

*Georgia, near the Azerbaijan border*

The lowlands south of Tbilisi and north of Tobuz and the Kura River were a fertile but featureless expanse of agricultural plantations and barbed wire. This was the border between the Islamic republic of Azerbaijan and the war-torn, Christian nation of Georgia. A movement, which called itself the Azerbaijan Popular Front, had gained strength in recent years, recruiting heavily from the semi-autonomous Western territories of Russia, the fledgling Slavic nations splintered off during the 1990's from the long extinct Soviet Union, and the more recently created autonomous regions of war ravaged Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. From this vast swath of disaffected peoples, the APF had forged a multi-national Islamic alliance under the command of the previously unknown guerrilla leader, Eli Tubasi.

Tubasi, a former petroleum worker and a minor official in the Azerbaijan capital city of Baku, had risen to power with the overthrow of the dictator, Ali Surat Mutaliyov. He was now the primary spokesman and leader of the APF, though this movement was now extended far beyond its original borders. In the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Georgia had been hard pressed to remain intact. In addition to the pressures placed upon it by the APF, there were several autonomous regions within its borders, all of which were engaged in constant struggles for expansion and military gain against the former parent nation.

Georgia was also the site of numerous stockpiles of H.E.U., or highly enriched uranium -- an uncomfortable legacy from the days of the U.S.S.R. Securing these stockpiles during this period of military conflict and unpaid salaries was a challenge that was, frankly, not being met. In the last decade, several individuals peddling nuclear material stolen from the former Soviet Union, had been arrested in Europe and the Middle East, but so far there had been no confirmed cases of countries or terrorist groups obtaining the ingredients for making a bomb through such thefts. It was only a matter of time before such a thing would come to pass.

"The reactor guards work in 24 hour shifts, al-Sayyab." said General Julian Serbenko, a veteran of the former Soviet Union's security force.

"Shhhh! They'll hear you!" whispered Ibn al-Sayyab, clad in robes, a camouflage parka and a weapons belt, his breath a vapor, as he crouched behind a soot smudged brick wall, alongside the bedraggled and unshaven Russian General. The weather beaten building which they regarded in the moonless darkness was not one hour from the capital city of Tbilisi but they may as well have been in Siberia for all the life that could be discerned here. It was also only a short drive to the border. This amazed al-Sayyab. Leave it to the Russians to build a nuclear power plant less than one half hour from the frontier. But then again, in the old days, it wasn't the frontier.

One lonely spotlight illuminated the rusting metal doorway. It was a decrepit monument to the lost heyday of Soviet science. The entrance to the storage compound of Georgia's largest -- and fully non-operational -- nuclear reactor.

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The General ignored al-Sayyab's comment. "At precisely 1:17 AM both guards will be at the opposite side of the building engaged in a weapons sale. It is a ruse entirely for your benefit."

"A clever plan, General Serbenko. Who would expect one illegal activity to camouflage another?" The Persian nodded approvingly. "Tubasi will be pleased."

"*Da*, perhaps he will. And you have the payment?"

"My men, beyond the ridge, have the package. After we have the H.E.U. you will receive it."

"*Otlivno*. We begin in five minutes. Signal your men."

al-Sayyab turned, and hurled a few stones over the ridge behind them. He was answered with a faint, short whistle. Shortly thereafter another camouflage clad figure appeared.

"Ah, Herif. Good," nodded al-Sayyab as he was handed something. al-Sayyab and Herif exchanged whispers. Serbenko checked his weapon, his back against the brick wall. Herif ran off.

"Two minutes," growled the General softly, his voice like gravel in the darkness.

They were an unlikely pairing. Tubasi's APF machinations had thrown them together for this raid -- and each had much to gain -- but afterwards they would return to their usual condition of mistrust and mutual hatred. They waited, barely breathing.

From the other side of the building could be heard the rumble of an approaching truck. The crunching sound of the guard's footfalls quickly followed.

Serbenko poked the Persian hard with his finger, "The ruse has begun. Go!"

al-Sayyab ran in a low crouch to the base of the storage compound's doorway. He extracted a small package from the confines of his robe. Looking back for an instant, he spotted the General peering around the brick wall ready to provide cover if it was needed. al-Sayyab hoped it was not. These Russians were the worst kind of infidel traitors. They would sell their mothers.

He worked the plasticized PETN compound into the door frame and around the locking mechanism, and then embedded a radio controlled blasting cap into the plastic around the lock. Satisfied with his work he ran back to the protection of the brick wall.

"Ready, Comrade Serbenko."

"GENERAL Serbenko."

"EX-General Serbenko."

Serbenko smiled coldly. "I should kill you now and leave your worthless body here for the locals to find, you overzealous camel dropping."

"Poetic, comrade, but much as I might enjoy trading insults with you, the time has come for action."

And with that, al-Sayyab pressed the button on the radio detonator he exposed from under his robes.

FOOM!

The door shuddered and blew inwards in a cloud of dust and noise.

"The explosive works well, *vidal?*" commented the General proudly.

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“*Chraa,*” al-Sayyab grunted, disinterested, and waved his associates on. Like wraiths they rose from their hiding places and cautiously made their way toward the entrance.

As they approached the storage facility, the two guards who should have been guarding the doorway suddenly came charging forth from opposite corners of the building with their guns blazing. The racket was curtailed abruptly by the “thup thup” of semi-automatic, silenced weapons blasting holes in the two hapless sentries. They fell face first into the dirt in a simultaneous stumbling motion, and lay inert.

“*Idioty,*” muttered the General.

al-Sayyab beckoned his man forward. The raiding party entered the facility.

“Ah, vintage fifties Empire. What an antique,” remarked Serbenko, looking around disgustedly, as they scanned the gloomy interior.

“*Yala!*” shouted al-Sayyab to his men and gestured at an interior vault door.

Several of the raiders converged on the doorway and began to don radiation suits from a nearby rack.

When they were ready, three of the raiders entered the room, carrying a very large, long duffel bag. They opened the bag to reveal a lead-lined, carbon graphite casing with a shaped interior exactly matching the dimensions of a nuclear fuel rod.

Following their training, which Serbenko had provided, the three raiders set about working the winch controls within the vault room to lift out one of several nuclear fuel assemblies which lay submerged in the deuterium filled containment pool. Once they had one of the assemblies positioned over a graphite palette, they extracted one of the rods and quickly placed it inside the portable casing they had brought. They worked rapidly and soon the casing was back in the duffel bag and they were out of the vault.

As soon as they had shed the heavy protective garments and re-donned their winter gear, six APF men lifted the duffel bag and, with a signal from al-Sayyab, proceeded out of the containment building into the cold, Georgian winter. Ahead, a convoy of shuttered headlights abruptly blazed into brightness, as more of al-Sayyab’s troupe came forward to assist their comrades.

al-Sayyab and Serbenko stood watching for a few moments. Then they turned toward each other.

“Mission accomplished, comrade,” said al-Sayyab with a bow. As he came up from his bent position, he revealed a small automatic weapon.

Serbenko raised an eyebrow and coolly assessed the weapon that was aimed at his heart. “A 9x18 Makarov. Probably Bulgarian from the looks of it. Very impressive, camel herder.”

“You will cease calling me that, infidel.”

“*Idioty!* Didn’t you think I would expect this from the sorry likes of you?” sneered Serbenko as he slashed his arm in a wide arc. A long blade emerged from his sleeve, propelled by centrifugal force, and sliced its way through the air where al-Sayyab’s neck formerly occupied space.

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al-Sayyab was on the ground a few feet away, “I did indeed expect that much of you, EX-General. Now you will be more than EX, you will be altogether EX-tinct!” al-Sayyab fired his pistol from the ground and the Russian crumpled like a heavy pillar to the ground, as he spat out a curse.

“*Chort!*”

That was his last word.

As al-Sayyab stood, he could hear distant sirens and shouting voices. *As usual, the Russian Calvary -- far too late -- probably Serbenko's fail-safe backup*, he thought to himself.

“*Ilaa l-liqaa', sharmute*,” he said with a grim laugh to the General’s corpse, bidding his leave, and walking calmly toward the waiting convoy of trucks.

“To the frontier,” he ordered quietly to his driver, feeling extraordinarily calm. Soon the *Jihad* would have its flaming sword to wield against the Zionists and imperialist infidels. Soon the everlasting struggle between Ishmael and Isaac, the sons of Abraham, would come to a culmination and justice would be done once and for all time. He would receive his blessing from Tubasi back in Baku. Then there would be only one more gesture to make.