

Italy – Things are as wonderful here as I remember. It has been several years since I've been here and this place is very special to me. After leaving the Corps I needed some time to reacquaint myself with civilian life, so I decided to travel the world. Italy was where my brief modeling career began. You may laugh, but modeling led me to the two loves that changed the course of my life: photography and cocaine. Photography is what has brought me here again, but cocaine is what has kept me here. There is no irony in this, only a kind of a beautiful sadness. I am an addict.

The trip began well enough in Rome. There, I photographed Sudanese refugees in an attempt to draw attention to the poor treatment they're receiving from the Italian government – and believe me, they are. Afterwards, I came to Milan, where all the partying began. Partying is par for the course in Milan because there is an over-abundance of designer clothes, super models, designer drugs, and superstar DJs.

It all began with Nancy Pierce, though. If only everything began and ended with Nancy Pierce... God, I'm starting to come down. I need a drink.

It was Nancy who asked me to come to Italy in the first place. She is a nurse with *Médecins Sans Frontières*¹ so got a firsthand glimpse of what has been going on in Rome. Typical Nancy. She knew that more needed to be done, so she took action. She called and asked me to come with my camera. This was the first time she has ever called to ask a favor, so I was glad to oblige. She's a very strong woman, pretty tough too, and I have tons of respect for what she does.

Nancy and I first met shortly after I started my career in photojournalism. We kept running into each other, being in the same places for the same catastrophes – her to help, me to photograph. As much as I tell myself that my photos do help in their own way, Nancy is actually in the shit, healing the sick. Aside from sharing stints in various parts of Hell around the world, we always make it a point to see one another in New York whenever we're both stateside.

Right now I'm watching the sun rise over one of my favorite places on earth, the *Piazza Della Repubblica*, from the balcony of my suite at the Hotel Principe Di Savoia. As the sun sheds it's light on the ninth day of this bender, my thoughts drift back to Nancy. It was great seeing her again. We were able to get together for coffee once and dinner once, but it was just

¹ ...or Doctors Without Borders

what I needed after my last op. I'm always left wanting more after seeing Nancy, though. After the types of experiences we've shared, there is definitely a very unique bond between us. But she just sees me as a friend. We have too much in common she says. What the Hell does that even mean? Anyway, what happens after isn't her fault, though she is the reason - if that makes any sense.

My moment of clarity is broken up when the two models, who accompanied me back to my room just a few hours ago, wake from their stupor. The Czech is rolling a joint mixed with tobacco. The Japanese girl takes another bump of coke before hopping into the shower. I walk back into the room and take a few tokes of the joint with the Czech. I hate tobacco mixed with weed, but I smoke it anyway. Then I do another bump myself and follow the Japanese girl into the shower. I will find out later that around this time I missed a call from Gabriel about an assignment.

Sharjah - My flight lands in one of the richest emirates in the UAE and I'm not thinking about this case at all right now. My head is still swimming. Gabriel's man, "Bulukiya," is waiting for me in the airport and the cab ride is a difficult one. No details are discussed, just in case the driver is not who he should be. We pretend to be old friends from college. Most of the things we say are pseudo-scripted allusions to Gabriel, or our own history. I can barely keep up and am fairly sure I've said a couple things I shouldn't have, though nothing serious. I think Bulukiya is being overly cautious, although I do understand, given the current situation here. The public outcries against the government aren't being heard by the emir, let alone the president of the UAE. Even I can feel the tension rising, and I just got off a damned plane.

It is fairly obvious that Bulukiya isn't one of the old man's typical pigeons. Usually Gabriel's people are former spies or police detectives. From our little coded conversation, it seems that Bulukiya owns a hotel, though not the one where I'm staying. (If I find out that his hotel is nicer than mine, I'm really going to be pissed.) Suddenly it dawns on me where I know the name "Bulukiya" from. He's a character from one of the One Thousand And One [Arabian] Nights stories Gabriel made me read before he brought me

here. That was almost three years ago and I learned a unique lesson about Middle Eastern culture on that trip.

Gabriel took me to a place he calls The Four Corners. At first glance it was an expansive, albeit enclosed, courtyard but there is so much more to it. That fact became clear as we spent more time there. The varying scents of hookah smoke combined with smoldering grilled lamb produced an aromatic odor that is unforgettable. The sound of men chattering, laughing, and arguing could be heard all throughout, intermingled every now and then with the clinking of small coffee cups on saucers. All night long, men migrate from one small pocket of conversation to another. Yet, in each of the four physical corners of the place sit immovable forces of nature disguised as men. As Gabriel gestured to each corner, he noted their affiliations – the gangsters, the philosophers, the religious zealots, and the students.

“But why are the students separated from the philosophers,” I asked, knowing the answer the moment the words passed my lips.

“School’s out, son,” was all he replied.

Of course, age is a defining factor. The students are young and will grow to become tomorrow’s gangsters, zealots, and philosophers. Those that go there to spend their evenings represent the future of the other corners. The students are openly courted by the men from the other corners in almost every other facet of life, but never in that place. Not only would it defile the space to have an argument break out between suitors, but the simple fact is that no one wants to tip their hand to the other corners. Daring to coax a student to their conversation would be to openly invite the competition to also pursue the prize. Obviously, the philosophers have the most to lose, since they are the students’ teachers. This leaves room for creativity when it comes to gangsters and zealots. The gangsters offer the pleasures of the living world – fame, money, power, and sex. The zealots are able to offer Heaven itself – an afterlife of peace, piety, and your own harem of virgins. After all, what is 20 years of earthly pleasure compared to eternity?

Finally in my room, I skim the file that Bulukiya gave me. This one is going to be exceedingly difficult, but at least the old man has some contacts here. I’m supposed to meet up with Khurram (God I hope I don’t end up having to pronounce his name before we meet) Ibrahim. He runs that controversial news blog Entropedia.com and has been fanning the flames here through his web site and YouTube for the past couple of months. Great! Now I understand why Bulukiya wasn’t taking any chances. Another odd connection though. This

Ibrahim guy is a young web activist, pretty far away from what I've come to expect from Gabriel's social circle.

And then it dawns on me. If I go to the bar downstairs, I could probably score an eight ball of coke within an hour. Just like its neighbor Dubai, all the action in Sharjah goes down in the hotels, from prostitution to gambling, to drugs. Before I even realize it, I'm already standing and buttoning my shirt back up to go. In that instant, a wave of self-loathing washes over me. I have to keep these cravings in check and get my shit together, starting now.

The job is Zulay Santiago, an American teacher from Texas who went missing while visiting Sharjah a few days ago. Gabriel said that this one is personal, so I've got to do right by the old man. Maybe he has a buddy on the police force that needs help. That's unlikely though. Gabriel could help with that himself. And what does this Ibrahim have to do with it?

Sleep is hardly what I would call what I experienced last night. I'm already exhausted from the trip, but I don't have time for withdrawal. Breakfast consists of scrambled eggs, Cheerios, and a 5-Hour Energy. I put on a Tom-Tom outfit² and am ready for the day. The meeting with Ibrahim isn't for another three hours, but I need to get the Hell out of here. I hire a car and go over to the [Eye of the Emirates](#). The fact that Sharjah is the cultural center of the Emirates makes it more special than it's more popular, albeit Anglicized, neighbor. While Dubai is a spectacular experience, Sharjah has a depth of character that Dubai will never rival. The Eye is a good relaxing way to kill some time, but mostly it allows me to see the lay of the land. During my last trip with Gabriel, we visited all the Emirates, so I didn't get to see very much of any. Sharjah is a breathtaking city with modern skyscrapers, beautiful parks, and ornate mosques all over.

The ride on the Eye leaves me feeling a little better and now I'm ready to get my blood flowing. I have the driver take me to the Sharjah Golf & Shooting Club. I'm definitely not out of practice, considering how things went in Bulgaria, but I need to get used to having a weapon in my hand again. I really don't expect any fireworks, but I'll be damned if I get myself caught in a shootout with shaky hands. After only two targets, I am enamored with the Sig Sauer X-6 I rented from the Club and am determined to purchase one. I had originally hoped to get in some paint ball (or moving target

² A grey Tom Ford suit with Thomas Pink shirt and tie

practice as I like to call it) at their world-renowned facility, but I have to buy myself one of these things as soon as fucking possible. An old Navy SEAL buddy of mine used to go on and on about the Sig but I never made much of an effort to get one for myself. A Safety Instructor (SI) at the shooting range tells me I can buy a brand new one from a dealer not far from the Club. The SI gives my driver the directions and I'm meeting with the dealer in no time.

We arrive at a high rise luxury apartment building and are greeted by a concierge. I'm told that "Mr. Lalwani" is waiting for me in his penthouse apartment. No garish gun shops for me apparently. The concierge escorts me to the elevator and rides up with me. The doors open right into the apartment, which is bathed in sunlight because of the floor-to-ceiling windows. Besides all the gold trinkets, I notice that there are paintings everywhere, so Mr. Lalwani is likely an art dealer in addition to being a gun runner. Selling art is a great cover for moving weapons internationally. So while my not-so-humble host is not exactly creative he is, at the least, intelligent.

"Hello, Mr. Hammond, it is a pleasure to meet you. I am Younes Lalwani. Our mutual friend from the Gun Club has informed me that you are interested in purchasing one of my more functional art pieces."

"That's correct. I am somewhat of an aficionado on functional art."

"Of course you are. That would explain the finely crafted piece you have in the spring-loaded rig attached to your forearm."

My eyebrow creeps up inquisitively.

"Forgive me. You were x-rayed in the elevator. My security staff relays the information to my man's earpiece and I give instructions on how to proceed. Given the circumstances of your invitation and your impeccable suit, I decided that you are trustworthy."

"And you believe that the concierge is capable of dealing with me if you had decided not to trust me?"

"Hopefully we'll never find out," he says with a sly smile before making his way into the next room. For the record, I'm fairly sure I could take the guy. But let's save some dick measuring and posturing for later.

In the next room, Lalwani is typing a code into a pad on the wall. The wall then slides back fifteen feet, revealing an impressively stocked gun cage. The arsenal before me includes mostly hand guns and light automatic weaponry.

“Well played, Mr. Lalwani.” His smile is full of false humility.

“You are too kind. I am but a humble public servant.”

He wants to push a couple of special edition X-6s with colored pearl coating on me, but I’m not here for gimmicks. A few minutes later I am the proud owner of a Sig Sauer X-6 with gold-plated control levers, hammer, and grip plate screws. I really did want the light weight version but, what can I say, maybe some of the decadence of this place is rubbing off on me. He then tries to sell me a gun called a Caracal, which is produced here in the UAE – Abu Dhabi to be precise. It’s a semiautomatic pistol with a rubber handle and grip, and is specially designed to maintain accuracy with successive shots. Younes tells me that this is the service pistol for the UAE police force, and it all sounds very well and good. After all, you can’t tell a sniper that you’ve got a pistol that maintains good accuracy and not expect him to be a little interested. I’m not significantly equipped here, so buying extra hardware isn’t a bad idea. But this thing is a little pricy for a brand I’ve never even heard of and I don’t want to get taken for a ride. After a little negotiation I decide to get the Caracal. I have just enough time to get in 30 more minutes of practice with my new toys at the Golf & Shooting Club before I have to meet Khurram.

We’re supposed to meet at the Classic Car Museum because it’s a public place; as well as a popular one. Khurram’s photo was included in the file. I’m sure he knows what I look like as well, so this should be a simple meet & greet in the middle of a city in the desert, surrounded by classic cars from all over the world. I notice Khurram Ibrahim observing a black refurbished Volkswagen Beetle. Of all the cars in this place, that’s the one he wants to check out? I have never been able to understand people’s fascination with that car. But I push that feeling down and make my way over.

“Nice car,” I lie.

“Nice gun bag,” is his reply. I’m pretty shocked at this greeting – especially since I bought the most discreet gun case Younes had.

“Don’t worry. We see our fair share of ‘private contractors’ come through here, so I know what a gunman in public looks like. It seems to me that all Americans own guns,” he added matter-of-factly.

“You watch too many action movies,” I retort.

"I watch too many CNN reports," he replies coolly.

Good one.

"I'm here on business, as you know. I didn't have any tools with me, so had to purchase some."

"Oh, I understand. Gabriel speaks of you often. You are the militia man, the hunter, and the thug, all rolled into one. You use a gun to solve your problems."

As much as I hate hearing the words, and I do, I can't help but acknowledge their truth.

"I use a gun to solve other people's problems," I shoot back with an antagonistic smile.

"There are ways to solve people's problems without guns."

"Not the problems I solve."

"So you say."

He walks away slowly, effectively ending our little exchange. It isn't one of those drop-the-mic exits, trying to make a dramatic point and leaving with the last word. I think he's just ready to get down to business, which is fine by me. I choose to believe this. If I think about it anymore, I'll just end up getting upset.

We go to a café nearby and are whisked through the place and upstairs to an empty banquet area. It is already decorated for what I can only assume will be a wedding. I'm feeling a little underdressed but then the manila folders come out and I start to get comfortable. Khurrum produces a couple of photos of him and a woman who looks very familiar.

"This is me with Zulay Santiago. She disappeared eleven days ago. Of course, there's lots of pressure from your government to find her. I was just informed yesterday by a friend in the press that the police have discovered our secret relationship and now I am a suspect."

"You had a relationship with Zulay Santiago? How much do the police know already? And what are they going to find out when they really start digging?"

"Zulay and I met at a dance club in Dubai. I didn't tell her who I was, but she told me who she was. She'd been traveling alone because she and her husband are having difficulties and she needed some space to figure things out. She didn't come here looking for me but she found me. What an amazing soul she is. I haven't seen her in days, though, and I fear the worst."

“That was very touching. But is it true? You need to be honest with me, here. If you’re a suspect or worse, guilty, then I need to know. The U.S. government isn’t the one you should be worried about. You’re a trouble maker right here. If Gabriel knows that you’re behind these demonstrations where truckloads of laborers are brought in to Sharjah, then you can be damned sure the local authorities do as well.”

“Now you understand, gunman. They are trying to silence me by accusing me of murdering a woman I love. This is why you are here. How can those guns of yours solve my problem?

“I’m going to ignore that. The first thing you need to do, though, is get the Hell off the streets. We’ve got to go into hiding. Wait, what? Murder?”

“No. This I cannot do. That is exactly what they want me to do. No.”

“Look, this isn’t up for discussion. We’ll just lay low for a while and figure things out. I will find Zulay while you keep your head down. I’m not trying to make you quit fighting the good fight, but you can put it on hold for a while to save your own life.”

“I will not go into hiding. And you will not find Zulay. She is not with me and she has not gone back to her husband. This can only mean one thing.”

It all becomes irrelevant as the sound of tires screeching outside precludes the arrival of no less than 8 police officers dressed in riot gear. Cocked, locked, and ready to rock, they shout for us to raise our hands and we comply. Khurram gives me an “I-told-you-so” look of exasperation before being lifted out of his chair, restrained and ushered downstairs and eventually into a police van. I am also arrested, but not treated as unceremoniously. They got their man; I’m just a technicality.

Once in custody pleading my case is easy enough. It is for just such occasions that I work with a nom de guerre. Ashiel Hammond is a well-known photo journalist, but “Anderson Howe” is literally nobody. If the police had my real name, they would likely think I was here and meeting with Khurram about his civil rights work, effectively placing a big target square on my back. Instead, I tell the three detectives taking turns questioning me that I’d met Khurram at the Car Museum and found him very handsome. I explained that after talking for a bit, we decided to get something to eat and went to the restaurant where they found us. We were upstairs because the owner asked us to eat there, away from view of other customers. Naturally, I didn’t

appreciate such treatment, but I was more interested in the company than the food anyway. This is when things start to get uncomfortable. Of course, that's the idea. Insinuating that Mr. Ibrahim may be gay isn't going to do him any favors, considering that homosexuality is illegal in the UAE. I have essentially given them something else to try to convict him on, but if I can get the job done here, he'll gain his freedom anyway. In the meantime, I need to be able to move around without oversight. There is no connection between us that they will be able to find, so this little charade should do the trick.

In the evening I change my clothes, grab my camera, and go to the designated location where a rally that Khurrum had arranged earlier is set to take place. His cohorts know that he's been arrested, but go forward with it anyway. As cliché as it is, they all know he would want it to. The problem is that the authorities now know about it as well. They didn't have enough time to pre-empt it, but the Sharjah police force is able to stifle the thing before it even gets started. Ibrahim's people should have known this would happen. Maybe they did. Maybe they thought it would be good for their cause to have two buses full of Southeast Asian workers brought in to Sharjah from Amjan to protest their treatment by the construction and hospitality industries turned back by force. Maybe they were expecting cops in riot gear, dogs, water hoses, or some other really dramatic show of Alabama-in-the-1960's style force. What they got was a polite looking rolling barricade. Ten-foot high panels of wood on wheels walled in the protestors, closing them off from public view before they could all get off their buses. I can't see much from where I've positioned myself, but it isn't long before the bus engines almost literally grumble to life, signaling their defeat. I get a few shots of the buses driving out of the barricade. While I could see the heart-breaking, dejected expressions on the faces of the workers as they are driven back to their tenements, there are no good shots to be had. This day will surely be lost to time.

Many of the people who live in Sharjah are also Southeast Asian workers, but they are white-collar professionals. Khurrum and his people are banking on good 'ol hometown sympathy, but this type of protest could never

happen in Dubai. These laborers still need to work so there is zero chance of them making a problem in plain sight of their bosses. The same goes for Amjan. If Sharjah is the suburb of Dubai, then Amjan is its slum. Amjan is where all of these workers are housed, so there would be no point in protesting there, since the only people who would see are in the same predicament. Basically if change doesn't come from Sharjah, change just isn't coming. As much as I respect and sympathize with the situation here, this isn't my mission. I have to get started trying to find Zulay Santiago and time is definitely a factor. Getting any cooperation from the police will be a little difficult now, so I'm going to have to see what Gabriel can do for me. If the little folder I got when I arrived is all the intelligence there is on this case, I've basically got nothing to start with. As I begin to ponder just how much this sucks, I get a text from Gabriel: "SNAFU"

When I get back to my hotel, I call Gabriel immediately.

"You know how much I hate getting bad news before I have my morning coffee," Gabriel says when he picks up the phone.

"It's after 10am in New York, Gabriel."

"I'm in LA, so it's just after 7am here, thank you very much."

"What are you doing in LA?"

"Don't worry about that. All you need to know is that I am on urgent business. But you've got much more pressing questions to deal with at the moment."

"From your message, I get that my situation is harder than it was 30 minutes ago, so make with the explaining, old man. Then you can have your coffee."

"The body of an unidentified woman being referred to as a prostitute has been found in Amjan. Local authorities are keeping a lid on it for now because a murder mystery is just the kind of publicity they want to avoid given the current situation there; of which you are quite aware.

"Um, yes."

"Meanwhile the FBI is pushing the emir of Sharjah for answers in this Santiago case, so they are coordinating their efforts with neighboring emirates. It is my understanding that the Sharjah police are close to identifying the body of this so-called prostitute as Zulay Santiago."

"Fuck."

³ Situation Now All Fucked Up

“Exactly, and there’s more. Zulay appears to have been killed in a way that suggests the murderer is part of a terror cell calling itself ‘Eagles of Salah al-Din.’⁴ They haven’t officially claimed credit for the kill but their calling card is there.”

“Do I need the grisly details?”

“Not really. But here’s a major plus for you, the locals haven’t made the connection to the Eagles yet. I was able to put that together on my own. The FBI won’t take very long to figure it out, though. Hell, the way things go these days, friggin’ CNN may get the story even before the Feds.”

“So I have a little lead time.”

“Not much. Contact Bulu--”

“I think I have an asset I can work on this one.”

“This is not an opportunity for you to try and get laid. Get to work.”

I don’t even get to voice my incredulity because the old bastard just hangs up on me.

Younes Lalwani and I arrange to meet at The Prestige social club, also known as The Four Corners, at 10pm. And here I am at 11:15pm, still waiting. The Prestige is a private club for local and international powerhouses to meet and greet in the most luxurious surroundings available in Sharjah. This place is so exclusive, even Gabriel couldn’t get in. He knew about it, of course, but wasn’t able to get membership. I joined using my real name, but my press credentials weren’t enough. I had to send in copies of my birth certificate and social security card to prove to the board that my parents really were Zack Hammond and Jillian Howe⁵ and that I am indeed a billionaire. To the outside world, Sharjah is little more than a suburb of Dubai, so the fact that a place like this exists here is very telling. What Gabriel refers to as The Four Corners is really a private courtyard café at the back of the property. It is absolutely massive, but rarely used during the day. The place comes roaring to life each night around 9pm almost like clockwork. Membership is not available to women but the staff is predominantly made up

⁴ Better known by the Anglicized name “Saladin”

⁵ “Zackillian” for those of you who remember...

of attractive females; primarily from the 'Stans, particularly Kyrgyzstan⁶ from the look of things tonight. Managers, other high level positions, and the board are all men, but most of the people that members come in contact with are exotic looking women from surrounding countries. No prostitutes here, there is too much in the way of reputation at stake, which is why these women come from Muslim countries. It is definitely a look-don't-touch kind of atmosphere.

Three glasses of Gentleman Jack later, Younes finally arrives. A few minutes after that, we're alone in a gaming room playing Piquet⁷ with gold foil embossed cards. My Indo-Moroccan opponent is smoking a hash joint with a cigarette holder. I'm pulling drags from a hookah standing on a table positioned between the two of us. I'm losing at cards. The competitor in me won't accept the excuse that Mr. Lalwani has been playing this game for far longer than I, or that I'm getting a contact high from his second-hand smoke. But I do have the luxury of a higher purpose tonight which supersedes my desire for victory. Who am I kidding? It is pissing me off that I'm losing. To this point, we've only been making small talk, discussing our penchant for Italian designers. It even turns out that we're both wearing MSGM suits, and we agree that Massimo Georgetti suits are the only things worth owning, since his other lines are far too "youthful." More importantly, I'm going to lose this game, so I'd better start getting the answers to my questions while I'm at it.

"I have a few questions, if you don't mind."

"I would hope so. Your Piquet skills are a bit lacking, and I would hope that I could be of better service to you than as a mere sparring partner."

"I'm looking for a group of fighters who may be clients of yours. They call themselves The Eagles of Sala al-Din."

"Ah, I have heard of these men. But they are not my clients. You should speak with Ranjit Shah, who is responsible for a sizable portion of the poppy trade going into Africa through the Middle East. From what I hear, the Eagles of Salah al-Din are part of this trafficking. If they are in fact his clients, he should be able to help you. I will contact you tomorrow if I can make the arrangement."

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyrgyzstan>

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piquet>

“Well, that was easy.”

“I make decisions using my instincts and the information provided me. Let us examine what I know of you and you will see why I have decided to help you. You are an American who plays Piquet and is a member of one of the most exclusive social clubs in the world. Not to mention that you have purchased two handguns from me just this morning. These things tell me that you are the kind of man that a man such as me should have as an associate.”

“I am in your debt.”

“Yes, you are,” he says with a grin worthy of Shaytan himself.

Younes calls at 7am to let me know that the meeting is on with Ranjit Shah. I'm to meet him at his apartment at the Mulkiyet al-Jinn, the only 6-star hotel in Sharjah. The hotel is beautiful. It is easily the most exquisite I've seen so far on this trip. That makes sense. The edifice rising before me is based on the “Broken Obelisk” sculpture by Barnett Newman (the next time you're in New York City, check it out at the Museum of Modern Art)⁸. The dimensions may not be as extreme as in the sculpture and the roof is smooth and not unfinished looking, but the effect is the same. This building's design is a modern structural achievement whose only raison d'être is to be impressive. This is the type of thing you would only find in the UAE. I shake off the feeling of awe and go inside. At the front desk, I inform a pretty Indian woman that I am here for a meeting with Ranjit Shah. She makes a phone call and within two minutes three very large Indian men in black suits appear to escort me up to Shah. Ranjit's suite is magnificent, with a tasteful mingling of North African, East Asian, and South Asian décor; mainly tied together with a black and red color motif.

Ranjit Shah is brought into the room to greet me and my jaw goes slack. He is shorter than average, though not small. In fact, he is powerfully built, with broad shoulders, very dark skin, a long beaklike nose, and deep set eyes that portray a cool intensity. He's wearing a black suit with a white shirt. No tie, with his collar open.

“Why, hello ‘Bulukiya.’ It is a pleasure to see you again.”

“Welcome to my hotel, Mr. ‘Anderson Howe.’ Glad you could make it.”

Both of us, now stripped of our cover, but neither revealing our true self. Well played, Gabriel Sexton, you never cease to surprise me. Shah informs me that he's hosting a Muay Thai championship qualifying fight at

⁸ http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81555

this hotel later in the week. Having a vested interest in the outcome; he finances the challenger, my gracious host has spared no expense in the presentation. As we view the arrangement from the center of the ring, I am reminded of Rocky IV, when Apollo Creed makes his entrance to "Living in America." Now, by no stretch is a Muay Thai match typically the type of event that elicits such grandiosity, but then I remember where I am and with whom I'm dealing.

"Now tell me, Mr. Hammond, why you think I should do what it is you ask?"

"Well, first off, since you know Gabriel, you have an idea of what he's doing. Therefore you know that my intentions are good. But I'll give you the specifics anyway. I'm trying to save a man's life. A man, by the way, who is a citizen of Sharjah, that is being persecuted for trying to help people - many of them from the same country that you call home."

"Ah, I know of this man. He is a fool who does not understand the caste system in India. Someone should have told him that people who are educated and wealthy will never do anything to help those who are untouchable and therefore beneath them in every way possible. For these types of problems, I blame you Americans. You want to show the world how virtuous your freedoms are, but they are not the virtues of all men. Neither are all American men free."

"As much as I'd love to 'debate' you right here in this boxing ring, I will refrain. But let me tell you this; the man I am trying to find has killed a woman, a good woman, a teacher. She deserves justice."

"I do know who has committed this heinous act, and he does deserve to be punished. But he and his organization are clients of mine. Why should I endanger my business so? Is my profession not risky enough already?"

"One could argue that this is the profession you chose. But I believe in protecting my friends. If this organization should become your enemy, then they will also become my enemy. And remember, Gabriel and I make great allies, but even better adversaries."

"Of this, I have no doubt. I am committed to helping Gabriel Sexton and, by extension, you. The things he has done for me, I may never be able to repay. But please understand that the man you seek is both powerful and dangerous. So I must have your word that I will have your support in the event of an emergency.

“I give you my word that both Gabriel and I are committed to your safety. We will do our best to protect you from any retribution.”

“I accept your word on your honor. The man you seek is Omar al-Muhaidib.”

“Al-Muhaidib? That name sounds familiar.”

“Good for you. Omar’s father, Walid, and brother, Salman, head a very large oil company in Riyadh. Omar is a zealot and has followed his uncle, Abdul, down the path of jihad. Killing this woman, this teacher, was a test. The last I heard of him, Omar was being smuggled out of the country into Pakistan.

“Even I know that he’s likely no longer in Pakistan anymore. But that is an excellent place to start. Thank you, Ranjit, I appreciate your assistance.”

“Keep your thanks. I may need a favor from you some day. I would rather have that.”

“You’ve got it. We shall meet again, in the place where there is no darkness.”⁹ I always thought that was a cool way to end a conversation.

Back at my hotel, I pour over the files I requested from Gabriel on Omar and Abdul al-Muhaidib. There isn’t much on Omar, but Abdul has quite the resume. I’m reading the pages from his file as they roll off my (incredibly small and light) wireless printer/fax/scanner, like it’s on the New York Times best seller list. Abdul started out fighting the Russians in Afghanistan. Okay, who didn’t? Fair enough, but it gets better. After they finally drive out the Soviet soldiers, instead of sticking around for the Afghan Civil War to claim his piece of the pie, like everyone else, he heads back to Saudi Arabia and goes to work with his brother, Walid. Then there’s nothing for several years, until he shows up in Bosnia. Guess you can’t keep a good Mujahideen wrapped up in a suit for too long. His name later appears in connection with a few bombings in Kashmir, then the file goes dark again. Interestingly enough, around that time is when young Omar starts making a name for himself in India. Two years ago he was linked to an organization called Ulema Mujahideen, who claimed responsibility for several bombings throughout India. Strangely, this group seems to have only been active during that time. And then Omar falls off the grid as well.

⁹ A quote from 1984 by George Orwell

So if uncle Abdul and Omar are part of this Eagles of Sala al-din organization, how are they flying under the radar? At least Abdul seems particularly proficient at hiding, so it is possible that they just haven't been connected yet. Even though there is no mention of these Eagles in India, I'd bet the farm that Abdul was there along with Omar. He had been in Kashmir less than a year prior. And all of the attacks in India were coordinated strikes involving several bombs going off at multiple targets within minutes of each other. That seems very complicated for a noob like Omar and an organization that nobody had heard of before.

I start reading the case files on the Ulema Mujahideen bombings for more clues and it looks like each incident is related to a different provocation. In one case, the explosions are in retaliation to the arrest of an imam in connection with bombings from several years prior. On another occasion, a major hotel and several tourist attractions were bombed. And in a more bizarre instance, on the same day that several Bollywood actors were threatened with death if they did not immediately end their career, two movie theatres were bombed, but four more explosive devices were diffused at other locations.

These days, terror groups are very splintered and focused. There's one for every cause, and way too much was done right for these Ulema Mujahideen guys to be aimless rookies just looking to blow shit up. This also explains why many of the suspects in these cases are from various other terror cells, none of whom claimed responsibility for the bombings. So it would seem that Abdul is the missing link here. He's planning the attacks, while nephew Omar is using a fake Ulema Mujahideen name to keep investigators off his trail. That is a pretty interesting development. A lot of these Mujahideen fighters do go from place to place in support of other groups, but I've never heard of a terrorist-for-hire before.

Islamabad – Gabriel got word to me that there is some chatter going on about a Pakistani Intelligence Bureau (IB) inspector, Khalif Raza, who has been looking into Abdul al-Muhaidib. Abdul's involvement in those bombings in Indian Kashmir a few years ago were most likely carried out from Pakistan and this government needs to keep the pressure on terror cells operating

within its borders. So maybe I've lucked out and Omar is still here. There isn't much available intel on the Eagles of Sala al-din, but it seems to be a small operation - just Abdul, Omar, and a handful of accomplices, so I'm not expecting to run into a hit squad. If they have a certain way of carrying out assassinations, it's most likely because only one person is doing it. I'd been in Karachi for a day, looking into some of Younes Lalwani's competitors, hoping to find a lead and was getting nowhere fast before Gabriel contacted me.

I've been in Islamabad for less than nine hours, and have been shadowing Raza for three of those already. He lives alone which is great, no family members to worry about. He lives in PWD on Street 31, which is a Public Works Department housing development for federal employees, so the area has a lot of houses. This is another plus, because if he lived in one of those high-rise apartment buildings like so many here in Islamabad do, it could get messy. The houses here are pretty huge, but also attached, so that limits entries and exits to 3 - front, back, and roof. This is a three-story structure with, I'd guess, 4 bedrooms, plus a garage in the front and second-floor patio, so there's a lot of ground to cover. High stone walls separate the back yards of the houses on this street from the ones behind them, so attempting to get in through the back means going through someone else's house first. That just leaves the front door and the roof. My money's on the roof as Abdul's entry point, which is why I'm on the roof of a house for sale across the street.

This guy is good. No surprise he waited for nightfall, I expected that. But he moves so slowly, so patiently from rooftop to rooftop, I could barely pick up any motion. It's almost too late when I finally see a shadowy figure trying to enter through a window on the third floor. But I'm ready, so am able to get off a "warning shot" that tags him in the right arm. The bastard goes down, but I can't see which direction he heads in. Between the distance and the darkness, I might not have done anything but break the skin, but I have his attention now. No return fire though.

I roll over, hop to my feet, then jump down onto the balcony. From there it's a short drop onto the street, before I hotfoot it over to Raza's house. When I get there, the front door is locked, so I jump up and catch a railing on the patio above the garage. As I pull myself up, I hear AK-47 fire from inside. I duck down immediately. That's most likely Khalif Raza. There was no AK on the guy I shot. The moment I stand up, someone crashes

through the patio door and runs into me. We both go tumbling over the railing. This son of a bitch is using me to cushion his landing!

I slam down hard on the pavement and can hear footfalls and haggard breathing as whoever it is makes a run for it. Raza bursts out his front door blasting rounds at the fleeing would-be assassin. Luckily he doesn't notice me. He suddenly stops firing and I can hear a helicopter not too far away. If I had to judge, I'd say it was near the park a block away from here. Raza runs past me, presumably toward the helicopter. I let him go, as I have no interest in catching a stray bullet from a spooked man with a machine gun. Once clear, I get up and make my way towards the commotion. There's no more gunfire. I arrive in time to see the helicopter take off and am treated to a slew of what I can only imagine are Pakistani curses coming from Mr. Raza. Inside the 'copter are several men wearing black paramilitary gear. That's more than a little odd.

After a quick introduction and some in-depth explaining, I'm back at Raza's home having tea. He made a phone call when we got back, and the authorities have yet to arrive.

"Thank you most sincerely for intervening tonight. I owe my life to you, Mr. Howe. Those bastards from RAW would have let me die and still made off with their prize.

"Raw? And you're welcome, by the way."

"The men in the helicopter who carried off our mutual friend are agents of the Indian External Intelligence Agency, the Research and Analysis Wing specifically, R-A-W. They are the equivalent to your Central Intelligence Agency, only RAW has no problem running snatch and grab operations on targets of interest across international borders. They also prosecute and punish these individuals in secret, so I don't envy Abdul al-Muhaidib."

"So you believe that was al-Muhaidib tonight?"

"I don't believe, I know. He sees me as a traitor to Islam because I am investigating him and his crimes. How ridiculous! He's blowing people up and I'm the traitor to Islam! There is no doubt in my mind that had it not been for you, I would have had my throat slit and my left hand pinned to my mouth with the dagger."

"That's very specific. Is that the calling card of the Eagles of Sala al-din?"

"It is an allusion to Shaytan, who eats with his left hand. Anyone who opposes them is an infidel. But this is just smoke and mirrors. Abdul al-

Muhaidib is no religious zealot. He is an anarchist who uses Islam to sow havoc and destruction around the world.”

“Do you know much about his operation?”

“It is very small, just him and a few others. He is the brain and the heart of the group, the rest just follow him. Abdul will lend his mind and his brigade to a cause he accepts, but is also happy distributing guns and drugs. I have been able to connect him to Chechnya and Myanmar recently, so one of those places would likely have been his next target. But now that the Indians have him, I don’t think we’ll be hearing any more from the Eagles of Salah al-Din.”

Yingjiang – I’m in China, the Yunnan Province to be exact, preparing to go over the border into rebel controlled section of Burma (the country now known as Myanmar...). The obvious reason I chose Myanmar is that it’s closer to Pakistan than Chechnya. But I’m going through China because it will be much less dangerous to cross into Kachin Independence Army (KIA) territory from the Chinese side, than it would be to fly to Myanmar and make my way through the jungle. Over the years, the Myanmar government has been able to successfully push the Kachin back towards the China border, so I’m avoiding having to sneak through the military-controlled zone, just to do so again with the Kachin rebels. Now, I’m a Marine Corps Sniper and always will be. Drop me anywhere with a map and a backpack and I’ll be good. But time is an issue here. Flying from Pakistan to China isn’t difficult, and my press credentials actually helped speed my getting to Yunnan on more than one occasion.

With all this recent air travel, I’ve had a lot of time to re-read Omar and Abdul’s files and find interesting connections. The Kachin conflict is a rather unique one for someone in Omar’s new position. Myanmar’s proximity to the Golden Triangle gives him a gateway to open up new avenues in the opium trade. Sadly, guns and drugs make for fair bartering options in many war-torn parts of the world. So it is a potentially big win for him, especially if he really has no religious allegiance, because the Kachin rebels are Christian. I get the feeling that Omar may not have the same leanings toward anarchy as uncle Abdul though. In fact, one CIA analyst had a theory that

Omar helped Myanmar's then military dictatorship stage a cyber-attack that crippled the country's internet access for over a week. Taking down the internet for an entire country for so long sounds like just the sort of thing that Uncle Anarchist would do, but certainly not at the behest of the government. The analyst posits that Omar was given the task as a way for the government to distance itself from the attack, which was intended to sabotage an upcoming election.

Once I arrive in Nabang village, the press credentials come out so it isn't odd when I start asking certain questions. Several people point me to Zhang Yiu, a local doctor and preacher at a small church. Apparently he also speaks English. Mr. Zhang is at his office when I get there and has no patients at the moment. I tell him that I am interested in going over to Myanmar. The man doesn't bat an eyelash and actually responds, in a very excited tone, that he is going to Myanmar tonight. It turns out that Zhang is a Jingbo, an ethnic minority in China whom he says are related to Kachins. He smuggles medical supplies over the border for people living in Kachin refugee camps. The Myanmar government has been able to successfully contain the rebels, but they still keep a close watch over things and sometimes bullets fly near the borders. This is why the good doctor is so happy that I've arrived. He was almost shot by a Myanmar army soldier the last time he tried to cross, but thinks that things will go much easier for him if he is traveling with an American journalist. I sure hope he's right.

As we're preparing to leave, Zhang mentioned that there has been an increase in traffic recently, and that just yesterday five "dark men" made their way out of the trees and into Nabang. As racist as that may sound, (and I don't believe that was his intention) I can only imagine that he is referring to one Mr. Omar al-Muhaidib and the rest of the Eagles of Sala al-din. I'm shocked and am pretty sure I'm not even doing a half-descent job of hiding it. He goes on to say that everything that has anything to do with Kachins or Myanmar finds its way to him eventually. When I press him a bit more, he recalls also being told by the person that saw them that one of the men seemed to mention the Philippines.

Laiza, Myanmar – I insisted on us both wearing camouflage, which can be purchased anywhere in the world these days. If we're going to do this, then dammit we're going to do it right. Crossing the border was relatively easy, I did note two or three possible spots where Myanmar army camps had been previously, but we didn't run into any trouble. The trip is more of a nature hike than the jungle trek I'd been expecting. The scenery is beautiful, complete with a river and waterfall along the border area. The refugee camp isn't far, but the change in setting couldn't be starker. It isn't squalor, because this place is far from filthy, but it is so crowded. There are more people here than this village can support. Still, the people are happy to see us, especially since Zhang was able to bring more than double his normal load because I came along. And even though the people in this camp have lost their homes, they haven't lost everything. You can see the pride and hope they share. Before leaving, I try to take some photos of the nightly activities around the camp, but people are not open to the idea, even when I tell them that my pictures can help show the world their struggle. And then it occurs to me that the KIA most likely turned down Omar's help. After all, what reason do they have to trust him? That's why he's going to the Philippines; there is no opportunity for him here. We don't stay very long at all, and I'm back in my hotel room with no time for a good night's rest before traveling again tomorrow. My last thought before drifting into unconsciousness is that it has only been four days since I left the UAE.

Zamboanga City – The Philippines – I arrive in the Philippines in the afternoon and am able to rent a Royal Enfield Bullet motorcycle at the airport. Gabriel got word to me during my flight that he's been able to establish a potential connection for Omar here. I'm on my way to see Maricar Del Potro, who we have reason to believe is the person that Omar is here to see. As I turn left onto Mayor Climaco Ave where Del Potro lives, I see a van coming up the street in the opposite direction. The driver is clearly an Arab, and while this is the Muslim area (Mindanao) it is not exactly an Arabic neighborhood. Fuck it. I'm going to go with my gut and follow this van. With a quick left turn at the next corner and another left on the following corner, I'm not far behind the van. The Bullet maneuvers great and

I'm really glad I decided to go with it when I realize where we're headed. In just a few minutes we're in a Muslim slum called Rio Hondo¹⁰, part of which is actually built right on the river.

The van stops at the entrance to Rio Hondo. A Filipino woman (that I can only assume is Maricar Del Potro) waits in a motor boat as five men board. The number is right, so I'm feeling better about this decision. I have to ditch the motorcycle though, as I have a better chance of remaining incognito if I continue on foot. What passes for housing in this neighborhood are sheet metal shacks built on stilts over the river. The boat navigates slowly through the waterway, while I try to keep a discreet distance on the raised walkways that look like leftover scenery from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, but actually hold up pretty well.

Eventually they make a turn that I can't follow and it's over-or-under time for me - either I start going along the rooftops of these homes [over] or try to follow in the water [under]. Over works better for me because I don't want to get my guns wet. So I attempt to leap across the water onto the roof of a house opposite me. I don't make it, not completely at least, and I slam hard onto the side of a house. And as I scramble to pull myself up onto the roof, part of me can't help but think that a week ago, I would have made it. Luckily I am not accosted by any angry Filipinos in the process, so I can reasonably surmise that no one is home.

Now here I am, bounding from rooftop to rooftop like some idiotic Batman wannabe, trying to keep pace with this boat while simultaneously trying to make as little noise as possible. But in the back of my mind is the repetitive prayer I'm sending out to every deity I can think of - that I please, please not fall through one of these "houses" into the murky water below. And then it happens. Something gives way below me and I drop through a roof.

Looking around, I'm in what appears to be a large empty room. Then I notice the boys huddled together in the corner. Kufi hats. No shoes. I'm lying on small rugs. This is a makeshift mosque. Well if that's not ironic, I don't know what is! I groan, grumble, and curse while slowly getting to my feet, but I can see the fear in the boys dissolve into curiosity. One of them realizes that I may be hurt and rushes over to me. The others follow suit and the three are able to get me to sit down, before realizing that they

¹⁰ <http://www.flickr.com/search/?q=rio%20hondo%20philippines>

want to take me to someone who can help. I can't understand a word they're saying but the intentions are clear. I'm able to walk, so they shuffle me over the planks at a speed I'm not exactly comfortable with and the next thing I know, we're in front of a larger shanty built on a more shallow part of the riverbank. Oh shit. There's an awfully familiar looking boat tied up outside this place.

We're prevented from entering by two Filipino men in their 30's, armed with AK-47s. One wears a soccer jersey that says Fly Emirates (Barcelona?¹¹) while the other has on a blue polo shirt with fatigue shorts. The kids' excitement has grown intense and they all clamor at once, pleading their case to be admitted so I can get help. Again, all speculation, but I think I've got it right. Fly Emirates listens intently, though with some obvious difficulty. 'Ol Polo shirt is having none of it though. He waves his hand dismissively and turns his head to ignore the cacophonous children. He and I are both a little shocked when Fly Emirates concedes and starts pushing the sliding door aside so we can go in. As I am ushered in by my cadre of little helpers, I can see out the corner of my eye that Polo shirt is very not happy with the decision, as he slaps Fly Emirates on the back of the head and gesticulates his disapproval.

Inside is a large open room, about 500 square feet in diameter, with nine people sitting in a circle on the floor. Off to one side I see an ornate silver tea set and on the other are three plates, each with a grilled fish on it. There's a lot of smoking going on among the men and Maricar is using an electronic cigarette. Needless to say, all conversation stops when the boys spill in for the second round of rushed explaining about my potential injuries. I have to say, I'm pretty impressed with these kids and their sense of urgency. A Filipino man who previously had his back to us stands and quiets the boys, like the cool uncle at the family reunion. He responds to their concern but doesn't get caught up in it. He calls on the oldest to explain the situation then listens carefully. He asks no questions and when the boy is done, he says some things to them all that sound very complimentary and he seems proud of them. And then with some gentle shoulder shakes and a few claps on the back, the boys are sent off without protest.

The climate in the room changes the moment the door slides closed behind my little rescuers. The Filipino man stiffens, stands up to his true

¹¹ Turns out its Real Madrid, but honestly, if it isn't AC Milan, I have no idea...

height and puffs out his chest. He walks around me like a jaguar eyeing its prey before stopping in front of me, his eyes locked on mine. Running his hands over my shoulders, he finally speaks.

“Lacoste jacket? Not an astronaut then. Not Superman either. So why are you falling out of the sky?”

He straightens my jacket lapels as a passive aggressive threat, like some 80’s movie bully. But in the process he must see my gun holsters because his pupils suddenly dilate. That’s my cue. I slam my knee into his balls and kick him in the chest, sending him reeling backwards into the middle of the circle. By the time the group can get their wits about them, I’ve already drawn my shiny new pistols. Now, it’s time for the Wyatt Earp line.¹² Wait a minute. Where’s Maricar? The sound of the gun cocking behind me is all the answer I need. Well this isn’t how things were supposed to go. Damn she’s fast.

“Put down your guns and kick them over there.”

I put my guns down slowly and nudge them gently toward the men in the circle. Sudden movements could make the pretty lady with the gun anxious, and nobody wants that. With my arms raised, I rise slowly until I’m standing up straight. Behind me I hear the door slide open, followed by the sound of people rushing in. The Filipinos and the Eagles leap to their feet in surprise, so I’m guessing it’s not their people that just ran in. I turn around just as Maricar whips around to point her gun at the visitors.

It’s Gabriel, with his lightweight XM8 assault rifle, wearing a suit and a London Fog (to complete the “old spy” look). He’s got Street and Smith, his entourage, with him. Victoria “Street” Calle is our fearless leader’s daughter, as well as a computer hacker. Street’s half-Mexican and half-Gabriel, and takes care of all the intel that Gabriel can’t get from old friends inside the CIA. I’m pretty sure she’s a big part of the reason Gabriel is no longer with the Company, but he has made reforming her part of his life’s mission. Ottawa Smith, a former Army Ranger turned getaway wheel man, is Gabriel’s driver and best friend. Imagine Kevin Garnett, a foot shorter, still 250, and 15 years older and you’ve pretty much got him. Ottawa and Gabriel are both too old for this game, but just can’t get it out of their system. Smith is brandishing two Uzi pistols while Street’s got her

¹² “You boys can get me. That won’t be a problem with all the guns you got here. But I’m taking ten or twelve of you with me. If you want me, then come up front...we’ll all go together.”

Glock drawn. I can see that the safety is still on, so she has no intention of firing a single shot. Wonderful. Gabriel takes command of the situation immediately.

“Put down your weapons! You are all under arrest for your part in the planning and carrying out of September’s attack on Zamboanga City Hall.”

And then it happens. Street flips the safety off her Glock and tosses it to me.

“Head’s up, pretty boy! Don’t forget to say some stupid one-liner!”

I’m sure that in her head I catch the gun, use it to knock Maricar out and then round up the bad guys, thereby saving the day. Too bad Street’s lob falls about two feet short. The gun lands at a weird angle and actually goes off when it hits the ground. This, of course, sets off the gun fight at the OK Canal. Omar and his men fan out and start firing. My Caracal is closest to me, so I duck and roll over to it and, taking advantage of the open space, am able to take out three of the Eagles – who happened to be the only ones shooting.

I spot Omar crawling towards my Sig Sauer and leap on him. We roll around for a bit before crashing into a wall, denting it. I punch him in the face then force him out of a window-shaped hole cut into the wall and we tumble into the river. By the way, this is definitely payback for what his uncle did to me in Pakistan. We exchange blows down in the muddy water but the fall has definitely taken some fight out of the guy. That is, until he sees my gun lying not far off. Omar reaches for the Caracal and actually makes it there first. Before I can do anything to stop him I’m already staring down the barrel of my own pistol. He pulls the trigger. He gives no wicked grin, no maniacal laughter, not even a snide comment about me being an infidel. He just pulls the fucking trigger. Nothing happens. I’ve never been so happy about a water-logged gun before in my life! I grab my new paperweight and slam it upside Omar’s head, making sure to strike his temple with the barrel of the gun. He’ll only be out for a couple seconds, but at least I can take a goddam breath now.

I bring Omar back to the meeting room where Gabriel and Street are tying everyone up that I hadn’t shot.

“No shootout?” I ask.

“These walls are sheet metal, bullets flying all over the place will go right through and into neighboring homes. The local fighters knew that.

Smith and I are old tactical experts, so we knew it too. I guess you didn't realize that. Damned good thing you know how to shoot, then."

Gabriel always did know how to make a win feel like a loss. But a flawed victory is still victory. On the way out, passing Street, I tell her, "No more late night action movie marathons for you, young lady."
"Thank God!"

After handing the bad guys over to the authorities, we charter a flight to Sharjah, which includes a stop in Doha to refuel. I stay in Doha to relax. Gabriel should be able to handle Omar's delivery to the authorities in Sharjah on his own. I'm going to rest and actually stay in one place for more than 48 hours. I book a villa at the Grand Hyatt Doha to ensure the most enjoyable stay possible. After sleeping the first day away, I'm now sitting on the beach with a copy of The Count of Monte Cristo and a glass of Gentleman Jack. It just doesn't get much better than this.

Now that I've had some time to regroup, I may as well fill you in on some of the details leading up to the previous day's action. It should help to me keep my mind off of Nancy, about whom I can't stop thinking, even though I know I shouldn't. Our intrepid young hacker and data analyst, the aforementioned "Street," found the link between Omar and Maricar while digging into current events in the Philippines involving Muslim rabble-rousers. She discovered that during a hostage situation a few months ago at the Zamboanga City Hall, the last two people to be released were Maricar Del Potro and a man fitting Omar's description. This was all carried out by a splinter group of the MNLF (Muslim National Liberation Front) and, given Omar and his uncle's latest activities, seemed to fit the kind of thing they'd be involved with. It only took Street a few minutes to discover that Maricar was suddenly being paid more attention by the Filipino National Intelligence Coordinating Agency. So, either she was a plant along with Omar, or some heavy duty Stockholm syndrome happened during the week-long hostage crisis. I don't know, and don't really care, but it was an actionable lead. It didn't take long to figure that maybe Omar was going to meet with the same people again, so we determined that back-up may be in order. Frankly, I was lucky that Gabriel and his people were coming from California instead of New

York. I definitely didn't have the extra hours to spare. A friend once told me: "Men plan and God laughs." I don't know about God or fate, but I do know that this is a win for the good guys. I'll drink to that.

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END