

*An Ordinary Woman*

By Roberto Costantini

Translated from the Italian by Brian Robert Moore

My name is Aba Abate. My father wanted me to be first, always, starting even from the taking of attendance in kindergarten. Fun, isn't it? But not for me.

The people who love me know *who* I really am, but not *what* I am.

The people who work with me know *what* I am, but not *who* I am.

I'm Ice, and I can fool anyone.

Except myself.

## SUNDAY

The young Arab man on the computer screen was visibly uneasy. The female voice, on the other hand, was more than calm, as though she were talking with her hairdresser about what color she should choose to streak her hair. She spoke to him in his own language, to make him feel more comfortable.

“So, Kebab. Did Omar give you that thing to bring to Tripoli?”

During their communications, which could be intercepted despite all precautions, code names were always used. The young man had chosen that nickname because he worked in a kebab shop.

“Yes, miss. An envelope. I was told to bring it on the flight from Rome with a layover in Tunis.”

“Did you open it?”

“I couldn’t, miss. It was sealed.”

Kebab took a pause, as if he were waiting to be reprimanded. But she didn’t say anything.

“I had no choice, miss.”

“Of course, I understand. Go on, Kebab.”

“Omar gave it to me in the airport right before security. He told me to go to the toilet as soon as I was on the plane, leave it there, and then go straight to my seat.”

“So you don’t know what was inside.”

“No. But before leaving it in the bathroom I tried to feel what was inside a little bit. It was light, but I couldn’t fold it completely, like it didn’t only contain pieces of paper. Maybe even a little notebook.”

There was a slight pause, the playful yelling of teenagers. Then the woman asked the next question quite casually, as if she were asking him how much onions he put in the kebabs.

“Did you see who on the plane took the envelope?”

“No. The bathroom was close to the front rows and I was in the back. Sorry, but what’s all that yelling and laughing?”

The woman chose the method which had been taught to her since she was a kid and which she applied in both her lives.

*Lie only when it’s indispensable. Lies lead to trouble, better omissions.*

“Just some kids playing.”

“Are you in a park, miss? It’s not raining where you are?”

She had no choice but to lie. And so she used her standard method for those kinds of circumstances. Learnt always from the same teacher.

*When you can’t or you don’t want to tell the truth, change the topic.*

“Kebab, you already told me about Omar and the envelope in our last conversation before Christmas. Why did you want to speak to me today instead of waiting for the next scheduled date at the end of January?”

The expression on the young Arab’s face turned grave.

“Friday, at the Mosque, I ran into Omar again. He thanked me for delivering the envelope. Then he said that he wanted to see the weapons. You know, the ones I told him I had stolen, from the weapons store, the ones that you...”

She cut him off immediately.

*Don't ever speak about dangerous topics if you already know them.*

“Why did he want to see them?”

The young Arab realized he had made a mistake. Even if the line was encrypted, certain details were simply unhelpful.

“I'm sorry, miss. I'm a little bit nervous.”

“Don't worry, Kebab. Go on.”

“We went to my house. I showed him the three handguns and the assault rifle, and Omar asked me if I knew how to use them. I told him that I had fought against Gaddafi, I showed him the pictures from Misrata.

“Good. And then?”

“We smoked shisha, I added some hashish like you suggested...”

“As long as you only use it for work, Kebab. It damages the brain.”

“Of course, miss, just to loosen him up a bit, I didn't even inhale. After smoking for a good while, Omar said that my weapons and that my experience could come in handy. He wants to introduce me to his friends, who already have a fair bit of weapons themselves. He says that we can do something together.”

At that point the young Arab became silent. He brought a cigarette to his lips and lit it. The woman observing him on the screen from a few hundred kilometers away noticed that his hand was trembling.

She, however, did not have time to waste. She never did.

Even if it was Sunday, she had personal and familial tasks to take care of. She had already done her hour on the treadmill and had gone to mass, but she still needed to get lunch ready for her husband and kids. She couldn't cook for them all the other days of the week, not even in the evening, because of her work, but she had guarded that Sunday ritual with her whole being. And she refused to resort to petty tricks, like some other women she knew, who went to buy trays of lasagna or roasts which they tried to pass off as home-cooked.

She held herself back from rushing the young Arab.

He was the one who had asked to speak urgently: she only needed to wait. In fact, after two or three drags of his cigarette, the young Arab spontaneously went back to telling the story.

“Omar had smoked a fair bit of hashish, he was completely stoned and he wanted to blow me away with a big secret. He told me that there's a young kid who's going to arrive soon from Tripoli and that...”

She interrupted him.

“Did he say *walad saghir*?”

Again, yelling and laughter could be heard in the background, but this time the young man ignored it.

“No, miss. He said *little boy*, in English.”

She held her breath. She glimpsed her own face in the mirror on the wall, and was greatly relieved that Kebab couldn't see her. When she spoke, her voice now sounded impatient to her for the first time.

"Kebab, are you sure that's exactly what he said?"

The Arab scrunched up his forehead. He'd been doing that job for a few years now, and he knew the woman well. He had never heard her sound worried.

"Yes, I'm sure. He said that the little boy will leave on one of the boats and will arrive in Sicily, then he'll make his way to the friends in the north, for a big bang."

"Big bang?"

"He said those exact words in English too: *big bang*."

Kebab put out his cigarette and immediately lit another.

"That's why I thought I'd notify you, otherwise I never would have bothered you on a Sunday."

The woman took another deep breath to stay in control and to release the concern from her voice.

*Avoid scaring more those who are already scared, learn from good doctors.*

"You did the right thing, Kebab. Maybe Omar is just a big talker. When does your friend say this little boy is supposed to leave?"

"He said that it won't be before next week, but we have to get ready to welcome him and organize everything so he'll find what's needed for the big bang."

"How did you leave things with Omar?"

"He wants us to see each other tomorrow at nine in the morning in a parking lot by the train station in Piacenza. He told me to take the train tomorrow morning, the one that gets into Piacenza at nine. He'll be waiting for me in the parking lot behind the station. And that I should bring the bag with the guns."

"And then?"

"Then he'd take me in his car to see his friends. He didn't want to tell me where."

The woman noticed his use of the conditional, and understood that the young man was not feeling remotely good about this. She asked herself whether it was fair to reassure him. She concluded that in her job, in their job, the key word was not *fair* but *appropriate*.

"Kebab, you have the watch I gave you, the Swatch exactly like yours, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Wear it instead of yours. That way, from here, we'll be in that car with you. Is that completely clear?"

For the first time, the young Arab spoke in Italian.

"I have a pregnant wife in Misrata, miss. If anything happens to me, I'd like..."

He did not complete the sentence, probably hoping she would exempt him from something he clearly felt uneasy about. She imagined for a second the young pregnant woman waiting for her husband Kebab. Then she heard the two teenagers singing from somewhere *when I think of that day...* and the image of the pregnant wife of Kebab was gone, substituted by that of a young Arab with a backpack walking through a crowd of Italian teenagers.

"Don't be afraid, Kebab. We're here to protect you."

Again, in the background, there was singing: *what a life to take, what a bond to break*. The woman ended the call.

I shut the notebook computer and stand up from the desk to leave the small study where my husband goes to concentrate. It's here that he creates his taglines for work, which he is starting to be fed up with and that's why he, has been trying since some time to write a novel. Every now and then I'm tempted to hack into his computer to read what he has written. Two things hold me back: the chronic lack of time typical of women with two jobs—the one in the office, and the one as a mother with kids—and the second reason, fear. Fear that I'll find myself looking at hundreds of pages all full of the same sentence, *All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy*, like Nicholson's wife in *The Shining*.

I look into the living room, where I can still hear the yelling and singing of two teenagers. They are lying down, watching a trailer of Puff Daddy's song. I am no expert of rap or trap or whatever they call it, but I am a good learner whenever it comes to something which could help me learn about my kids more than asking unanswered questions. Caterina is on the couch with that robe of mine which I haven't been able to find for days, Francesco in the armchair with his size-46 bare feet on the marble table, right next to the vase that I bought yesterday in an antique store in via Giulia at an outrageous price. Now, it's true that on Sunday they have a right to be a little lazy and that they follow their father's example since they have also his genes. But where have my genes gone? Sure, I can see them in Caterina's long curled hair which I have shortened since I was thirteen to end up today with this kind of outdated bob haircut. I can see them in Francesco's eye when they go from green to grey when he's upset. But the idea that life is either too easy or too hard to fight belongs entirely to Paolo. And though there are occasions where I start doubting he may have a point, my father's lessons and rules prevail.

"Francesco, can you set the table?"

Francesco is the baby boy of the house. Fifteen years old and one hundred eighty-four centimeters by ninety kilograms of muscle, hair, some acne, bellowing voice and hormones. He looks at me, shocked.

"But today is Shrek's turn!"

By "Shrek", he means Caterina, the baby girl of the house. Eighteen years old. One hundred sixty-five centimeters by sixty kilograms of insecurity which fuel a continuous and unpredictable alternation between anger and sweetness.

She gives him a friendly kick. "Not true, today's the little shit's turn! Plus, I need to study. Tomorrow I have the tryouts for the Math Olympiads."

"I also have an in-class assignment tomorrow, Shrek."

I intervene with my standard method, mostly to stop the emerging fight. "On that note, don't forget your dictionary, Francesco."

The big guy looks at me as if I've pronounced a word he has never heard before.

"Which dictionary?"

"The Latin one."

"I have math tomorrow, mom. Latin is next Monday."

I smile at him and speak calmly, as one does with a child who has merely turned into a giant but yet not into a boy.

“Math is next Monday, tomorrow is Latin.”

His mood immediately shifts. “How many times do I need to tell you not to look in my journal?”

When he started high school, I no longer wanted to be part of *the frustrated mother’s club* who found out things only by chance: in-class assignments, oral exams, field trips. I chose this dubious yet effective solution: snooping in my son’s journal.

*At the end of the day, snooping into other people’s lives is my job, isn’t it?*

Meanwhile, neither of them has lifted their eyes from the screen while they speak across me, as they also do at the beginning of an argument, in which I won’t be the referee, but the cause or the victim.

*Raising them the right way is truly difficult, but not doing it would be a crime.*

I repeat this sentence to myself a hundred times a day, and every now and then I look around, searching for my partner, or at least an accomplice, an assistant, a helper. But Paolo has his own approach to these things, which is different from mine: “Give them time, space and trust, Aba. They won’t grow up if we are always on their back.”

By “we”, he means “you.”

So our kids are subject to two different lines: prescriptive or live and let live. It would make no sense on my part to argue with Paolo about this, since his *live and let live* was the main reason I fell in love with him and we are still together after almost two decades. For the kids is just like learning two languages, they’ll probably need both.

Meanwhile, the kids refuse to take their eyes off the screen and give no sign of getting up. I have no choice but to sharpen my tone a bit.

“Francesco, it’s your turn.”

The big guy looks up from the screen, they’ve now moved on to a US TV series and Cate is laughing her socks off from a joke along the lines of *would you ask Picasso to play a game of Pictionary? Would you ask Rockefeller to a game of Monopoly?*

Francesco stares at me.

“Who’s Rockefeller, mom?”

“Rockefeller is a billionaire. Move on.”

“But why me and not Schreck!”

“Because today’s Sunday, not Saturday.”

“Oh, I coulda sworn it was Saturday.”

“Could have.”

“You could have what?”

“Nothing. Where’s dad?”

Caterina lifts her cute face, which is just a bit too puffy. “Locked in your room writing, seeing as you took his study.”

Francesco also jumps in. Kind of his father’s minor brother at times.

“He’s writing his novel. We’ll call him when lunch is on the table.”

Isn't it a perfect Sunday morning! While Francesco lazily sets up the table for breakfast and Caterina laughs about metaphysical jokes and Paolo writes his novel I can squeeze the oranges and give a thought to the problem which I will face at work tomorrow: little boy.



## MONDAY

When my work lets me, I always drive the kids to school in the car. That allows me to make sure they get there on time, to know which mood they are in, to eventually capture some bit of information about their secret lives. Today Paolo has come along too. He has a morning meeting with the head of the agency for a new commercial.

“These damn German clients! At nine in the morning! I mean, you tell me if you can explain something creative at sunrise.”

“But you do have an idea to put forward, right?”

“Yes, of course. Picture the scene. Fancy restaurant with a fabulous view of the sea, a young, gorgeous woman facing us, a man with gray hair with his back to us, they’re holding hands, but her eyes look beyond, toward the balustrade on the sea where a beautiful young guy is watching her, a quick exchange of glances and voilà, cut away, now you see the gray-haired man happy in his top-down convertible, and a voice comes in: *some things always stay faithful*. What do you think?”

“Is it an ad for a by-the-hour hotel?”

“Come on, Aba, it’s the new top-of-the-line convertible by...”

“It seems like a commercial for rich sleazebags to me.”

Paolo laughs, still that handsome smile I spotted when we first met. “Then it’s perfect. That’s exactly the target group.”

I try to quickly navigate out of the Roman traffic with our Yaris hybrid. It’s pouring rain, so today even the people who normally use public transportation add to the jumble of sheet metal that spoils this city’s beauty. Everything is a continual stop and go.

Sitting next to me, Paolo sings the praises of his great ecological decision.

“You see, sweet, it’s exactly in these situations of starting and stopping that you save with the hybrid.”

“Uhm...”

Due to my own lack of reaction, he turns to the teenagers sitting in the back.

“When mom steps on the brake to slow down, the electric motor creates friction with the rotation of the wheels, that way the kinetic energy becomes electric energy stored in the battery.”

I take a glance back in the rearview mirror. Francesco, the future engineer of Paolo’s waking dreams and the likely chronically unemployed adult of my continual nightmares, is sniggering about something idiotic. He has the new iPhone that my husband wanted to give him for the B—in reality, the B minus minus—he got on his last physics assignment.

Caterina, meanwhile, is doing a last-minute refresher for the Math Olympiads, reviewing aloud to herself.

*The domain of a function is the set of all permissible inputs of the variable x. In the case of a fractional equation...*

“In the case of a fractional equation you find the lowest common multiple of the denominators of the fraction terms, right?”

Caterina is asking Paolo, as if I had bought my degree in statistics on the internet and he was a scientist and not a doctor in literature and philosophy.

A platinum blonde driving an SUV cuts me off to avoid a puddle, sending me almost onto the sidewalk and forcing me to slam on the brakes and miss the green light.

*Now I'll run the red light, follow her, cut her off, force her to get out and cut her down to size until there's nothing left but her sun-blond hair.*

Obviously, I can't in front of these three. And actually never.

*But, as a fantasy, it's very appealing. Maybe one day, when they're grown up, and Paolo's traveling doing events for his novel and I'm retired—then I'll do it.*

I automatically memorize the license plate. Thanks to family genes, I have an exceptional memory, sharpened ever since I was a little girl when my father would make me repeat entire verses of Greek tragedies or of the Divine Comedy, and even lists of the phone numbers of all of his countless colleagues.

Caterina complains. "Where are you rushing to, mommy?"

"I have a meeting."

Francesco backs her up: whenever I'm the one in the middle, the two of them sure know how to join forces. "My friends say that ministry workers never do anything! What are you always in such a rush to do?"

Then comes Paolo to defend me. In his own way.

"Mom needs to clock in at the ministry every day by nine, kids."

Right, exactly. This is the big advantage of Paolo's live and let live: he is happy to know *who* I am, doesn't even ask himself *what* I am.

Aba hurriedly swiped her ID card and typed the code to enter the parking lot beneath the offices of the Italian Secret Service.

*The uncrossable border. For everyone, even for Paolo, Caterina and Francesco.*

She was about to enter the elevator when she felt the point of something pressing against the middle of her back.

"Hands up, Ice."

She turned around and smiled at Pietro Ferrara, deputy director of the Internal Information and Security Agency, AISI, her immediate superior and boss. And also her father's ex assistant who used to teach her, when she was a kid, all the tricks in order to defeat her male cousins at hide-go-seek.

"One of these days I'm going to turn around and shoot."

"You're not armed. And anyway, the only one who knows how to use a gun out of the two of us is me."

Aba pushed the button for the third floor.

"I got here late, with the rain there are too many people on the streets who don't know how to drive."

The man still had that friendly smile, which Aba could remember even from when she was a child.

“You’re only a few minutes late, Aba. And if it were up to you, you’d be the only one with a driver’s license. Why don’t you walk to work like I do?”

“You live in the basement of this very building, Pietro.”

It was all but true. Ferrara lived at the end of the block, by himself, in the same apartment where he had gone to live with his Emma after they got married. He never moved out from there, even after Emma’s death.

Together they walked into the wide conference room with monitors lining the walls, simply known as the screen room. Three young professionals were seated around the large table. They were already wearing their microphone headsets.

Ferrara took his time taking off his padded raincoat, which was more suitable for Siberia than Rome. Underneath, he was wearing one of his usual jacket and pants combinations, which mixed unlikely colored velvets, tweeds and corduroys, as if he had his clothes chosen for him every morning by a blind butler.

Aba took off her trench and grabbed a seat. She looked at the large screen occupying the entirety of the back wall, put on the headphones, and addressed the young analyst operating the connection.

“Where are they, Tonino?”

Antonio, known as Tonino, was one of the young people working directly for her in the Infiltration Operations unit. He was slim, muscular, with big candy eyes, sculpted features, and a crew-cut that was extra short besides the gelled-up front. He was wearing a good brand suit jacket over a round-neck t-shirt and faded jeans.

“They turned off of the main highway. Omar’s calm, so is Kebab. Omar doesn’t want to take the highway because of the cameras. They’ve passed Lodi Vecchio, Omar is not saying where they’re going.”

Tonino pointed to the 70-inch monitor attached to the conference room wall. The red dot indicating the location of the Renault Clio was moving slowly along the road. It had a yellow dot in front of it. Other yellow dots sped by in the opposite direction while others passed them. She didn’t like that slow yellow dot. Aba looked at the bony red haired skinny boy with the short pony tail.

«Albert, ha the driver used a phone since they are in the car?»

«No.»

There were two alternating voices inside the Clio. One was Kebab’s, the other was high-pitched, shrill, almost in falsetto. They spoke to each other in Arabic, while Leyla gave simultaneous translations. Her large black eyes, carefully mascaraed and encircled by her white veil, were downcast, to her hands with painted white nails. Her Italian was perfect, as was her Arabic. In both languages she knew even slang and nuances of meaning.

“Kebab, Italians don’t give a shit about the double line. Now I’m going to pass this hearse too.”

“No, Omar, you don’t want them to stop us for a ticket?”

Aba understood Arabic pretty well, but something was not clear to her.

“Did he say ‘you don’t want’ or ‘I don’t want,’ Leyla?”

The girl blushed.

“He said ‘I don’t want. I apologize.’”

“I don’t want to.’ Kebab knows that we’re listening to him and he’s suggesting not to intervene for the time being. Is that ok with you, Pietro?”

Ferrara responded with his chain smoker’s voice, between one coughing fit and another. “Pretty sharp, this Kebab of yours. You trained him well.”

Ferrara thought highly of her, but Aba could tell from his answer that he had a few doubts about the situation. He expressed it indirectly in order not to take away any of her authority in front of the three younger colleagues.

*His second sentence is actually a question. How much is Kebab able to hold under the tension?*

Aba stared at her boss. Ferrara had spent twenty years in the Carabinieri, before the twenty in the services, in the AISE and AISI. As a pupil of Aba’s father, he followed a guiding principle:

*Caution, prudence, considering all the possibilities.*

However, she had no doubts on Kebab’s loyalty or nerves.

“He was already very capable, Pietro. He’s got good nerves. He fought on the ground against Gaddafi, putting his life on the line.”

In that moment, another yellow dot appeared on the screen. It was roughly a hundred meters ahead, and was stopped on the side of the road, facing the same direction as the Clio. They heard the driver’s agitated, high-pitched voice.”

“Son of a bitch, they want us to pull over.”

And then there was Kebab’s, overlapping with the translation coming from Leyla Salem.

“Pull over, Omar, it’s only a traffic cop. Get out your license and registration.”

On the screen, they saw the red point of the Clio slow down and stop a little before the stationary yellow point at the side of the road.

Aba was proud of Kebab.. “Kebab is doing great, he is notifying us that it’s highway patrol, not the Carabinieri.”

Right then they heard sounds in the car, like a glove compartment being opened then shut. Kebab’s alarmed voice came in immediately after.

“Are you crazy, Omar? Why are you taking out a gun? Put it away, now.”

“We have a whole fucking bag full of weapons in the trunk, damn it!”

As Leyla finished the translation,

Aba immediately went into action. She was in charge, she didn’t need to ask her boss for approval.

“Tonino, give me the audio channel with highway patrol operational headquarters.”

It took Tonino only a few seconds to get through.

“You’re connected with highway patrol headquarters, Director Abate.”

Aba took the microphone. “You have a car on the provincial road just after Lodi Vecchio.”

A calm male voice responded. “One second, I’ll check.”

“I don’t have a second and there’s nothing to check. You need to order to immediately call off anyone from stopping or checking the car.”

“What?”

“You know where I’m calling from, don’t you?”

His tone of voice changed. “Of course, I apologize. I’ll communicate this right away.”

But it was already too late.

In the headphones, Aba heard shouts and the crackling of gunshots.

Aba and Ferrara had stayed alone in the screen room. He stood up, slid on his raincoat and tied his scarf tight. Ferrara seemed older to her, his white, sparse hair on his scalp, his wide forehead furrowed by deep horizontal wrinkles, his pale face creased by vertical wrinkles that went from the bags under his eyes down to his white mustache. She was worried about him. That man had been the emotional substitute of her father and his wife Emma, until she died, the physical and emotional substitute of her mother.

*This looks like a physical Alzheimer, little rocks starting to fall down before the landslide..*

“Let’s go on the terrace, Aba. You can get some air and I’ll smoke a cigarette.”

Aba threw her trench over her shoulders and followed him to the door to a terrace covered with every sort of antenna. A steady drizzle was coming down, and so they stayed standing under the arched roof. Furious honking rose from the traffic in the street below.

Ferrara lit a cigarette with an old Zippo lighter with the yellow and red crest of Rome. Then he took a long drag and immediately started coughing.

“Smoking’s bad for you, Pietro. You should quit, at least until this cough goes away.”

Ferrara’s mind seemed to be completely elsewhere.

“Right. You, meanwhile, don’t have any bad habits, besides your tendency to be presumptuous.”

“It wasn’t presumptuousness. Who could have ever expected they’d be stopped by highway patrol?”

Ferrara looked at her through the smoke and through his own breath going out of his mouth into the damp cold of the morning. He had that warm and forgiving smile he showed only when they were alone, since he knew how Aba was adamant about being treated formally in front of their colleagues.

“I wasn’t talking about the accident, but about how you spoke to that poor operator, like *do you have any idea who I am?*”

“He was making us lose seconds of precious time. Maybe we wouldn’t have lost Kebab if...”

“Aba, that sad bastard on the phone has nothing to do with it. Now you’re very upset...”  
Aba saw again the image of the pregnant young woman waiting for her husband Kebab.

“I’m never upset, and you know it. But I told Kebab that we’d protect him, that there was no need to worry, his wife is pregnant...”

“You couldn’t have predicted this accident. We’ll help his wife through our usual channels for these unfortunate cases.”

Aba sighed, shaking her head as she watched the sky full of black clouds swollen with rain. Sure, Kebab’s wife would get some economical relief through unofficial channels. But she would never have her husband back and their child would never meet his father.

*Kebab was afraid and I forced him*

She knew that wasn’t true. Those were the rules of the job which Kebab was aware about. Still, Aba was uncomfortable about Ferrara’s use of the term accident.

“Do you really believe it was an unlucky coincidence, Pietro?”

Now Ferrara shook his head. He looked concerned, which Aba felt sorry for.

*He’s concerned about me, not about the accident. About little Aba, so hard on herself and on others.*

He inhaled and coughed again.

“There’ll be an investigation. We’re analysts, Ana, not investigators, much less soothsayers.”

“But the likelihood of being stopped to be checked by the police is extremely low, miniscule. Since I got my license, and that was twenty years ago, I’ve never been stopped.”

“You’re a respectable-looking white woman. They’re two dark-skinned young men.”

“Okay, but I’m still not sure, Pietro. Who’s going to speak to the police about this anyway?”

Ferrara looked at her in the eyes. Aba had seen in those eyes the same affection for thirty years, but now she was no longer a child, and he wasn’t the young assistant to the general Adelmo Abate. She wanted only respect in there, not warmth.

“I’ll assign Guido Luci to speak with the judiciary police, which will need to investigate the incident and look for the hideout where Omar was bringing Kebab. You don’t need to worry about it.”

Last sentence was very clear but a young Aba would have insisted.

*Why can’t I hide in the pit, uncle Pietro?*

“I don’t agree. But, obviously, I’ll follow orders. I grew up following orders without agreeing.”

Ferrara knew perfectly the deep meaning of those words, the love-hate relationship between Aba and a father so powerful, respected, idolized.

“Do you know why I preferred you to Guido Luci as head of infiltration operations?”

*Because I’m much better than Guido Luci and everyone else. Because I came first in the internal competition and I always have the highest score in training courses. Because by myself I recruited more than twenty people in ten years and none of the little men have ever managed to do that. Because no one in here still thinks that I got here thanks to anyone, either to my father or you.*

*Because I deserve it.*

“You just accused me of being presumptuous. I’ll abstain from this one.”

Now Ferrara was staring at the rain, as if he were following a painful thought.

“Your father spent three years in a vegetative coma. And you went to see him for hours, every day, you sat alone by his bed reading him the newspaper, as Adelmo had done every morning his whole life.”

Aba immediately stiffened.

“I’m an only child and I’d already lost my mother. It was my duty. He didn’t have anyone else.”

“He had all and therefore no one except you. But very few daughters would have done the same. Loyalty and a sense of sacrifice are two fundamental attributes in our line of work. The third skill is the one that he didn’t have time to teach you all the way.”

She shook her head.

“I’m prudent, Pietro, and you know this. How could I have imagined that the driver was a crazy guy with a gun? It’s not a question of...”

Ferrara interrupted her. His hair was thinner, his wrinkles deeper, but the warm and soft tone he used with her as a kid was unchanged.

*Not in the pit, Aba, you could fall down.*

“When I was head of the Special Operations Group and needed to sniff out terrorists and mobsters, one day we picked up the scent of someone we’d been trying to track down for years. He was in a house in the countryside in the middle of nowhere, him and two accomplices, and his eleven-year-old son. I ordered to wait to avoid hurting the kid. We raided the place when his son went out early in the morning to milk the cow.”

Ferrara massaged his shoulder. There, Aba new, was where the bullet had gone through.

“There was a machine gun under the hay. That little kid killed two people, two of my boys. My decision was pure imprudence.”

Aba knew who made that merciless judgement. The same man who forbid her for ever to play hide-go-seek after she fell in the pit.

“And yet, since then you’re a hero. When they operated on you, half of the police in Catania came under the window of the hospital to sing your praises, ‘Popeye.’”

Ferrara didn’t smile.

“I didn’t like Gene Hackman in *The French Connection*.”

“So then why did you choose Popeye as your codename?”

“It’s a reminder, Aba. Those two boys died because I acted like Popeye Doyle. But bravery, sometimes, is just thoughtlessness. You know that, right?”

Aba frowned, as she always did whenever Pietro quoted her father. Ferrara laid a hand on her shoulder. Aba had liked this once, she knew that this gesture was to fill two holes: the lack of a wife and daughter for him, and of a father for her. But they were at work, not at home. Now she held an important position and what she used to experience as affection now she perceived as a condescending paternalism. She pulled away, and Ferrara sighed.

“So, just to make sure we are clear on this. Guido Luci will work with the police, but you’ll cover little boy on your own.”

*Splitting information is an act of prudence.*

Aba nodded. In that line of work, hierarchy always must be respected, even if she didn't agree and even if Pietro Ferrara was her old adopted uncle.

"Alright. And what should we do about little boy?"

"What's necessary. Whatever it takes, Aba. We've never even had a single person killed by an attack in this country. And, seeing as I'm retiring in a few months after over forty years of service, I'd like it to stay that way."

It was the first time she heard him openly address the issue of retirement. Everyone knew in the office, however no one dared ever mention it. Aba thought he might want to talk with her about it.

"It will not happen, Pietro. Thanks to the years of invisible work of people like you. You are a national hero, like Dalla Chiesa, Falcone, Borsellino."

"Neither of them has retired, Aba."

That sentence gave Aba the answer. His decay started with the nightmare of the approaching retirement. Her heart sank for him.

"Pietro, you have already done so much, you have a right to..."

Aba stopped, feeling the inconsistency of her own words.

*Will I feel like that in twenty more years in here?*

Ferrara changed subject, as they had both learned from the same teacher.

"I'm going to see Giulio Bonan in a bit, the deputy director of the External Information Agency for North Africa and the Middle East at AISE."

"I'd prefer to call you Mr. Ferrara in front of the rest of the world."

Ferrara let out a laugh. "I still haven't told you if I'm going to bring you with me to Bonan. Why does it annoy you so much if I'm informal and call you by your first name?"

*Because you picked it up from him. He used to do it with his university students and with his colleagues in the police and the service. That way they'd relax and speak more freely.*

"It wasn't politeness, it was just a tactic, Pietro."

Ferrara frowned. He was always trying to bridge between Aba and her father. "Your father was a great man, Aba. He was the youngest commanding general of the Carabinieri, he modernized first the corps and then the service, and made them more respectable. He was an example for my entire generation."

Aba was never at ease with emphasis, especially if it had to do with her father.. She was familiar with the admiration, or as Aba defined it, the adoration for a man who had been the youngest commanding general of the Carabinieri and had transformed, modernized and made respectable first the corps and then the Italy's secret service. But the border between admiration and adoration was the border between logic and faith which Aba strongly believed should be kept separate. She and Ferrara had talked about it a thousand times after Adelmo died, then slowly that subject, which pushed them apart, stopped being a part of their conversations, and even when Ferrara tried to start again, Aba would evade it.

"Bonan is the same rank as you. In front of him I'd like to call you Mr. or Deputy Director Ferrara."

He shook his head.



“I don’t do it just with you, Aba. I do it with everyone working for me. It’s an old habit. The sense of teamwork is too important in the Special Operations Group for hierarchical formality to interfere. Why does it bother you so much if I’m informal and call people by name?”

“Fine, I’ll call you ‘uncle’ in front of Giulio Bonan.

Ferrara smiled.

“That would be nice, but you never did even as a kid. You called aunt my wife Emma, but I always was *signor Pietro*.”

Aba did not like going so far back in time. That part before Paolo just came back as *involuntary memories*, never recalled and often dismissed.

“Then what will we tell Giulio Bonan, Pietro?”

Ferrara gave up on protesting and decided to change the subject.

“Have you already met him before?”

“Not in person.”

“Well, try not to speak excessively forceful. The ones that come from the Navy are usually a bit formal.”

“All bosses are formal in this place. Besides you.”

“Bonan is a bit more than the rest. He frequents exclusive clubs, ones just for men.”

“I don’t have anything against gay people.”

Ferrara chuckled.

“Misogynists, not gays. Navy men are gallant, but they have their own way of considering women.”

“Sue, a girl in every port! Just my type of man, wonderful!”

“Well, if he tries to kiss your hand...”

“I have a pair of winter gloves in my bag. I’ll wear those.”

“And if he seems a bit skeptical toward you, will you refrain from any of your wisecracks?”

“I’ll be very mild-mannered.”

Ferrara broke into laughter, then his laugh turned into a cough. “Like that time you pretended your hand was shaking and poured scalding tea on that colonel’s crotch?”

“He put his hand on my knee under the table, I couldn’t help but get excited.”

“Of course. I can imagine, Ice.”

Ferrara put out his third cigarette in an ash tray and was ready to lit a new one.

She took his arm. “Let’s go back inside. I feel cold out here Pietro.”

”That wasn’t true. She felt much better out there, she hated the heating inside but she wanted him back in so he could no longer smoke.

Soon after, they were sitting at a table in the building’s cafeteria, which at that time of day was nearly deserted. Ferrara ordered coffee spiked with a bit of cognac and Aba a glass of water.

“So, what are we going to ask Bonan, Pietro?”

He took a gulp of his coffee.

“We need to have him intervene with the Libyans and block any departures. He was the one that acted as a bridge between the Libyan and Italian governments to keep afloat the Libyan coast guard and keep the illegal departures under control.”

“Can we do without naming our Kebab?”

“No, Aba. AISI and AISE work together. Which means you’ll tell him about Kebab, without hiding anything.”

Aba made a disappointed face, and Ferrara looked at his now empty espresso mug.

“Yesterday it was freezing cold at the stadium. Rome lost partly because those guys from Turin are used to this cold.”

“You’re not as good as me at changing the subject. Plus, I really wouldn’t say so.”

“You don’t mean that you also think Juventus should’ve got that penalty kick!”

“I was referring to the temperature. Sure, it’s raining, but it’s not that cold. And you’re always nice and covered. You should cut it out with all those cigarettes, as well as the countless spiked coffees a day, the tripe and *pagliata*, and the Rome games at the stadium...”

“There was no penalty. In the nosebleeds I had to take out the old police badge to stop the crazed people from invading the field.”

“The nosebleeds? Are you crazy? Here we get tickets every week for the authority’s section, why don’t you go there?”

“Because I go to root for the team, Aba. Not to go chat with the authorities and people using their tickets.”

Ferrara asked for a second espresso with cognac, threw it down and shivered. Then he stood up.

“Let’s go see Bonan. don’t make a face or groan if he tries to kiss your hand, okay?”

The walls of Giulio Bonan’s conference room were covered in photos of racing sail boats and oil paintings of war ships. While Ferrara watched the rain outside from the window, Aba dwelled on those images.

*Remember, Aba, the objects a man surrounds himself with come in two types: either reality, or a mask.*

The man who entered was, at first glance, very different from Ferrara. He was at least ten years younger, well-dressed in a tailored gray suit, a vest, white shirt, a blue and grey tie and a matching handkerchief in his pocket. His smooth hair was combed back on a wide forehead, his eyes were clear and cold.

*Good looking, according to standard.*

He shook Ferrara’s hand and bowed to Aba, followed by a half-kiss of her hand, stopped half way by her Maggie Thatcher smile. He sat in front of the man of equal rank, and on top of the glass conference table he placed a journal with a leather cover, half black and half white. On it he rested a black pen with a white point.

Ferrara wrinkled his forehead.

“Listen, Giulio, we haven’t known each other long, but I’d like to clear something up before we start. The ref made up the penalty, you should’ve lost.”

Bonan seemed perplexed. Ferrara pointed at the journal and the pen.

“You’re a Juventus fan, no?”

Most would have smiled, but not Bonan .

“They’re the colors of my sailing club. And I hate soccer.”

Ferrara seemed surprised for a second, as if that affirmation was completely incongruous with the male sex. Then, making a face, he pointed to the walls.

“You’re lucky then. It’s really awful in the nosebleeds, I’ll give you that. But if I tried watching those boats of yours, I’d end up taking a nice nap.”

Bonan stared at him coldly.

“I don’t watch. I go at the helm, and there’s not much time for naps. So, why are we here, Pietro?”

Ferrara pointed to Aba. “Ms. Abate will explain everything to you.”

Aba felt Giulio Bonan’s eyes on her, and the sense of annoyance was immediate. As always, she tried to turn the sensation into information and this into action.

*He doesn’t trust women. I will always have problems if I just fight him without knowing him more.*

“I’ve heard much about you. And not just because of your father.”

Aba was one of the best experts in the method of slight provocations. Her reputation in the office was so high regardless of her father that she didn’t care to answer. But Bonan insisted with the same method.

“I read in your resume that as a girl you won a lot of female tournaments, both in chess and Risk.”

Aba decided to start replying on the same tone: “They were mixed championships. Even if I was often the only finalist of the female sex.”

At this he raised an eyebrow.

“Only solo games? No tennis or bridge?”

“It’s better on one’s own, that way you know who to blame if things go badly.”

“But you’re married, aren’t you?”

Aba and pointed first at the wedding ring on Bonan’s finger and then at the wall.

“So are you. And yet I only see solo races.”

Bonan didn’t even flinch at this. “I’m not married. The ring is to keep away any women who might have hopes that I could only end up disappointing.”

Ferrara coughed and then jumped into the conversation, before Aba could reply.

“As you know, Giulio, much of our security network depends on undercover men and women who’ve infiltrated different mosques here in Italy. Each one of them is a precious resource that we select with enormous care after an observation period of several months. Over the years, Aba has recruited them one by one and she directs them. Now she’ll explain the situation to you.”

Bonan wrote down a note and simply signaled to Aba to continue. Aba was still investigating on him, so she started speaking in a dull voice, keeping her eyes on Bonan. She began to relay the story, trying to limit herself to the essentials.

“In mid 2011, during the civil war, many wounded people from Libya came to Italy. For a while I had been monitoring the flow of arrivals. Among them, there was a guy from the

Misrata brigades which fought with us against Gaddafi. He was twenty-two years old, had a business degree and an arm that was almost gangrene from a mine.”

Bonan cut her off.

“I imagine the person you’re talking about had a name.”

Aba had no problem with that question. She was within the rules of the game, regardless of his higher rank,

“Kebab, because he worked in a kebab shop as a cover, and that’s what they called him around the mosques.”

Bonan shot a glance at Aba, then at Ferrara. “His first and last name?”

Ferrara intervened .

“Sorry, Giulio, but the name isn’t helpful for what we’re going to talk to you about. Our internal security procedures for people undercover are very rigid, and Aba guards these measures ferociously.

For the first time, Bonan smiled. At her, with cold still eyes, just stirring a little his lips.

“I would never associate the word *ferocious* with a beautiful woman.”

Aba knew that was a turning point in their relationship. She needed him to know she was a colleague, a respected colleague.

“Isn’t that what they said to Joan of Arc before bringing her to the stake.”

Bonan show no signs of strain.

“I’m afraid the poor thing didn’t speak any English.”

Again, Ferrara intervened. And this time his tone was imperative. “Aba, we’re all in a hurry. Go on.”

She went back to staring at Bonan, who took notes in the meantime.

“I had him hospitalized at San Camillio in Rome, where they saved his arm. That’s how our relationship began

“There were all the right conditions to recruit him. He was grateful to me, he wanted to find a job in Italy where had he worked as a waiter for a summer once, he was hoping to come to live here one day with his wife. I found him work as a waiter in a kebab place near Milan, we needed someone to get into the mosque in Sesto San Giovanni. He was Muslim, a believer but a moderate one, and...”

Bonan immediately took his eyes up from his notes.

“How can you be sure of this?”

“I wasn’t at the beginning, but I became sure over time.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand. I grew up in a world where shallow waters are either ahead or they aren’t.”

“We don’t do echo sounding, Mr. Bonan. We have procedures, protocols. In the usual twelve months in which we monitored him, I became convinced that he was a moderate and reasonable person, like 99% of Muslims, and so...”

Again, the pen stopped writing.

“What is the official source of the percentile you just cited?”

Aba felt satisfied with herself.

*Little innocent provocations will help you to understand who you're dealing with, to separate the pictures from the frames.*

“Apologies, it’s not an official figure but a personal conviction of mine. In any case, only then did we make the offer to Kebab to collaborate with us. He immediately said yes, in exchange for a residence permit and a stable job.”

“And that’s it? No money?”

Aba looked at Ferrara. He was the one that needed to answer that question, if he wanted.

“Giulio, the work is the main compensation. Then we give one-time sums for interesting information.”

Bonan took down another note and turned to Aba. “I see. And Kebab supplied you with some interesting information?”

“During these past years Kebab supplied us regularly with information. According to protocol, we cross-checked it with other sources and his reliability was almost always confirmed. For years he kept us up to date on what was happening in that mosque.”

“But he never slipped you anything worthy of a special economic bonus.”

“In a Skype meeting before Christmas, Kebab told me that a couple of months before in the Mosque in Sesto San Giovanni he had met a guy who was known as Omar. He had recently moved to Sesto, and Kebab had introduced him in the place where he worked. They slowly got to know each other, and after a few months, Omar asked him what he thought about Jihad.”

Bonan interrupted her. “Is that a normal timeframe?”

“Yes, it’s in the usual parameters. Our infiltrators follow a standard protocol in order to screen people: they’re not supposed to report to us any big talker, otherwise we’d drown in these reports. That waiting time also helps to gain the suspected individual’s trust. At the beginning, they say they don’t know much about Jihad but they understand the reasons behind it, and they act interested in knowing more. Then, if the other puts himself out there a bit, they say they’ve stolen things, even robbed tobacco shops and gas stations. And if the other one goes even further, they tell them that they also have weapons, which they obtained by robbing a gun shop.”

“And if the other one asks to see them?”

“The infiltrator can show them to him, but only further on and only when there’s a reason. We give them one, naturally.”

Bonan nodded, wrote down something with his Montblanc in his elegant journal. He nodded her to go on.

“Omar didn’t ask right away to see the guns. He told Kebab that maybe he would introduce him to his friends, but first Kebab had to prove his dedication to the cause. Since every year during the Christmas holidays Kebab went back to Libya to see his parents, Omar asked him to take an envelope with him that he would hand to him at the airport in Rome. Kebab accepted, with my authorization. It was twenty or so days ago, a little before Christmas.”

Bonan turned to Ferrara. He was his equivalent in rank, after all.

“You should have informed us, Pietro. Tripoli isn’t in your jurisdiction. Why didn’t you even notify us when Kebab had delivered that envelope in Tripoli?”

“Because the envelope wasn’t delivered in Tripoli. Someone took it on the plane before the intermediate stop. So there was nothing to do in Tripoli.”

Bonan nodded and waited. Aba glanced toward Ferrara, who gave her a sign of agreement, and she continued.

“Kebab went back to Tripoli. We were supposed to speak again at the end of the month, but he activated the protocol to request an urgent meeting. We spoke on Skype yesterday, before lunch.”

Aba was absolutely conscious of the need for cooperation between AISI and AISE but showing Kebab’s face to Giulio Bonan made her feel uneasy. However, she had an obligation to follow Ferrara’s orders.

*Total openness.*

Therefore Aba pushed a button on her smartphone and Kebab’s young, concerned face appeared on the screen. She played the recording of their conversation.

*So, Kebab. Did Omar give you that thing to bring to Tripoli?*

They listened to the recording in silence, up to Aba’s last sentence.

*Don’t be afraid, Kebab. We’re here to protect you.*

Bonan stared at her, expressionless. Then he repeated the two words that, during the call with Kebab, had made Aba feel out of breath.

“So, a little boy?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. He was somehow amused.

“When the Americans gave this codename to the atomic bomb they would drop on Hiroshima, they surely didn’t imagine that one day a jihadist would nickname in the same way the suicide bombers that would blow himself up in the middle of a crowd. However, this Kebab of yours could have made all of this up himself, no? To justify the benefits he was receiving, to turn his wife’s arrival in Italy into a reality...”

Aba knew her strategy well, had known it ever since she was a child.

*I’m not the one who needs to fight now. Like with my male cousins at Risk, I need to let them fight among themselves, destroy each other at the border of Kamchatka and Yakutia, and that’s when I’ll come in.*

Ferrara had stuck a cigarette in his mouth, which he obviously could not light. From Aba and Bonan’s silence, he realized that it was up to him to step in. And he did so, with a lot of patience in his tone.

“Giulio, in two different instances, Kebab led us to put together information allowing us to deport certain individuals who had started to demonstrate potentially dangerous behavior.”

Giulio Bonan shifted his cerulean eyes to Aba.

“And this can guarantee us that he’s trustworthy?”

“As you surely know, Mr. Bonan, it’s only through a great number of standard observations that we can, only at times, identify the exceptions. I believe in the Navy they use this same method of cryptography.”

He seemed surprised for a moment. But not upset.

*A fight makes doesn’t make him nervous.*

Ferrara had a burst of coughing, perhaps real, perhaps forced in order to move away the conversation from its slippery slope, and addressed Bonan.

“Giulio, we need to take action with the Libyans. Their coast guard needs to block sea departures.”

“It already does. They are very precise agreements. I put in place the project myself, for some time now we’ve had our own repair ship in rotation by the port of Tripoli, this way we’ve gotten their own ships running again.”

“But many boats and rafts leave anyway!”

Bonan shrugged his shoulders.

“That’s part of the implicit consequences of this kind of agreement, Pietro.”

“I don’t understand...”

“We also have our own secrets, as you do with your infiltrators. Let’s just say that there are power balances that need to be maintained, but the point is that we get what it is we’re paying for.”

Ferrara started to become annoyed.

“I don’t want to know your secrets, and the point is that we need to block all boats from leaving. All of them. Starting next Sunday, there shouldn’t even be a pin leaving the coast of Libya.”

Bonan shook his head. “We don’t pay them enough for that. This Kebab of yours wasn’t able to tell us the date or place of the potential departure of this hypothetical little boy?” From a mere second Aba had the impression that Bonan knew the answer to that question or simply guessed it. However, it was not her who was supposed to answer, it was Ferrara.

“No, Kebab isn’t able to tell us.”

Bonan raised an eyebrow.”

“I gather, then, that there was some complication, otherwise you wouldn’t be here. Do you intend to tell me about it, or should I blindly trust a waiter from a kebab shop?”

Aba still kept her mouth shut.

*Let the two of them have at each other some more between Yakutia and Kamchatka.*

Ferrara thought about it for a little before finally nodding, and Aba started the audio recording from just a few hours earlier, the one with Kebab in the car with Omar, up until the exchange of gunfire with the highway patrol.

Bonan listened in silence, took some notes, and formulated the most obvious question, just as if he was speaking of some trivial minor surgery.

“The outcome?”

Ferrara sighed. “Kebab and Omar are both dead. Luckily, the members of the police acted immediately, not one of them was wounded or killed.”

“How many shots did Omar fire before they took him down?”

Aba knew that Bonan’s was an intelligent and appropriate question, which she also would have willingly asked Ferrara, but her boss had already told her not to concern herself with it. But that question hid another one, a difficult one to answer.

*How did they manage to act so quickly against a desperate man with a gun?*

This time Ferrara tried to cut the topic short. He was an ex-police officer, and he responded as one.

“The judicial police’s investigation will tell us that. For now, the matter at hand is that we’ve lost Kebab and we need to stop the little boy from leaving.”

Bonan put the cap on his Montblanc and closed his white-black journal. By now Aba knew that for a man like Bonan every gesture had a clear meaning. In this case:

*On this basis, don’t count on us* “The situation in Libya is very complex, Pietro. I’m sorry, but we can’t alert the Libyan government and their coast guard and our local allies with warnings that are not absolutely solid.”

Ferrara continued in his effort to be firm but polite.

“Of course. My job, however, is not to worry about disturbing the Libyan government. It’s protecting Italy from attacks.”

Bonan shrugged his shoulders. It was as that sentence was obvious but irrelevant to him.

“I know. This is the biggest concern of politicians, who only deal with short-term problems, the ones that have an impact on elections.”

Now Ferrara was decidedly annoyed.

“I’m concerned about possible victims, not about politics.”

Bonan appeared unmoved.

“I, on the other hand, am also concerned about strategies on the long term, which go beyond single governments or brief legislative terms. It’s strategy that keeps protects our safety, not reactive tactics. You have six days to locate the hideout where Kebab was leading you. Find it, and then your little boy, granting that he exists, will travel for nothing.”

Ferrara was irritated, he hadn’t expected that kind of reaction, coming from his own environment of teamwork.

“We’re already looking for the hideout. But it’s an operation that takes time, time that we might not have. That’s why our priority is stopping little boy from leaving Libya.”

Bonan didn’t respond right away. Rather, he stopped to observe his colleague.

“You’re too worried, Antonio. Is there something you still haven’t told me?”

Aba had now suspected that for some time.

*Pietro knows something, there’s no question that everything about little boy is true.*

But it was something that Ferrara did not intend to reveal to Bonan in front of her. She had understood that. He was her boss, after all. He had the right and surely he had a good reason.

Aba stood up. “Excuse me, I need to make an urgent call home.”

Ferrara turned to her and smiled.

“Just stay in the hallway and then come back, Aba. I’m sure it’ll only take you a minute, right?”

I leave the room and take out my personal phone. It’s full of messages from Caterina.

My heart is racing.

I don’t remember anything

I’m going to shit myself, help

I search for the right words.



Take a deep breath. Ignore everything that's around you. Think about how this test is a small one, the first of many, learn to fight.

The reply comes immediately.

You don't help me at all when you talk like that.

So I decide to end the conversation here.

*It's easier facing Admiral Bonan.*

Aba came back into the room just in time to hear Ferrara's request to Bonan.

"We need someone we trust in Tripoli to talk to the coast guard right away, Giulio."

Bonan nodded. He seemed different now, more cooperative and slightly concerned.

"We shouldn't speak officially to the Libyan government about it, Pietro."

"Why?"

"Because the secret wouldn't last a minute and correct action would not be assured. The Libyan coastal guard is divided in clans who fight for money and power, some people are reliable, others are not. We must work on them unofficially but through a very direct channel."

"So, what do you suggest?"

"The best way would be to make an offer to the person who knows everyone in the coast guard, outside of official channels, without too many explanations. This man, mister Mansur, calls himself an admiral and we have an easy channel in Tripoli to reach him."

Ferrara scrunched up his forehead. "What channel?"

"In Tripoli we've had a collaborator working from the outside who we use every now and then. He has great contacts with Mansur. He gives tour guides now and then to Italian tourists in Libya as a cover, I think he has a couple degrees in art and in languages."

Ferrara was not happy.

"You talking about Johnny Jazir I guess. I met him back when I was in AISE. He helped get those out of the Algerian desert after being kidnapped by Bedouins. But he's a rather particular sort of guy. Do you know him well, Giulio?"

"Not personally, but he has an impressive history of assignments carried out for us. And when you give a capable individual clear orders and the appropriate pay..."

Ferrara seemed hardly convinced.

"The world isn't a ship, Giulio. Professor Jazir is certainly capable and very tied to money, but he's not an obedient sailor. I don't feel comfortable using him, I don't want to tell him or the Libyans about little boy."

Bonan was perplexed. "And so what do you suggest then?"

"We need to make a direct, personal offer to this admiral Mansur, to block all of the departures for two weeks starting Sunday, he doesn't need to know why."

"We have a problem, Pietro. You don't want Jazir to work on it and I don't want to expose an official employee of AISE."

Aba had waited silently for her chance. She was ready.

*Now that you've destroyed each other between Yakutia and Kamchatka, I can attack Asia.*

“I know the issue, I’ve known Tripoli since the days of Gaddafi, I know what Libyans are like, I’m a woman...”

Bonan looked at her, mockery in his eyes.

“Since you mention it, mister Mansur is homosexual...”

Aba responded, icily.

“I wasn’t thinking of a striptease. Just that for negotiations, a woman is less threatening, more inoffensive.”

“Ms. Abate, I haven’t known you long, but I wouldn’t describe you as inoffensive.”

Ferrara blocked once more that unpromising deviation.

“Aba has been to Libya many times for the migrant agreements. Her official job at the ministry is to keep in check certain agreements. It would be normal for her to go to speak with the head of the coast guard, no one will think anything of it.”

Bonan thought it over for a while. Then nodded.

“Alright, fine. Let’s say that, for the moment, it’s an internal security issue and it’s your responsibility, Pietro. So one of your people can cover it.”

Aba was not surprised by the lack of resistance.

*He believes a woman will be easily under control.*

Bonan placed his journal and Montblanc pen back in his folder, shook Ferrara’s hand, signaled a half bow in Aba’s direction, without the kiss this time. Just a few last words as he took his leave.

“You’re a mother with a family, Ms. Abate. You don’t appear at all to be a Mata Hari type, but I sure wouldn’t feel easy having you as one of my enemies.”

As soon as Bonan left, Ferrara stood up.

“Let’s go down to the café. I need something to warm me up.”

The café inside the building was empty. People had already finished their breakfast, and it was early for the traditional mid-morning cappuccino.

Ferrara ordered three espressos, each one with a drop of anisette. Aba, a green tea. They sat at a small table near the window. He looked out at the black sky and shivered.

“I hate this damn rain, Aba. This awful winter looks like *Blade Runner*. I’m freezing.”

“Don’t be silly, Pietro. It’s not that cold. You should get yourself checked out.”

He gulped down the first coffee.

“Can you really imagine me at the doctor, sitting there as he studies my red and white blood cells frowning? I’m a total wimp, Aba, I’d piss my pants.”

“When you went by yourself into that mafioso’s hideout and he greeted you with gun shots, you weren’t a wimp.”

He gulped down the second coffee.

“That wasn’t bravery. It was sloppiness.”

In the the café lit by artificial light, Aba thought back on her father Adelmo’s own terrible assessment of that episode.

*Pietro didn’t follow my advice, he wasn’t prudent. As with his wife Emma.*

“You can’t tell me what you told Bonan to convince him?”

He threw down the third coffee and smiled to change the subject.

“He gets on your nerves, doesn’t he?”

“What does it matter?”

“That allusion to the fact that he doesn’t know the usual methodologies was slightly offensive and not strictly necessary, Aba. A lot of provocations in a short time. It was useless, and it wasn’t like you.”

Aba stared pensively at the three espresso mugs that Ferrara had emptied.

“My intention wasn’t to be contentious, Pietro. Males’ character is revealed through their reactions to minor slights.”

“Minor slights?”

Aba lifted her eyes again to Ferrara.

“In high school I had a desk partner who was pretty mild-mannered, warm and great at math. I said to him *I like you, I really do, but only as a friend*. He never acted mild-mannered or warm again, and he stopped helping me in math.”

Ferrara burst out laughing, alternating with coughing.

“Okay, but he wasn’t a future admiral and director of the secret service. You have to listen to me, you know how much I care about your career. Be careful with Bonan. Don’t underestimate him and therefore don’t provoke him”

“I provoked him because I don’t underestimate him. You still didn’t answer me.”

“You didn’t either, Aba.”

She stood up. Now people were coming into the café, and she had never liked the idea of being seen sitting around, wasting time, with her boss. It could be misinterpreted.

“I’m going to the airport. I can make it in time to catch the flight that goes through Malta.”

“Johnny Jazir won’t be happy about your intrusion into his territory.”

Aba shrugged her shoulders. “We don’t work for our own happiness.”

“If you knew him the way I do...”

“I’ll read his resume. And I’ll keep him well informed, though only about what’s indispensable.”

Ferrara smiled. “‘Well informed about the indispensable.’ Sounds like something your father would have said. But you need to make me a promise, Aba. ”

She smiled at him. She knew he was more worried about her than about the mission.

*And this is wrong*

“I’ll be prudent. I’m *always* prudent, Pietro, and you know it...”

He looked at her affectionally, wagged his head and smiled.

“Since you were a little girl, you were extraordinary in everything, only a little presumptuous at times, sure that you could control everything.”

“I’m a grown-up girl, Pietro.”

“Exactly. Therefore just negotiate a convenient price and wrap things up quickly. That way you can avoid Professor Johnny Jazir.”

I always have a 48 hours briefcase in my office. Half for papers, half with the essentials for a short trip.

*But no one can understand from my bag that I'm leaving, nor how long I'll be gone. Sometimes I don't even know.*

My family is used to sudden, sporadic trips to remote sites, where they think I need to go check a financial budget and even uncover some small or large irregularity. This hidden side excites my children's imagination.

*Mom gets thieves arrested.*

With this mediocre but effective dramatization, I've accustomed them to not ask where I'm going, or at least not to push for an answer. And so I send a simple text to Paolo.

*"Unexpected mission, sweetheart. I'll be back tomorrow. I'll tell Rodica."*

Rodica is the person who saves my life, but who I never see. She arrives at my house every day after three buses or trains from a small town between the sea and Latina, comes in after I've gone to work and leaves before I come home, taking care of everything my work prevents me from doing. Our relationship is prevalently through messages, which are always as concise as possible.

*Don't do any experiments tonight for dinner.*

That is a problem: the fact that she thinks she knows how to cook, in addition to her desire to please Caterina.

*Follow the week's menu, Cate's on a diet, no butter on sole. Rare steak for Fra, well done for Paolo. Make sure he takes clean jersey for afternoon rugby practice. Leave everything ready for dinner, remind Cate to walk Killer after dinner. Put calculator in Fra's backpack, tomorrow math assignment. Check battery. Go to blood test appointment I made for you.*

I smile for the lack of articles. It's part of the concision. More time saved.

*This way, even if the plane crashes, they'll survive at least the night.*

I check what's in my briefcase as the taxi takes me to the airport.

*Yes, I have my veil, wig, dark sunglasses. Just missing the Victoria's Secret lingerie, that would be Giulio Bonan's comment..*

During the flight to Malta, in the middle of the Mediterranean, the airplane started to shake, and Aba instinctively gripped her hands to the armrests.

*How would they survive without me?.*

She turned to the older woman sitting next to her by the window. "Could you lower the blind, please?"

The passenger immediately satisfied her request and smiled. "Are you afraid of flying?"

She was a kind little old woman, and Aba felt relaxed for a moment. "No, I'm afraid of crashing."

The woman's smile widened. "Well, of course. Who isn't afraid of dying?"

"The truth is that I'm not scared of dying on the spot. I'm afraid of the thoughts before dying. If the airplane goes crashing, I'd have all that time to think."

"And what would you think about?"

“About my children who’d be left all alone.”

She had responded out of impulse, but she immediately regretted it.

*Be cautious, Aba, and never forget it. Especially when under stress.*

The woman looked somewhat confused. “I see you wear a wedding ring. There’d always be your husband left to take care of them, no?”

Aba chose right away to lie, which she almost never did, for practical reasons.

*A completely different art from that of omission, and a much more dangerous one, to be used only when indispensable.*

“I’m not married. I wear a wedding ring when I travel to keep away unwanted men.”

*It’s not true, but Bonan gave me the idea...*

As she said it, she adopted the most appropriate smile for the situation, the Mona Lisa. She used it in those few occasions in which she was forced to lie, ever since her father brought her to the Louvre the first time and told her to practice that smile as much as she could.

*How did dad describe it? Too defenseless to lie.*

The old woman broke out laughing, then stretched out her boney, well-manicured hand covered in jewels.

“I’m Jacqueline Loris, archeologist. I’m going to Tripoli.”

Aba was happy that she had already put on the long black wig with bangs and her large dark sunglasses. She shook the thin and fragile hand. There was no point lying about her destination, since it would only be found out later.

“Nice to meet you, I’m also going to Tripoli.”

“Oh really? I’m going to the Rixos. What about you?”

This time Aba opted for an omission in the form of an answer.

“I’m a government employee. I’m going to Tripoli for some administrative checks.”

“Will you stay long?”

The voice of the hostess, announcing that they would soon be landing in Malta, saved Aba from another lie or simple omission.

When they got off the plane, Aba told the old archeologist, as an excuse, that she needed to make a phone call. Then she quickly walked to the connections desk and had them move her seat on the Malta-Tripoli flight so that she would be in a row by herself.

She was seriously annoyed with herself for revealing that she had children.

*Your fear of flying makes you vulnerable. You should never speak to strangers.*

Then, seated alone in the last row, she spent fifty minutes clutching the armrest, the window shades down, while the plane flew over the last stretch of sea separating her from the African coast.

She tried to concentrate on little boy and on the meeting in Tripoli. But only one thought kept hammering away at her brain.

*What will they do without me if I die?*

The taxi drove from Mitiga Airport toward the center of the city on a four-lane road, through the yellow dust of the Ghibli wind, trying to make its way around the trucks and pickups.

I haven't been back to Tripoli since the fall of the Colonel, in 2011, and I haven't missed it. No one in a sane state of mind would miss the way of driving that reflects daily how little life is worth, the overly intense colors, the whiffs of odors that assail you out of nowhere, the sticky heat that suddenly clings to you even in the winter. Right now, I'm in the thick of a heat that makes no sense for January, the sky yellow with sand carried by the wind from the south, from the Sahara.

I look around and the only new things I see are more women around wearing veils and more traffic cameras. It seems an absurd proliferation in a city where many cars don't have a license plate and the others have the old Libyan one, with black tape stuck to it to cover the word *Giamahiria*.

And, naturally, there are the pickups carrying machine guns and boys armed with handguns and even Kalashnikovs. I wonder what would happen if they stopped us and one of these excited and inexperienced kids shot me. My fears are always the same, like in the airplane.

*Who will take care of them?*

I activate the special encrypted telephone, the one that can't be located or intercepted, nearly impenetrable access. In reality, it needs to be used carefully and sparingly, because today nothing is sacrosanct, and "privacy" is an extremely optimistic word.

Then I turn back on my personal phone and read the texts.

*Have a good trip, sweet. – Your ideal husband*

A series of characters follow which, I've learned, indicate two emoticons: a smiley face and a little heart. I try to ignore my slight disappointment. At the end of the day, there's nothing wrong with expressing emotions through those symbols. Maybe I'm old, seeing as I prefer full words to abbreviations and emojis. There are so many of them, but on my old-school phone I don't know how to make even the essentials: the cow for the blonde woman in the SUV, the pig for my colleague Ollio and for the people-pleaser who runs the supermarket, the snake for Giulio Bonan ...

I send a text to my little giant.

How did the assignment go?

The answer comes straight away.

It was shit.

At this point, I just need to send the message I've been fearing most. The one that can completely ruin this far-from-easy day. I think of Hamlet, facing the horizon. To know or not to know, that is the question. We overly sensitive parents, or overly prying, or overly foolish, we always have to choose between worrying and disappointment. It's my nature to exclude uncertainty, at least you can act on bad news, and so I write it and send it.

Hi Cate, how did the test for the Olympiads go?

No answer. Since my daughter is constantly on, the lack of an answer is a clear indicator.

*Wonderful. Everything at home is perfect. Now I just need to deal with a few little trifles like little boy.*

I see my face in the rearview mirror: pale, with those little wrinkles in the corner of my eyes and lips, slightly sunken cheeks accentuated by the long black wig with bangs. I put back

on my Greta Garbo-style glasses. A ridiculous precaution? Maybe, or maybe not. But there is always the man who knew all except love.

*Always choose prudence, Aba, especially when it doesn't cost you anything.*

It was already mid-afternoon, but outside, with the Ghibli coming from the desert, the temperature was over twenty degrees Celsius and the air conditioning in the conference room of what was pompously called the Office of Internal Security did not work. Or rather, the fan coil was making noise but letting out room-temperature air.

The Admiral Mansur of the coast guard, who had arrived at that level more out of self-appointment than for career accomplishments, had accepted meeting Ms. Abate: the Italian government was still an important client after all. He had suggested this office, where it was normal for him to receive a government official from Italy's Ministry of the Interior, which, it was known, collaborated with the Libyan coast guard to contain the numbers of boats leaving with desperate migrants.

Mansur was wearing a gray, well-ironed uniform, maybe a bit too tight for a somewhat corpulent middle-aged man trying to seem young.

"How can I help you, miss?"

Mr. Mansur spoke in Arabic, but as much as Aba understood perfectly, she waited for the translation from the assistant acting also as an interpreter. What's more, while she understood Arabic, Mansur understood Italian. The young man with long eyelashes expressed himself in a very formal English and an affected accent with French undertones.

"We need something that I hope you can do for us, Mr. Mansur."

The word "Mr." was the first test Aba had planned for that man. He didn't seem to appreciate it, he didn't wait for the young assistant's translation and responded directly in English.

"I am an admiral of the Libyan Navy and I command the coast guard, miss."

Vain, touchy, over reactive. Therefore, untrustworthy.

Aba decided to try her second test right away and switched to Russian. She knew that Mansur had studied in Moscow, like many high-ranking officials who had served Gadaffi.

"We need to speak alone, Admiral."

Mansur huffed, then signaled to his young assistant and spoke to him in Arabic, taking for granted that an Italian woman could know Russian, but certainly not Arabic.

It was his first mistake.

"Go, *habibi*, let me know the room number."

The assistant stood up and left. Mansur leaned back in his armchair and extended his hands out in a fairly theatrical gesture.

"Well, miss?"

"A person we're interested in will try to leave aboard a Libyan boat in the next few days."

Mansur looked at her with a mocking air and lit a long menthol cigarette with a silver Dunhill.

“No, truly?”

Mansur’s cellphone let out a beep. He gave a glance at the message and Aba noticed his smile.

*Now he knows which room his habibi is in—his love—, and he doesn’t want to waste time.*

“When, miss?”

“Sometime next week.”

“Our week or yours?”

“Ours. From Sunday night.”

Mansur breathed in and exhaled a bit of menthol smoke from his nostrils.

“Alright. I’ll increase security a bit.”

Aba shook her head.

“Perhaps I haven’t explained myself well, Admiral Mansur. Starting Sunday, not even a single fishing boat should leave for sea.”

Mansur suddenly seemed to be paying closer attention.

*He’s starting to get wind of the situation.*

“That’s not part of the agreement, miss. With your superiors we agreed that...”

“I know very well what you agreed on with my superiors. But they’re the ones who sent me, with a very precise order.”

“And what would that be?”

*Unfortunately, I have to be more explicit. Risky, with this type of untrustworthy man. But it’s unavoidable, considering his position.*

“They sent me to tell you that that this person is very unwelcome in Italy. So, from next Sunday, no one will be leaving from the Libyan coasts.”

He stared at her greedily.

“Completely block the departures? And for how long?”

“At least ten days.”

“Miss, do you know how much it would cost us to do that?”

“Who will it cost, Mr. Mansur? The traffickers?”

*Or is it some of the the coast guard? Or you, personally?*

That second, her personal cellphone resting started to ring. She saw the name: Francesco. And right away, without fail, came the terrible thought that hits any mother when a call is unexpected

*Something serious has happened to Caterina or Paolo.*

“Could you excuse me a moment.”

I take the phone, stand up and walk as far as I can from the charming Mr. fake-admiral Mansur while my hearts races in my chest.

“Francesco, what happened?”

“I just got home from school and Rodica overcooked both of the steaks! You know that when I have rugby in the afternoon I have to eat it bloody, otherwise I suck!”



My heart slows down, the fear shifts into relief, then into anger. But he's my son, even if he interrupts me for nothing. I feel Mansur's eyes on me. I turn to give him my back. I talk quietly, to the wall.

"There are cans of tuna in the fridge. Take those."

"Why are you whispering? What am I supposed to do with that gross tuna without oil that fatty eats to lose weight?"

"Don't talk about your sister that way. Then you can make yourself two eggs, I taught you how, remember?"

"And what are they, protein?"

"Yes, of course."

"You're not pulling my leg, ma? You know that if I can't even keep on my feet coach is going to have me on the bench for the big match Saturday."

"I swear. They're protein."

"Where are you? Why are you talking like a zombie?"

I think about those young boys with machineguns. The same age as Francesco.

*I need to keep little boy far from us all*

"Sorry Fra, I'm in a meeting. I need to go, I'll call you tonight.

And I hang up. I stare at the wall for a little. I keep speaking to the wall, with a happier tone, and louder.

"Thanks for calling me, dear. Talk to you later."

Aba turned around and stared at Mansur. He looked at her mockingly.

"Your son doesn't know how to cook, miss?"

It was time to cut it out with these smiles and skirmishes. That man was not a professional, he was merely an opportunist, and he didn't deserve much respect. Aba shifted into the Maggie Thatcher, that stretched-out and, according to the Iron Lady's critics, totally false smile which Aba had practiced in front of the mirror thousands of times.

"The collaboration between our two governments is very valuable for both sides, Admiral Mansur."

"Of course. But reciprocity is the foundation of collaboration, miss. You are asking me something extra, something very costly."

Aba decided that it was time to discontinue the discussion until she checked out this guy further.

*Act weak in front of cocky people. They won't be ready for it when you attack.*

"I understand. But in order to make you an offer I have to call Rome and get authorization. We can talk about it tonight at dinner."

Aba stood up and Mansur followed.

"I'm busy, miss. You can call me when your superiors have authorized you to make an offer."

Aba nodded.

*As I imagined: he's only interested in men, and not women also. Or maybe my looks really are starting to get worse.*

*No, the first possibility is more likely.*

"I'm sure I'll have an offer to make, Admiral."

*Humble, weak, subservient.*

I'm at the Waddan, the same hotel I used to go to before the revolution in 2011. I keep coming here out of convenience, seeing as just a single alley separates it from the Italian embassy. From my laptop lying open on the bathroom cabinet comes Francesco's guttural voice and then his face.

"I can't see you, mom."

I can't allow for Francesco figure out where I am from some detail in the room. Like the painting of the camel-backed Bedouin hanging on the wall behind him.

"My camera isn't working. How did rugby practice go?"

There's blame in Francesco's voice, which bothers me, because it's a warning of future weakness.

*The biggest failing there is, a true sickness.*

"He took me out of next Saturday's lineup! I couldn't stand on my own two feet without the steak. You know that John never played without a steak first?"

In any case, the coach said that he'll let me play during the second half, when the others are tired."

"Of course, that way you'll destroy all of them like John Cena."

Now my little guy starts laughing. "He doesn't play rugby, he's a wrestler. I was talking about John Wilkinson, the superhero that scored for England in the overtime in 2003. "

"I'm sorry, just a bit stressed with some problem at work..."

"Problems with financial upraising, ma?"

He keeps laughing, and I'm happy when he laughs, whatever it is he's saying, even if he says "upraising" instead of "appraising." Seeing as he's in a good mood, I take a stab.

"You don't want to try fencing again? You liked doing it for years."

"You forced me to because I was little. Fencing is for girls."

"The Italian male team is one of the best in the world..."

"Big deal! If they play a match against the women, they'd get killed. While in rugby, if women played against men, they'd end up..."

"Alright, Fra. Has your dad come back from work?"

"A while ago. He always comes home early, unlike you. Thing is, he's pissed off..."

"Francesco!"

"It's not a curse word, come on! Anyway, they turned down his commercial, he's got his knickers in a twist..."

I decide to let it go and to deal with the more unpleasant subject. "Why did the test go badly?"

Or why was it a "shit" test, in his expressive way of defining what happened.

He snorted. “It was fricking hard, something written by some author no one’s ever heard of, this Naso guy...”

“Publius Ovidius Naso is not exactly unheard of...”

“Might be, but this thing, the Metaphormosis...”

“Metamorphosis.”

I’m discouraged and tired. He suddenly realized it from my tone of voice, and I can see a concerned look in his eyes.

“Are you not feeling well, mom?”

I love this child who’s become enormous and hairy in one year but is still a baby. Now he does this all the time, switching in a split second from maximum aggressiveness to the tenderness of a puppy with the dimension of a bear.

*He could never fight with those kids out here with machineguns, they’d tear him apart. Him and everyone like him. And I’m here to keep them far away from our kids.*

“No, I’m great. I just have some problems with work. Is your sister there?”

Francesco chuckles. “She’s getting ready to go out, says she has a costume party. Even though Shrek has no need for a costume!”

“Don’t call her that. You know that she’s doing everything she can to lose weight. And plus, you don’t talk that way about a young lady.”

“Every now and then the young lady opens your secret shelf that’s not a secret. Do you count the boxes of cookies?”

“You spying little shit!”

Caterina’s voice and face jump into the screen. She has an excessive amount of make-up on, her eyes circled black and eyelashes lengthened, giant earrings, purple lipstick and a death-like paleness on her puffy cheeks. I try not to sound critical or annoyed. I need to help her to help herself.

“Hi, baby, didn’t you go a little far with the make-up? Where are you going?”

She giggles. “I’m going to a themed party, mom. Strong women against asshole men.”

Sure, in my day we’d throw parties to pair up, not to fight.

“And who are you dressed up as?”

“Lisbeth Salander. You haven’t seen *Millennium*, mom?”

“Yeah, with dad on TV. I don’t really like violent stuff..”

“It’s not violent, ma! And I look like her, don’t I?”

*Thank goodness she can’t see my expression. They’ll all make fun of her. They’re so cruel at that age...*

“Are you sure Cate? Lisbeth doesn’t exist. You don’t want to choose a real strong woman?”

“Like?”

“I don’t know, someone like Angela Merkel?”

Her eyes suddenly turn sad. “You say her because she’s fat, don’t you?”

“Merkel isn’t fat.”

Francesco lets out a laugh. “In my class we call her Angieball!”

*Where did he learn to be a male chauvinist?*

“Francesco, you will not speak about any woman like that, and I told you a thousand times not to...”

Then I see the dark tears stream over my daughter's round cheeks, and my heart aches.

*What kind of mother am I if I make you cry? Why did I let you gain weight? If I had been closer to you, today we wouldn't be here with this whole tragedy to deal with!*

But I can't let myself be moved, I can't let her go out looking like that. I need to follow my established method for keeping everything under control.

*Distract her. Change the subject. Joking tone.*

"Listen, you know that I can see that you took my foundation to make your cheeks pale like Lisbeth Salander. But why did you put your eyeshadow in my beauty case?"

Caterina stops crying. She even gives a half smile, and I want to be there to hug and kiss her. I should be there.

"Because you should look younger, mom. You're too serious, your shadow makes you look older. Even dad says so, that you should wear brighter things."

Caterina is only more direct than Paolo. Every so often he'll point out to me how our shared female friends look younger, only he doesn't understand that it's not makeup but the botox.

There's only the one method left.

"Tell me about the Olympiads."

She makes an unhappy face.

"The teacher said that he'll correct them tomorrow and he's gonna tell us the results before we leave school."

"He's going to tell us, Cate. How did it go?"

"One hundred multiple-choice questions on a spreadsheet in an hour. Some of them were impossible. I got nervous and then..."

*I was only ever nervous when I wasn't well prepared, Cate.*

I think this, but I'm careful not to say it.

*Loving often means keeping quiet, Aba.*

Rather, she needs positive reinforcement and an alternative to Lisbeth Salander.

"I dressed up when I was a girl too, you know?"

It's not a lie, even if the only time I ever wore a costume was at the end-of-the-year play in high school, and I only did it to please my best friend, Tiziana, who was the director.

"I don't believe you, you're not the type."

"I'm telling you I did. And I was even a really strong woman who fought against bad men."

Cate stares at me incredulously. "No way. Who was it?"

"You know who Joan of Arc is, don't you?"

"Obviously, I studied her in school, the one that made the English shit themselves. But I don't believe you!"

I pass right over this obscenity, it's not the time. "Well, if you go into the basement and open the trunk with *off limits* written on it, you'll find my costume there intact."

She hesitates, unsure. "Is this a joke?"

I shrug my shoulders. "See for yourself. The code to open it is 9999. Nine four times. You can take it if you want, but close the trunk after."

The hard part is already done. Joan of Arc really is in there.

Along with a lot of other things from before. Before 9 September 1999.  
She's not interested anyway. She'll rush to get the costume and that's it... I hope.

"Can you put dad on?"

A few seconds and then Paolo's youthful, smiling face comes in.

"How's it going?"

Not one question about where I am, or with whom, or why. That's the big deal of his life and let live in a world of competitive men, the key reason why I fell in love and married him.

*A perfect husband. Perfect for Ice.*

"Alright. They didn't like the *forever faithful beauty* for the convertible?"

He makes a face that's somewhere between mockery and disgust. "They said that it's too subtle a joke, that our target audience wouldn't understand it. And unfaithful women seems to alienate our male Catholic target."

"Only women, I assume. Well, put a good-looking dude who's having dinner with his wife and looking at a blonde at the next table."

"It doesn't work the same way, Aba."

"I know. But you could change the tagline, like *only if you get inside will you know what you're missing...*" He is a bit surprised, not used to his polite wife being so unconventional.

*Point is I've had a hard day at work, sweetheart.*

"I've studied years in college Five years of university and three of doctorate studies to make up this crap. just to sell these stupid slogans, Aba. I'm getting bored."

"You're so bright at it, Paolo! Why don't you use your phantasy for making your novel a bestseller?"

Now he's not smiling . "Thinking about selling copies of my novel would be a little like writing my idiotic taglines."

I could easily tell him he might never find a publisher if he doesn't care about sales. But I've had enough for the day. And so we close the call.

Aba connected her encrypted phone to the computer. Then, on skype, she dialed a videocall to another encrypted number. It rang for a while, then Tonino answered, somewhat out of breath and with his hair ruffled, in an undershirt, his biceps powerful and sweaty.

"Hello!"

She felt uncertain for a second. "Are you home?"

"Yes, I left early today because I have a dinner meeting. I was doing some abdominals..."

"I need something on the man I saw here this afternoon. You need to take a look at what he gets up to in his room with his *habibi*."

“What can you give me?”

“I’ll send you his computer’s serial number. That should be enough, he’s not really the prudent type.”

“Okay, I’ll see to it first thing tomorrow.”

“No. I need it right away. The abdominals will wait.”

He stared at her surprised, without saying a word.

*Why are you so harsh, Aba? Can’t you say “please”? What does Tonino see? A middle-aged woman who was once fairly good looking and now has crow’s feet in her frozen-cold face?*

“Can I ask you something, Ms. Abate?”

“I’m in a hurry, Tonino. Quick.”

“You seem really tense, and I’m sorry. Is there anything I can do to help you?”

Aba was shocked. Tonino was kind and generous, with eyes that were too sweet for Aba’s tastes but not for all of the other women in the office. Only that, like every hypersensitive person, he was great at analyzing the emotions on people’s faces like data in a database.

*How is this possible? My family problems should never emerge during a work conversation. It’s dangerous. I need to be more careful.*

She should have told him that it was none of his business, but deep down she needed to let things out a bit in order to work better. After all, they weren’t work secrets.

*All of my girlfriends are having fun, with their lovers, husbands, children and friends, at home, in restaurants, movies, theaters. I’m here, by myself, far from home, planning to blackmail someone.*

“Today at school my daughter took the test for the Math Olympiads and it went badly.”

She saw Tonino’s eyes fill up with a comprehension verging on compassion, and she immediately regretted it.

*Never share things for no reason, never let your guard down, Aba.*

Aba spoke before he could comment in any way, applying her method. “Could you take a step back from the camera, Tonino?”

His eyes opened wide. “Why?”

“To see what you wear from the waist down when you do your crunches.”

He was embarrassed, mortified. “I’m sorry, but I don’t have the right to a bit of privacy even when I’m in my own place?”

“You have the right of someone in your line of work, which isn’t a ministry employee. And you don’t have the right to lie to me.”

“But, ma’am...”

“It starts with the little lies. Philby hid his bottles of vodka from his wife before revealing secrets to the enemy. Now find me what I need.”

She hung up. She had no doubt. The point was not whatever Tonino was doing. The point was his lies. A social virus. HIV was an incubator to AIDS just as lies were an incubator to treason.

*And my role is also to educate them, just like with Caterina e Francesco*

Then she looked out the window, towards the castle from whose walls Gaddafi had yelled at the crowds, calling the rebels “sewer rats.” Now the wail of the muezzin was calling the faithful to evening prayer. She had always liked that singsong and the humble way Muslims prayed.

She didn't believe that that very way of praying was at the foundation of terrorism, as did those who saw in every Muslim a likely terrorist. Terrorism had two roots that ran much deeper: the injustices that created resentment, and the secret services of certain governments which fostered it.

*Politicians need to eradicate the first of the two, while we need to fight the second.*

Again she thought about the youngsters with the Kalashnikov. They were just slightly older than Caterina. She felt slightly sick. It had not to do with physical fear. It was something worst.

*Who is right and who is wrong? Are we the good guys or the bad guys?*

She must have gotten lost in those thoughts, because when Tonino's message arrived on her encrypted cellphone, forty minutes had already passed. It was a message with various attachments, without any text.

She called Mr. Mansur from the phone in the hotel room. It rang for a while, then he picked up. He was as out of breath, just like Tonino had been.

"Were you doing crunches, Admiral?"

"What? I don't understand what..."

"I have your offer. Can we see each other tomorrow morning?"

"At seven o'clock in my office, miss."

"Thank you, Admiral. I'll be on time."

*Humble, weak, subservient.*

From the dark, beyond the cracked-open windows, came the sound of the light night-time traffic, more trucks than cars. Thanks to the highway Gaddafi had built, the sea, which was close, was far away.

I call room service and ask if they can bring me a salad.

"No salad, miss. Only hamburger and chips or cheese."

I give up on ordering. The beep coming from my personal cellphone tells me I have a message.

I need to talk to you about Roberto. Tizzy.

Tiziana is my best friend, maybe my only friend since school, but keeping track for all these years of her life as a single woman with many lovers is very complicated. I have passed from solidarity to sympathy for her because of these awful men she always ended up with and finally to some form of rage for what I called receipt for self destruction and she called the only way to true love. I don't remember if Roberto is the last boyfriend I met or a new entry. And this is only the first problem to resolve. And so I send her a open-ended message.

Of course, whenever you like.

Her response clears up everything.

You'll like him. He looks like Enzino, remember?

So he's a new entry. And he looks like that pretty boy in high school who would googly eyes at every girl who had a pair of boobs.

Tiziana has always been that way, ever since high school: cute and intellectual, kind of hippy, -she suited guys, but was too naïve to hold on to them. She was the hardy-studious

intellectual, while I was the one who studied for the two of us. She did theater, read books and newspapers, thought that going to bed with guys was a form of knowledge of the world and a distinctive sign of female emancipation. I studied everything, and kept the boys at a distance—they were interested in only one thing anyway, and I had figured out from Tizzy that they weren't even good at giving her the orgasms that I could get on my own.

But she is the only real friend I have. The couples that Paolo and I see are simply acquaintances.

Lunch Wednesday?

The response comes immediately.

Meet at my bookstore, I'll take you somewhere.

I tell her that works for me and I lie down on the bed, dressed and with a good number of thoughts buzzing around my head. My conversation with Paolo comes back to mind. His work is starting to make the present unbearable, and his refusal to write a book that could sell makes the future unacceptable.

He's completely right. Eight years of literary and philosophical studies are absolutely too many only to think up well paid idiocies. But he's also wrong: whether he likes it or not, we live in a real world.

I had learned the limits of thoughts from when I was little.

Which means enough thinking about Paolo and his issues with overly-dumb slogans and overly-intelligent books. I turn on the computer. Francesco downloaded all of my favorite movies and added a few others, more recent ones, of his own selection. But I'm not in the mood for novelty. I choose *Casablanca*, which I know by heart.

I fall asleep a little before Ingrid Bergman gets on the plane without ever turning back toward Bogart.



## TUESDAY

Aba woke up at five o'clock sharp. She didn't like sleeping without Paolo next to her, it was never a deep, restorative sleep. Every time it happened, she missed her husband's arms around her, his chest against her back, his warmth, his smell, his breathing.

*Everything that we grew and fostered together every day for almost twenty years. Real love, not the kind in a Bergman and Bogart film. And whoever says the opposite, like Tiziana, ends up alone like Bergman.*

She called room service to order a tea, but no one picked up. She vigorously brushed her teeth and flossed, as she had taught Caterina and Francesco to do for years. Then she took out her workout clothes from her bag, put them on and started moving in circles around the room. She changed direction, did jumps, crunches, push-ups. After an hour she took a shower, and was about to call room service again, when there was a knock on the door and she saw an envelope slipped under the door.

She walked toward it, naked and wet. She opened the envelope. In it was a business card from the Italian Institute of Culture and an invitation.

"9 o'clock, Castle, guided tour with Professor Johnny Jazir."

Nude and dripping, Aba sat on the bed. On her computer she opened a file she had downloaded in Rome from their internal database before leaving for Tripoli: *Marlow*.

The agents chose their codenames themselves. She had chosen "Ice," it was what her male peers had called her in high school. Deep down, she found it funny.

*Maybe Johnny Jazir thinks Marlow is funny.*

She clicked on the icon and opened the file.

*Johnny Jazir, born in Cairo, uncertain date between 1968 and 1972, father unknown but probably Western, Egyptian mother who gave him last name. Grew up in Egypt until finishing his studies at the French high school in Alexandria. In 1989 he moved to Nairobi where he graduated in history and literature, then from 1992 he was in Rome where he graduated in art history in 1995. In 1996 he started to collaborate with multiple Italian cultural institutes. Locations: Algiers, Rabat, Tunis, Cairo, Tripoli.*

As Aba already knew, the last part was only a cover. The spread-out headquarters of the Institute of Culture were actually various missions that professor Johnny Jazir had performed for the Italian secret service, and maybe for others too. In the middle, surely a lot more had happened in those two decades. But the complete information on Johnny Jazir, alias JJ, alias Marlow, was only available in the database reserved for the level of deputy director and up.

*And then there are those who can't be found in any database.*

Aba clearly remembered the orders her boss, Pietro Ferrara, and Giulio Bonan had given her.

*Negotiate a good price and come back.*

Most of the time it was the best solution. However, in this specific case, Aba did not see it that way. Sure, money would have convinced Mr. Mansur, for the moment. But afterward,

if something went wrong, Mansur would not hold up when faced with an investigation. What's more, there was the very concrete risk that the funds could end up financing buying other, stronger rubber migrant boats, seeing as Mr. Mansur's power was exactly proportional to the human traffic moving between the two ends of the Mediterranean.

*Money can secure betrayal but not loyalty. There are only two things for that: gratitude, or fear.*

*But whoever is loyal to you out of fear will be the first to become your enemy when a greater fear supplants it.*

Admiral Mansur was sipping a coffee, which Aba had declined.

"So, miss, you were authorized by your superiors?"

Aba was happy about the slightly offensive subtext.

*He's really convinced that I'm a little harmless woman.*

Aba had made her decision about which tactic to follow.

*First we'll try gratitude.*

"We know that you are very passionate about soccer, and that one of your sons plays for Al-Ittihad. Maybe he could try out for one of our teams, a B-series team to start."

Mansur gulped down the rest of the coffee, wiped his lips with a spotless handkerchief and lit one of his menthol cigarettes with the Dunhill.

"I'm not Gaddafi, miss, I have a sense of reality. My son is... How do you all say it? A jerk-off. I think we'll need to find another chip to bargain with."

*That only leaves fear.*

Aba took out her smartphone from her bag and looked for the picture Tonino had sent her that night. She placed the phone in front of Mansur so that he could clearly see the image.

"It's never a good idea to leave the computer on in the bedroom. Don't you know that they all have built-in cameras?"

Mansur seemed astonished, speechless. Then his expression shifted from bafflement to rage. He took his gun out of its holster and placed it next to Aba's smartphone.

"You haven't understood a fucking thing. This isn't the Libya of your fascist ancestors, nor the one of that bastard Gaddafi. We're the ones giving orders here, and if I shoot you, I'll have your body cut into bits and thrown in the sea, and no one will know. And even if they do find out, they'd keep off my back. Tell me if you've understood."

Aba thought about a countless number of things in those few seconds. Her brain had been used to making complex reasoning in real time ever since her father one night when she was six years old, had placed a chessboard with an hourglass in front of her.

*Popeye had warned me to be prudent. But I'm not imprudent, and this reaction coming from Mansur isn't natural... Unless... unless...*

She took back the phone, put it in her pocket and stood up.

"I'll speak about it with your partner, Mr. Mansur. Or maybe he's your boss, isn't he?"

Mansur suddenly went pale, but he didn't say anything while she left. As soon as she was outside, Aba stopped in the shade under the awning of a small fruit shop.

*This is a different world. They don't play chess or Risk here. Only at cowboys and Indians, that stupid game that little men love so much.*

*Alright, JJ, I'll be at the Castle.*

She arrived back at the hotel and went up to the room. She looked in the mirror. Her pale face, along with the black wig with bangs, made her look like that singer she liked so much.

*Bang bang, I hit the ground... Bang bang, my baby shot me down.*

She changed, putting her large grey hood back on, and washed off the little make-up from her eyes.

“9 o’clock, Castle, guided tour with Professor Johnny Jazir.”

She knew she couldn’t ignore him, Bonan and Ferrara had been clear. If she was unsuccessful with Mansur, she needed to turn to Johnny Jazir. But she had taken for granted that she would be the one to eventually decide where, when and how. Now, after Mr. Mansur’s gun placed on the table, she had no choice.

She wrapped the dark headscarf around the wig and put on her black glasses. She would go by foot, getting there when the tour was almost over. She left at nine and set out toward Martyrs’ Square, which under Gaddafi was called Green Square, under the Senussi monarchy Independence Square, and before that, under the Italians, Piazza Italia. Names that told a century of Libyan history.

*What will the next name be?*

She passed the pool of the fountain without the antelope, which had first been shot at by RPGs and then stolen by one of the many Salafist militias. There was nearly no one underneath the arcades, the stores were all closed. Aba crossed the square, lashed by a tepid and sticky wind full of dust and sand. She walked toward the sea and came to the entrance of the castle which had been painted red by the Colonel.

She showed the invitation to a distracted soldier who pointed her to a group of fifteen or so people. They must have been professors and students from a visiting Italian university. They were in the Spanish courtyard facing out onto the square, and they were all listening to the guide.

He was a normal looking man, maybe a bit on the short side, maybe a bit thin, a high hairline with hair that wasn’t thick or thin, white or dark, with a beard that wasn’t long or short, just a little black and a little gray. He had a cap with a visor and a pair of outdated Ray-Bans with green rectangular lenses. He was wearing a suede jacket that must have been thirty years old, a worn and crumpled shirt of grey linen, sand-colored cotton pants and a pair of comfortable sandals out of which poked toenails that were too long and a bit dirty from the ground. He was leaning indolently against one of the stone lions as he smoked a cigarette. He entertained the tourists in an *Arab* Italian, his accent sliding the *s*’s into a *sh* sound, his cadence blending into a singsong.

Overall, he didn’t give the impression of a professor, let alone a secret service agent.

“All of the invaders of this country have gotten their hands on this castle: Turks, Spanish, English, Italians. Each one has left their own bad memory.”

“Even Gaddafi?”

“Of course, he threatened the rebels from the ramparts of the castle!”

“He called them sewer rats!”

Professor Jazir listened distractedly to the visitors' comments, without responding. When they had finished, he threw the lit cigarette butt to the ground and signaled for them to follow him to the stables.

"In one of the rooms you can even admire the Colonel's old sky-blue Volkswagen. A memory of him."

From his tone of voice, no one could have been able to tell if it was joking or sincere, if JJ was making fun of the Colonel or paying him tribute.

"Are there some memories of Ghuma al-Mahmudi as well?"

Professor Jazir remained motionless for an instant, without turning to the person who had asked the question. Then, behind his green glasses, he moved his gaze to the tourist with long black hair poking out of her headscarf, dressed in a lumpy grey sweatshirt and sneakers.

"Of course, ma'am. There are some drops of his blood on the walls facing the square, where the Turks had his head hung up so that everyone understood the cost of rebellion."

He turned, leading the tourists inside toward the government offices and the archeological museum. At the end of the tour, before saying goodbye, he handed a business card to each of them.

*Italian Institute of Culture – Dr. Johnny Jazir.*

On the one he gave to the last tourist to arrive there was also a sentence written in pencil.

*At the embassy in an hour.*

I take my time walking along Al Fata street. The Ghibli has become worse, blowing even harder. The sun is a pale sphere in a sky turned yellowish from the sand.

I have a headache, which I haven't had to deal with in a while. I try to tell myself that it's only the idea of having to share *everything indispensable* with professor Johnny Jazir giving me a migraine.

My phone beeps. I stop by a small market to read the message. It's from Caterina.

I did it!

I can feel a wave of relief, then joy. Then a disdain for myself.

*How can you be so susceptible to the mood of a young girl who's as volatile as every other teenager?*

But that teenager is my daughter, the key part of my life. I feel joy and pain for her as I've never felt, even for myself.

It's an old story, partially explicit, partially intuited, among the adults we usually see.

*Is there such a thing as a full life without kids?*

I think so, but I'm happy and lucky not to have to ask the question.

I always tell you you're too negative, Cate.

You're right mom! I got 100 out of 100!

The joy immediately fizzles out.

*Something doesn't add up. But it's definitely not the moment to talk ask.*

I write the absolute minimum.

Good job. I'll see you tonight.

Caterina is not happy. Rightly so. Which mother would act like this?

Good job... that's all?

Did you already tell dad?

Obviously I told him! He said that I'm a genius!

I walk into the alley before the Waddan and stop in front of a small building, today the seat of the Italian embassy. There's always my usual method left.

How did the party go?

The Joan of Arc costume was badass!

Did you close the trunk?

\*Winking face.\*

Great, now I have to remember to change the code.

I'm in a meeting, Cate. I'll call you later.

A young male secretary knocked, then opened. He led her to a small room with walls covered in books, a large table and a few seats in not particularly good shape.

Johnny Jazir was sitting at that table, a book in his hands, an unlit cigarette in his lips, without his cap but with the green-tinted Ray-Bans still covering his eyes.

"Professor Jazir, Ms. Abate, from the Ministry of the Interior. She'd like advice on historical Libyan books."

Professor Jazir didn't take off the glasses and stood up. He didn't stretch out his hand, but closed the door.

"Please, Ms. Abate, sit down. Would you like a coffee?"

He preempted her saying no by nodding his head yes, so Aba agreed.

"Yes, please, professor."

"I'll make it myself in the mocha pot, with a real espresso cup. The vending machine coffee only leaves a hole in the stomach. Come with me."

The professor walked through the glass door onto a small terrace facing a shabby inner courtyard, where two cars with diplomatic plates were parked. There were two chairs and a small Formica table with a gas camping stove, connected to a small gas cylinder. The tight space was enclosed by a thin metallic net made of little squares.

Professor Jazir signaled to her to sit, filled up the coffee pot, rubbed a match against his nail and used it to light the flame underneath the pot and then a cigarette.

"Let's stay outside so I can smoke. The ambassador says that smoking causes cancer. To think whose hands your diplomacy is in! He probably believes that Hitler caused the war and that Christ's death was brought about by Pilate."

She knew that talking outside was a precaution, but also a warning. There could be microphones inside of the embassy, cameras, ears and eyes. But she didn't feel completely at ease.

"And if the ambassador heard you speaking about him like this, Professor?"

"We can speak openly hear." He pointed to the metallic net and smiled. "It's called a Faraday cage. But we can only stay out here as long as it takes to drink a coffee, otherwise the

Yankees at the NSA start getting nervous if they can't hear us. They're always afraid they're going to miss some key moment, poor things."

Aba watched him pour the coffee into a cup and water into a small glass. The professor placed everything in front of her on the table, then sat down in the other seat.

"Sugar?"

"No thank you. I stopped drinking coffee years ago."

Aba regretted that stupid sentence, but he didn't comment. He crushed the cigarette butt on the ground with the heel of his sandal, pulled out from his suede jacket a toothpick and stuck it in his mouth. Then he looked at her from behind the greenish lenses.

"You were a bit imprudent. A normal tourist has never heard of Ghuma al-Mahmudi. Nor has a regular employee of the Ministry. You know, among those tourists, there could have been people in our own line of work."

"I needed you to notice me in order to make contact."

"I had already noticed you. Despite my age, I still notice an attractive woman, even if that wig is awful and the bangs down to the eyebrows don't suit you. It makes you look like a caricature of a spy or of Queen Cleopatra."

*He's trying to test you. Stay calm.*

"You notified Mr. Bonan of my arrival, didn't you?"

He ignored the question.

*Now that's why Bonan let me come to Tripoli without much resistance. He knew his man would be keeping tabs on me anyway.*

"But who told you that I had chosen the Waddan hotel?"

"An old friend of mine crossed your path on the plane. What's more, she told me that you are afraid of flying."

"It's not relevant."

"Fine. Well, what brings you to Tripoli? Serious administrative irregularities in the Libyan coast guard's spending of the money you give them to keep those bad people far away from your beautiful shores?"

"You already know why, Professor. I want your friend Mansur to block all of the boats from leaving. Only that I need to negotiate the price with you, not with him. Correct?"

"You tried to blackmail someone who works for you Italians."

"He wasn't at all afraid, because you authorized him to threaten me if I didn't offer enough money. Otherwise he never would have dared pointing a gun against an Italian official..."

"An Italian official who was blackmailing him. Anyway, don't worry, he won't tell Bonan or Ferrara. You'll be making him a good offer anyway, won't you?"

"Tell me the price and we'll try to make an agreement."

JJ pointed to the glass door.

"We can't stay out here any longer. You have a little time before the flight to Malta. I'd like to show you something, then I'll take you to the airport and I'll give you a fair price."

He stood up, and she followed him inside. The professor handed her a book on the archeological history of Sabratha and Leptis Magna.

"And this must be the book I was looking for."

Aba took it and slid it into her bag without even looking at it.

“Thank you, Professor. So, if it’s not a problem you wouldn’t mind taking me to the airport?”

*Now whoever is listening won’t worry.*

In the jeep, JJ sat in the back, letting Aba take the seat next to the driver, a young, smiling black man who remained quiet. JJ calmly smoked in silence as they crossed Tripoli in the direction of the city outskirts. The Ghibli was still lashing, encircling them in a warm and sticky sand cloud. At a certain point, the jeep turned off of the Gargaresh waterfront and onto a dirt road. Aba turned toward JJ.

“Where are we going?”

“To one of the five-star hotels you all finance. Officially, you came here to check how the Italian taxpayers’ money is spent, correct? It’s better if you at least make a visit.”

Aba gave an alarmed look at the driver, who, however, did not seem to understand Italian and kept driving in silence. The jeep stopped in front of a two-meter tall protective wall made of white lime and topped with barbed wire. The two guards in front of the gate walked over. JJ spoke to them in Arabic.

“She is from the Italian ministry. Admiral Mansur should have notified you about our visit.”

The older guard nodded while the younger one lifted the entry bar, peering at Aba’s face under her scarf.

Hundreds of people were sitting on the ground, grouped together under the metal roof over the unpaved, dusty ground. They were all black, most of them young men, some of the women had babies in their arms while their somewhat older children ran around kicking at a ball of rags. The Ghibli wrapped up everything and everyone, like in those old sepia-colored photographs. That unseasonable heat brought with it flies, sweat and the smell of human beings.

For a bare moment she imagined Caterina and Francesco in the middle of that crowd and closed her eyes to let the image go.

A short man with hair as curly as his moustache walked up to them. He was wearing a uniform that did not belong to any official army. He glanced at Aba and then addressed JJ in Arabic.

“I’m the commandant of this camp. Admiral Mansur notified us. As you can see, the guests are in good conditions here. In a little while they’ll have a meal and then will go back to their living quarters.”

Aba tried to concentrate.

*Why the hell did he bring me here? What does he want from me?*

She looked around. The eyes of those ‘guests’ looked dim, the ones of people who no longer have the strength even to curse their own fate. Besides a small brick building, which was probably for the guards, Aba only saw sheet-metal containers, semi-opened on the sides. They could only hold half of those people, at the most. She turned to JJ.

“I’d like to see the living quarters.”

JJ translated this, but the man with the mustache immediately shook his head.

“You can’t. Precisely today they are disinfecting for scorpions.”

Aba didn’t wait for the translation and walked toward the first container. She heard JJ behind her as he spoke in Arabic to the officer trying to stop her.

“She’s a friend of Admiral Mansur. She’s the one paying your salary, and she has a terrible attitude, so it’s best to let her go ahead.”

At the back, invisible from the entrance, the container was open, exposed to the Ghibli, without any kind of wall. There weren’t beds or even cots inside. Only mats, old sheets and towels thrown on the floor of earth and sand, even outside of the metal covering. Outside was a narrow booth, again made of sheet metal though without a roof, with a bucket inside, which must have been used for bodily needs. Next to it, a stinking, uncovered septic tank.

Again she saw Caterina and Francesco entering the booth. She got upset with herself and discarded the image.

*It’s not our fault. What can we do? We send money to an ONG every Christmas...*

Aba went over to the single small brick building. Inside she found four rooms with unmade beds, a small kitchen, a bathroom and a stair going down to a kind of basement. She went down, but the wide wooden door was locked.

Aba went back outside.

“Professor Jazir, can you come over here, please?”

JJ walked over unhurriedly, his lit cigarette between his lips, his hands in his coat pockets, his eyes hidden behind his Ray-Bans.

“What is it?”

Aba pointed at the containers. “Is this what we pay them for?”

He passed a hand on his trim beard to swat a fly, which continued to bother him, and while it buzzed around his head, he suddenly grabbed it in his fist and threw it in one smooth motion towards the wall.

Then he smiled at Aba.

“They’re very irritating, you know?”

Aba pointed at the door to the basement. “Those dark red stains aren’t rust, are they?”

JJ didn’t even turn to look. “No, it’s not rust.”

There was no sarcasm in his tone, nor any hint of disdain.

“So it’s blood. I’m guessing that what’s down there isn’t a cellar.”

“No cellar, Muslims don’t drink wine. You see, you pay the Libyans to keep those blacks far away from your beaches. How, doesn’t concern you. If you want them to be kept in the Waddan, I can see to it, you’d just need to pay more.”

In that instant, the special ringtone for Rodica came from Aba’s personal phone.

*You can go without answering your husband or kids. But not the housekeeper.*

“Excuse me one second, Professor.”

She walked a couple meters away, “I’m in a meeting, Rodica. What is it?”

“Mr. Paolo says I don’t cook tonight. He’ll do it.”

*“He’ll do it” sounds more like a threat than a promise.*

“Okay, you take care of Killer. I’ll call him after.”

Aba hung up and walked back to Johnny Jazir. “You brought me here to ask for more money for your friend Mansur so he can improve the life of these poor people? And you think I believe that?”



JJ shook his head. “Mansur isn’t my friend, and I didn’t bring you here to ask for money for them, it would never be enough. In order to improve the lives of these people you Westerners would need to give up your standard of living. But I’m guessing this topic doesn’t interest you.”

Aba looked at the time. She needed to be at the airport in the next thirty minutes if she didn’t want to miss the flight to Malta. She had truly had enough of Professor Johnny Jazir.

“You are no Che Guevara or Mandela, Professor. You wouldn’t move a finger for any of them unless well paid.”

Something passed on his face, she could tell, even with his eyes covered by the dark green sun glasses.

*But I don’t care, whatever it may be.*

She turned and, without another word, went back to the jeep. The young, smiling driver let her in to the seat next to him as before, while JJ sat down in the back. Before they took off, Jazir leaned towards her.

“So, look at them, now do you understand why I brought you here?”

“To give me a crisis of conscience and squeeze out some extra money for you and your friend Mansur. We already pay a lot, you know this. If these prison guards are... are...”

“Animals? You can say it, Ice. I’m only half Arab, half animal, I won’t be offended. But I didn’t bring you here for you to be pricked by a conscience that you don’t have.”

“Then for what, Professor?”

JJ pointed back to the gait to the camp they were leaving. “Because little boy is here. Or in another hotel like this.”

Aba pointed at the driver and hissed under her breath. “Have you gone crazy, Professor?”

JJ clapped his hands loudly right behind the driver’s ears and yelled just a couple of inches away.

*“Jalla! Adbah!”*

The young black man didn’t react even slightly.

“He’s deaf.”

“Even if he can’t hear us, he could tell someone he saw us together.”

“He can’t. He’s mute too. Evergreen is deaf and mute, but not from birth.”

“Evergreen?”

“I don’t know what his real name is, but that’s what I call him. He was a gardener and a driver. Then in 2011 he was forced by Gaddafi’s men to move with his family into a barracks to be the driver and attendant of some regime big shot. The bomb from one of your airplanes blew up just twenty meters from him and took away his hearing and his will to speak. Not to mention his wife and three children.”

“There weren’t any Italian aircrafts among the planes bombing the regime loyalists in 2011.”

JJ sneered. “Ah, right of course, how silly of me. You only gave... How do you call it?”

“Logistical support. Anyway, I’d be less worried if your driver was also blind.”

“I know that you are an extremely prudent type, Ms. Abate. But if Evergreen were blind, then I’d need to drive, and I’m a really lazy guy. Well, going back to our main problem, it’s a *walad saghir*, a little boy that we need to stop?”

“It’s no concern of yours. You only need to tell me a fair price to block the departures.”

He smiled. “One hundred twenty thousand euros in advance to a Dubai account for a complete halt for ten days. One hundred for the service, and twenty for the offence that you committed against the admiral.”

Aba shook her head. “One hundred. And tell Mr. Mansur not to ever come to Italy, not even on vacation. Something could happen to him.”

JJ laughed. “Come on, Ice, he never would have shot you. People like him never do. He’s a fag, isn’t he? No, how do you all say it? Differently...”

“Cut it out with this garbage.”

He slid a toothpick in between his teeth. “I’ll speak your case to Mansur for you, we’ll make it one hundred thousand. But what happens after ten days?”

“In ten days, we’ll have found the base in Italy.”

JJ took the toothpick from his mouth and put it back in his pocket.

“And if you don’t succeed?”

Aba had already thought about it, but she saw no solution and didn’t say anything.

“Now do you understand why I showed you this five-star hotel?”

Aba didn’t say a word, and JJ went on.

“He’s here. Or in one of the other camps in Tripoli, which Mansur or one of his friends runs.”

Aba shook her head.

“Really? And who could ensure this?”

“No one. But people don’t set out in those boats without passing through one of these places first.”

He placed a dusty hand on her shoulder.

“You should trust me, miss.”

Aba pulled away from him with an abrupt movement.

“I understand, professor. How much would it cost?”

Johnny Jazir shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ll convince Mansur. For fifty thousand euros more he could find him.”

“And then, Professor? After Mansur has found little boy?”

“Why should I know. You’re the secret agent,.”

Aba clearly felt the poison that was starting to circulate inside her, the same way she felt those awful grains of sand, the sweat, the flies, the feral odor of desperation. She looked at the man behind those antiquated green Ray-Bans.

*He knows very well what he is suggesting me. The opposite of what my father taught me.*

No one said another word. They sat there, like two strangers, until the driver stopped the car in front of the terminal.

Aba took her trolley briefcase and got out. She was very afraid at the idea of flying with that wind, but she had no intention of letting it show. JJ followed her, accompanying her towards the terminal entrance.

“You are a little pale. Don’t worry about the Ghibli. The pilots who take off from here are used to it.”

“I’m not worried about that.”

He threw away the end of his lit cigarette, which flew away, carried by the same wind that was disheveling his black, gray and white hair.

“You’re right to think about the *walad saghir*. Little boy is only valuable to you if ...”

Aba interrupted him.

“It would be too imprudent.”

The professor smiled and nodded for a little while.

“Anyway, the plane won’t crash, not yours.”

His eyes were invisible behind the lenses of those horrible sunglasses, but Aba was sure they were laughing at her.

She turned her back to him and walked to the check in desk. She was happy to leave that place, with its boys holding Kalashnikovs at street corners, with its whiffs of sewer stench, its beautiful castle now painted red, its waterfront made into a highway and parking lots, its tepid wind with clinging sand evaporating your energy, and its hell-like places which people like Mansur and Johnny Jazir had fun calling five-star hotels. But the poison had begun to circulate.

*Maybe he’s not wrong about little boy, maybe we could...*

The principle of prudence started to fight against the part of her that her father had considered a serious and dangerous genetic defect, one that he was unable to eradicate completely.

*Your mother also thought she was indestructible. In order to bring you into this world, she didn’t want to treat her cancer.*