

CHOICE OF ENEMIES

A Nathan Monsarrat Thriller

M. A. Richards



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Continue the Enlightenment!

MUJAHEDIN, AL-QAIDA, & SEVENTY-TWO VIRGINS

Nathan Monsarrat had not planned to tip his hourglass of sand at Greylock College in western Massachusetts. A week beyond his fortieth birthday, he sat in his third-floor corner office and stared at the neat stacks of files that Doris Lambert, his secretary, had placed on the rosewood desk earlier in the morning. Outside his windows the Berkshire kingdom blazed with the autumnal colors of oak, maple, and birch leaves.

Campbell Hall, the college's granite crown of higher education, housed the administrative functions of the college, including the Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Studies, the position Monsarrat had occupied since leaving the Central Intelligence Agency two years earlier. He enjoyed his new life in academia, despite the often infuriating faculty meetings and the constant griping of his colleagues, who always capitalized on opportunities to take offense at slights, either real or imagined, but always insignificant.

The door to his office remained open to staff and students. Publicly, he professed a policy of accessibility. Privately, enclosed spaces poked him with hot needles of claustrophobia. Although he had regained his health and weight, the irrational constrictions along with occasional bouts of malaria offered reminders of his Delta imprisonment.

He called through the open space. "Doris, what time does the Disciplinary Committee meet?"

In response, she engaged the intercom. Doris embraced decorum. "From two until four. In the Conference Room. It's your last appointment of the day."

"Do you have the file?"

"I put it on your desk this morning. It's the blue, plastic folder with the red flag on the tab in the upper left corner of your desk, exactly where you requested it."

A walk in the bracing autumn air might stimulate his appetite. He might chance upon a professor preparing an upcoming lecture, or a student studying for an exam. He could exercise at the gym. He really wanted a drink, despite the fine, crimson worms of early dissipation that had begun to mar his features like thin webs of shame. He believed he had earned his fondness for bourbon.

He studied the Tag Heuer on his left wrist, a replacement for the watch stolen by the FATA rebels. Two hours until lunch. He glanced at his gym bag in the corner of the office. The delicate chirping of the beige telephone on his desk annoyed him. On his first day at the college, he had requested a telephone with a more robust ring but still awaited its delivery.

He picked up the receiver. "Yes, Doris? What is it?"

"A caller on your private extension, Dean. Would you like to speak with him?"

Monsarrat heard the pique in her voice. She offended easily. He had considered firing her, but the talent pool in the Berkshires was thin, and the community of secretaries rarely forgave assaults upon its ranks. "Professor? Student?"

"His name is Franklin Seleucid from the Educational Placement Services in Boston. He'd like to speak with you about an African student interested in the college."

He shuddered as she spoke the given and family names, chilled by the "F" and "S," as if an ill wind had blown from the hilltops. "How does he have my private number?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Dean. If you speak with him, you can ask him directly."

Early in his tenure, Monsarrat had attempted to discern the thin line separating flippant Doris from practical Doris, but the border was porous, and he had abandoned the effort. "Put him through."

He heard the line click as she made the transfer. In a voice resplendent with bonhomie, he announced, "Good morning. Dean Monsarrat speaking."

"Good morning to you, Dean Monsarrat. Franklin Seleucid from the Educational Placement Services in Boston here. Thank you for taking my call."

Monsarrat had always suspected that Sanhedrin, like a dormant disease, would one day infect his new life. "It's been a long time, Felix. You're still on the side of angels?"

One hundred miles to the east, Sanhedrin replied, "It's Franklin, Dean."

Felix Sanhedrin was ten years older than Monsarrat, six inches shorter, fifty pounds lighter, and one thousand percent more Machiavellian. If the Lord had smiled upon Sanhedrin only once, it was to grant him the gift of arrogance. Monsarrat had worked diligently to remain on the good side of his former boss. He hadn't coveted Sanhedrin's long knives protruding from his back.

No matter under which name Sanhedrin traveled, Monsarrat considered him a mercury blob. The man was incapable, through constitution or training, of providing definition. A conversation with Sanhedrin was an exercise in Delphic obscurity. "My apologies, Franklin. How may I help you?"

"We're a new company, very small and very selective, an elite agency you won't

forget, once you work with us. We provide clean solutions to oily situations,” he explained. “We specialize in placing highly motivated students from Africa in small, liberal arts colleges throughout New England. Our clients are the sons and daughters of wealthy families.”

He allowed the dean to grasp the fiscal importance of his statement. “We advise our clients on the best placement for their academic experiences in the United States. We have an exemplary prospect who specifically requested to study at Greylock College. In fact, he insists that he will attend no other school. I’d like to discuss his placement with you. Are you free for lunch tomorrow?”

Monsarrat shifted the receiver between his hands, as if weighing the pros and cons of accepting the invitation. On the obverse, the five hundred miles separating the college from the Agency provided a barely acceptable buffer zone from his former boss. On the reverse, it always proved safer to confront Sanhedrin than to allow him to slink through the shadows, like a hot-breathed, bony assassin. “I could meet you for lunch at 1:00 p.m. tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow at 1:00 p.m. Should we meet on campus?”

Monsarrat wanted to keep Sanhedrin as far from his academic colleagues as possible. Complications trailed him like the dirty train of a bridal gown. “Why don’t we meet in town? There’s an excellent Lebanese restaurant called Sidon on the corner of Main and Pine Streets. You can park your car in the public lot.”

“I’m sure you’ll be excited by my student, Dean. He presents an excellent opportunity. Who knows? He may only be our first venture together.”

“Until tomorrow, Mr. Seleucid.”

He dropped the phone into its cradle, pressed the intercom, and passed the information to Doris to enter into the office’s digital calendar. “And I’m taking an early lunch.”

“Very well, Dean.”

Monsarrat imagined her glower. Doris, he decided, was efficient but cold-blooded. She would get along well with Sanhedrin.

He picked up his gym bag and strode out of the office. Crossing the campus, he greeted colleagues and students. Holbrooke Gymnasium, a two-story box of red brick and tall, glass windows, housed a well-equipped gym. In the faculty locker room, he hung his academic suit in his locker, changed into exercise clothes, and entered the weight room.

He worked the free weights, more reps with lighter loads to lengthen the muscles, thirty-pound dumbbell curls, a dozen lifts with his right arm, followed by a dozen lifts with the left arm. He switched focus from biceps to triceps and supplemented the iron with sit-ups and push-ups. Monsarrat worked out with an exactitude lacking in other areas of his life.

He switched out the dumbbells for a one-hundred- pound barbell. The iron felt light in his hands. When he doubled the disks, the heavier weight released his paranoia. He welcomed its prickly return. A healthy measure helped his critical thinking. The sweet spot was to maintain the balance between sharp analysis and cold fear.

He spread a towel on the floor and crunched his rectus abdominus muscles with increased intensity. After the two hundredth repetition, he tucked his chin onto his knees and breathed deeply. He flipped onto his stomach and stiffened his arms. The line of his back formed a smooth incline. He bent his elbows parallel to the floor, so the square of his chin rested centimeters off the ground. He finished one hundred push-ups, flipped onto his back, and began the second of his six sets of sit-ups and push-ups.

He walked to the treadmill, set the timer for forty-five minutes, and left the incline flat. During the first minutes, he jogged slowly, gradually increasing speed and the degree of incline. Running purified him, as if he were a penitent burning the Agency from his marrow, one gorgonian memory at a time.

Recuperating in Virginia, Monsarrat had asked his former boss why he needed four and a half months to finalize his release. Sanhedrin's reply, that he used the time to collect intelligence on FATA, a group that posed a threat to the oil interests of the Agency, had upset him. When he objected to being used as an opportunity, Sanhedrin reminded him that they were both soldiers in the army of Langley.

"Except I fought the war in the slime and the shit, while you wore thousand-dollar suits and ate lunches with oil executives at The Hay-Adams."

Sanhedrin replied with an infuriating insouciance. "Each of us fights with the gifts the Lord bestowed upon him. My gifts are cerebral. Yours are physical."

Monsarrat had wanted to physically leap from his bed and throttle him. He was surprised that the urge still remained strong. The treadmill's timer chirped. The revolving belt slowed to the pace of a slow jog, and the degree of incline flattened. The timer chirped a second time, and the belt halted its revolutions. Monsarrat breathed deeply. Sweat poured from his body. His heart pounded. His muscles throbbed. He felt powerful.

The Disciplinary Committee meeting started on time and finished ninety minutes late. When he returned to Campbell Hall, only the janitors remained in the building. In his office, he scanned the e-mails that had arrived during his absence. He fingered the business card the dean of students, a recent divorcée with a doctorate in Jacobean theater and an office across the hall from his own, had passed him at the start of the meeting. A question mark with a heart beneath the curved line followed her cell phone number. He studied the card like a conjurer shifting bones before feeding it to the shredder. Until recently, the Agency had been his mistress.

Beneath yellowed pools of arc light in the dedicated lot behind Campbell Hall, he unlocked the door to his Jeep, drove to Holbrooke Gymnasium, and retrieved his gym bag. On Main Street, save for a few restaurants, bars, and coffee shops, businesses were shuttered. He knew he should eat dinner, yet he wanted a drink. Food only provided cover.

He turned onto Elm Street and parked in front of Ralph's, a local watering hole. An eponymous neon sign illuminated the entrance to the bar. The town and the gown mixed along Main Street, but on Elm Street, Ralph's customers preferred to drink with people they had known since childhood. Out-of-town students sensed hostility. Local students, even those who lived with their parents in the town, experienced resentment. Faculty departed before finishing their drinks and never returned. Despite his tailored suits, silk ties, custom-made shirts, and hand-lasted shoes, Monsarrat had been accepted by Ralph Sanders, the owner and bartender, a hard man an inch shorter, twenty pounds lighter, and ten years younger.

The first time he had stepped into the bar's dark interior, Monsarrat sat alone at the rail and sipped shots of Wild Turkey. Ralph poured his drinks with the charm of a proctologist, until Monsarrat commented on a framed photograph of Chuck Norris by the cash register. The actor's signature was as bold and strong as his celluloid roles.

"You know Chuck?"

"I met Mr. Norris," Ralph answered in a voice colder than the shots of frozen vodka he served with a side of cherry licorice, Ladies Special, 8:00 p.m. until closing, every night.

"He came through here?"

"Fuck no. I had the honor in Fallujah. Back in 2006."

"You're a Marine?" Monsarrat avoided the past tense, which was only used when a grunt had gone onto his eternal reward.

Ralph wore the bristled crew cut of the jarhead. “You know Fallujah?”

“Al-Fallujah. Ar-Ramadi. Hadithah. Ar-Rutbah. Al-Jid. Al-Qa’im,” Monsarrat agreed. “I’m still shaking the sand from the Western Desert out of my crotch.”

Ralph examined him. “You’re not a Marine.”

“No, sir, I am not, but I had the honor of sharing time in Al- Anbar with some of the finest men and women to grace the uniform.”

“The Army sent you to Fallujah?”

Monsarrat had not spoken about his time in Iraq to anyone at the college. The facts did not fit the cover of dean. Yet, he felt an immediate affinity with Ralph, as he did with most veterans of the Al-Anbar campaign. “I went for the hunting.”

Ralph snorted, a rolling baritone laugh. “That’s rich. We hunted ragheads every minute of every day in the desert. What did you hunt?”

A dozen customers sat in the bar. Some drank steadily. A few watched the Red Sox lose to the Orioles on a fifty-inch plasma television. Others engaged in a favorite local pastime, excoriating the hated New York sports teams.

Monsarrat spoke softly, so that only Ralph could hear his words, “*Mujahedin*. Mostly al-Qaida and foreign fighters. Every shit bird we could send to his seventy-two virgins.”

“Christians in Action?”

“Sir, gentlemen never discuss religion, politics, or women.”

Ralph supplied the punch line. “Good thing we’re not gentlemen.”

He poured a double shot of Wild Turkey and passed it to Monsarrat. “You did some righteous work over there. It’s on the house.”

Monsarrat entered the bar and took his usual seat at the rail. He tilted his head toward the regulars. They never exchanged verbal greetings, only nods and raised hands. He had learned their names through the osmosis of proximity. He recognized their odors, how they held their cigarettes, the slouch of their backs as they hunched over their boilermakers. Conversation in the bar interfered with the business of drinking. Occasionally, the gregarious cheered when the Red Sox scored.

Ralph poured a double shot of Wild Turkey. “What’s the news from the hallowed

halls of academia, Dean?”

“Same shit, different day, Ralph. Same as it ever was.”

“Roger that, Dean. May the good Lord bless us and keep us from radical change.”

Monsarrat swallowed the bourbon and savored the sweet burn in his throat. He placed the double-shot glass upside down onto the bar. “Don’t stop now, Ralph. You’ve hit the sweet spot.”

On the television, a gaggle of former baseball players discussed the Fall Classic. “Who do you think will take the Series?”

“Fuck me if I care. I lost interest after the Dead Sox choked.”

“An autumn event as regular as leaves turning,” agreed Monsarrat.

Ralph poured the second double shot. “As long as it ain’t the Spankies. I hate those New York clowns almost as much as I hate Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar.”

The second glass of Wild Turkey joined the first on the bar. He dropped a twenty dollar bill next to it. “Death to all shit birds.”

Generous tips bought goodwill. Ralph leaned across the bar. “Coupla guys came into the bar today, late afternoon, just in time for the before dinner rush.”

Monsarrat knew Ralph did not subscribe to the philosophy of gossip. “Local guys?”

He might have read the description from a police report. “Different accents. Dressed too nice. Oxford shirts. Pressed khakis with creases. Dock shoes. Blazers. Fifty-dollar haircuts, styled and blow dried. No facial hair.”

He felt the electric surge of paranoia. “Sounds like upscale clientele, Ralph.”

Ralph filled a third shot glass. “Upscale from somewhere not here. They had a bad smell to them.”

Monsarrat left the bourbon on the bar. “What did they smell like?”

“They smelled like feds.”

He dispensed with jocularly. “What are you not telling me?”

“They sat at the bar. One guy made a call on his cell phone. He talked like he

was inside a bubble.”

“You blended into the background, just part of the woodwork?”

“I’m just a yokel with a buzz cut,” Ralph agreed. “Harmless. Probably brainless. Drink my profits, go home, beat the wife, kiss the dog.”

“Enough foreplay. Tell me.”

“They talked about the dean. Not any dean. A specific dean.”

“No names?”

“No names,” Ralph agreed, “but I thought you might be interested.”

“A female dean? Male? Old? Young?”

“No details, but they discussed access and egress points and securing a perimeter. They talked about getting back to Boston in time for dinner.”

“Feds, you say?”

“Just a feeling, Dean. The kinda sensation that kept me alive in Iraq.”

Monsarrat picked up the shot glass, swallowed the bourbon, and placed the glass upside down on the bar. He covered it with a second twenty dollar bill. “Obliged, brother.”

“Drive carefully, Dean. I’ve got to think about my publican’s license.”

Monsarrat guided the Jeep down Elm Street. He halted at the stop sign, flicked the directional signal, turned onto Maple Street, and bore right at the fork onto Cartwright Road. Number 24 was set back from the pavement by a large yard. Maple, oak, elm, and a smattering of birch trees provided shade. In another week, the palette of their leaves would carpet the lawn with fallen colors.

He parked the Jeep in the driveway, picked up his gym bag, and unlocked the three deadbolts on the front door. Inside the house, he dropped the locks, tossed the gym bag onto the maple floorboards, and crossed the foyer to the security node. In its pale glow, he tapped a twelve digit alphanumeric code, then scanned the whorls of his right index finger. The diodes flashed green.

He had augmented the security system with digital cameras designed to record in all light and weather conditions onto detachable drives. With help from a friend in the Boston Field Office of the FBI, he received licenses to possess and carry a small arsenal of weapons. A Glock 30 protected the bedroom. A second

Glock 30 defended the living room. He placed Smith & Wesson seven-round .357 Magnums in the bathroom and in the garage. An HK45 rested in a kitchen drawer. In the center console of the hardtop Jeep he locked a five-round .38 Smith & Wesson Special. He preferred forty-five caliber pistols and .38 or .357 magnum revolvers for dependability and stopping power. He found fifty caliber handguns unwieldy, nine millimeter pistols temperamental, forties a poor compromise, and long guns unsuited to concealment.

In his bedroom, he hung his suit and tie on wooden hangers. He cleaned his shoes, placed them on a dowel rack, and tossed everything else into the clothes hamper. In the bathroom, he donned a pair of sweat pants and a sweatshirt. He removed his leather briefcase from the closet, tossed it onto the bed, and spun codes into the dual combination locks. Two years earlier he had modified its interior to provide structural stiffness, a holster, and loops for a brace of magazines. He took a Glock 30 and two full mags from the night stand. He checked the action and the loads before placing them into the briefcase.

He placed the briefcase on the floor next to the bed but did not close the locks. Ralph's story had loosed his paranoia from its dormancy. In the morning he would cross the Rubicon and carry, for the first time, a weapon into Campbell Hall. He felt vaguely stained. To hear the sound of a voice in the big house, he spoke aloud. "The first time is hard. Popping your own cherry is difficult."

In the kitchen, he poured a generous amount of Wild Turkey 12 Year Old into a cut crystal tumbler and fixed a simple dinner, four ounces of linguine with butter and garlic sauce. He read a chapter of a Douglas MacArthur biography. A few minutes before midnight, he rinsed the dishes and placed them into the dishwasher. In the bathroom, he flossed and brushed his teeth. Before turning off the bedroom light and sliding beneath the blankets, he checked that the Glock remained within reach. His final thoughts before sleep centered on the same questions he had entertained since listening to Ralph's report.

Why would two heavy hitters arrive in western Massachusetts less than twenty-four hours prior to his luncheon meeting with his former boss? Why would two heavy hitters need to discuss access and egress points? Why would they need to secure a perimeter? Why had Sanhedrin called him?

A COBBLER IN WILLIAMSBURG

Six hours after its departure, the Lufthansa jet touched down in Frankfurt. In the lounge, Monsarrat again embraced his paranoia and changed his routing. “Will my suitcase be on the new flight?”

“Not to worry, Mr. Walsh. We have enough time to make the connection to New York,” the representative promised.

He slept through the nine-hour flight. In John F. Kennedy International Airport, the statue caused little curiosity. In the Green Line, he handed a Customs official his declaration form. He walked to the taxi rank with a jauntiness he had not felt for many months. In the back of the cab, he instructed the driver to take him to the Plaza Hotel. He retrieved his cell phone from the valise and dialed Solomon Grinnell.

The former yeshiva *bocher* answered on the first ring. “*Nu?*”

“I used to work for your father,” Monsarrat began. “Back in the day. As his adviser.”

Grinnell’s father, David, had been a cobbler in Williamsburg who had never employed more than a hammer and tacks, but the Biblical reference was Monsarrat’s standard greeting.

Grinnell spoke as if he had just emerged from a casting call for heavily accented Brooklyn thugs. He peppered his conversations with Yiddish, Hebrew, and Arabic slang. “You wanna buy a diamond, *habibi?*”

“I’m looking for something dignified, not ostentatious. Something practical, but powerful. Something that sends a message.”

“You leave it to me, my friend. I know what you like.”

“Why don’t you bring it to your favorite restaurant? The flowery one? In ninety minutes?”

“Expedited service costs extra. On a Sunday evening, no less.”

“Ninety minutes, Solomon.” He closed the connection and awaited the call from his former boss, who would be displeased that the Nok had not arrived in Boston.

When the cell phone rang, the screen showed the number from Sanhedrin’s business card. “The flight out of Port Harcourt was delayed. I missed the

connection in Abuja.”

Disappointment tinged his reply. “You switched flights in Frankfurt.”

“We were rerouted to Miami.”

“You flew into JFK. On time. No delays. A little more than an hour ago.”

“What do you want, Felix?”

“I would have thought that answer to be obvious, Nathan. I want you here, in Boston, right now, handing me the statue.”

“Yeah, about the Nok. Looks like we’ll have a slight delay in our delivery schedule.”

“How much of a delay, Nathan?”

“Gotta take another call, Felix. I’ll be in touch.” He severed the connection, slid the battery from the case, and dropped the pieces into the valise. He did trust cell phones.

On Sunday evening, traffic into Manhattan flowed easily. The Plaza Hotel conjured fond memories for Monsarrat of afternoons in the Oak Bar, drinking bourbon with oil company executives whose expense accounts reached as deep as their drilling projects. The driver stopped beneath the draped flags at the Fifth Avenue entrance. Monsarrat paid him as a bellboy carried his suitcase into the lobby. At the bell desk he received a claims check. He carried the aluminum case and the valise to the Rose Club. The maître d’ led him to a table at the rear.

“I’m expecting a friend. About my size, a little heavier, thick, black hair with lots of brilliantine. He looks like a South Korean politician with a *yarmulke*.”

He slipped the twenty dollar bill into his pocket. “I’ll look for him.”

The Rose Club was a compromise between a London gentleman’s club and a Parisian boudoir. Monsarrat ordered a bourbon and a seafood Cobb salad from a waitress who spoke as if she were auditioning for the role of Kate in a Broadway production of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

The maître d’ escorted Grinnell to the table between the delivery of the bourbon and the salad. The New Yorker wore a black suit and a white shirt with an open collar, as befitting Hassidic couture. A leather laptop bag hung from his broad shoulder. While most of his religious brethren shopped at Sears, Grinnell wore Armani suits and tailored shirts. Upon first sight, he was often mistaken for an

Italian businessman, or a French cop, until the *tzizit* of his *tallis* hanging beneath the hems of his jacket and the silken *yarmulke* perched upon his brilliantine hair were noticed.

Monsarrat had met him through a Mossad contact based at the United Nations, when they lured a Libyan diplomat with oil connections and a predilection for young boys into a honey trap. Grinnell had supplied the boys, and Monsarrat had admired his discretion. Two months later, he purchased from him a five round .38 Smith & Wesson Special, identifying numbers removed, for a nervous American oil executive who had slept with the wife of a Venezuelan colleague.

Grinnell lived and worked among his fellow Hassidim but possessed the soul of a Russian mafia *vor*. He and three brothers owned a small diamond exchange on 47th Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, in the Diamond District. In certain social circles, he was renown for his artistry turning handguns into collectibles bejeweled with diamonds and precious stones.

Monsarrat stood and shook hands with him. The Hassid placed the leather laptop bag on the floor, then summoned the waitress.

“Dearest, bring me a Johnnie Walker Blue. And whatever it is that my friend is eating.”

The waitress eyed him with a cold menace but held her tongue.

“Will you pick around the shrimp, Solomon?”

Grinnell lifted his left shoulder in an exaggerated shrug. “*Insha'allah*. The Lord will guide me.”

“How are you, Solomon? You're looking very prosperous.”

“*Baruch ha'shem*. Business is good. It's been a long time, *habibi*. I heard you had a few problems a while back? Something African?”

“I retired. I'm a dean now. Greylock College in the Berkshires.”

One of Grinnell's bushy eyebrows arched. “*Oy*. An academic with special needs?”

Monsarrat shrugged. “I take on the occasional odd job for friends.”

Grinnell handed him a white envelope. “Whenever you feel the need to visit the *sherutim*, fill this envelope with \$5,000. Plus any gratuity you feel appropriate.”

“Dollars and euros together?”

“As long as I don’t lose on the exchange rate, Nathan.”

Monsarrat pushed back his chair. “Excuse me, my friend. I need to use the men’s room.”

He took the aluminum case and the valise with him. In the privacy of a toilet stall, he placed the dollars and euros into the envelope. He included five one hundred dollar bills as a tip for expeditious service and added an extra thousand dollars.

At the table, he placed the envelope between them. “Five thousand equivalent and an extra five hundred for your kindness on a Sunday evening.”

“Conducting business at night upsets my wife. She prefers me to remain at home with her and the children.”

Monsarrat nodded sympathetically. “What did I purchase, Solomon?”

“Just like before, Nathan. A clean five round .38 Smith & Wesson Special. Plus two boxes of hollow point bullets, in case you want to take down a Middle Eastern Emirate.”

Monsarrat tapped the envelope. “I added an extra thousand dollars to the envelope. I need a ride.”

Grinnell was already punching a number into his cell phone. “To where, *habibi*? Uptown? New Jersey? Westchester?”

“New Hampshire. Just over the Massachusetts line.”

Grinnell’s other eyebrow arched. “You’ll cover gas and tolls, in addition to the thousand?”

“Of course.”

Grinnell’s accent intensified when he addressed the cell phone. “Moishe, I need you to bring the Audi to the Plaza Hotel with a full gas tank. You have a passenger.”

He listened for a moment. “Take her home and give her a good-night kiss. I want you here before I finish my salad, and you know how quickly I eat.”

He severed the connection as the waitress brought his food. He held up the glass of Johnnie Walker Blue. “*L’chaim*, my friend. May you prosper in your new career.”

The Hassid carefully ate his salad, picking around the shrimp.

“The Lord is guiding your fork, Solomon.”

“Blessed be the name.”

Monsarrat smiled at the mention of the Ijaw.

“Something amusing, Nathan?”

Monsarrat had never discovered the font of his inspiration. He was simply gratified that it kept appearing. “What do you hear from Sanhedrin?”

Grinnell finished his salad. He arranged the shrimp into a small mound. “Funny you should ask. A business associate also inquired about Felix a while back.”

“A Russian gentleman?”

“I don’t think that gentleman applies to this individual. Russian, though, yes.”

“What did he ask?”

Grinnell poked the shrimp with his fork, and the pile collapsed. “He was interested in Felix’s *bona fides*. He wanted to know if he were trustworthy.”

“An interesting question from a Russian.”

“I told him that Felix was an expert in his field and left it at that. Are you involved with Sanhedrin? Is he the reason you need my services?”

The chirping of Grinnell’s cell phone spared Monsarrat from answering the question. The Hassid listened for a moment. “Moishe is here. Get going. I’ll cover the check.”

Monsarrat shook his hand. He gathered the laptop bag, aluminum case, and valise.

Grinnell eyed the luggage. “You’re not light on your feet anymore.”

Monsarrat admitted the critique had merit. “One last thing, Solomon.”

“Name it, *habibi*.”

“Let me know if you hear anything more from your Russian friend about Sanhedrin.”

The Hassid held up an admonishing finger. "Sanhedrin is a dangerous man, Nathan, but these Russians make him look like a puppy. You upset them, and very bad things happen to you."

At the bell desk, the driver greeted him. His clothes were the same color as Grinnell's, but more polyester than Armani. "You're Nathan, right? I'm Moishe Goldman. You wanna go on a ride?"

He stood an inch shorter than six feet and weighed perhaps two hundred pounds, all of it hard. His slightly flattened nose added to the intensity of his accent. The flat bulge between his black jacket and white shirt suggested a nine millimeter weapon. His large knuckles were scarred. "I've never been to New Hampshire."

Monsarrat shook his hand and felt its strength. "You box, Moishe?"

"Light heavyweight," he admitted. "I've added a few pounds since I stopped."

"Are you as good with that nine millimeter as you are with your hands?"

He smiled modestly. "It's a tie."

Monsarrat retrieved his suitcase. He pointed to the Audi A8, and the bell boy placed the suitcase into the trunk. He tipped him and slid the aluminum case and the valise onto the rear bucket seats.

Streetlights illuminated their route. "I thought we'd go up the Henry Hudson, take the Cross Bronx, pick up I-95, and cruise to New Hampshire. The Audi cruises well."

"Before New London, go north on I-395. You get close to the Massachusetts border, I'll tell you where to pull over."

"Got it, boss."

He gave Goldman three hundred dollars. "For gas and tolls. And coffee. A lot of coffee. Don't be shy about stopping."

"Yes, sir, boss. You want, I'll grind the beans myself."

Grinnell had provided a nylon hip holster for the well-maintained revolver. He spun the cylinder, loaded five rounds of brass-jacketed hollow point bullets, replaced the weapon, and left the zipper open. He dropped the laptop bag into the passenger door's pocket, close to his right hand.

Goldman watched him. "Expecting trouble, boss?"

“I have a bad habit of pissing people off.”

“Believe me, boss, I know what you mean.”

Monsarrat closed his eyes. He thought about Sanhedrin and the terracotta. Sanhedrin and Blessed. Sanhedrin and Innocence.

“Would you like music, boss? I got rock 'n' roll. I got classical. I got opera. I got country 'n' western. I got jazz. I got all the music guys of your generation like.”

“Surprise me.”

Goldman spun dials and punched buttons. Monsarrat recognized “Cumberland Blues.” When they stopped for coffee across the Connecticut line, he noted that Goldman removed the keys from the ignition.

They passed aged industrial cities strung like rusted trinkets the length of Long Island Sound. At Old Saybrook, they crossed the Connecticut River. Twenty minutes later, Goldman exited onto I-395. Approaching the Massachusetts border, Monsarrat felt the presence of Sanhedrin, as if his former boss were a vengeful Shakespearean shade striding through the shadows of the empty border.

“Take the next exit. Bear right at the bottom of the ramp. Go straight for two hundred yards. You'll have a choice of all-night gas stations. I'll need a can of lighter fluid, a box of kitchen matches, and one of those aluminum cooking trays. And another coffee.”

Goldman pulled the Audi into a space in front of a mini-mart. He returned in a few minutes and passed Monsarrat a plastic bag, along with a cup of black coffee.

“We gonna have a barbeque, boss? You want me to pick up steaks? A few cold brews?”

Monsarrat gestured at the pumps. “You need gas?”

“I'm a frugal guy. Less money on gas, more money for me. I can make it to New Hampshire in this baby. Gas is twenty, thirty cents per gallon cheaper there.”

Monsarrat placed the aluminum cooking tray and the other purchases on his lap. “North of Putnam, you'll see a sign for a rest area. Pull into it slowly. It will be very dark.”

“You got it, boss.”

The Audi covered the distance quickly. Goldman steered the car into the empty rest area, and in the glare of the car's headlights, Monsarrat saw a picnic table. "Park the car, but leave the headlights on. Lock it, and come with me."

He slid the Smith & Wesson beneath his belt and carried the valise and the plastic bag to the table. The grill was filled with bottles and cans, and the metal bars were rusted. He took the documents from the valise, tore the papers into small pieces, made three loose piles in the aluminum tray, and sprayed the piles with lighter fluid.

"We gonna play with fire, boss? Get a little bit of pyromania action going?"

Monsarrat lit a kitchen match and dropped it onto the first pile. The lighter fluid ignited, and the paper curled into ash. He repeated the procedure twice, wrapped his hand inside the plastic bag, and crushed the ashes.

He didn't need to ask him if he carried a knife. "Give me your blade."

He accepted a five-inch dagger and sliced the binding of the Walsh passport. He cut the data and visa pages into small squares, soaked them in lighter fluid, and burned the papers twice before crushing the ashes.

Old habits only slumbered in his memory. He passed everything to Goldman. "Sprinkle the ashes across the grass. A little here. A little there. Don't dump them all in one spot. Toss the rest of the crap into two or three garbage cans."

"Like a *goyishe* cremation ceremony, boss?"

When Goldman returned, he unlocked the doors. "Fast work, boss. Just under fifteen minutes."

In Massachusetts, I-395 changed its numbers to I-290. The Audi passed through Worcester and merged onto I-495. In Chelmsford, Goldman turned onto Route Three. Beyond the New Hampshire border, Monsarrat instructed him to take exit number eight. "At the bottom of the ramp, drive into the park-and-ride lot."

"No need to catch a bus, boss. I'll take you where you want to go."

"Drive around the lot, Moishe. First clockwise. Then reverse direction. Go slow."

"We looking for anything special, boss?"

"Special, no. Out of the ordinary, yes."

"Like what, for example?"

“Like thugs in cars waiting for a bus that won’t arrive until morning.”

Goldman finished the first loop. He put the Audi into a tight turn and drove in the opposite direction. “No thugs, boss.”

Monsarrat knew that if Sanhedrin were involved, appearances deceived. “Two rows to the right, toward the middle. Stop at the Jeep.”

He fit the suitcase into the trunk and laid the aluminum case onto the rear bench. He laid the laptop bag with the revolver and his personal items on the passenger seat.

Goldman stood next to the idling Audi. “You need me for anything else, boss? I gotta get back. My mom likes me to be home by sunrise.”

Monsarrat handed him a Benjamin Franklin. “For coffee, Moishe. It’s a long ride.”

The brake lights of the big car flashed in the darkness as he climbed into the Jeep. He drove down Amherst Street until he found a hotel. At the registration desk, he filled out the form and gave three hundred dollars to the clerk, a young man with moguls of scarlet acne on his cheeks. “I left my credit card case in the kitchen.”

The clerk passed him the room key and a cash receipt. “It’s not a problem, sir. Cash or credit card for one night. Either is okay.”

In the room, he switched on the television. The twenty-four- hour weather channel predicted excellent meteorological conditions for the new day. He confirmed the Nok and the doohickey were no worse for wear of the trip and inspected the Smith & Wesson and its arsenal of hollow point bullets. He did not need to bring down a Middle Eastern Emirate. A small former boss would suffice.

A BEAUTIFUL RUSSIAN VOR

The small convoy departed the City Center of Cape Town and followed De Waal Drive toward the southern suburbs, skirting the flank of Devil's Peak and following Edinburgh Drive into Constantia. Cloistered behind the darkened windows of the big Mercedes, Monsarrat imagined gum trees lining wide boulevards, the leafy trellises of hilly vineyards, and the ocean's tangy salt air.

The convoy climbed a long, uphill slope. Pavel leaned the big vehicle into curves and accelerated into the straight sections. After five more minutes, he braked, drove forward, and stopped the Mercedes.

"Masha takes our security very seriously," Nicky explained. "Not everyone in this country appreciates us, our culture, and our approach to business."

The four doors opened, and yellow floodlight spilled into the Mercedes. Monsarrat saw a security pen, a tracked gate in front with a matching gate behind. A burly Russian gripped a Sig Sauer P516 pistol while he inspected the interior of the vehicle. A second Russian restrained an Alsatian on a short, chain leash. A third Russian pointed a Mossberg twelve gauge shotgun at them. Each dressed like Sasha and Pavel and, despite the hour, wore sunglasses. When the first Russian spoke into a microphone attached to the cuff of his blazer, the tracked gate slid open. The doors of the Mercedes closed, and Pavel drove slowly out of the pen.

He stopped before the entrance to the *dacha*, wide, stone steps leading into a three-story, Mediterranean villa encircled by manicured lawns. Trellises flanked the albarium stucco walls, and wrought-iron railings protected the tall windows.

Monsarrat stepped out of the Mercedes. "What's the view during the day?"

"Tokai Forest and Hout Bay," Nicky replied. "You must sample our Chardonnay. It's fermented in French oak barrels. We're thinking of expanding into the American market."

Pavel handed the young Russian a Berretta Px4. "For you, *pakhan*."

Monsarrat admitted his mistake. "I thought you were just a *pizdyuk*, Nicky. You didn't say you're the second-in-command."

Inside the *dacha*, slats of wide mahogany covered the floors. Paintings by Repin, Malevich, Maximov, and Serov shared the walls with illustrations by Bilibin and eighteenth century *lubki* woodcuts. A diamond encrusted samovar stood on a jappaned side table.

“No icons?”

“Our boss does not believe in religion,” Nicky replied. He opened a pair of French doors with beveled glass and zinc and led him to an Empire armchair of gilded Karelian birch beneath a self-portrait of Orest Kiprensky. “Sasha will remain with you to make sure you are not bored.”

The older Russian sat in a carved Svirsky Bergère chair of gesso and gilding, his granite hands folded demurely in his lap, the index finger of his right hand resting lightly on the trigger guard of the Berretta. Neither the pistol’s sights nor his cobalt eyes wavered.

When he attempted to rise from the armchair, Sasha spoke his first words. His voice sounded like boulders in the throes of a rockslide. “*Nyet. Ne ustavayte.*”

Monsarrat did not want to argue with a nine-millimeter pistol. He held up his hands. “Where’d you get your prison tats, Sasha? Butyrka Tyur’ma or Matrosskaya Tishina?”

Sasha’s expression did not change. “*Pehtuch.*”

“A prison bitch? Was that your job in the gulag?”

Nicky’s return precluded Sasha’s reply. “Our boss will see you now, David.”

Monsarrat followed the young Russian up a curving staircase with steps and balustrades carved of the same mahogany that lined the floor. He felt Sasha’s presence behind him. On the third floor, Nicky led him down a hall flanked with marble busts of Romanov royalty. “Our boss is a connoisseur of Russian history in all its glories and humiliations.”

“But not religion. Not a very Russian trait.”

Nicky knocked on a set of double doors. A strong voice proclaimed, “*Vkohdit!*”

He pushed open the doors. “David Clarendon is here, Masha. Would you like me to stay with you?”

“It is not necessary, Nicky. I am sure that Mr. Clarendon is a gentleman.”

Monsarrat stepped inside, and Nicky closed the doors behind him. Metal, glass, and leather Bauhaus furniture filled the room. Soviet-era paintings proclaimed the triumphs of the proletariat, bountiful agricultural harvests, feats of factory production, and garlands of athletic medals. In the corner of the room a small Klykov bronze statue of Marshall Zhukov stood on a granite pedestal the color of dried blood.

She noticed his interest. “The statue was a study for the larger monument now at the Resurrection Gate in Moscow, at the northern entrance to the *Kreml*. Georgy Konstantinovich was a brilliant soldier and a great man. Compared to the Marshall, the wax dummy’s mausoleum in *Krasnaya Ploschad* is an insult to the history of Red Square.”

Her feet were bare, and her pedicure shined with the colors of Joseph’s coat. She stood six feet tall and exuded confidence and power like perfume scented other women. She wore makeup lightly, and crimson lipstick sparkled from the light of a silver candelabrum. A matching crimson coated the nails of her fingers. She wore jeans and a silk tee shirt with a single gold necklace.

She walked toward him and offered her hand. Her fingers, long, tapered, and unadorned by jewelry, belonged to a pianist on the proscenium stage of the St. Petersburg Conservatory. “Your *Dyadya* Bruce speaks fondly of you. It is a rare emotion in our world.”

Monsarrat felt the strength of her firm grip. “Which world is that, Ms. Krupnik?”

She asked questions. She did not answer them. “Please sit, Mr. Clarendon. We have many items to discuss.”

A leather and aluminum couch cost more than his annual salary at the college. “I look forward to our conversation.”

“Would you like a drink before we begin? I believe you enjoy bourbon?”

Monsarrat had never known Wilson to be garrulous, but the beauty of a younger woman had inspired many older men to share their secrets. “Neat, please.”

She crossed to a sideboard, poured three fingers of Maker’s Mark into two tumblers of cut crystal, and handed him one. “A toast, Mr. Clarendon?”

“To peace and friendship?” he suggested. “*K miru i druzhby?*”

“Better to profits and free markets, plus expeditious partnerships.”

Her skin was pale, and her thick, black hair luxuriant. Her Slavic cheekbones were high and sharp, and gold flecked her emerald eyes. He thought her strikingly beautiful, but knew pulchritude had not won her position as *vor v’zakonye*. “You have a message from our mutual friend?”

She sat on the far edge of the couch with her legs tucked beneath her thighs and placed her tumbler on a matching side table. “I do not usually run errands for the Central Intelligence Agency, but I am as genuinely fond of your *Dyadya*

Bruce as he is of you.”

“Thank you for your kindness.”

“A Krupnik is generous to her friends, Mr. Clarendon.”

Monsarrat understood the warning, a Krupnik is dangerous to her enemies.
“Please, I’m David.”

When the *vor* smiled, stage lights burst through velvet darkness. “Now we conduct business, Mr. Clarendon, not make friendships, but perhaps after our work is concluded, we will reconsider our relationship.”

He raised his tumbler. “I look forward to it, Ms. Krupnik.”

Her index finger chastised him. “Twice you have assumed that I am not married.”

“Should I address you as Mrs. Krupnik?”

She chose not to respond. Instead, she examined him like a curious schoolmistress. “Assumptions are reckless. They cause people to die. Are you reckless, Mr. Clarendon?”

He thought it a good question. He should have been recruiting students for the college, not sipping bourbon with a beautiful Russian *vor*. “To survive in our world, you need to trust your instincts.”

“You would rather trust your instincts than the opinions of your experts?”

“Experts are usually enamored of their own thoughts.”

“And your instincts, Mr. Clarendon?”

“I’ve failed them more than they have failed me,” he replied honestly.

“*Yah soglasen*. I agree. We must have trust in ourselves, not only to survive in our world, but to flourish and rule.”

He felt as if he had passed an unannounced test.

“Bruce did not trust the Central Intelligence Agency to pass to you his message. He is an analyst, but he also has instincts.”

Monsarrat swallowed bourbon. He understood the value of silence.

“He says it is very important you know that Mr. Franklin Seleucid has arrived

in Cape Town to recruit inexperienced students for study in the United States.”

He focused on Wilson’s word choice. Inexperienced. Innocent. Innocence. Like the proverbial bad penny, Sanhedrin turned up in the most unwanted places. “Did he offer more specific information?”

When she shook her head, thick, black hair twirled around her pale throat.

He asked her the same question he had posed to Nicky. “How did you find me?”

“Bruce has a great many friends in Pretoria for whom he conducts favors. These friends may be called upon to repay his generosity.”

“Friends in the security services?”

“*Da*. Friends in the *sluzhba*.”

Monsarrat understood that locating him under his work name had posed few problems for Wilson. The analyst would have reviewed the footage of international arrivals, working backwards from the day they met in Sandton, chosen a dozen faces to disguise his primary target, and passed the identification request to his South African friends. The name David Clarendon would have been on his desk within an hour. “Was it difficult to locate me at the hostel?”

“Bruce said you would like to stay, he used the expression, under the radar.”

“Did he mention the reason for my visit to Cape Town?”

“He quoted the Lebanese saying about friends and enemies.”

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” Monsarrat recited.

“We Russians believe so also. *Droog poznayotsya v bedé*.”

He supplied the translation. “A friend is known in trouble.”

She looked at him with a new respect. “Bruce did not tell me that you speak our language so well. To truly understand the soul of Russia, you must first speak her tongue.”

He suspected the *vor* was working toward a goal. He settled into the couch and waited for her to reach it.

“We have a mutual enemy, Mr. Monsarrat,” she began.

Hearing his name stunned him. Wilson had become more than garrulous. He

had abandoned loyalty for betrayal.

“*Da*, you are Nathan Monsarrat of Massachusetts in the United States. You are Dean of Undergraduate Studies at Greylock University.”

He did not correct her. “Our mutual friend is usually more reticent.”

“*Nyet*. Bruce only wants to help you. He is worried for you,” she explained. “We have done business many times. He knows I am trustworthy.”

He wondered if Wilson saw him as the means to the end of unknotting the *vor's* knickers. He knew very smart men who had done very stupid things for women far less beautiful than Masha Krupnik. “Should I believe in your goodwill?”

“You should believe I offer a solution to the problem you want to resolve.”

He finished the bourbon. “You mean Innocence.”

“*Da*. He is a violent animal. He does not understand how to conduct business. Also, he is grasping. You say so?”

“Greedy,” he agreed. “I would add psychopathic.”

“*Soglasen*. He is abnormal.” She refreshed their drinks and returned to the couch. “Bruce said you have an unpleasant history with him.”

He offered a sanitized explanation for his presence in Cape Town. “Innocence has pissed off many people. Some of them would like to speak with him. I’ve been hired to make it happen.”

She absorbed his explanation. “Where will this conversation take place?”

He shaded facts. “After I secure him, I make a phone call and receive instructions.”

“If he refuses to cooperate, do you have a second option?”

“The people who hired me prefer that Innocence travels vertically, but horizontal is acceptable as a last resort.”

She used the Soviet term. “*Chehpeh*.”

“*Chrezvychnoye proisshestviye*. In an emergency situation.”

“In such a situation,” she continued, “you would facilitate the death of Innocence?”

“You make it sound like a kindness.”

She sipped the bourbon. “More of a justice.”

Her proposition was pellucid. “We are in an American win-win situation, Mr. Monsarrat. Kill Innocence, satisfy your obligations to your employers, and receive their payment. I also will pay you to kill the animal. Everyone wins.”

Monsarrat did not tell her that he had never planned to deliver a vertical Innocence. “What do you win, Ms. Krupnik, if Innocence dies?”

“Satisfaction, Mr. Monsarrat.”

“Can you place a monetary value on satisfaction?”

“Like health and happiness, it can not be measured in dollars. Still, I will provide you with the satisfaction of a quarter million dollar deposit into your bank account.”

“For killing Innocence?”

“*Da*, for killing Innocence,” she agreed. “For me, it is a sound business investment. For you, it is an opportunity to receive two payments for one job.”

Monsarrat asked her the same question he had asked Palmer. “Why don’t you kill him yourself? I’m sure Sasha and Nicky are more than capable.”

She preferred to discuss her proposal. “I will place immediately \$100,000 into your bank account. I will provide the additional \$150,000 when I have positive proof that Innocence is dead.”

Monsarrat weighed the quarter million dollars against his distrust of Russians.

“What were your plans, Mr. Monsarrat, if I had not invited you to my *dacha* for this chat?”

He appreciated the perspicacity of her questions. “I would observe him, and when the opportunity arose, I would remove him.”

“I am curious. How would you remove him? He is a most paranoid individual.”

Lacking an answer, he repeated his own question. “Why do you need me to kill him?”

“If I were brutal like Innocence, I would kill him and everyone with him, but I consider business to be a chessboard not a battlefield, and I am a grandmaster

not a general. I do not want war. I want him dead, and if you kill him, I am blameless.”

“You want to consolidate your territory without repercussions?”

“Your reputation is of a very resourceful man, Mr. Monsarrat.”

She once again illuminated the room with her smile. “Also, my quarter million dollars, plus what your employers will pay you, is not insignificant.”

“Do you have a specific proposition, Ms. Krupnik? Something more substantial than just wanting me to kill your competition?”

“*Da, konechna*, of course,” she answered. “Innocence must die far from Cape Town. If you kill him here, I will be accused. There will be a war. I will triumph, but the violence is not good for my business.”

“A dead Innocence is good for business?”

“Very much so,” she agreed. “A dead Innocence is good for my bottom line.”

“When does he need to die?”

“Within the next forty-eight hours.”

“Why so soon?”

“He will travel tomorrow morning by car with his bodyguards to Rosh Pinah in Namibia to discuss a contract with a business associate. I want you also to travel there.”

He suspected that her offer was an ultimatum: accept and be rewarded, decline and be punished. With finality. “Your intelligence is very good.”

“I also have excellent friends in the *sluzhba*.”

“How will I travel to Namibia?”

“Nicky will take you to Violsdrif, but you will enter Namibia alone. In Rosh Pinah, you kill Innocence.”

“I never been there,” he protested. “I’d be operating blind.”

“I believe in your reputation.”

Monsarrat wished he were as confident.

“For proof of his death,” she continued. “You will shoot him in the head and show me the mutilated ear.”

He played for time, to evaluate his options. “How can I do that if I’m in Rosh Pinah and you’re in Cape Town?”

“Nicky will provide the necessary arrangements.”

“If I choose to decline your generous offer, Ms. Krupnik?”

With a single sentence, she reduced his options to none. “If so, Mr. Monsarrat, or if you accept my money but fail to kill Innocence, I will send Nicky to you.”

He entertained the image of a Brighton beach dumpster. “In that case, when do I leave?”

“At dawn. Your account at the hostel will be settled, your possessions will be disposed, and your cell phone and revolver will disappear into False Bay. New items will be provided. The *sluzhba* will erase all evidence of David Clarendon entering and exiting the country. You will return to South Africa neither as Clarendon nor Monsarrat.”

He understood the perils of questioning a *vor*’s orders.

“Do you have any more questions, Mr. Monsarrat?”

He had many questions she would never answer and few she might entertain. He proposed one of the latter. “Will I also have to kill the man he’s meeting?”

“If it is useful.”

She walked to her desk and reached into a drawer. She returned to the couch and passed him a thick envelope. “Ten thousand dollars for expenses.”

He considered the Russian aphorism about dining with the devil. He would need a very long spoon with Masha Krupnik. She was one of the coldest, most efficient, women he had ever met.

She delivered a warning as subtle as a sledgehammer. “You speak our language and understand our culture. Remember that secrets are sacrosanct to Russians, more precious than diamonds.”

He nodded his understanding.

“*Otlichno*. Excellent. I am confident of your success.”

He wished he shared her optimism.

She held out her hand. "We are in agreement, *da?*"

"I have a condition."

She nodded her assent like royalty granting a request. "*Yah slushayu*. I am listening."

He shared Palmer's intelligence on Rosalinda Santiago with her. "After Innocence leaves Cape Town, I want you to rescue her from his villa. She'll be ill. I want you to arrange for her recuperation in a private clinic here. When she's strong enough to travel, I want you to give her a passport and send her home to Manila. Or to Massachusetts. Anywhere she wants to go."

"You are a loyal man, Mr. Monsarrat."

"I am," he agreed. "I am also very careful. Before I shoot Innocence in the head and show you his mutilated ear, I want to see Rosalinda. I want to hear her voice."

"What will you do if I am unable to free her from the villa?"

"I doubt that will be a problem for a woman of your abilities," he answered. "Also, I want you to open an account in her name in one of your Swiss banks and deposit the quarter-million-dollar fee into it."

She studied him, as if she had discovered a *yurodiviy*, a holy fool, on her couch. "You are a very generous man."

"She saved my life. I owe her." "I give you my word," she agreed. "I believe you, Ms. Krupnik, but I also give you my word if anything happens to Rosalinda, I will return to Cape Town and your *byki* will not stop me from killing you."

"I do not scare, Mr. Monsarrat."

"*Yah ponimayu*. I understand," he said. "As I do not make empty threats."

She offered her hand, and he shook it. "Bruce was correct. You are a rare man."

He slipped the envelope into his sweatshirt. "Is our business concluded, Ms. Krupnik?"

"*Nyet*." She stood and walked to the double doors. "Nicky, come inside please."

The young Russian entered the room. "*Da*, Masha"

“Mr. Monsarrat will stay with us tonight. Prepare the Pushkin Room.”

She waited until the young Russian departed. “Are you hungry, Nathan?”

The switch from the professional to the personal caught him by surprise. “I am.”

“*Chornoiy ikra?* The caviar is Beluga.”

“Of course.”

She crossed to her desk and punched a button on the phone.

“Oleg. I require dinner for two. *Prinesi minye chornoiy ikra. Dlya dvukh chelovek. Toxe dva stankhana i butylku Bison. Plyus dva omarov iz Maine.* Broil the lobsters.”

She glanced at Monsarrat. “Serve me in forty-five minutes, Oleg. Make sure the bottle of vodka and the two glasses are very cold. You know how I like Bison.”

She disconnected the intercom. “You do not mind me ordering, Nathan?”

“Vodka, caviar, and lobster? I am in your good hands, Ms. Krupnik.”

“Business is concluded,” she admonished. “I am now Masha.”

During his career with the Agency, the *sluzhba* had been the enemy, eager to entrap him with the siren exchange of sex for secrets. As dean, he no longer possessed secrets, and Masha Krupnik was a *vor*, not a spy.

She sat next to him on the couch. Her long fingers reached for his sweatshirt. He helped her pull it over his head. His tee shirt followed the sweatshirt into the floor. He pulled her silk tee shirt over her head, dropped it on top of the growing pile of clothes, and unclasped her bra. Her nipples were pink and thick atop her white breasts. A thin, blue vein throbbed in her neck. He lightly bit her throat.

“*Nyet.* I am not a fragile American woman. I do not break so easily.” She shoved him onto the cushions and sank her teeth into his pectoral muscles. She pulled off his running shoes and socks and tossed them onto the floor. His jeans and underwear followed.

Emerald eyes flecked with gold surveyed her conquest. “As I suspected. *Otlichno.*”

Monsarrat wrapped her in his arms and reversed their positions. She lifted her hips. He unsnapped her jeans and dragged them down her legs. Her lace

underwear was crimson, the color of her fingernails.

“Use your teeth,” she commanded.

He bit the waistband, pulled it off her hips, and spit the lace onto the floor. He looked down at her face, framed by waves of her thick, black hair. He ran his fingertips over her crimson lipstick and spread it across her high Slavic cheekbones. He felt her sharp nails dig into his back. She wrapped her long legs around his waist, bit his neck and lips. She gripped his ears and guided his head between her legs. Her mons was bald. Her *amor Veneris* was swollen. He tasted her salty stickiness.

Her wet softness wrapped around his hard flesh. She moved her hips against him greedily. He thrust slowly and then more quickly as her breathing rasped.

“*Da*, now, *vmeste!* Together!”

She reached for his hair and pulled his face toward her. She bit his tongue and climaxed. Monsarrat felt his body spin, tethered by his flesh to the woman beneath him, and shuddered as her breathing slowed and deepened.

They lay side by side on the couch, their bodies coated in a sheen of sweat. She ran her fingers over her breasts and pressed them to his lips. Monsarrat wondered if she sealed all her business deals on the couch.

After a few minutes, she stood and pulled on her lace underwear. “Dress now, Nathan. It would be impolite to be naked when Oleg arrives to serve us dinner.”

He followed her instructions. He suspected it would be safer than the alternative.

A FORMER YESHIVA *BOCHER*

Fields of green covered the Berkshire campus. Flowers waved in the late August breeze like Mother Nature's banners. From his office in Campbell Hall, Monsarrat watched the bustle of the annual ritual, the first day of the new academic year. For some, it offered the opportunity to learn. For others, it was a party with a steep cover charge.

Beneath the soft morning sun, freshmen and their parents walked apart, separated by an embarrassed generational gulf. Upperclassmen threw Frisbees. Gentler souls sat beneath the shade of oak trees, joined by the umbilical cords of earbuds. Effusive students drank beer, smoked joints, and danced to music booming from speakers balanced in dormitory windows. He suspected some of them would stand in the docket of future Disciplinary Committee meetings.

Lately, Doris had greeted him with a smile and hummed catchy pop tunes throughout the day. A satisfied lilt lifted her voice, and disapproval no longer darkened her visage. Each morning, she set daisies, buttercups, and petunias in a clear glass vase on his desk. To mark the special day's festive occasion, she sported a beehive hairdo, a silk skirt and blouse combination, patent leather sling pumps, and a necklace of freshwater pearls. He suspected the newly hired instructor of English 101 as the motivation behind her mood shift. Since the prior month's faculty orientation, the freshly minted PhD had spent more time by her desk than in his own office.

The evening following his return from Windhoek, Monsarrat had burned all traces of David Clarendon and scattered his ashes across his backyard, like the remains of a cremated brother. The next morning, he received a telephone call from a discrete bank in Zurich to finalize the details of his new bank account. Two days later, he flew to see Abby. They spent the weekend on the Mall, exploring the Freer Gallery, the Sackler Gallery, and the American Art Museum of the Smithsonian Institution. They watched children bobbing on the wooden horses of the carousel in front of the Arts and Industries Building. The calliope music sounded like summer.

"We should see a ball game," Monsarrat offered.

Abby had been distant since his arrival. "We should talk, Nathan. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

They crossed Independence Avenue and walked toward the Potomac River. On Sixth Street, they stepped into a coffee shop. Monsarrat ordered two lattes. They sat by a window and watched families hurry toward the L'Enfant Plaza metro station.

Abby began slowly, as if she were preparing to divulge state secrets. "Felix never includes me on his messages, but Friday morning he blind copied me on an e-mail he sent to the Mandarin collective."

If Sanhedrin had sent a message directly to the Mandarins, he had broken the Agency's rigid lines of protocol. "He must be sure that whatever intel he possesses is pure gold," Monsarrat mused. "His superiors won't be happy that he went around them."

She removed the plastic cover from the cup and sipped the foam. "He didn't go around them. He vaulted right over them. He told the Mandarins that he possessed intel of an extremely sensitive nature. He waved all the flags of national security and said he would speak to them and only them. He did not allow any intermediaries."

Monsarrat understood well the machinations of his former boss. "Did he describe the nature of the intel?"

"He mentioned oil, al-Qaida, and treason," she answered. "Specifically, he informed them of the treason of a former valued member of the Agency. He named you, Nathan."

Her announcement did not surprise him. He had anticipated the dropping of Sanhedrin's second shoe. "Did he say what I was to have done?"

"Felix claimed that you scuttled an Agency operation to bring a friendly, democratic government to an oil-producing West African nation. He called it "Operation Blessed Innocence." He said you assassinated the number one and number two men in the democratic opposition."

Despite her concern, Monsarrat smiled at the thought of Blessed and Innocence in any government, democratic or despotic. "Felix is being Felix. He's covering his ass with one hand and asking for medals with the other."

She was not mollified. "I worry about you, baby. You don't know Felix like I do.

He's driven, like he's trying to avenge the insults he suffered as a boy."

"Did he mention who paid me to scuttle his op?"

Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. "He claimed you took hundreds of thousands of dollars from Yahya al-Masri, the financial genius of al-Qaida. He accused you of complicity in setting up a government based upon Shari'ah law that would sell its oil only to our enemies and our competition."

Monsarrat suspected Sanhedrin had coordinated his story with the oil wallahs. With their support, the Mandarins would consider his charges seriously. If they chose to act upon them, he would know soon enough, immediately after they shoved a black hood over his head and bundled him aboard a rendition flight to Gitmo. "Felix thinks I jilted him when I retired. He takes my new life in academia as a personal insult."

"What happened when you took your trip? Did you go back to the Delta?"

Monsarrat chose his words carefully. "Not the Delta, Abby. South Africa and Namibia. That's where Sanhedrin popped up. He brokered a reconciliation between the Mandarins and the oil wallahs. They worked together to put a puppet into power in Abuja. Felix's supposed number two man in the democratic opposition was the son of the puppet, and the father wanted the son by his side. The son was the psychopath who held me captive in the Delta and killed Rosalinda."

"You're sure she's dead, baby? You said the photograph was doctored?"

"I'm sure, Abby. The picture was created by software," he explained. "Rosalinda died three years ago in the Delta. In Namibia, I had to make a choice, let the psychopath live or kill him for what he did to me and Rosalinda."

"So you executed him?"

"It was an easy decision," Monsarrat admitted, "but it pissed off Felix, and he wants his pound of flesh from me, as punishment for interfering with his plans."

He failed to add that Sanhedrin had forgotten neither his humiliation in Greenfield nor the money he had paid to transport the terracotta statue from Port Harcourt. He also suspected that Palmer had provided his former boss with

details of the oil consortium's generous fee. Sanhedrin may also have learned of the Russian's quarter million dollar payment. A grasping man of combustible jealousies, the knowledge would have infuriated him.

Abby's instincts were on target. "Felix wants you to know what he's doing, and he's using me to play messenger."

Monsarrat did not want to share Sanhedrin's parting threat in Rosh Pinah. "Don't worry, Abby, but if Felix starts acting stranger than usual, let me know."

"I'm not good at these games, Nathan. I don't want to be the messenger. I just want to be with you and do my job."

Monsarrat hated the thought of surrendering to Sanhedrin's blackmail but refused to allow his former boss to use her as a hostage. "On Monday, tell Felix you're not seeing me anymore. He'll leave you alone as soon as he's satisfied you've told him the truth."

She slammed the table so hard that her latte spilled. "Absolutely not! He doesn't run my life! I will not let him come between us."

He walked to the counter and returned with a handful of paper napkins to blot the coffee. "It's the smart thing to do, Abby."

Frustration and anger laced her reply. "Like quitting the Agency was the smart thing for you to do? You have so many unresolved issues, Nathan."

He agreed but did not want to hold the discussion in a coffee shop. "You know no one walks away from the Agency clean."

If she knew, she was not in the mood to concur. "Felix scares me, baby. He wants so much, and he wants it so fast."

"I'm not working against him, Abby. I just want him to leave you alone and stay far away from the Berkshires."

"Your Nipmuck agreement?" she laughed. "You're too trusting, Nathan. Felix never met a handshake he didn't violate."

After he returned from Washington, Monsarrat visited Ralph to fulfill his financial obligations. "As promised, Ralph. Cash for the promissory note."

The Marine passed him the note but ignored the envelope. "I didn't earn it."

Monsarrat shredded the paper and burned the small pieces in an empty pretzel bowl. "With all respect, Ralph, take the money."

"Can't do that, Dean."

Monsarrat tossed the envelope to Tiny. "Maybe your brother's smarter than you."

He grabbed it from Tiny's huge hands. "You're a good man, Dean. Stupid with your cash, but a good man."

"To clean thoughts," Monsarrat responded, raising his shot glass of bourbon.

"And dirty deeds," Ralph answered.

The conversation confused Tiny. "What are you two talking about?"

His brother snapped him with a wet towel. "Go clean the tables, Tiny. I ain't paying you to stand around and look pretty."

When he moved away, Ralph asked, "What happened in Cape Town, Dean?"

Monsarrat shook his head. "Spook shit."

"Why the bug out?"

Monsarrat continued to scythe the air, like a pendulum gathering force. "Enjoy the cash, Ralph. You earned it. Just don't mention it to the IRS."

"My momma only raised one fool, and he's wiping down tables with a dirty rag."

Monsarrat dropped a twenty dollar bill on the bar. "*Semper Fi*, brother."

The next week, to Doris's delight, he traveled on his recruitment trip through the Southern states. Upon his return, the long summer days passed easily. He slipped into the comfort of his routine like an old man donning his favorite slippers, but he had angered too many scrofulous people to allow the slow pace of the college town to lull him. He kept the five round .38 Smith & Wesson Special locked in the Jeep and the Glock 30 hidden in his briefcase, in addition to carrying a seven round .22 Magnum Smith & Wesson in a leather holster on

his hip. With its two-inch barrel, it weighed less than a pound and was easily hidden.

On the Friday morning prior to the start of the new semester, he received a call from Solomon Grinnell. The former yeshiva *bocher* spoke elliptically. "You used to work for my father. He never appreciated your advice. He saw you as an affliction to his authority."

"As do so many others," Monsarrat responded. "*Shabbat shalom*, my friend."

"*Shabbat shalom*. Peace be upon you, *habibi*. How are you faring these days?" Even at his most solicitous, Grinnell sounded like a Brooklyn thug.

Monsarrat answered truthfully. "Actually, I am very well."

"I'm happy to hear it. The affair with my business associate worked out smoothly?"

"The large Russian?" Monsarrat asked.

"Who works for the art collector."

Monsarrat had experienced his fill of Russians. "As smoothly as any venture involving our mutual friend can work out."

"Which brings me to the reason for my call," Grinnell responded. "You asked me to let you know if I heard anything about him and the Russian community."

"Has he pissed off the wrong people again?"

"Only the wrong people? Since when has he been so discriminating?"

Monsarrat pictured him enjoying a Talmudic moment. "Give me some good news, please. Did one of your friends take out a contract on him?"

"Just a buzz in your ear, *habibi*. Our mutual friend has been spending quality time with the art collector he worked for previously. The one to whom he delivered a very valuable statue. Word is that our mutual friend has been retained to find another national treasure."

Monsarrat absorbed the information. "Any thoughts on the location of this treasure?"

Grinnell admitted he could not divulge details. "Although I have heard the words icon, Vladimir, a large dollar figure, and a tight deadline used in the same sentence."

"How large a dollar figure?"

"Rumor has it in the eight-figure range."

"I'm impressed," Monsarrat admitted, "but I haven't heard from our mutual friend. I hope to keep it that way."

"*Insha'allah*. If I learn more, I'll let you know." Grinnell promised.

The festivities on the campus grew more raucous. A Frisbee sailed by his window. He opened his e-mail to find a message from Wilson, sent from a private account. Nephew, my retirement from our mutual employer is imminent, at the conclusion of this fiscal year. I hope to see you again soon. In fond regards, Uncle.

Monsarrat deleted the message. He wondered if their lunch in Johannesburg had influenced Wilson's decision to retire. He suspected Sanhedrin had feted him in Pretoria before arriving in Rosh Pinah. His instincts warned that complications trailed the analyst like a dirty bridal train.

The institutional beige telephone on his desk chirped. He still awaited a replacement handset. He pressed the speaker button and launched another salvo in his charm offensive. "Thank you for the lovely flowers, Doris. Your pearls are very becoming, too."

Flustered, she answered, "Oh, thank you so much, Dean. You're very kind to mention it."

An electronic silence hung between them. "May I help you, Doris?"

To overcome her embarrassment, she spoke breathlessly. "You have a call on your private extension, Dean. Mr. Franklin Seleucid from Educational Placement Services. He wants to discuss a potential student. He's the same man who called last year."

Her memory impressed Monsarrat. Perhaps there was more to Doris than what met the obvious eye. "Did he say anything else?"

“Just that he wants to speak with you.”

Monsarrat patted the .22 Magnum on his hip. He could instruct Doris to never accept calls from Franklin Seleucid and Educational Placement Services, but Sanhedrin would simply show up at his office. He could order the college's security to remove him from the campus, but his former boss would somehow force a meeting. The best he could do would be to dictate the terms of engagement.

“Put him though, Doris. Persistent bugger, isn't he?”

“Did his student enroll in the college this term, Dean?”

“Unfortunately, no. He wasn't able to travel.”

“That's too bad,” she said. “I'm putting Mr. Seleucid through to you now.”

Monsarrat waited for the call to transfer. He felt strong enough, ready to defeat Sanhedrin. He felt, at long last, more Monsarrat than dean, more Monsarrat than spook.