had that burning intensity, that absolute psycho certainty, that you see only in the face of the man who *knows* he's right and it's his sacred duty to straighten you out or kill you. And yet there was a certain hypnotic, irresistible-force quality, too; it was

easy to believe that he'd be good at getting people to listen to him.

"What makes Abdelkader special," Michael said, "is that he doesn't just preach the jihad, he actively supports it. And not just by the usual fund-raising activities."

The picture changed again; now it showed a good-sized building, obviously a mosque — it had the dome and the minaret — but of modern design. "His mosque," Michael said, "is in effect a recruiting office and primary training center for some of the most dangerous, irreconcilable groups in the European terrorist underground. He's very effective indeed; the jihadist Pied Piper, one journalist called him. Very powerful speaker, very charismatic personality. Amazingly good at persuading otherwise intelligent, educated people — especially young men — to give up everything, even their lives, for the holy war he preaches."

Leila said, "The authorities can't do anything?"

"They've tried. This country has laws, too, specifically meant to stop that sort of thing. But Abdelkader has been very careful. He never says anything directly illegal in public, and he doesn't keep incriminating materials at the mosque or his home."

Michael clicked again and the screen went dark. "And now your employer, your *client* if you will, wants Abdelkader removed. You'll have to ask him why," he said. "All I know is that he applied a short time ago — he's required to file notice, you see, before taking action against any member of the clergy — and on consideration it was decided that the project was not only permissible but desirable. Even worthy of a certain degree of cooperation and support."

"OK," I said, "everybody agrees this bastard needs to go. But why does your boss need our help to take him out? Good old-fashioned lightning strike, or whatever the current technique—"

I'd thought Michael's expression was unfriendly. I hadn't seen anything yet. He clamped his mouth shut; you could see the little muscles working along his jaw. "Even if that were an option," he said at last, in a very tight dusty voice, "it wouldn't solve the problem. Abdelkader's death just now would make him an even bigger hero. People would be inspired to join the jihad to honor his memory. Recruiting might actually increase."

"OK, I can see that," I said. "So what's the plan?"

"There is no plan. The goal is for Abdelkader to be eliminated, image and all. Not merely removed, but thoroughly disgraced and discredited. The plan," Michael said, "is for you to develop and carry out."

He touched the eject button and took the disk from the computer and put it in a plastic case. "This contains the full file on Abdelkader— personal background, known habits and behavior patterns, structure of his organization, layout of the mosque and so on. If there's anything else you need to know, you'll find a number for contacting this office."

He held out the disk. I nodded in Leila's direction; she took it and slipped it into her big leather purse.

"Understand this," Michael said. "Our participation will be limited strictly to intelligence, logistic support, that sort of thing. We will not actively participate in any act of violence."

I said, "This is really getting your ass, isn't it? Having to work with us?"

He winced and closed his eyes. "My personal feelings," he said, "if any, are immaterial. I do as I am told."

He waved a hand. "I take it you can find your way out?"

We did. The door opened as we reached the top of the stairs. Outside, I turned to close it, but there was no door there, only the unbroken gray wall of St. Paul's.

"That," Leila said some time later, "was a very strange business."

We were sitting at a corner table in an undistinguished pub in Blackfriars, having an undistinguished late lunch. It was about half past one and the noon crowd had mostly gone back to work; a few customers still sat at the bar but nobody within earshot.

I said, "Strange, all right. I guess it was even stranger for you."

She gave me a funny look. "Why?" Then her eyebrows went up. "Oh, I see. You mean because I — look, Major Hackett—"

"Please. My name's Gordon Hackett. That 'Major' thing was a long time ago." I sat back and reached for my beer. "It's just something Himself does to annoy me."

"Himself?" Her eyes lit up. "Is that what you call him? I love it...look, Mr. Hackett — Gordon? — don't assume too much about me." Her English was more American than British, but she had, I noticed now, just the tiniest touch of another accent, too faint to identify. "My family left Beirut the same year I was born. I grew up in Brussels," she said, "and I wasn't brought up in any religion at all. My parents were very upper-middle-class, very modern, very secular."

I started to speak but she raised a finger. "Please, I want to tell you this...my brother," she said, "was like the rest of us at first. Then in his late teens he began hanging out with some young men from an extremist group. Pretty soon he began going to services at a jihadist mosque, attending classes and meetings and so on. My father was annoyed, but he didn't take it seriously, none of us did. Just a phase, we thought.

"You understand, I was away at school — University of Chicago — for much of this time. When I came home in the summer I hardly knew him. He'd shaved his head, he never smiled—" She looked down at her plate. "He slapped me," she said in a barely audible voice, "and called me a whore, because I didn't cover my head."

I kept quiet. After a minute she looked up. "Later that year," she said, "after I'd gone back to the university, he left without a word to anyone. A few months later he blew himself to bits on a street corner in Tel Aviv."

She made a bitter little snorting sound. "He didn't even succeed in killing anyone but himself. Evidently the bomb went off prematurely."

I couldn't think of a damn thing to say.

"And so," she said, "I said some things about being willing to sell my soul if I could get revenge. And was contacted, in time, by — Himself."

"Who told you that, contrary to general belief, he wasn't in the market for souls," I said. "But that he had plenty of openings for certain types of contract work."

"Exactly. The same for you?"

I nodded and sipped at my Foster's. One of the better side effects of the Australian invasion has been that you can finally get a decent cold beer at most London pubs.

Leila said, "You lost someone too? The Trade Center?"

"The Pentagon." The one nobody ever talks about. "I didn't lose anyone in particular, though," I said. "See, I was supposed to be on board that plane. Only I overslept and missed it."

"Oh." Her eyebrows shot up. "You think if you'd been on board — but you couldn't have stopped it," she said. "Not by yourself. And no one would have helped you."

"No. In fact there's a good chance the other passengers would have stopped me. They'd all had it drilled into their heads: do what they say and nobody gets hurt. But," I said, "guilt isn't exactly the most logical of human feelings."

I finished my beer and set the glass down. "Well, if we're both done, I guess it's time to get to work. First off I think we both need to spend some time studying the contents of that disk. Which means we need another copy, so let's drop by my flat and I'll burn one."

"Yes." She reached for her purse and paused. "Gordon, you seem like a nice man, but — well, on some of these operations, in the past, I've worked with men who seemed to expect certain things that weren't in my job description. If you follow me."

"I imagine I do." I stood up. "Don't worry about it. I think I can hold my rampaging libido in check."

She was looking embarrassed. "It's just that these awkward situations always seem to start with the words 'Let's drop by my flat.'"

"I can well imagine," I said. "And now we've got that out of the way, let's see if we can get a cab. Looks like it's started raining."

I spent the rest of the day and the evening going over the material on Abdelkader. Leila phoned once, around six or so; she'd been doing the same thing and a couple of questions had occurred to her. I thought about asking her to dinner but decided against it. Instead I went down to the neighborhood pub and insulted my heart with the steak and kidney pie.

Walking back to my building in the rain, I saw how the job could be done. It wouldn't be all that difficult, if certain things could be managed. At the flat I thought it over some more, had another look at the contents of the CD, and phoned Michael. He didn't sound happy to hear from me, but there was a note of reluctant relief in his voice when I told him I had a plan.

"More pictures of Abdelkader?" he said when I made my request. "Surely you've got enough. We collected—"

"Wait up." I told him the kind of pictures I needed.

That set him off big time. He didn't actually yell at me but he came close. I must be joking. What in the world would I want with something like that?

"Are you sure you want to know?" I asked.

No, he didn't. In any case it was out of the question. He couldn't believe I'd ask such a thing. Even if it were possible—

"Come on," I said. "You're the ones with all the special powers, right? All-Seeing Eye and all that? Surely

you can get a few candid-camera shots for me."

There was a long silence. I was beginning to wonder if he'd simply thrown the phone down and walked off, but then his voice came back on again, surprisingly quiet and calm now. "I'll have to take it up with Higher Authority." You could hear the caps. "I'll get back to you."

Leila came by next morning and I laid the plan out for her. When I was done she sat back on the couch and looked thoughtful. "Hm. You think we can do it?"

"I don't see why not. If I can get everything I need. Can *you* do it? Your part of the setup, I mean."

"Oh, yes. In fact I'll go and start work on it right away."

She started to get up. I said, "You don't have to leave yet. There's not that big a hurry."

She smiled. "No, I really need to—"

The laptop's incoming-message buzzer went off. I said, "Excuse me," and went over and sat down on the couch next to her and flipped up the screen. Sure enough, Michael had come through. I hadn't expected to hear from him so soon. Higher Authority must have told him to move his ass.

There was no text message, only an enclosed zip file full of jpeg images. I opened it and had a look. Beside me Leila made a strange muffled sound. "What in the world?" she said.

"Just some stuff I needed. You know, for the job."

"Ah. Of course." She scooted closer and leaned forward for a better look. "Oh, dear. He's...not in such good shape, is he?"

"Looks like he's got a nice place, though," I said, trying not to be distracted by the soft pressure of her hip against mine. "The faithful must be supporting him well."

"And he certainly needs it. Well." She stood up. "As I say, I'd better get to work. After seeing what someone else is going to have to work with, I can't complain about my part of the job."

Christiaan Goosen said, "Gordon, my friend. A pleasure to see you again." He grinned up at me. "Come in and let's see what you've brought me."

He spun his wheelchair around and I followed him down the hallway of his Golders Green home. It wasn't easy keeping up; he still used an old-fashioned hand-powered chair but he was damn fast with it. He'd had enough practice; he'd been in it, or one like it, since the Gestapo got through with him in '45. "Slow down," I said. "Damn it, you cheap old Dutch bastard, when are you going to get an electric? Don't tell me the pornography business doesn't pay enough."

He gave a scornful snort. "What for? My arms still work." He rolled through a doorway into a big room lined with computer hardware and file cabinets and turned to face me. "Here." He held out a brown-spotted hand. "Let's see what you've got."

I handed him the CD disk I'd burned back at the flat. He popped it into the nearest computer and studied the photos for a few minutes. "All right," he said. "Sure, I can do what you want. How soon do you need it?"

"As soon as possible. But it's not a rush job," I said. "Take as long as you need to do it right. There's no actual deadline."

"Good. What level of quality are we talking about?"

"In terms of pictorial quality, not very high. If it's too professional-looking it won't be credible. But," I said, "if you mean the shop job, I need your very best. They'll have to pass extremely close scrutiny by experts."

"Not to worry. When I get done even the — your employer won't be able to tell what's been done." He looked around at me with bright white-browed blue eyes. "Speaking of whom, give him my regards and tell him when he gets the time I'd like another chess match. Last time he almost beat me."

Back at the flat I phoned Leila and asked if she'd like to go to dinner. There was a pretty long silence and then she said, "I think we'd better not. Don't misunderstand," she added quickly. "It's a very attractive offer. But this wouldn't be a good time to get off on a tangent, would it?"

"Okay. Looks like it's going to be a pretty lousy night for going out anyway." I looked out the window at the gray rain slanting across Draycott Place. "Come by tomorrow," I said. "Say about half past one. There's somebody we both need to see."

The sign over the door said NIGEL'S ANTIQUE MILITARY TOYS. The display window was filled with lead soldiers in hand-painted 19th-century uniforms, knights in armor, horses pulling old-fashioned cannon and the like. "Wow," Leila said.

The interior of the shop was packed with glassed-in display cases containing more miniature armies. Wooden and cast-metal airplanes dangled on wires from the ceiling. Behind the counter Nigel St. John, three hundred pounds of ex-Royal Marine Commando dressed in a purple silk caftan with matching eye liner, sat meticulously cleaning dust from a Dinky Toys armored car with a soft brush. "Gordon!" he cried delightedly as we entered. "Just a sec, I'll be right with you."

He set the little car down carefully on the counter and came around to meet us, Birkenstocks slapping softly on the gleaming parquet floor. "And this is of course Ms. Aziz?" He grabbed Leila's hand with both of his, making it disappear completely. "So pleased to meet you. Watch out for this old beast." He rolled his eyes at me. "He's a flaming hetero, you know."

He rubbed a palm over his shaven scalp and sighed. "Well, I suppose you want to get right down to business, in your usual crass way. Just a moment, then - "

He went to the front door and locked it. Then he led the way to the back of the shop, through a bead-curtained doorway and into a cluttered storeroom. Pushing back the ornate fringed rug, he hooked his fingers through a ring set in the floor and with no apparent effort hoisted a large block of concrete, revealing a deep recess from which he lifted a long metal box.

"You understand," he said as he carried the box over to a nearby desk, "I don't have anything on the premises beyond your common or garden-variety hardware." He set the box down and opened the lid. "Which nowadays, in London, generally means former-Iron-Curtain ironmongery."

He reached into the box and took out a lumpy object wrapped in soft black cloth. "For example," he said, unwrapping it, "the seven point six-two Tokarev. Practically the default weapon among our local

street jobs, I'm afraid."

He handed it over: a hefty, slabsided semi-automatic, roughly finished, vaguely similar in shape to the old GI .45. "Typical Russian effort," Nigel said. "They're all over Europe, now, since the collapse of the jolly old Evil Empire. The police aren't keen, because that little high-speed bullet will go through a protective vest like shite through a duck. Pardon the language, Ms. Aziz."

"Have you got anything smaller?" I asked.

"For Milady here? Yes, of course." He rummaged in the box again and came up with a seriously ugly pistol. "Here we are. Makarov, almost as popular as the Tok. Fires the short nine-mil round, not terribly noisy yet adequate stopping power."

"See how it fits your hand," I told Leila

I wasn't expecting much — I was ready to grab it away from her, in fact, if she did anything silly with it — but to my surprise she took it from him with a quick sure motion and swung around to point it at the doorway in a very professional two-hand grip. "Not bad," she said thoughtfully. "Good balance."

She looked at me. "Himself saw to it that I learned certain skills. In the Chicago area it wasn't hard to find instruction."

"Now if you want something more discreet," Nigel said, "what about a genuine original silenced Sten? Second World War vintage, but clean. I don't have it here, but—"

"No, that's all right. We'll take these," I said. "And a clip's worth of ammo for each." If we needed more than that the mission would be hopelessly blown anyway.

On the way back through the showroom Nigel said, "You really must come again when you've got time to chat. I don't often get such interesting visitors."

"You're pretty interesting yourself," Leila told him.

Nigel laughed. "What you're thinking," he said, "is how did a nice girl like me get into a business like this? Some tragic story, perhaps?"

He raised his hands palm-up. "I'm sorry, but the truth is quite simple and sordid. For what your employer pays me, I would agree to dance the gazotsky each day at high noon in front of the Imperial War Museum, clad only in an organdy athletic supporter and playing 'Blue Bonnets Over the Border' on a Bolivian nose flute."

He unlocked the door. "Have a lovely day."

"And now," Leila said, after I had stashed the guns away in the hidden space behind the mantelpiece, "what happens next?"

"We wait. If you've got anything you want to do this weekend, go ahead. I'll call you when I hear from Christiaan."

"All right. Meanwhile," she said, "aren't you going to ask me out to dinner again?"

"Should I?" I said.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I think you definitely should."

"Would you like to have dinner with me?" I said.

"I thought you'd never ask," she said.

"This is a nice restaurant," she said, a few hours later. "Never been here before. I'll have to make a note."

She reached for the wine bottle, which by now was going on empty; we were just about finished with dinner. She'd made a solid contribution to the reduction of the bottle's contents, too. I was glad she liked it; from the price it must have been made from unicorn's blood.

She looked up and saw me watching her. "What?" she said.

"Nothing. It just seems a little strange. Sorry."

Her forehead wrinkled slightly. "But I don't - oh, you mean that I'm drinking wine? I told you," she said, "I'm strictly secular. I don't believe in any of that."

"Even though you're personally employed," I said, "by one of the most important figures in at least three major religions."

She laughed. "You're right, of course. I'm being completely irrational. It's just that somehow I don't think of...*them* in any religious context. More like a couple of warring alien entities, like in some science fiction story."

She made a face. "And that, of course, is even more illogical. But then the whole thing is illogical," she said. "Even within its own terms. Look at what we're doing and who we're doing it for. Why should he be involved in any of this? Especially on the side of, as you'd say, the good guys?"

"You don't know?" I said. "Himself is an art lover. All the arts, any kind — painting, sculpture, music, you name it. Not just the highbrow kind, either, he's a big Tom Waits fan for example."

"Which naturally puts him on the the other side," Leila said, nodding slowly, "from people who don't believe in any of those things. All right, that makes sense. I had no idea."

"I remember once," I said, "I happened to mention the Taliban, and he said, 'I'll always wish I'd done something about them before they did it.' I thought he meant nine-eleven. Turned out he was talking about the Buddhas of Bamiyan."

I surveyed the table. "We seem to be finished, don't we? So," I said, "what now? Do I take you home, or do we go somewhere for drinks, or what?"

She set her glass down and gave me a long cool look. The tip of her tongue appeared for just an instant between her lips.

"I don't really want anything more to drink," she said. "But I'd very much like to go back to your flat and go to bed with you."

When I got my voice back I said, "I thought you didn't want to get off on a tangent."

"That was then. We both had things to do. Now—" She shrugged. "You said if there was anything I wanted to do I should go ahead and do it. Well, this is what I want to do. Don't you?"

There were any number of possible clever responses but I wasn't in the mood for Noel Coward dialogue. "Yes," I said. "I'm just starting to realize how much."

I woke up with the sun high outside the windows. I lay there for a moment, no doubt wearing a very goofy smile, and then sat up and swung my feet to the floor. While I was sitting there experiencing a great reluctance to stand up, the bathroom door opened and Leila came up the hall, dabbing at her neck with a towel. She was wearing a cheerful expression and nothing else.

"Hi," she said. "How are you feeling?"

"Ask me after I'm awake." I watched her walk across the room toward the chair where she'd hung her underwear, enjoying the slight jiggle of breasts and bottom — she was a trifle full-bodied for the modern style, which suited me just fine — and the warm sheen of her skin. I said, "Is it hot in here or is it just you?"

She shot me a grin and bent down to step into her panties. That was worth watching too. I fell back across the bed. "Damn, woman," I said, "you're *dangerous*, you know that? I think you killed me. Have you no mercy on your elders?"

"Aww. Poor old man." She settled the panties over her hips and reached for her bra. "You didn't seem all that old last night. I was impressed."

"I was a bit surprised myself. It's been a long time."

"For me too. Well," she said, "since doing it *with* someone, if you know what I'm saying."

She paused, holding her bra not yet hooked. "Gordon — I don't want to seem pushy, but would you like me to move in here with you till the mission's over? It would simplify things, wouldn't it?"

I thought about it. Just from a logistical and operational angle, it made sense. And it would be a pleasant change from Lonely, Bored, and Horny, Attorneys-at-Law. "Sure," I said. "Why not?"

"Then I'll go pack a few things," she said, "and come back here."

When she was gone I got up and walked into the living room and turned on the laptop. There was one message:

I tried to reach you last night but you were otherwise engaged.

Looks as if you've got everything under control. Carry on.

I'll be in touch before long. Oh, and congratulations.

Monday Christiaan called to tell me the pictures were ready. Well, it had been a damn good couple of days while it lasted.

He had everything ready for me when I showed up: a big envelope full of prints and a carton of CD disks. I opened the envelope and looked through the prints. My stomach did a slow roll. "Christiaan, this is beyond a doubt the most disgusting thing I've ever seen."

"Understand," he said, "no young boys were harmed in order to make these. The source material was

hacked from the private collection of a Bengali stockbroker who lives in Marylebone, and whom I'm going to do something about one of these days." He tapped the box. "The disks, are you sure that's enough? I could quickly make more copies."

"No, that's all right. The disks are just for backup and effect anyway. This stuff is going to be all over the Internet and that's what matters."

"I could take care of that for you," he offered.

"Thanks," I said, "but no need. There's somebody who'll just love to do it."

"Leila," I said as I came in the door of the flat, "have you got that note ready?"

"Sure." She held up a yellow legal-pad sheet covered with Arabic script. "I was just looking it over, in fact."

"Good." I sat down on the couch, dumping the box and the envelope on the coffee table. "What's it say?"

"Roughly, '*Death to the false teacher, the evil deceiver and perverter of Muslim youth.*' Signed, the Brotherhood of Islamic Purity."

"Perfect." I looked around. "Where did I put that phone—"

While I was looking for the cell phone she bent down and opened the envelope. I started to warn her but it was too late. She dropped the pictures and ran for the bathroom, holding her hands to her mouth. I heard retching sounds and then running water.

After a few minutes she reappeared, her face very pale. "Gordon, that's *vile*."

"It's supposed to be," I said. "That's the idea, remember?"

She dropped into the nearest chair. "Who are you calling?" she asked.

"Michael. I've got to have his help distributing this stuff," I said. "It's got to be absolutely untraceable — there are going to be some extremely sharp people trying to track where it came from — and his lot are the only ones who can guarantee that."

"He's not going to like this," she said.

"Oh," I said, "once I've explained the situation, I'm sure he'll be a regular angel."

Michael said, "No. *No*. I can't believe you're even asking. And did you have to show me that—" He shuddered.

"Oh, come on," I said. "Like you haven't seen worse?"

We were standing in back of St. Paul's. This time he hadn't invited me in.

"Michael," I said, "let's cut the bullshit. We both know what's going on. The good guys, as usual, are willing for the bad guys to do what needs to be done, because that way you can go on telling yourselves how good you are. Just as long as you don't get *your* hands wet."

He flinched. I said, "I'm not asking you to kill anybody—"

"No," he said. "Just distribute child pornography."

"If you want to think of it that way. Or you can come down off your holy cloud and get real. Look," I said, "do you think I like this any better than you do? But it's the best possible way to get the results we're after, and I'm willing to swallow my precious scruples for that and you can damn well swallow yours too. Check with your Higher Authority if you want, but we both know damn well what the answer's going to be."

He took a long slow ragged breath. "Is there anything else?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Neither of us has any experience driving English style, so we're going to need transportation to and from. I take it that's not a problem?"

"No. When do you plan to...do it?"

"Tomorrow night. I'll get back to you with the time. Oh, and one other thing," I said. "A thunderstorm would be very helpful. A big noisy one, a real blaster. See if you can get that laid on for tomorrow evening, won't you? There's a good chap."

Late Tuesday afternoon I stripped the guns down and checked the actions and added a few drops of lubricant here and there. It was all completely unnecessary — Nigel would no more have sold a dirty gun than he'd have pissed on Judy Garland's grave — but it helped pass the time.

I was wondering about the weather; for most of the day the sky had been clear except for a few patches of cloud, and the TV forecast hadn't said anything beyond the standard "chance of rain." I needn't have worried; Higher Authority came through in plenty of time. By the time I got the guns back together the sky had clouded over with big heavy masses of cumulo-nimbus and you could hear an occasional low rumble not far away.

We had an early dinner, frozen stuff from Waitrose; Leila had confessed to total incompetence in the kitchen and I wasn't much better, but that's why Michael's boss gave us microwaves. We didn't talk much.

After dinner Leila went into the bedroom and came out a little later wearing a long shapeless black dress, her head covered by a black *hijab* scarf. "Don't laugh," she said. Her face was as stormy as the sky outside. "Don't you dare laugh, and don't make any jokes. There's nothing funny about it."

I handed her the Makarov and she made it disappear somewhere in the folds of her outfit. "Ready?" I said, and she nodded. "All right, then." I stood up and slipped the Tokarev into the waistband of my pants and zipped my black windbreaker halfway up to cover it. I picked up the backpack off the couch and hooked it over my shoulders and got out my cell phone and keyed it.

Michael answered immediately. "Time," I said, and stuck the phone in my pocket and jerked my head toward the door. "Let's go."

The rain was fairly bucketing down as we came out the front door of the building. A black cab sat at the curb. Its lights flashed, twice. "Run," I said, and we sprinted across the sidewalk.

Michael was sitting behind the wheel. He was wearing a tweed jacket and a cap instead of his usual white getup. He didn't look around, let alone make any move to help, as I wrenched the door open and

we tumbled into the back seat. He put the cab in gear and pulled away from the curb without a word, while we tried to wipe the rain from our faces. Should have brought an umbrella, I thought, but some things are just too ridiculous.

The storm was really hitting its stride as we rolled through the dark streets, great white forks of lightning stabbing down toward the city and thunder blamming and slamming away like a bombing strike. I started to tell Michael to convey my thanks, but he didn't seem to be in a mood for conversation.

Abdelkader's mosque was located on a crooked one-way street in a north London neighborhood. His home was just down the street, but according to Michael's information he'd be working late tonight in his office in the rear of the mosque. There would be a single bodyguard; otherwise, at this hour and in this weather, there shouldn't be anyone else around.

Michael stopped the cab in front of the darkened mosque and waited while we jumped out and ran for it. I headed around the corner of the building at a dead run, Leila splashing along behind me. By now we were both drenched to the marrow; lucky if we didn't catch pneumonia, but the storm made unbeatable cover.

A paved walkway ran along the side of the mosque, toward the rear, where lights shone through a couple of windows next to a small door. I flattened my back against the wall beside the door and nodded to Leila.

She went over and began to pound. I could barely hear her knocking over the boom of the thunder and the pounding of the rain, but no doubt it sounded louder inside. In less than a minute the door opened.

Leila began screaming in Arabic, a high penetrating wail that cut through the racket of the storm like a runaway chainsaw. She had her headscarf pulled over the bottom part of her face to form a veil, but it didn't muffle her a bit. She waved her hands frantically, pointing back up toward the street, the way we'd just come. I couldn't understand a word but the meaning was obvious: come quick, hurry, look—

And a moment later there he was, a husky young man in a camo jacket and a fancy skullcap. He stood there, peering the way she was pointing and trying to shield his eyes from the rain, while I came up behind him. The Tokarev made a solid thunk against the side of his head and I caught him as he went down.

Leila took his feet and we dragged him inside and shut the door. I checked for a pulse and found one — I don't know why, I didn't give a damn one way or another — but he was going to be out of the picture a lot longer than we needed.

To the left of the entrance was another door, with a sign in Arabic. The handle turned readily in my left hand. The room beyond was brightly lit and I blinked involuntarily as I stepped through, holding the Tokarev ready, into Abdelkader's office.

It was a good-sized place, bigger than it had looked in the pictures, the walls paneled in some sort of dark wood and hung with prayer rugs and banners with calligraphic inscriptions stitched in gold. At the far end, behind a massive wooden desk, sat a man in a white robe and turban. I didn't have any trouble recognizing him; I'd been looking at that face for over a week.

He looked up; his eyes went wide. He said something in Arabic, first in a puzzled voice and then an angry shout. He started to get to his feet, still yelling. Maybe he was calling for the guard; maybe he was telling me to get the fuck out. I didn't really care. His time was up.

I held the Tokarev out in front of me and sighted. I was just taking up the slack when there was a loud bang and a tiny dark spot appeared on the front of the white robe, a couple of inches below where I'd been aiming.

Abdelkader stopped shouting. He stopped moving, and then, after a second or so, he stopped being alive. You could see it happen; there is nothing quite like that sudden total slackness. A moment later he slid down behind the desk out of sight.

Beside me Leila said something I didn't understand. Then, in English, "I'm sorry, Gordon. I couldn't—"

"That's all right." I gave her a quick touch on the shoulder. "I should have asked if you wanted to do it. All right, let's finish up."

I stuck the Tok back in my belt while Leila stepped behind me and unzipped the backpack and got out the box of CD disks. I went over and switched on the computer on Abdelkader's desk — good computer, latest model Dell; whatever else the deceased had had against Western civilization, he'd certainly been up on the technology — and put a disk in. The drive hummed and then the screen displayed the first of Christiaan's doctored photos, depicting Abdelkader apparently sodomizing a dark-haired, scared-looking teenage boy.

I set the box of disks beside the computer. Leila had already opened the envelope and scattered the prints artistically about the desk and floor. She leaned over the desk and dropped a couple on Abdelkader's body and then dug out her hand-written note. She started to put it on the desk but I said, "Wait." I'd just spotted a big curved Middle Eastern dagger in a fancy sheath on the wall.

Leila saw where I was looking. "Oh, yes," she said, and went to get it, while I used the sleeve of my soggy windbreaker to wipe everything I'd touched.

The guard was still limp on the floor of the entrance hall. Leila held the note up to the office door and I drove the dagger through to pin it in place.

Outside it was still raining as hard as ever. As we reached the street I took out the cell phone to call Michael, but before I could key it the black cab appeared at the curb. Not showed up, *appeared*, just like that, without even any beam-me-up-Scotty shimmering. This time the back door swung open for us. "Go," I said as we piled inside, but Michael was already going, snaking down that crooked street and around the next corner like a Grand Prix driver going for the money lap.

I took Leila's pistol and cleared it and dropped it into the backpack along with mine. "You can dispose of these, can't you?" I said to Michael. "Beat them into pruning hooks or whatever."

Then I got out the cell phone again and made a call to Scotland Yard.

"Outstanding," Himself said. "Absolutely brilliant. I couldn't be more pleased."

We were sitting on the couch in my flat. Or rather Leila and I were; Himself, of course, was looking out at us from the laptop screen. Behind him the TV was showing a BBC newscast. The sound was off but it didn't matter; they weren't saying anything they hadn't already said at least half a dozen times this morning. Right now the screen showed a picture of Abdelkader's mosque.

"I was a bit unhappy last night," he said, "when you left the bodyguard alive. If he'd regained consciousness before the police arrived, he might have ruined things. But no harm done."

He smiled at me. "And I'm definitely going to have to give your friend Christiaan a bonus. All those people viewing those forged photos," he said, "they'll never know they're looking at the work of an authentic genius."

Leila said, "Not everyone is going to be convinced, you know. A lot of people are simply going to refuse to believe it." Her mouth quirked ruefully. "I'm afraid we're very good at denial."

"Like everyone else in the world," Himself said. "And in fact those things are being said even now. Al-Jazeera has already run several statements by various prominent persons, denouncing the whole thing as the work of the CIA, the Israelis, or both."

He made a dismissive gesture. "It doesn't matter. I've gotten what I was after."

I said, "Just what *were* you after, if you don't mind my asking? I never did get your angle on this business."

"Oh, that's simple enough. In that same neighborhood," Himself said, "less than a kilometer from the mosque, lives a Syrian family with a sixteen-year-old son. The parents are neither religious nor political, but the boy has been showing signs of interest — attending services now and then, talking with some of Abdelkader's younger followers—" He looked at Leila. "I'm afraid you'd recognize the pattern all too well."

"Yes," she said. "Oh, yes."

"And," he said, "it couldn't be allowed to go on. Because that boy has a musical talent such as I haven't seen since the young Mozart — even now, he can do things with a violin to make your heart stop — and it would have been an unspeakable tragedy to let those lunatics destroy him."

"Do you think it worked?" Leila said.

"No doubt about it. Already young Jamal is in a state of shock at the news," he said. "A few reinforcing images planted in his mind as he sleeps, and he will never again feel anything but revulsion at the thought of Abdelkader and all he stood for."

I said, "I'm a son of a bitch."

"I won't argue the point. But in this case you did a truly worthy thing. And now," Himself said, "I have pressing business to attend to, so I'll leave you to yourselves. I'll be in touch, though. Quite soon."

The screen went dark. I flipped the laptop shut and turned to face Leila. "Well," I said, "what do you want to do now?"

"What now?" Her voice and face had gone bleak. "Now," she said, "we say goodbye."

I opened my mouth to protest but she raised a hand. "No, please. The longer we're together, the harder it's going to be to end it. Even one more day together — let alone another night—"

She shook her head. "Reality time," she said. "It's over."

"It doesn't have to be." I looked at her, wanting badly to reach out to her but knowing she'd pull away. "As far as I'm concerned it doesn't ever have to be."

"A pretty thing to say. Maybe you even mean it. But it wouldn't work," she said. "It couldn't. This has been an unusual assignment for me, you know. Most of the time I have to operate in communities where

you would never blend in — where you'd probably be killed — and anyway I couldn't do my job with you along. And you've got your own work to do, too."

"We could ask Himself to release us from our contracts."

"And we could ask the sun to rise in the west. Don't talk nonsense," she said angrily. "You know better."

She was right, of course. For all the witty urbane persona, Himself was still who he was, and his contracts had extremely serious penalty clauses. People didn't make deals with him and then back out when they realized they'd made a mistake. If they could, where would he be?

She stood up. "I've already packed my things. Please, Gordon," she said, "if you care for me at all, don't try to stop me."

I watched as she went into the bedroom and came back carrying her bag and her coat. I got up and followed her to the door. She turned and looked up at me and I raised a hand toward her face, but she said, "No, please. If you touch me I may not be able to do this at all. Goodbye, Gordon," she said. "Take care of yourself."

"Goodbye, Leila," I said.

After the door closed behind her I stood there for a few minutes tasting those last two words in my mouth, knowing at last what the trapped wolf tastes when he chews off his own leg.

That afternoon I took a cab out to Heathrow and sat for a couple of hours waiting for my plane, watching all the people who knew where they were going.