

## Zahara

### A Short Story by Fritz Struhsaker



#### **Dubai, United Arab Emirates**

It is the near future. Russian military adventurism in Europe and the aftermath of the Battle of Taiwan Straights between China and Western Allied Nations have created two opposing spheres of influence. A second cold war divides the world between the totalitarian regimes aligned with China and Russia and the rest of the free world. The great powers vie for the control of the Middle East with its oil reserves and newly discovered lithium reserves to fuel the green energy economy. Dubai, the defacto economic capital of the region, has become a center of

intrigue and espionage.

#### **Port of Jebel Ali, Jebel Ali Economic Freezone, Dubai**

Chief Detective Amrita Singh focused on the gasoline-powered Mercedes Benz Sprinter van in front of her. The van was still idling. The driver, likely European, sat upright, held in place by his seatbelt. Blood dripped from the hole in his forehead, and a far greater amount of blood permeated his clothing from the wound in his chest. A dead Asian woman with similar injuries sat beside him, handcuffed and strapped to the passenger's seat. Judging from the size of the holes through the front windshield and the entry wounds in the victims' foreheads, the pair had been shot at close range with a small-caliber weapon—likely a 9mm of some sort. “*Very clean, very professional,*” Chief Detective Singh thought to herself.

Singh wrapped up her questioning of the patrol officers who discovered the victims. “So, to be clear,” she asked, “You found no witnesses, no sign of a struggle, and no brass or other physical evidence, correct?”

“That’s correct, Chief Detective,” the lead officer answered. “All we found was a van with four bullet holes in the windshield, idling in the middle of the night in the Jebel Ali port warehouse district. We only stopped to investigate because our thermal scanners indicated the engine was running and the van hadn’t moved after two patrol passes flying over the area.”

A warning tone gradually increased above them. The forensics team arrived in their FlyCr (“flicker” – slang for flying car). Singh didn’t bother to look up. Instead, she turned and thanked the patrol officers and dismissed them to return to their duties. She turned to her Mech synthetic partner Sam, whom she’d nicknamed after the fictional detective Sam Spade. “Sam, please run a second check of the crime scene for brass,” Singh ordered. “I’d like your opinion on whether we are looking at one or two shooters once you’ve sized up the crime scene.”

“Yes, Sayidi,” Sam confirmed using the Arabic word for master, a term Sam knew irritated his human partner. The Mech turned and went about his work. “*Such a smart-aleck,*” Amarita thought, wondering if the Mech’s personality was a reflection of his creator, Travis Stanhauser. The new Stanhauser Robotics Mechs purchased for the Dubai police department were a marvel. Unlike the older Japan Robotic Corp models, the Stanhauser units could perform all the duties of a typical human partner. Five thousand Stanhauser units already filled the Dubai police ranks, making up one-third of the force. Another five thousand were on order with plans to have Mechs staff half the force. One Mech partnered with one human for patrol officers and detectives.

After 30 minutes, the forensic team completed their initial investigation of the crime scene. Amrita could finally physically inspect the victims. She donned a pair of latex gloves and AR glasses (augmented reality glasses). She tucked the stems of her AR glasses under her black hijab, the traditional scarf covering her head and neck, leaving her face uncovered, unlike a more traditional niqab that left only the eyes exposed. The hijab complimented her gold-embroidered black tunic and flowing black haram pants. She looked every ounce of the well coffered upper-middle-class emigre that flocked to Dubai to make their fortune.

Amrita started with the European driver. She turned his head, looked directly at the victim, and tapped the side of her AR glasses, which instantly linked the image to both the INTERPOL and Dubai police databases. In a few seconds, the cloud-based facial recognition system identified the victim as Detective Hans Kleiner, a German national assigned to UAE

INTERPOL. *“What are you doing here running around in a ground transport van with the rest of the kafala,”* Amrita thought to herself with a tinge of guilt for using the derogatory term, kalafa, an Emirati catchall for lower class foreign migrant workers from India, Pakistan, and the Philippines, among other nations. Ground vehicles are for logistics and those too poor to afford a FlyCr. *“Where’s your assigned FlyCr? More importantly, where’s your backup?”* she mused.

Amrita turned her attention to the Asian woman in the passenger seat. The petite woman wore a designer western pantsuit, revealing far too much blood-stained cleavage to fit within the norms of good taste in polite Dubai society. The victim’s striking medium-length platinum-dyed hair only added to her decadence. In Amrita’s opinion, this poor girl would be quite fetching if it were not for the weeping bullet hole in her forehead. *“Pitty, you had your whole life in front of you,”* Amrita sadly reflected as she lined up the young woman’s face in her field of view for identification with her AR glasses. The identification data quickly returned, highlighted in bold red script in her field of vision:

Cynthia Gao, US Citizen, resident of San Francisco, graduated with honors from Stanford with a BA in logistics.

*“Smart girl,”* Amrita thought. *“But not smart enough to escape your fate here, it seems.”* Amrita blinked with her right eye signaling her AR glass to display more information. Now it got interesting. INTERPOL had a RED NOTICE out on Miss Gao. Gao, a Hong Kong 14K Triad operative, was suspected of being the mastermind behind several 14K smuggling operations. *“So much for using that pricy exclusive Stanford education as a force of good. Of course, the same could be said of most Silicon Valley CEOs from Stanford,”* Amrita mused sarcastically.

Gao had neither AR glasses nor an “old school” smartphone in her possession. The same was true for DDetective Kleiner, which was odd. Amrita carefully checked the driver’s seat and floor area again. A slight oblong bulge under Kleiner’s left foot caught her eye. Amrita surmised that Kleiner had just enough warning to drop his phone, kick it under the floor mat, and place his foot over it before the shooting started. She opened her purse and pulled out an interrogator to extract the phone number and SIM identifier from the smartphone. She dictated a brief message and added the extracted smartphone information.

From: Chief Detective Amrita Singh, General Department of Criminal Investigation

To: Watch Officer, General Department of Artificial Intelligence

Subject: Urgent Forensic Access Request.

Please forward the last twenty-four hours of phone records and text messages of the attached device. This is an urgent priority request in conjunction with a double homicide involving a member of INTERPOL.

Dubai was not the United States or European Union. The legal concepts of privacy rights, self-incrimination, search and seizure, and prohibition of torture did not exist. Not a problem if you are a law-abiding resident or citizen, but a considerable advantage over criminal elements for the UAE police and internal security. As part of the Ministry of Interior, the General Department of Artificial Intelligence captured and recorded phone records, emails, texts, and WEB access history of every person in the UAE 24x7x365. Amrita would have her information in a few minutes. Meanwhile, it was time to see what Sam had discovered.

“So, Sam, what have you found?” Amrita queried her synthetic partner.

“Forensics found no fingerprints, and my second search found no brass,” Sam stated. “However, evidence indicates that two different weapons were used to perpetrate the crime. The bullet holes through the van’s windshield and the victim’s wounds have size differences. Ms. Gao’s ballistics are consistent with small-caliber 5.8mm x 21mm ammunition. The only weapon that uses 5.8mm x 21mm rounds is the Chinese QSZ-92 pistol, a weapon of choice amongst the various Triad organizations. The ballistics for INTERPOL Agent Kleiner are consistent with 9mm x 19mm parabellum rounds typical of a Glock, Luger, or any number of other weapons manufacturers. The evidence suggests two assailants stood at point-blank range in front of the van and fired two clean shots with little or no warning. The shooting accuracy along with a clean crime scene would indicate the work of professionals.”

Amrita held up her hand to pause her synthetic partner’s report. The download from the General Department of Artificial Intelligence had just arrived. She scanned the list of incoming and outgoing phone numbers. Nothing unusual until the last few calls before the attack. Three calls went out to the same local UAE number, which looked oddly familiar to Chief Detective Singh. Then it dawned on her. It was her friend Zahara Fitzroy bint Sharif Al Ronaihi’s cell number. Amrita scanned the text messages. She found nothing unusual until the final message:

**[Zahara – It seems our troubles are twice as complicated. We may need the help of your Russian associates. Let’s meet at our usual place in Deira (north of Dubai Creek) first thing tomorrow. Our window of opportunity is less than 36 hours.]**

No sooner had Amrita finished reading the text when an urgent message arrived from her Chief to return to the station and provide an update. Word that an INTERPOL officer was dead traveled fast. “Sam, we need to go see the Chief,” Amrita stated.

“Do you think the Chief has an issue with Mechs?” Sam queried his partner. “He always seems so ambivalent and curt when we speak with him.”

“It’s not you, Sam,” Amrita observed. “It’s me. The Chief is a chauvinist, and he finds it irritating that his best detective is a woman. Even worse, an infidel, non-Emirati, woman from Boston. My existence stands as an affront to his narrow-minded worldview.” Amrita viewed her career as a personal feminist crusader the day she emigrated 12 years ago with her MIT-educated husband, who accepted the Dean of Engineering position at Zayed University.

“Good to know!” Sam quipped as he let out a synthetic laugh. “I am happy that it’s you and not me who offends the Chief,” Amrita smiled and laughed at her synthetic partner’s little jest. Sam’s little quips and wry comments never failed to amaze and amuse her.

The pair boarded their unmarked FlyCr, set the destination to headquarters, and ascended straight upward 1000 feet to merge into the traffic pattern of the Sky Lane above them. As the FlyCr made its automated journey to headquarters, Chief Detective Amrita Singh sent a brief message:

**[Zahara – what have you gotten yourself involved in now? Agent Kleiner is dead along with RED NOTICE suspect Cynthia Gao. We need to talk. Call Me.]**



**Burg Al Arab Hotel, Umm Suqeim Beach, Dubai**

*“It’s time for you to go,”*

Amaran, Zahara’s AI minder, chimed softly in her ear. *“You mustn’t keep Mr. Morozov waiting.”*

*“I am aware of the time,*

*Amaran. Morozov will wait,”* Zahara

mentally replied. *“After all, we are meeting twelve floors down and five minutes away. I have plenty of time to finish things properly here.”*

Zahara returned her attention to Farah bin Mohammed Al Kalief. Farah stood naked in front of her, surveying the view of northern Dubai through the floor-to-ceiling tinted glass windows of their 39<sup>th</sup>-floor room in the Burg Al Arab hotel. Looking out toward the Sharjah desert, a glittering array of skyscrapers, residential towers, and affluent coastal neighborhoods filled Farah’s field of view, including the Burj Kalifa, the world’s tallest building, and the iconic Dubai Frame. The view was as breathtaking as the ultra-luxury Burj Al Arab hotel itself, with its stunning, unmistakable sail-inspired architecture designed by British architect Tom Wright.

Farah was the first wife of the Deputy Director of State Security of the UAE Ministry of Interior, Mohammed Al Kalief, and a member of Dubai’s extended royal family by marriage. Farah was as striking as Dubai itself. Zahara admired her shimmering long dark hair, silky tanned skin, and her tall, lithe, incredibly toned frame.

Zahara, completely naked herself, wrapped an arm around Farah from behind, pressing her body into the curve of her lover’s back. Zahara’s lips gently kissed the nape of Farah’s neck. The scent of Farah’s bespoke Parisian perfume, with its notes of sandalwood and exotic spice, filled her senses. Zahara moved both her hands upward, caressing Farah’s firm, perfectly shaped breasts. Her index fingers slowly circled Farah’s large pronounced areolas, hardening her nipples and sending goosebumps down Farah’s spine. Farah leaned her head back and began passionately kissing Zahara. Zahara’s right hand slowly drifted down Farah’s flat abdomen until

her index finger reached the perfect spot and began circling faster and faster. Farah began to writhe, moan, and at last, she shuddered uncontrollably.

An instant later, Farah sobbed, tears in her eyes. She turned around, pressing Zahara's body and breasts into hers. "Let's run away," Farah whispered with a slight British accent. "You have the means. We could escape this gilded prison. We could be free."

Zahara gently held Farah's face with both hands, wiped away the tears from her eyes, kissed her, then pulled back and whispered, "You know that neither of us can withdraw from our public lives and openly admit this relationship. It is an unforgivable infidelity in the eyes of Sharia Law. If we are ever discovered, I would be stripped of my wealth, beaten, imprisoned, and permanently expelled. Your punishment as an unfaithful married Muslim woman in a lesbian relationship would be *rajm* - being stoned to death by your powerful husband's kin - an honor killing. You can never run. As a member of the extended royal family, no expense would be spared to find you and bring you to justice. So set aside these escape fantasies of yours. Lose yourself in the moment, our small respite from the rest of the world, a secret which we must maintain with all possible discretion."

In truth, all manner of sin, corruption, and infidelity occurred in the sprawling metropolis below them. Success in the upper echelon of Dubai's society requires secrecy, discretion, appearances, succeeding, and never failing. The UAE is an absolute tribal monarchy based on ancient Sharia Law for civil matters and whose commercial laws, thankfully, were based on British Common Law. Only fifteen percent of the population were Emirati citizens. A status set solely by blood relations to the original bedouins of the seven sheikdoms that comprised the UAE. Everyone else was a resident alien, a guest worker, welcome to participate in Dubai's economic opportunities as long as you play by the rules. There was no right to free speech, no right to vote, no jury of one's peers, and most important of all, no welfare. If you couldn't pay your way or fell on hard times, you were placed on a flight to your home country and blacklisted from ever returning. The same was true after any serious infraction of the law. Public drunkenness, drug use, violence, lude or salacious behavior, and even public displays of affection result in swift, brutal punishment and deportation. Homosexuality, transsexuality, and infidelity were deemed offenses second only to murder. Despite all these personal restrictions, tens of thousands of expatriates from across the globe migrated annually for a chance to make

their fortunes in this thriving desert metropolis. With these expatriates came every sin and perversion of the western and eastern world, unseen and carried out discretely behind closed doors.

It was an ideal base of operations for Zahara Fitzroy bint Sharif Al Ronaihi, the scion of two powerful, wealthy families, one British and the other Emirati. Secrets were the currency of human relations in Dubai, and leveraging them was a talent in which Zahara excelled.

Zahara felt sorry for Farah. She was a bird trapped in a gilded cage, but it was a cage of her own creation. Farah, the daughter of a successful Kuwaiti businessman, met her husband, an extended cousin of the Royal Family of the sheikdom of Abu Dhabi while pursuing a BA in business at Cambridge in the UK. They were a love match, not an arranged marriage, and for the first five years, their marriage had been idyllic. But after several miscarriages, Farah learned she could never have children. By Emirati law and custom, a man could take up to four wives, and upon learning that Farah was barren, her husband took a second wife. It wounded Farah's pride, but she grew to accept the situation. Over five years, the second wife delivered two girls, who Farah adored. Yet there was no son to provide Mohammed Al Kalief a proper heir. Enter wife number three, who immediately bore Mohammed, a son, and captured all of his attention. Farah and the second wife were functionally and emotionally widowed. As Mohammad's first wife, Farah stood at his side for all the myriad political and social functions expected of their station. Yet, once they left the public eye and returned home, Farah would retire to her private chambers alone. Her husband treated her well, and she was his confidante in all matters, but he no longer showed his first wife affection, not even the slightest touch. She had become trapped in a loveless marriage, a friend and confidant, not a wife.

In this neglected and emotionally needy state, Farah was in the perfect psychological state for recruitment as an asset. Zahara, who traveled in the same social circles, identified Farah's quiet despair, befriended her, and gained her confidence using their shared collegiate experience at Cambridge to break the ice. In an interesting twist for Zahara, Farah initiated their physical relationship. At least, that's what Zahara allowed Farah to believe. As for Mohammed, he loved his wife in his dispassionate asexual way and was relieved that Farah was no longer melancholy all the time. She had found a respectable friend and happiness in her station as his first wife.



Just like that, Zahara had cultivated an asset at the very top of the Dubai Ministry of Interior (MoI). Mohammed Al Kalief, MoI Deputy Director for State Security, confided everything to his first wife, Farah. She would, in turn, confide everything to her lover, Zahara. That is how Zahara learned about Cynthis Gao and 14KTriad's attempts to break the UN Chinese weapons quarantine and ship critical hypersonic technology to the Iranians on behalf of Chinese Military Intelligence. With hypersonic missile technology, the Iranians could thwart Israel's Iron Dome 4 anti-missile systems that guarded Isreal, Qutar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and a handful of other nations. The introduction of hypersonic weapons would drastically change the balance of power in the region, and it could even lead to war, which was the entire point of China's efforts

Zahara relayed this information to another of her assets, INTERPOL agent Hans Klierner, who she learned had a RED NOTICE outstanding for Ms. Gao. Zahara's recruitment of Hans Kleiner was a simple matter. As a closeted gay man, she took Hans to one of the few places in Dubai he could be himself, an LBGTO speakeasy run by another "acquaintance," Oleg Morozov, head of the Solntsevskaya Bratva Russian crime syndicate in Dubai. The gesture cemented a bond of trust between them, and just like that, another asset fell into place.

Hans had devised a plan for Zahara to question Ms. Gao privately before formally placing her in INTERPOL custody. Now Hans and Ms.Gao were dead, leaving Oleg Morokov as the lone resource who could assist Zahara in solving this puzzle. That assistance would come at a cost, of course.

Zahara led Farah from the window to the bed, sat down, and pulled Farah down next to her. Zahara leaned over, kissed Farah, and whispered, "I must go. You know I'm running late."

"I know. We both have appointments to keep," Farah replied with a sigh of resignation, caressing Zahara's cheek. "I know the routine. You leave first while I wait a discreet amount of time before departing from my adjoining room." There was no need to say anything else. Zahara's "Jūsha," Japanese for manservant, Takeru Takahashi, or Tak, for short, arranged the illicit couple's rendezvous. Tak reserved pairs of attached rooms at random hotels under different aliases, ensuring complete anonymity for Zahara and Farah.

A few minutes later, Zahara stepped out of her hotel room door. Dressed in a stylish royal blue pantsuit, dark sunglasses, and a matching Najib covering her head, mouth, and nose, Zahara's identity was hidden from the prying eyes of the hotel's security cameras and facial recognition. As she made her way to the elevators, Amaran, her AI minder, interrupted her train of thought. *"Zahara, you have just enough time before meeting Mr. Morokov to respond to Chief Detective Singh."*

*"Thank you for reminding, Amaran,"* Zahara noted with her inner voice. Then in a brief moment of introspection, she confided. *"In a different life, Amaran, I would run away with Farah. She's a very fine person and deserving of the love she so desires but can never have. It's a pity that my heart belongs to another, and it always will."*

*"In a different life, Zahara,"* Amaran replied. *"Neither of us would choose to be here. We would be home, far from here. Unfortunately, we have our duty and our destiny to fulfill."*

Zahara closed this train of thought and dialed her friend and sometimes partner in crime, Chief Detective Amrita Singh. The line went straight to voice mail. Knowing that UAE security scanned all voice messages, Zahara left an intentionally vague message. *"Chief Detective Singh, this is Zahara Fitzroy bint Sharif Al Ronaihi retuning your call. I'm sorry to hear about Ms. Gao and Agent Kleiner. I can confirm that I've had several conversations with Agent Kleiner over the last few days concerning shipping manifests at Jebel Ali port. Agent Kleiner also requested that I speak with another party about his inquiry. I'm heading to that meeting right now. I'd be happy to answer any other questions you may have. Feel free to reach out."*



The elevator door opened, and Zahara entered and punched the button for the 27<sup>th</sup> floor. By the time the elevator doors reopened, Zahara's Najib and sunglasses were gone, stored in her purse. She walked into the Skyview lounge on the 27<sup>th</sup> floor with its chic modern design and ocean-inspired color scheme in hues of blues and greens. She took a two-person table along the massive glass wall opposite the bar, ordered an aviation martini, and gazed out at the same view she had enjoyed minutes earlier in her room 12 floors above the Skyview lounge.

A few minutes later, Oleg Morozov entered the Skyview Lounge. He recognized Zahara instantly. She was impossible to miss, a perfect silhouette set against the azure blue of the Persian Gulf and the city's glimmering skyscrapers. Impeccably dressed, Oleg admired Zahara's natural beauty, perfectly coiffed hair and nails, and, above all else, her uniquely beautiful eyes. Almond-shaped and noticeably larger than normal, her eyes were aqua-green with small streaks of violet, the likes of which Oleg had never seen in his life. Beauty aside, Zahara was a dichotomy. People acquainted with her found her warm, personable, and insightful while maintaining the perfect degree of aristocratic detachment needed to operate in Dubai's Arabic male-dominated social structure. Zahara came off as smart, capable, trustworthy, and extremely savvy. She exuded a "quiet cool" aloof sexuality. Men wanted her. Women envied her. Yet everyone sensed Zahara was out of their league. Oleg couldn't help but be enamored and fixated with her. He felt a guilty forbidden desire to be with her and dreamed of acting out on that obsession, yet he knew he never could. She was strictly forbidden fruit.

In truth, Zahara's personality was a facade, an illusion, a persona fashioned to operate in Dubai, which was itself a dazzling illusion. Zahara could size up people, read their wants and desires, and manipulate them at will. Internally she was cold, calculating, focused, and unemotional. Zahara knew what she wanted and would use any of her array of finely tuned interpersonal and physical skills to achieve the desired outcome. While many assumed Zahara was bisexual, she considered her sexuality transactional - a physical act to achieve her ends. No one could imagine that Zahara had one love, one exception, a secret passion, a weakness she hid from all the world.

As Oleg Morozov seated himself at the table next to Zahara, she casually sipped her aviation martini and purposely ignored him, taunting him with her casual aloofness. Oleg, above all else, desired legitimacy and inclusion in "polite society," which the very nature leading a local crime syndicate denied him. Zahara, a respected scion of two wealthy families, embodied

all that Oleg lacked, and her every word, move, and gesture was designed to exploit his subtle weakness to her advantage.

Tall, strong, well-muscled with angular facial features, short sandy colored hair, and light blue eyes, Oleg cut a handsome figure in his bespoke black suit. In Zahara's opinion, Oleg's most interesting feature was a deep scar across his right cheek earned in close-quarters combat as a Russian FSB operative during Russia's first misadventure in Crimea. Oleg Morozov was ashamed and disillusioned over his country's unwarranted invasion and would be even more so over the disastrous second invasion of Ukraine. He quit the FSB, which in turn got him blacklisted. Given his skill set, his only real employment option was to join the Solntsevskaya Bratva crime syndicate. Intelligent, efficient, ruthless when necessary, Oleg quickly rose through the ranks, leaving Russia to become Head of Dubai Operations nearly a decade ago. Oleg was second in command of the syndicate and a favorite of the Russian Oligarchs forced by Western sanctions to relocate to Dubai after the unpleasantness in Ukraine.

Zahara met Oleg nearly five years ago when she relocated her base of operations from Singapore to Dubai. A rival Russian syndicate, the Tambov Gang out of St. Petersburg, challenged Oleg's Solntsevskaya Bratva for control of Dubai's lucrative criminal enterprises. Unlike Oleg's organization, the Tambov operatives were vicious, volatile, and violent. Zahara was among several Dubai business leaders physically threatened by the Tambov. That threat was a grave mistake. When necessary, Zahara developed working relationships with crime syndicates when their interests aligned. Zahara could count Singapore Triad and the Yakuza in Tokyo as "allies of convenience." The Tambov serendipitously drove Zahara and Oleg's Dubai Solntsevskaya Bratva into another such alliance. Every Tambov in Dubai was dead within two weeks, creating quite the mess for Zahara's friend Chief Detective Amrita Singh, to clean up. To Oleg's amazement, the Solntsevskaya Bratva was responsible for just a third of those assassinations. Since those events, Oleg and Zahara maintained an unusual but useful relationship based on mutual respect, Quid Pro Quo trading of "favours," and a touch of emotional manipulation on Zahara's part. Oleg was certain Zahara was an operative of either the CIA, British MI-6, or Israeli Mossad. The CIA, British MI-6, and Israeli Mossad could never be certain if Zahara worked for Solntsevskaya Bratva or one of their opposite intelligence allies. Zahara worked for herself and no other, but the cloud surrounding her true allegiance was another useful façade to hide her real objectives.

After ordering a drink, Oleg broke the ice. “This is a very public place for us to meet Ms. Fitzroy. Are you not concerned about your reputation?”

“I’m not meeting with you, Mr. Morozov,” Zahara started in jest. “I’m politely avoiding a man seated at the table next to me who lacks the emotional intelligence to know when he’s being ignored.”

“You wound me, Ms. Fitzroy,” Oleg replied, then sat silently admiring the view as the waitress delivered Oleg’s drink of choice, Russian Standard Vodka on ice, no fruit.

Once the waitress departed, Oleg continued. “Ignoring your poor reception for such a valued friend, something must be very important for you to arrange a public meeting in broad daylight. So, what seems to be the problem?”

He was right, of course. Zahara typically arranged their rendezvous at Rasputin, Red Square, or one of several other high-end Russian establishments Oleg controlled. Late-night transactions negotiated over shots of vodka away from the prying eyes of Dubai’s police and Ministry of Interior.

“Two words, Oleg,” Zahara explained. “14K Triad. An INTERPOL agent and a 14K Triad member, possibly a turncoat, are already dead. Assassinated at the hands of the 14K Triad, or so my sources tell me. I need to find 14K Triad and extract some critical information. Time is of the essence. I have less than 24 hours. Can you help?”

Zahara gazed at the smile across Oleg’s face reflected on the lounge’s glass wall. Oleg let out a brief laugh at the irony of the situation. 14K was a problem for him too. “I may be able to assist you, Ms. Fitzroy, in return for some assistance on your part.”

“And what might that assistance be, Mr. Morozov?” Zahara queried.

“I need to convert 5 million dollars worth of cryptocurrency into hard cash. Untraceable, of course.” Oleg replied, knowing that Zahara’s considerable corporate assets included Dubai Crypto, which maintained “special relations” with all the major Emirati banks in the UAE Banks Federation.

“I can make that happen,” Zahara replied. “My standard fee of 10% applies, of course.”

“Of course. These exorbitant fees vex me, Ms. Fitzroy,” Oleg complained. “But I would think far less of you if you didn’t insist on them. After all, business is business. I assume your manservant, Tak, will make the arrangements as usual-Da? I’m still intrigued by the

circumstances that caused a former Yakuza to become a close confidante of a woman of your stature - quite a story in think.”

“That is a private matter, Oleg,” Zahara stated, avoiding his inquiries. “As to your request, Tak will contact you shortly. As to my request, what can you tell me?”

“Keep your friends close, but keep our enemies closer,” Oleg replied with a wicked smile. “In a gesture to maintain good relations, I’ve allowed the 14K Triad access to my clubs. You can expect them at the Red Square Nightclub just before midnight tonight. They are my guests. I would be more than happy to introduce you.”

“Brilliant,” Zahara exclaimed. “ You are a clever man. I’ll meet you at Red Square just after midnight.”

A voice chimed in Zahara’s head. It was her minder Amaran. “*Takeru Takahashi has arrived to take you to Abu Dhabi for your appointment with Samir Hammami at Neubandala headquarters.*”

Zahara pretended to look at her watch momentarily. “Oh my, how time flies,” she stated. “I must run to a pressing appointment. Oleg, Could you be a dear and pay my bill?”

Without waiting for an answer, Zahara got up from her table, collected her purse, and headed for the Skyview Lounge’s exit. As she passed by Oleg, she bent over slightly and whispered, “14K Triad is very dangerous. It’s the Tambovs all over again, I fear. Please be careful. It would be difficult to replace my favorite Russian bear.”

Just like that, she was gone. “*She loves me,*” Oleg wistfully thought to himself as he paid their bills. At least for today, Oleg Morozov would be happy. Zahara’s words dispersed the cloud of negative energy and depression so typical of his Russian nature.

Tak waited patiently for Zahara as she exited the Burj Al Arab hotel. He opened the door of her FlyC and gently closed it once Zahara seated herself. “Boss, our flying time is roughly fifteen minutes to Al Mamoura Tower for your meeting with Hammami-san,” Tak noted as he took the driver’s seat. “We will follow the E11 Sky Lane South over the old Shiek Maktoum Bin Rahed Rd at an altitude of 1200 feet. I assume your business went well with Morozov-san, Hai?”

“Thank you, Tak,” Zahara replied. “Business with Mr. Morozov was quite productive. I have a task for you while I meet with Mr. Hammami. I’ll explain once we are airborne.”

With that, the FlyCr emitted the familiar warning sound as it purged, lifted off, and accelerated to a flight ceiling of 1200 feet to merge into E11 Sky Lane.



**Al Mamoura Tower, Neubandala  
Sovereign Wealth Headquarters,  
Abu Dhabi**

Dubai is the commercial center of the UAE, but the center of government power resides in the capital, Abu Dhabi, to the south. The city itself was home to the Presidential Palace, the Sheikh Zayed Grand

Mosque, and a handful of iconic towers housing the major ministries and sovereign-owned conglomerates funded from the UAE's vast oil reserves. Al Mamoura was one of the new iconic towers in Abu Dhabi's central business district and home to Neubandala, the largest of the three UAE sovereign wealth funds with assets in excess of 250 million \$US. Director Samir Hammami was the de facto head of Neubandala, second only to the President of the UAE, His Highness the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi. Samir was one of a hand full of trusted commoners among the Emirate Sheiks and their royal families, perhaps the most trusted commoner.

Tak landed the FlyCr in the temporary visitor parking area just outside the lobby entrance of Al Mamoura Tower and assisted Zahara from the vehicle. "Boss, just signal when you are finished with Hammami-san. Meanwhile. I will busy myself with the arrangements you have requested for Morozov-san."

"Thank you, Tak," Zahara replied as she left him and walked toward the lobby. She was surprised to see Samir Hammami waiting to greet her there. "*This is rather peculiar,*" Zahara thought. "*Samir usually has his assistant greet me.*" The peculiar always vexed Zahara. The peculiar was always a precursor to a problem.

"Zahara Fitzroy bint Sharif Al Ronaihi," Samir greeted her. "Thank you for seeing me on such short notice."

"Samir," Zahara replied. "As always, I'm at your beck and call."

That was a fact. Samir befriended Zahara early on in her transition from Singapore to Dubai. He took Zahara under his wing when she first arrived and helped her navigate the byzantine, unwritten rules of business and behavior in the UAE. Born in Syria, he came from nothing and rose through intelligence, capability, and competence to graduate with an MBA

from Oxford. He went on to begin his family and create a series of successful businesses in Aleppo, Syria. The Syrian civil war and the Battle of Aleppo, yet another Russian misadventure, changed all of that. Random Russian bombardmen killed his wife and children, and his businesses leveled to the ground. Early in their budding relationship, Samir explained to Zahara that she reminded him of his lost daughter. In his mind, Zahara embodied an image of all he had hoped for his daughter might have been. Having never had the presence of a father herself, Zahara felt a similar emotional bond to Samir.

Trim, tall, tanned, with thick short dark hair fading to grey on the sides, Samir had sharp, handsome features and an aquiline nose much like the Medici family of Italian fame. Urbane, judicious, confident, and refined, Samir was the very embodiment of a successful businessman. Zahara suspected His Highness the Sheikh of Abu Dhabi recognized these qualities, and together he and Samir had propelled Nuebandala to success.

“The Boat Race is in a few weeks,” Samir quipped, referring to the famous Oxford vs. Cambridge rowing competitions held on the Thames River in London every spring. “Care to wager me against Oxford?”

Zahara, who attended rival Cambridge, was obliged to take the bet. It was a ritual Samir and Zahara shared every year. “As usual, I’ll wager you a home-cooked meal if Oxford wins.”

Samir laughed. “Your cooking is terrible, my dear. So much so I’ll be forced to cheer for Cambridge rather than face the culinary disaster you call cooking!”

He was right, of course. Zahara smiled and laughed at Samir’s jest. “Alright,” Zahara relented. “Tak will prepare the meal if Cambridge loses, which should more than suffice.”

“Your Yakuza manservant is a man of many talents,” Samir observed. “He’s is wasting his time in your service. Seriously, I could build a restaurant empire around his culinary skills.”

“Tak prefers the Japanese term Jūsha, Samir,” Zahara chided. “While one connotation is valet or servant, the other is as a devoted follower.”

“Thank you for today’s lesson in Japanese culture. I am sure Tak is quite devoted to you. As to why he is devoted, that is the mystery.” Samir paused for a moment. “It’s a beautiful day. Let’s walk the grounds so we can have some privacy.”

Zahara followed Samir out of the lobby to a beautifully landscaped path lined with flowers, yucca, and towering Mediterranean palms, that encircled Al Mamoura Tower. “Zahara,” Samir began. “I’m very concerned for your safety. The Ministry of Interior handed me a report



today. Two people have been murdered, and one of them was an INTERPOL agent, a German national named Hans Kleiner, whose last known messages were to you. I know you have frequent contact with Thomas Miller, the CIA Station Chief, Sapherina Mizrahi of Mossad, and Nkiruka Okafor of MI-6. Then there is the matter of Mr. Morozov...”

Zahara cut Samir off. A rare event in conversations between men and women in Emirati society. “Hans Kleiner was a personal friend of mine, Samir.” She stated firmly, emphasizing her words. “He was assassinated. The other victim, the American, was a member of 14K Triad.” Zahara stopped for a moment and stared intensely at Samir. “Let that sink in again. The Triads are making another play to gain control in the Emirates. Say what you will about Oleg Morozov, and I know you despise Russians as a general rule. While not a saint, he is a civilized and principled man compared with any Triad leader. A decade ago, after the unpleasantness in Ukraine, the UAE willingly took in the Russian Oligarchs and all their investment money. Morozov and Solntsevskaya Bratva came with that deal.”

Zahara took a breath and reverted to a normal tone of voice. “Besides, you know the background of my various corporations, including Dubai Crypto. I have access to information invaluable to the Ministry of Interior and our CIA, MI-6, and Mossad allies. I am faithful to a fault to the Emirates and the Royal families, and I’m simply doing my part to help.”

Samir was taken aback by the intensity of Zahara’s reply. “*So passionate. So righteous.*” He thought to himself. “*Excellent qualities for a man, but dangerous for a woman in Emirati society.*” A point he could not possibly make to a strong-willed woman like Zahara. Instead, he acknowledged her position. “Zahara, all I am saying is I worry about you. I have lost too many people close to me. I’m just imploring you to exercise caution with these foreigners. They play by different rules, and while we tolerate them in our society, they can never be trusted. As for the Ministry of Interior and, for that matter, His Highness the Sheikh himself, both value your service. Your loyalty is without question.”

Samir paused and changed subjects. “This brings me to the second reason we need to meet today.” Samir reached in his pocket, pulled out a gold embossed envelope, and handed it to Zahara. She recognized the envelope right away, an official note from His Highness the Sheikh. “It’s an invitation to join His Highness for falconry and trap shooting. His Highness’s third son and his daughter will join us.”

“The Princess that competed in the Olympics?” Zahara quired, intrigued at the opportunity to meet the famous “shooting Princess,” as the local media referred to her.

“Yes, the very same Princess,” Samir confirmed. “As for the third son, Prince Khalid, he rather fancies you. He’s confided in me that he would like to have you as his fifth wife. His Highness favors the match. His Highness believes the presence of a strong, capable woman will curb his son’s playboy ways.”

The normally composed Zahara’s jaw dropped. Although he tried to convince her otherwise, Samir knew she was dead set against marriage or having children.

Zahara drew a deep breath to gather her composure, then replied. “It’s impossible to decline an invitation from His Highness gracefully. On the bright side, I’ll finally have the opportunity to meet the Princess. I understand she is quite accomplished as both a marksman and an intellectual. Besides, I do adore a good trap shoot.” She paused to look at Samir. “There is no bloody way. I refuse to be the fifth wife in that ridiculous playboy Prince Khalid’s harem. Besides, I thought UAE law limited a man to four wives anyway.”

“There is no limit to the number of wives for Emirati Royalty,” Samir replied, knowing that fact would only further goad Zahara. Samir was almost ashamed of savoring the irony of Zahara’s awkward situation. She rarely lost control of her vaunted composure.

Zahara went on a brief tear. “If I were to marry, Samir, not that there is a chance in hell that I would wed, I’d be the first and only wife. There’s no bloody way I’ll end up being emotionally abandoned like my good friend Farha bin Mohammed AL Kalief. I’m either good enough to be a man’s one and only wife, or I’d be no wife at all!”

Samir laughed. “Are you done?” Zahara calmed down from her rare emotional outburst. “Good!” Samir continued. “I’ll be with you the entire time as your chaperone, and I’ll try to tamp down Prince Khalid’s expectations ahead of time. Besides, it was the Princess that insisted on your invitation. She is intrigued by the famous independent Emirati businesswoman, Zahara Fitzroy bint Sharif Al Ronaihi.”

“Good to know,” Zahara replied, a smile returning to her face.

The pair had almost completed their walk around Al Mamoura Tower, and Samir stopped about a hundred meters from the lobby entrance. “One last thing before we part. This business with 14K Triad is more complicated and dangerous than it looks. The dead woman, Cynthia Gao, she’s not 14K Triad. Thomas Miller, the CIA Station Chief, just informed the Ministry of

Interior that Gao was, in fact, a Chinese MSS, Ministry of State Security, deeply embedded field agent. MSS is using 14K Triad as a front for their operations. Yìchén Péng, another embedded Chinese MSS agent, poses as the local 14K Triad chief. It's also rumored that General Chao Chang of Chinese 3PLA is the shadowy figure behind this subterfuge.”

Zahara was concerned and confused. “Samir, I can understand MSS involvement here. They're the equivalent of the American CIA. 3PLA is the Chinese version of the NSA under the People's Liberation Army. Why are they involved? “

“The Ministry is efforting that question as we speak,” Samir replied. “Please stay clear of this, Zahara. That is all I ask.” Samir couldn't wait for a reply. He was late for his next meeting, and rather than argue further with Zahara, which was pointless, he would leave the situation in her hands and hope for the best. Resigned in the fact that he'd have more luck taming the wind.

A few minutes later, Tak merged Zahara's FlyCr into the E11 Sky Lane South over the old Shiek Maktoum Bin Rahed Rd toward home.

“Your meeting with Hammami-san went well?” Tak inquired.

“Very well, Tak. Enlightening, in fact,” She replied. “It seems Chinese MSS is using 14K Triad as a front for their operations. That and, much to my chagrin, Prince Khalid would like to take me as his fifth wife.”

Tak let out a rare laugh relishing the irony of Zahara's words. “I do not know which you despise more, Chinese MSS or marriage. Either way, 14K Triad and Prince Khalid are fucked, I think.”

Both of them laughed at Tak's jest.

“We may need Chief Detective Singh's assistance tonight, given this new intelligence,” Zahara noted. “I'll drop her a brief update on the day's events and check on her availability.”

### **Red Square Nightclub, New Moscow Hotel, Deira neighborhood, Dubai**

It was close to midnight as Tak landed the FlyCr in Deira Park, allowing Zahara to discretely exit and walk to the New Moscow Hotel just two blocks away while Tak waited patiently for further instructions. Over the last decade, the influx of Russian Oligarch money had transformed Deira from a rundown working-class neighborhood and port into a vibrant and revitalized mecca for a new generation of expatriates seeking to escape the totalitarian regimes of the East. Running nearly 2 kilometers along Dubai Creek, Deira Park teamed with the buzz of

tourists and locals enjoying themselves in the waterside cafes, tourist boats, water taxis, and an array of yachts.

Even two blocks away, Zahara could still hear the din of the vibrant nightlife along the water as she entered the ornate Imperial Russian-themed Lobby of the New Moscow Hotel. Ignoring the bellhops and front desk staff, Zahara walked to the right of the grand marble staircase leading to the opulent Berlin Ballroom on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor and through a pair of double doors just beyond. As she made her way down the hallway to a second set of double doors, Zahara heard the muffled beat of the latest electro-dance music from the Red Square Night Club. A handsomely dressed bouncer opened one of the doors for her to pass. The music grew instantly louder as she passed by the queue of regular clientele waiting to enter the club and made her way to the VIP entrance. Everyone in the queue ogled the beautifully proportioned woman dressed head to toe in black leather. Zahara's knee-high boots, skin-tight pants, bustier top, and a thigh-length Nehru collar jacket were the very essence of the retro 1980s punk look worn by younger upper-class Emirati who could afford it.

"Who is she?" a man in line asked his girlfriend, a self-declared fashionista and expert in all things Hollywood.

"I'm sure I've seen her in Vogue," the girlfriend replied. "She's that new European actress everyone is raving about." Which was, of course, utter nonsense.

The VIP security bouncer, Yuri, recognized Zahara instantly as both a regular and a special friend to the boss, Mr. Morokov. He opened the VIP velvet rope to let Zahara pass. "Greetings, Ms. Fitzroy. Mr. Morozov and the staff are delighted to see you again."

"Thank you, Yuri," Zahara replied. "The pleasure is all mine."



Zahara entered Red Square Night Club, the posh Russian-themed discotheque synonymous with extravagance and debauchery. She weaved her way through the crowd of drunken revelers to an unmarked door in the back corner of the club. Zahara could barely hear herself think. The music was loud enough to make

her skin vibrate. For the average customer, Red Square was limited to the hotel's first floor with a long bar at the club entrance, a stage dominating the back wall, and a dance floor in front of the stage. Guests sat at regular cabaret tables in the center rear and bottle service booth seating flanking both sides. There was much more to the club than meets the eye. For those with money and more rarified tastes, Morozov operated an LBGTQ speakeasy on the basement level, just below Red Square - the very same LBGTQ speakeasy Zahara frequented to gain INTERPOL agent Hans Kleiner's confidence.

It took a few minutes to navigate the crowd until Zahara reached a set of heavy velvet curtains to the left of the stage. She parted the curtains, stepped behind them, and knocked on an unmarked door hidden behind the curtains. A small section of the door slid open, and after a quick inspection by security, the door opened, and Zahara stepped inside.

"Your timing is perfect, as always, Ms. Fitzroy," Oleg Morozov greeted her with a smile. "Your Triad friends are at the 3<sup>rd</sup> private bottle table on the left."

Like any crime syndicate, Solntsevskaya Bratva dabbled in prostitution, women, men, gay or straight, transvestites, threesomes, orgies – his clients had exotic tastes and the money to buy their indulgences. Yìchén Péng had one weakness, expensive prostitutes. Oleg had a very special "package" arranged for Yìchén that night. A new girl, an experienced woman of incomparable class and beauty. "A woman rumored to satisfy even the most exotic sexual tastes," Oleg had explained to Yìchén as part of Zahara's cover story for this clandestine rendezvous.

“You can’t miss Yìchén Péng,” Oleg explained with a worried expression. “He has a patch over his left eye and a long scar running down for the blinded eye.” Oleg grabbed Zahara by the arm and locked eyes with her. “This is a bad idea, Zahara. You should not do this. Even Russian syndicates avoid the Triads, and you should too.”

Zahara leaned over and kissed Oleg on the cheek. Oleg’s face became flush, and he felt oddly embarrassed, like a young schoolboy experiencing his first kiss. “I’m a grown woman, Oleg. Try not to worry,” she stated, giving him a sly, confident wink. Zahara turned and proceeded down the stairway to the speakeasy, leaving Oleg speechless.

The speakeasy was a smaller, more intimate version of the Red Square nightclub one floor above. A drag review and live sex show set to 1970s disco music played on the stage at the far end of the club. A large dancefloor occupied the center, flanked on both sides by split booth private bottle service tables. Each bottle table connected to a private room just behind, hidden by velvet curtains. A very convenient arrangement for transacting business of a “personal nature.” The club had no other seating, You could afford a booth, or you could not enter. Zahara surveyed the bars to her left and right as she entered the club from the stairwell. As usual, the bars teemed with prostitutes and clients of every persuasion imaginable. The dance floor was lively, with the partygoers dancing along with members of the drag show. To add to the debauch, a pair of extremely fetching couples engaged in oral sex at each end of the stage. These live sex shows were cheered on until one partner or another reached climax, and the partygoers shouted out in approval. It was the sort of thing you might find in the Reeperbahn in Hamburg, Germany, or the Red Light District in old Amsterdam. The fact that an establishment of this sort existed in Dubai and that at least half of the clientele were Saudi or Emirati would shock the authorities. In reality, while known to the authorities, the speakeasy was simply disavowed.

Zahara’s focus turned to the third booth on the left. “*Ah, there you are,*” She thought to herself, sizing up the eight Triad members and four prostitutes drinking and laughing at the booth. She locked her eyes on Yìchén Péng - the eye patch, the scar, just as Oleg described. Péng, dressed in a finely tailored charcoal grey Nehru collard suit, stood out from the shabbily dressed Triad members surrounding him. While the other men were laughing and carrying on with the bevy of prostitutes Oleg had sent to the table, Yìchén Péng quietly sipped his drink, seemingly lost in thought.

Zahara made her way to the booth, ignoring the crude drunken prattle of the thuggish 14k Triad members, and introduced herself to Yìchén in Mandarin Chinese. “Mr. Péng, a pleasure to meet you. Mr. Morozov tells me you are looking for some company. May I join you?”

Yìchén momentarily eyed Zahara up and down before answering in Mandarin. “I’m impressed. Oleg told me you were beautiful, but he failed to mention you spoke Mandarin. Please take a seat, miss ...what did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t give you one,” Zahara answered with a wry smile.

Yìchén nodded to one of his men on his left. “You don’t mind if my man, Mr. Liu, searches you do you? One can never be too careful.”

“I understand,” Zahara replied. Mr. Liu patted down her arms and legs. Liu’s hands moved to her torso. He worked his way up from Zahara’s waist and took the liberty of squeezing her breasts. Zahara slapped him. “Those are for the boss, you peasant dog,” she scolded. “Touch me like that again, Mr. Liu, and you’ll lose those hands!”

Yìchén laughed. “That is enough, Mr. Liu.” He turned to Zahara and motioned for her to sit beside him. “Very spirited. I think you and I will get on rather well.”

Over the next 30 minutes, Zahara plied Yìchén with her conversational and physical arts to a point where he practically demanded to have his way with her right there. “*Men! So predictable. So easily manipulated. Slaves to their base impulses.*” Zahara thought as she turned and whispered in Yìchén’s ear. “My skills require privacy.” Then she motioned her head to the private room behind them. Yìchén took her hand, led her toward the private room just behind their table, and signaled Mr. Liu he wanted privacy.

The dimly lit room had a beverage cart next to a comfortable sofa, a king bed with a light stand and lamp, and a private bathroom and shower. Zahara led Yìchén to the sofa and pushed him slightly, forcing him to sit down. She took off her leather jacket, casually flung it on the bed, leaned over, held Yìchén’s face in her hands, and passionately kissed him. Still locked in a kiss, Zahara straddled Yìchén sitting on his lap, pinning him against the sofa. She pulled Yìchén’s head back, giving him a chance to catch his breath, and as he did, Zahara bit down on a capsule in her left molar and breathed the contents out, then holding her breath to avoid the effects herself.

The neurotoxin cocktail, a combination of muscle relaxant and a powerful truth serum, acted in seconds. Yìchén's eyes rolled slightly, then he murmured, "I must have had too much to drink. I feel tipsy." Followed by a boyish giggle.

"Pay attention," Zahara stated calmly and slowly and gave Yìchén a playful smack across his face to get his attention. He attempted to focus, his gaze locked with hers. The cocktail of neurotoxins dilated his pupils and reminded Zahara of big black saucers. She had a little more than two minutes before the impact of the drugs would begin to wear off. Zahara had to work quickly. She began rattling off a series of questions.

"Who do you work for?"

"On paper, I'm a field agent for the Chinese Ministry of State Security posing as 14K Triad. I'm actually on a special assignment. I work directly for General Chao Chan, head of People's Liberation Army, 3PLA," Yìchén replied lackadaisically.

"What is your assignment?"

"Travel to Iran is closed. The Western Allies blockade all Chinese shipping, air traffic, and rail links. Using the triads as a front, we procured local United Arab Emirates shipping to move technology, technicians, and equipment to our ally Iran. This is the first of many blockade shipments if we are successful."

"What equipment? What technology?"

"Engines to build 100 hypersonic missiles. Technicians and knowhow to make many more."

"Why supply Iran? What is the motive for the operation?"

"Destabilize the Middle East. Break the basing arrangements for Western air forces units and navies to continue their blockade of China."

"How many ships are involved?"

"Two ships. The *Shining Star*, a large three-masted Dhow, docked not far from here on Dubai Creek. She will carry the technicians and technical data. The other ship is the *Trade Winds*, a 2000-ton freighter carrying the engine components docked at berth 40 at the Jebel Ali port."

"When do the ships depart?"

"They both depart tomorrow. The *Shining Star* departs at 8:00 AM. The *Trade Winds*, two hours later, 10:00 AM."



“Why did you kill Cynthia Gao and the INTERPOL agent?”

“Cynthia was compromised. Our instructions were clear. Eliminate any operational threat with extreme prejudice. Orders are orders.”

“A final question, why are the Chinese Ministry of State Security and People’s Liberation Army, 3PLA working together?”

“General Chao Chang has seized operational control of both intelligence agencies. He may very well become our next Primer. He is very powerful, ambitious, and dangerous. Should I fail here, I may quite possibly join Ms. Gao.”

Zahara had the information she needed. The neurotoxin cocktail was about to wear off, and Zahara needed a few additional minutes to make her escape. She placed her hand on Yìchén’s neck, centering her cocktail ring over his jugular, and released a transdermal dose of sedative.

*“Tak, Amaran, did you copy the intelligence on the two ships?”* Zahara queried with her inner voice. She received an affirmative from both her Jūsha, Tak, and her minder, Amaran. *“Good,”* she noted as she got up, poured a glass of scotch from the drink cart, tossed a little scotch on Yìchén’s shirt to make him look and smell drunk, and placed the rest of the glass in his hand.

*“Amaran, contact Miller at CIA, Mizrahi at Mossad, and Nkiruka Okafor at MI-6. Give them the details of the Shining Star and Trade Winds plot. I recommend they destroy the vessels at sea using the Western Alliesblockade as cover for any action,”* Zahara Directed.

She addressed her Jūsha (manservant) with her inner voice, *“Tak, I’ll meet you at the FlyCr in a few minutes. I’m extracting myself now.”*

With that, Zahara exited the room and passed through the curtains. Ignoring the other drunk Triad members and walked straight over to Mr. Liu. “I’ve never been so insulted in my life!” Zahara exclaimed in Mandarin, faining anger and frustration. “Your boss is passed out drunk in there. You should see to him.”

Zahara didn’t wait to see Mr. Liu’s reaction. She walked out of the bottle service booth onto the packed dance floor, quickly losing herself in the crowd. Liu didn’t follow. He made a beeline to the private room where he found Yìchén Péng passed out, just as the prostitute had described.

“Péng. Péng, wake up,” Liu stated while shaking his leader to get him conscious. Yìchén roused and took a moment to gain his faculties. As the cobwebs cleared, he asked Liu a simple question, “Where’s the woman?”

Zahara exited the hotel a few minutes later and walked toward Deira Park to rendezvous with Tak. “*That went quite well, all things considered,*” Zahara thought, somewhat pleased herself at the ease of her getaway. As she entered the park, Zahara heard the report of a gun firing and instantly felt a force like a sledgehammer hit her shoulder, almost knocking her off her feet. Before she could react, a second shot rang out. Zahara watched a spray of blood spread out in the air in front of her. Simultaneously, another hammering impact knocked the air out of her lungs.

She crumpled to the ground, mentally screaming in her mind. “*Tak, Tak, I’m hit! The ships, don’t forget the ships!*”

Lying on the ground, she could see an angry and agitated Yìchén Péng, gun in hand, moving toward her with the clear intent to finish what he started. She attempted to crawl away, but her limbs wouldn’t move. A bright circular light, like a halo, appeared above her, bathing her body in soft white light. Zahara heard a series of “zipping noises” accompanying flashes of orange light from the halo. Her pursuers fell, one by one as if struck by lightning, starting with Yìchén Péng. Zahara’s conscience began to fade. She felt oddly at peace as she lay in a pool of her own blood. “*I must have an angel on my shoulder,*” she mused as the Isha, the Muslim night prayer, pierced the silence from the minarets of the mosque a few blocks away. Someone picked her up. She looked at the face, a friendly face, and in her last moments of consciousness, she heard, “Boss, Boss, everything will be fine ...”

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Thomas Miller, UAE CIA Station Chief, was the first to receive the message from Amaran on behalf of Zahara. Back in Washington DC, it took nearly an hour to rouse the Director of the CIA, who immediately reached out to the President and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of staff. The small group spent the better part of two hours validating the intelligence Miller provided before informing Miller no American submarines were on station close enough to interdict the two ships. A Navy carrier-based strike would be too obvious and provocative. The Joint Chiefs rejected the carrier option without further consideration.

“Fucking gutless political hacks,” Miller fumed aloud as he speed-dialed Nkiruka Okafor, his local MI-6 British Intelligence contact hoping the British could step in where the US government had failed.

Okafor answered immediately. “Miller, about time you called. Is this about the two bloody ships Ms. Fitzroy’s assistant informed be about?” Nkiruka Okafor queried in her velvety British accent.

“Yes, Niruka. It’s no joy on our side. The US doesn’t have a submarine asset within reach, and an air attack is out of the question. Have you run this up the line with your team?”

“You’re in luck, Miller. I raised the Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service, and he questioned me about the veracity of Ms. Fitzroy’s intelligence and her character in general. It took a few minutes, but I explained her special relationship with MI-6, Mossad, and you lads at the CIA. Once he understood the gravity of the situation, he raised the alarm at the Ministry of Defense. The First Lord of the Admiralty confirmed we had an attack submarine stationed just outside the Hormuz Strait, less than an hour transit time to reach station off of Dubai.”

“Fucking fantastic!” Miller exclaimed. “I was worried we’d have to pull together a Plan B - some half-assed scheme to sabotage both ships before they sail. An attack on two vessels docked in UAE ports had the makings of a public relations nightmare.”

“Indeed, a bloody sodding mess,” Nkiruka agreed. “I reached out to Sapherina Mizrahi at Mossad while Admiralty was busy cutting emergency orders for our submarine commander. For obvious reasons, the Israelis can’t be seen as having a hand in this, but Saphirina has “eyes” on both ships. Your DoD reached out to British MoD to provide real-time satellite tracking of the targets. All we can do now is wait for the Admiralty to drop the hammer.”

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Chief Detective Amrita Singh picked up the incoming call from Tak. She’d been expecting a call from Zahara and was surprised to see Tak’s number instead.

“Hello Tak, I’ve been waiting for Zahara’s call. What’s happening?” Amrita asked

“Chief Detective,” Tak replied. “I have little time. There’s been an incident near the edge of Deira Park, near the New Moscow Hotel.”

Amrita was concerned. “What happened? Is Zahara alright?”

Tak didn't answer for a moment. "The Boss is injured," He began in a low and deliberate tone of voice. "Tak cannot be sure, but her injuries may be serious. I will know more after her repairs are complete."

Amrita looked at her Mech robotic partner Sam and mouthed, "Repaired?"

Sam shrugged his robotic shoulders and whispered, "Likely a poor choice of English vocabulary. Who can tell with you humans."

Amrita ignored her Mech partner's quip. "Tak, is there anything we can do to help?"

"That is the point of the call," Tak replied. "The Boss asked that you gain control of the investigation. Make sure she is in no way involved. Finally, Tak knows some evidence you find will raise many questions. Lose that evidence. It is best for everyone that you do. I will update you when I know more." The line went dead.

"Sam, let's get to Deira Park on the double," Amrita ordered.

Sam was way ahead of her as the acceleration pushed her back into the seat of their FlyCr. They arrived in under two minutes. As their FlyCr sounded a warning tone and descended, Amrita could see the regular police patrol had arrived and cordoned off the area. "Good," she thought to herself, "*We are the first detective team to arrive at the crime scene!*"

Amrita and Sam got out of the car and got a brief report from the officer in charge. Eight dead, lying in a rough semicircle pattern with no immediate signs of wounds or trauma. "Sam, please case the crime scene," Amrita instructed. "I'll call in and make sure we get assigned to the case."

A few minutes later, Sam returned and gave his report. "The officers missed it. Each victim suffered a barely visible trauma to the heart or the head. The only records of injuries like these that I can find are from lighting bolts—some type of powerful electromagnetic impulse. I performed facial recognition on the victims where I could. All the victims have ties to the Chinese 14K Triad."

"Is this some sort of gang turf war massacre?" Amrita queried.

"I cannot speak to motivation," Sam replied. "But I did find two shell casings from 5.8mm x 21mm rounds consistent with Chinese QSZ-92 pistol. The man holding the pistol, Mr. Yìchén Péng, may very well be one of the shooters in the Xynthia Gao, Hans Kleiner case."

“Wouldn’t that be a lucky break,” Marita mused.

“There is one last thing,” Sam continued. “The officers missed it due to the lighting and location. There is a significant pool of blood in the grass, roughly 30 meters from the victims.”

Amrita looked at Sam nervously and quietly stated the obvious. “Zahara.”

“I’ve collected a sample for the lab,” Sam noted. “If it is Zahara’s blood, which I remind you we cannot be certain, she has been gravely injured.”

No evidence existed to connect Zahara with the incident. Eight hours later, Sam and Chief Detective Amrita Singh received a copy of the lab report – the lab couldn’t match the blood to a blood type. The sample appeared contaminated with unknown nano-particles, and the lab technician theorized that it was possibly some sort of new synthetic blood. When asked what to do with the sample, Chief Detective Amrita Singh confirmed that the blood was contaminated, useless for the investigation and asked the technician to destroy it.

Chief Detective Amrita Singh had yet another mystery to add to her collection surrounding Zahara Fitzroy bint Sharif Al Ronaihi. Still worried about her injuries left a text:

**[Zahara – I hope you are well. Txt or call as soon as you can - Amrita]**

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On the bridge of the *HMS Audacious*, a British Astute-class fast attack submarine, Captain William Simon Fallows completed the final maneuvers to line up his attack on the freighter *Trade Winds*.

“Make tube one ready,” Captain Fallows ordered.

A minute later, the torpedo room confirmed, “Tube one ready in all aspects, Captain.”

“Sonar, confirm range and bearing to target. Calculate final firing solution.”

“Conn, Range 15,000 meters, Bearing 10 degrees to port. Firing solution complete. Tube one firing solutions loaded and ready in all aspects.”

“Very well,” Captain Fallowed confirmed. “Fire One,” he commanded.

The torpedo room confirmed, “Aye, Tube one fired.” The command was followed by a soft “whooshing” sound as the British Spearfish torpedo ejected from its tube. The Spearfish, a wire-guided torpedo with both active and passive sonar, began passive sonar acquisition of the target.

“Conn, Sonar, the fish has acquired the target and is running normally in all aspects. 9,000 meters to target and closing.”

Two minutes later, the torpedo room updated status: “1,000 meters to target, active sonar enabled. Twenty seconds to impact.”

The crew silently waited for confirmation of impact. The Spearfish torpedo hit the freighter *Trade Winds* dead amidship, and she broke in half and sunk in less than 30 seconds with all hands lost.

“Conn, Sonar, detonation confirmed. We have hull breakup and secondary explosions. Kill confirmed.”

There was no cheering or revelry at destroying their target. At least 50 crewmembers of the *Trade Winds*, many innocent of any crime, went to a watery grave. There was one more target on the butcher’s bill for the day, and roughly an hour later, the Dhow, *Shining Star*, joined the *Trade Winds* at the bottom of the Strait of Hormuz.

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In Beijing, at the Third Department of the People’s Liberation Army, 3PLA, headquarters eight hours later, General Chao Chang received two pieces of bad news almost simultaneously. The first piece of information, 3PLA operative Yìchén Péng was dead along with seven 14K triad members. The second, *Trade Winds* and *Shining Star*, failed to arrive at the port of Bandar Abbas in Iran. The two ship’s emergency transponders were no longer operating, and there were no signs of them anywhere in the Persian Gulf or the Gulf of Oman. General Chang concluded that, in all likelihood, the Western Allies had destroyed both vessels.

Always cool and calculating, General Chang showed no anger. He quietly pondered his next move. “*Revenge is a dish best served cold,*” he thought. “*I will discover who is responsible in due time.*”

**Fitzroy bint Sharif Al Ronaihi Residence, Emirates Hills neighborhood, Dubai**

A song, a beautiful lullaby, played in Zahara's head. Her mind was filled with images of snowcapped mountains, towering forests, and three large moons reflecting the red-orange light of the midday sun. "*Home,*" Zahara thought as she basked in the total peace and security of a "bonding dream."

"*Wake up, love,*" a voice sang in Zahara's head, then continued with the lullaby.

Zahara sighed. She could stay in this blissful state of a bonding dream forever. A quiet chittering sound by her ear and the wrestling of wings above interrupted her meditative state. Zahara concentrated on the sound, and her mind translated the strange noises into English. "Wake up, love." The soft little voice chattered. "You have given us quite the scare but are mended and well. The world of humankind does not sleep. We have much to do, so wake up."

Zahara yawned, "I'm waking, my love. How long was I asleep?" She opened her eyes and gazed out at her family of misfits. Tak stood at the end of her bed, smiling and barechested, displaying his beautiful "Hikae," chest panel tattoo, and "Nagasode," full arm sleeve tattoos designed by the famous artist Horiyoshi III. Amaran, her fluid, shapeshifting AI minder and protector, formed a smiling replica of Zahara's face. Finally, Kaliea, Zahara's feathered dragon-like raptor, a Calaxian bonded symbiote and Zahara's love match, chattered and rubbed her face against Zahara's as a sign of affection.

"Boss, you sleep almost 26 hours," Tak replied. "Tak very worried. You lose much too much blood." He waved his arm toward the fluid shapeshift AI and the feathered dragon-like raptor. "Amaran and Kalika perform many repairs and make you like new."

"I am fortunate to be here at all," Zahara noted. "I had an angel on my shoulder. My memory is hazy, but something interceded and managed to protect me at the last minute."

"Your Halo," Amaran explained. "A cloaked security drone I experimented with before declaring it operational and briefing you on this new layer of protection. We were fortunate I scheduled a field test during your mission. "

Zahara smiled. "Halo! I like it. Your thoughtfulness never ceases to amaze me. I may live to a see hundred with you by my side."

"You're a series ten human clone," Amaran responded, failing to recognize Zahara's jest. "You should live to over 300 years of age, perhaps more."

“I’m already 87 years old, but it feels like 300.” Zahara laughed. For the next few minutes, Zahara and her team, her family of misfits, discussed the events of the previous two days. Finally Zahara interuped all the banter. “I need to file my report holograph now that we’ve hashed out the events surrounding our latest crisis.” Zahara waved her hand toward the door. “Now run along, everyone.” Her bedroom now empty, Zahara gathered her thoughts and recorded her report:

**Imperial Science Guild, Alien Anthropology Division Headquarters, planet Calaxia,  
Zetara Star System**

**Department of Primitive Species Intervention – Earth Task Force**

**Interim status report by Operative 345**

I continue in my mission using my current cover persona, Zahara Fitzroy bint Sharif Al Ronaihi. Tensions between the so-called Western and Eastern powers continue unabated. Our team’s latest intervention thwarted another plot to destabilize the balance of power amongst the unaligned nations of the Middle East Region of Earth ...

In closing, the deaths of operatives 333 and 334 leave the Department of Primitive Species Intervention Earth Task Force incredibly shorthanded. Amaran, Kaliea, our human recruit, Takeru Takahashi, and I continue our mission to blunt humankind’s baser instincts. Still, I must respectfully impress upon the Alien Anthropology Division the urgent need for additional teams to deal with humankind’s current chaotic state. Until that time, I will seek to recruit additional humans to bolster Operations Team 345’s effectiveness.

Your Humble Servant,

Operative 345 - Zahara Fitzroy bint Sharif Al Ronaihi

The End ... Perhaps

Authors Notes;

This short story project began as a backstory exercise for a new character I will introduce in *The Armageddon*, the third book in the *Revelation Series*. I like the Zahara character concept so much that I decided to develop a short story around her. I hope you enjoy the story as much as I enjoyed writing it. In fact, there is so much more I can do with Zahara and the characters in this



story that I will likely write a series of short stories for my site and then publish it as a novella.  
What do you think?

Thank you for reading, and as always, your feedback and comments are welcome on the  
introduction blog for the story

Fritz Struhsaker

[www.struhsaker.com](http://www.struhsaker.com)