

Jihad over Innsmouth

Pseudopod 106

by Edward Morris, ...

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A cold, black, liquescent fear laps at the edges of my heart as I approach the first gate in the long Caliph's Maze of Airport Security. Some darker force is trying to sway me unobtrusively away, to make me renege my retainer's oath, cut my losses and run headlong to South America with the dwindling remains of my bank account.

Should I die on my quest, a first-class seat in Paradise awaits me. In my time, I have lived through every hell Shaitan could possibly devise right here on

Earth, moving behind newspaper headlines which even Al-Jazeera fears to run. Enquiring minds want to know, but some truths are better left to the darkness at the center of the universe, to be drowned out by the skirlings of the blind piper and his retinue of idiot flute-players.

But the oath I took goes deeper than the contract I signed with the old black man in Oakland last week. It is one our folk call fatwa, and is not to be broken. Come flood or djinn or plague of insects, I will board this plane.

I carry no arms upon my person. I'm simply afraid of Americans. This is a very hot land for me now. Every time I have to fly, I expect Justice Department agents in sober black suits to surround me, barking on their surveillance headsets that I am under arrest for any one of a thousand occupationally hazardous reasons which I foreswore tabulating long ago.

But no minions of the law shew themselves in the crowd. My fear settles back inside me and changes shape. For myself, I merely offer a silent prayer to Allah that my limited human perceptions had somehow interpreted the stars incorrectly. If not, as the American GI's I 'consult' with, put it, I would be in for a whole ration of shit.

They know they can batten down all the iron hooks of their 'Patriot Act' upon me for any number of 'moving violations.' But my contact at the Department of Defense just took me out to lunch this afternoon and waggled the bait of a possible new contract beneath my nose like sweet sashimi. If he were here, Dad would tell me I'm just being paranoid. But Dad's in Gaza, on a contract of his own.

In any case, your William Burroughs writes that perfect paranoia is perfect awareness. In my line of work, selective application of that idea holds the potential to save one's life. Under that lens, I realize that if They (definition subject to change without notice) felt like taking me out of the game, they could have done it by now. If not, I can only assume that I was still in their good graces and travel at will, until a harsh and bracketed detainment at this pestiferous little airport, followed by an unspecified hitch in the Tombs, wherein New York's Finest would perform upon my *habeas corpus* certain interrogation methods never proscribed by the Geneva Convention.

I'm afraid of Americans. But I keep forgetting that I'm an American, too. It seems an unlikely thing to forget, but I have been a nomad all my life in one way or another.

Under my real name, Hassan Sabbah al-Gazi (just call me Han, as people have since my sixth-grade year, when those ubiquitous Star Wars movies hit the theatres), I became a naturalized citizen when I was eleven. Dad moved us over here from Jerusalem after things got a little tense between himself and a false friend in the Mossad, the Israeli Secret Service. Our people have long sworn that Mossad eat what they kill. But my father had his reasons. He was actually doing the operative a favor, but one of a nature that would never hold up in court.

Oh, the family trade. I suck it up and approach the gate. A petrified-looking Lebanese guy with a chicken chest and a fake badge puffs up in my face at the first metal detector. The Marines have a wonderful idiom for his sort, an "empty uniform". His is hanging on him like a drop-cloth! I stifle a laugh.

"Sir," he barks in heavily-accented English. "Could you please remove your shoes?"

I drop to one knee, hands where he can see them, and do so, handing them up. He inspects them, then looks as though he may presently swallow his chin. As he reaches for his radio, I stay his hand so quickly he doesn't anticipate the motion. *Amateur*. I address him softly in Arabic.

"*Look, you push on the back and the heel fills up with air.*" I show him.

He looks again and groans at my Reebok pump gym sneakers that are probably almost as old as he is. "*A thousand pardons, cousin. My boss, you understand, he asks that we—*"

I sigh. "*Yeah, yeah. You're just doing your job. No worries.*"

He scuttles back to the X-ray conveyor, takes a long look at the screen, and hands me my bag. "*Shalom aleichem, habibi. Safe journey.*"

I bow with my right hand over my heart. "*Asayem aleichem shalom, cousin. Don't work too hard.*"

"*Not possible.*" He chuckles and waved me through. I start looking for Gate 11.

The thought of hitting Boylston Street in Boston around dinnertime makes me salivate. *De gustibus est non disputandum*, especially after the Swanson frozen fare in first class. From what I hear, the Combat Zone has been strip-mined of most of its red stoplights and dive bars, so further recreation is probably best left out. I wish I could hit the old MTA Pneumatic Railway tunnels down there and see if there are any new leads for me on the corkboard in the lobby of the other Pickman Gallery.

But there's no time to schmooze with the denizens, let alone the citizens. I am to meet with my contact on Boston Common an hour after we land. Transportation has been arranged. We will drive much further north from there, along a particularly fierce section of the Massachusetts coastline. Most maps have forgotten our destination, simply listing it as an unincorporated township on a dead, played-out reef. But the old brain-cases living on Supplemental Security in Arkham and Kingsport still call it Innsmouth.

Innsmouth. I can taste the word in my throat like raw calamari. My skin goes hot as my sweat goes cold. The word, and the memory of the word when I went to study out the terrain last Friday, fill my nostrils with the smell of cold boom town gone bust, mine-dumps leaching into the water table, sad rotting houses covered over with Z-Brick, with living denizens and permanently bolted doors. The word smelled like Kreutzfeld-Jakob's Disease and a hundred other kinds of runoff from inbreeding that science does not wish to name yet.

I'm going back. The mere thought makes me understand the *Hakagure* of the ancient Japanese samurai. It is the same with those of my faith who ply my trade. Behave as though the flesh was dead. Then... and now more than ever... one does not lose his mind when confronted with the dark.

In place of fear, my thoughts turn to wrath as Gate 11 looms large, just down the way a bit on the right. Several screaming children twine around me like cats for a moment. I consult my watch. I know I am not late. But I cannot, under any circumstances, foul this up.

Wrath. The denizens of Innsmouth deliberately flout my faith. The Prophet teaches us that Man evolved from clots of blood. Our learned men of this age teach

also that somewhere between blood clot and *H.sapiens sapiens*, we crawled out of the sea.

This is not to be doubted. But Innsmouth follows an infidel faith. Their own Shaitan, whom Islam has called Dagon since Babylon, has performed a miracle of fish unto any and every hard-luck sailor dumb or amachoor enough to steer his tired old Downeaster Alexa into the waters off the town's own Devil Reef.

Since the 1920s, decapod mating patterns in that part of the Bay, and migratory patterns of just about every species that ever turned a buck, had climbed steadily with no spike in sight. Of course, the corporate fisheries were in there first. But the fish are so thick you could practically walk on the water like Yeshua. Dagon apparently shares and shares alike.

By hypothetical evidence, which, being based in the supernatural, can neither be proven or refuted, rock-ribbed Protestants in every hamlet for miles around Innsmouth were slowly being swayed to the notion that there might be other fish in the sea. But for that, their mad TV preacher boasts, you must devolve back to the blood clot, back to Atlantis, to drown beneath the waves of our own DNA, to crawl back to the womb and die.

The Prophet cast out Dagon with all the other false gods. My business with the debased tornado-bait of Innsmouth is nothing more or less than jihad. I just hope it's over with quickly.

My contact is a rich writer from Bangor, only a few years my junior. Mr. Bachman is to outfit me with the necessary ordnance and artifacts. Dick holds a private pilot's license. All the paperwork has been taken care of through my Oakland liaison.

When did they start calling this section 'Business Elite', I wonder. Was 'First Class' too classist for these people? These funny, half-blind, blissfully oblivious, cell-phone-babbling, off-in-their-own-little-world Americans? It's their world. We're all just living in it.

Long might some of them live to think so. I sigh, stepping hurriedly on board. The pilot looks like a whippet with an elaborate mop of gray hair, prescription shades and a thick mustache.

He grins a set of teeth like the white keys on a piano.

"Welcome aboard! Happy holidays!" He briskly shakes my hand. I notice a bead of cocaine colored snot twinkling just beneath his right nostril. Pilots are all alike. In Arabic, I tell him he's an idiot and he's going to get us all killed. He smiles and nods and herds me in.

SEAT C-4. I slide up through Coach, glancing at the seat number on my ticket. C-4. *Very funny, Boss. You want me blown up that bad, do you? Freak.* I can't help but chuckle.

The intercom speakers blare into life, "GOOD MORNING. HAPPY HOLIDAYS." I part the curtain and venture into 'Business Elite', F row first, my eyes slightly ahead of me.

"FLIGHT 180 WILL BE DEPARTING LAGUARDIA IN JUST A FEW MINUTES. YOUR—"

"Oh, *shit.*" I look down fast, pretending like I'm searching my pocket for something. A soccer mom two seats ahead glances back at me like I'm about to pull a box-cutter. Right now, she's the least of my worries.

We Sufi have a kind of prayer for times like this. No matter what the Creator hands you, be it a hundred dollars or two broken legs, you smile as broadly as you can and say *Thank You, Sir, May I Have Another?* And you laugh. Thus, the worse something gets, the more important it becomes to deflect it.

But... my God... if... the man—if such he can be termed—who I was hired to find in... Innsmouth and kill is.... seated... right beside me on...this *plane*?

I committed the photograph to memory before I rolled a hashish spliff with it and smoked it to the head. This is a spot-on match. This is a practical joke. This is...

Why, this is going to be a long flight. I smile, grit my teeth and sit down, trying not to look at him.

But to hear him slurp and slobber over that sushi box, sucking on his mucilaginous webby fingers, a green rill of wasabi wending its way down his vestigial chin—

My mind spools out its quiet dossier, calming my restless hands that want to make my shoelaces into garrottes. Reverend Irving Waite, in the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful. The false prophet I have been promised ten million U.S. dollars (half up front), and flown all the way from Oakland, to smear from the skin of Space and Time. You can hear about something until the teller is blue in the face.

But seeing it sitting beside you is another matter entirely. He looks something like the jazz singer Mel Tormé, if Mel were to commission a bust of himself as a horror-movie latex appliance by Tom Savini. As the Marines say, he stinks like low tide took a shit in his pants. And then there's the reaction-time thing. Lovely dinner company.

I have been charged to end this creature. At present, I must somehow summon up the ingenuity to sit still for a two-plus hour flight and act as though I had no idea who he was.

I shove my bag under the seat and give up.

"How's the sushi?" In my head, I'm humming an old family chant to harmonize body functions. My sense of smell cycles down to almost nothing.

Waite's long, peeling head swivels like a newt's. His eyes are all wrong. I knew an autistic kid once, in Jerusalem, a beggar's son, whose eyes were almost that shade of gold. But the cataracts in Waite's eyes (or whatever they really are) makes the effect somehow more alarming. The tail of a shrimp hangs from his thick lower lip until he sees me looking and snaps it back with a *shtoomp*.

Most people would assume the black patches are squamous melanoma, flaking and coruscating at the sides of his wattled neck. It, like his head, is home to alarmingly random patches of scraggly nicotine-colored hair.

Anyone would think the right Reverend was taking chemotherapy. I know better.

He's getting ready to go join the Eternal Family Reunion out on Devil Reef. He's getting ready to grow gills, and use them.

He's getting ready to clot.

"Ehhh." The Rev rumbles back in a voice like a shovel over wet cement. "Tastes...two days... old. I c'd... get better'n this at home." His metabolism is probably so slowed-down by now that he took this long to register my presence.

That's an article of his faith too, you see. With immortality comes ichthyic serenity, and thus their human shells are swallowed in infantile Devonian slime.

I smile and nod. "I'll bet you could." And the conversation is left dangling.

To the left of us, in C-2, some punk kid is asleep with his shaven head against the window, blocking the view. He's dressed fairly nice for his sort, in an all-black suit with no tie, a rack of hoop earrings and a stud in either nostril. He looks exhausted.

My head jerks hard right. Anything to look away from the Rev. A crewcut flight attendant, who looks and swishes alarmingly like Dr. Smith on the old 'Lost In space' show

The crewcut flight attendant who popped up before us looked like Dr. Smith on that old show 'Lost In Space', "Would you care for a beverage, after we get rolling?"

"Green tea. No sugar."

"Very good, Mr. Sabbah." He blinked at Waite. "And we'll bring your clam juice for you, too, Reverend. I'll check on him," he jerked a thumb at punkboy, "Later."

Behind and above us, the tastefully-concealed speakers droned on, "Please discontinue the use of all celphones during the taxi period. Flight attendants, cross-check and aisle call, please."

Waite pushed his sushi box aside. Dr. Smith twinkled it away and flipped the old bastard's tray table up for him, trying not to make a face at Waite's personal BO of fish and unknown precious metals. (He did well. Very professional.)

"...Muuhokay." the Reverend replied too late. Dr. Smith was long gone.

Reverend... I shuddered in the leather seat as we began to taxi and the pilot told us over the loudspeakers that we would be first in line for takeoff. Reverend of what, a shithouse?

I had a whole dossier on this fool. He was the titular head of the Esoteric Order of Dagon. No union lobsterman or fisherman on that part of the coast would hear a word spoken against him. His kooky theosophical crossbreeding of Aleister Crowley and L. Ron Hubbard had cranked his books to the top of the New York Times best-seller list for weeks on end. Until very recently, his arena "revivals" had packed in the faithful deeper than the wildest dreams of Billy Graham.

But Waite wasn't on the "revival" circuit any more. He looked like hell in a Bundt pan. I wondered about his game plan.

My employer in Oakland, Mistah Thotep-if-you-please, had been exactly right. Now was the perfect time to strike, before Waite passed on the business that he was apparently running by remote control these days.

Two rows behind us, a baby was crying very loudly. Something told me this was going to be a long flight. I could sit still for days, if that was what it took. I have.

But give me a chance when we landed, and Waite would be going to that great big fish-hatchery in the sky.

I looked out the window at the obscenely gibbous moon. Lady Liberty rose from the waters like a fungous elder god. I'd been working too hard. Everything was out to get me. This had to stop.

Far below, I saw the desolate hubbub of Ground Zero, where the World Trade Center towers had been, as we began to ascend above the pollution and the clouds. As always when I saw that dry socket in the earth, I tried to cry, and begged Allah's forgiveness upon us all.

I haven't been able to cry since my last op in Afghanistan. My tears were on the inside. No one saw.

Somewhere, very softly, in-flight Muzak was blithely murdering the entire Dave Matthews band. I unfolded the little screen from my armrest, found my remote, turned it sideways, hit a few buttons, and waited for In-Flight Tetris to download, trying not to think about the thing in the seat beside me.

In the name of all that is holy, why wasn't Waite on a private jet? He could afford a fleet of Lears with the "donations" from his "crusades"... and oh, how apropos the latter word was. Had I the necessary tools, I would have garrotted him right then and there. I could have snapped his neck while we took off. But Innsmouth folk are quite hard to kill by ordinary means.

What were the chances that he'd be flying on Christmas, anyway? I'd thought to get a leg up, slip into Innsmouth on Greyhound under cover of night, and get this over with. I could have been in the Caymans the following morning, smoking ganja on the beach. No such luck.

At the front of the cabin, the screen where they'd been showing the safety video upon my arrival now glowed with a brown-and-green map of our journey. The speakers whined on once more.

"THIS IS YOUR CAPTAIN SPEAKING. WE HAVE LEVELLED OFF AT THIRTY-SEVEN THOUSAND FEET. WINDS ARE AT TEN MILES AN HOUR, VISIBILITY IS MODERATE TO LOW WITH OVERCAST SKIES AND LOW CLOUD COVER. WE WILL BE ARRIVING IN BOSTON IN APPROXIMATELY TWO HOURS' TIME. PLEASE ENJOY YOUR FLIGHT. HAPPY HOLIDAYS."

Dr. Smith bobbed up from the forward flight attendants' area pushing a cart. I set Tetris on level 10, waited again, and grinned graciously over the steaming porcelain mug of tea he handed to me. Thankfully, I couldn't smell the clam juice he set before Waite as he professionally folded the Reverend's tray table down once more.

The kid in 4-A was awake now. His voice was a throaty rasp. "Excuse me, boss. Next time you come by, could I get a cup of coffee?"

Dr. Smith nodded immediately. "We've got French roast, cappuccino, and—"

The kid grinned an endearing, crooked grin. "As long as it's in a cup." Dr. Smith nodded briskly, and retreated to the next row.

He shook his head. "Well, you can't beat this. They just shoved me in first class. Gotta love PriceLine."

"Ah." I sipped my passable tea, flipped the screen down into my armrest and turned it off with the remote. Conversation was always preferable on a long flight. "The luck of the draw. Why are you flying on Christmas?"

The kid shrugged. "Why not?"

That was fair, but I was bored and curious. "Were you in the military?" His hair had the look of being perpetually cut short by choice. I surmised that we could swap soldier-stories the entire flight.

"Nah. They wouldn't take me." He slapped his knee. "I got a game leg from being an idiot kid with a skateboard. You?"

"A bit. Not in America, though."

Waite was looking at the kid as if he wondered how he might taste. The kid was ignoring him completely. "Where did you do your service?"

“Mmm.” I tried to condense. “All over the Middle East. I was a consultant, you might say. I’m done with that now, though.”

He nodded, sensing that I didn’t want to talk about it. “My sisters put it like that, too.” he laughed. “ ‘I’m done.’ I guess I can understand that. Maybe I’m better off.”

“What do you do now?” I asked him. He shrugged expansively. Beside him, Waite appeared to nod off like a chicken with its head placed beneath its wing.

“I write comic books.” Now he was the one that didn’t look like he wanted to talk about it. “Creator-owned projects are going the way of the dinosaur, but... there are all sorts of ways around that.”

He named a few that he wrote for. You’d know them. You’d know his name, too, if you’re seriously into that sort of thing. I nodded.

“Do you know Grant Morrison?” That was the first name I thought of. “I used to read Doom Patrol sometimes, when I could keep up with—”

Dr. Smith passed back by with the kid’s coffee. “Here you are.”

The kid beamed. “What a neat guy. I remember staying up with him ’til four in the morning at the Hyatt in San Francisco talking about whether or not Rod Serling was right and the past really is inviolable.”

“Ah—” My compulsive reading paid off sometimes. “Serling got that from Jack Finney. Do you know of him?”

The kid frowned. “Didn’t he write *Time and Again*?”

“Yes. Also, a book of short stories called—”

I stopped. The back of my neck was alive with a chill. The kid looked unfazed.

“Yeah.” He answered the question I didn’t ask. “I felt that. Hmm...” A visor seemed to drop over his face. I knew that visor very well, from those strange, strange days in Afghanistan in the Eighties before the shit hit the fan and we were airlifted out. I saw it every time I looked in the mirror to shave, back then, on the few cold mornings in Kandahar when anything but a dry shave was available.

I wondered what hell this kid had been through to heighten his senses like that. “I thought it was just me—” he began.

Then, out of nowhere, Reverend Waite stood up and stepped into the aisle. The next few minutes were the only time in my life I’ve ever been sorry to have been born an Arab.

Things were falling into place, changing, switching perspectives like angles in a haunted house. I willed myself to concentrate on what was really there.

There was a choked gurgling sound over the loudspeakers. The plane banked hard right and down. In the row in front of us, a blue-haired old lady with a portable oxygen tank and a tube in her nose began to scream at the top of her lungs, clutching her chest.

Waite cocked his head at her, his cataracted eyes burning bright. I saw her slump back in her seat, her hands going limp. The kid was shrinking back in his seat, frantically searching his pockets.

“Hey!” The young woman beside her in that row said indignantly. “Hey, what did you—” I saw her jerk forward and heard her sudden silence. The seat to the old lady’s right was empty. The passengers across the aisle simply *didn’t see*.

Everything seemed to happen at once. From Coach and Business Elite alike, more screams and herd terror-babble ramped up as the plane began to vibrate. Wild lightning rattled through the seas of clouds outside.

Turbulence shook everything with the force of an earthquake. Tray tables bounced. Drinks spilled hither and yon. My tea flew toward the front of the cabin. The kid's empty coffee cup was nowhere in sight.

I turned around. In the front row of the Coach section, where the curtain had been yanked aside, a young girl with her hair dyed three different Crayola colors was clawing at her seatbelt, her eyes bugging out. Beside her, her boyfriend was still asleep.

A grossly fat yuppie with a Jimmy Carter part in his hair bulled to his feet, brandishing his briefcase and charged us, bellowing, "Allah *this*, mother *fucker!!!*" His tie was askew. His loafers pounded the aisle as his seatbelt clattered to the ground.

But the only friend of Allah on this plane was sitting perfectly still. The yuppie saw me... and then he saw Waite standing in the aisle, alive and alight and not a bit groggy at all.

Waite grinned with small, sharp teeth. One webbed hand came up, palm down, fat sushi-gummy fingers splayed. He croaked something that might have been a word.

The yuppie fell backward into seat 5-D, knocking over an old man's martini glass. The old man screamed, almost scooting into the lap of a snotty-looking little princess who pushed him away. "No!! Ew, I—Help!"

The yuppie went onto the floor. He didn't look like he was breathing. Waite folded his arms. The look on his jowly face said, Next? But the imperious son of a bitch wasn't even going to say anything.

In my trade, we're taught to behave as though we're already dead. My faith teaches that in times of common disaster, every believer is the executor of Allah's law. I was just waiting for these fools to quit flogging it and play their hand.

Once more, the cockpit speakers crackled. For a time, nothing came out of them.

"Phn'glui mgl'whnaf Cthulhu Ryl'yeh wgah-naghl fthagn."

They were testing the mikes. My Dad taught me that, in debased Atlantaeon, the phrase was their answer to our *Alif lam-mim. This book is not to be doubted.* But they were quoting the Necronomicon, not the Koran. The Necronomicon was Not To Be Doubted for all the wrong reasons. Even hearing it made me want to pick up a sword and start cutting heads.

Beside me, the kid was playing opossum. Waite grinned, taking a deep breath through the gill-slits in his scabby throat. "Today shalt thou be with us in Paradise," he croaked. No one on the whole plane had a problem hearing that.

The speakers were still on. There was dead silence over the whine of the engines and the rattle of the wings. Every passenger was in panic mode, too confused to listen.

"Citizens of America, please do not attempt to thwart the Beloved who are now flying this 767 aircraft." The voice from the speakers was burbling, staticky, full of the wrong inflections. "There will be one refueling stop over the Bermuda Triangle. Please to remain still and no one will be harmed until cabin is depressurized."

A knot of people, all ages and sexes, were trying to storm the cockpit, taking turns to pound on the door. A similar knot made for the back, every commuter wanting to be the first one to hide in the lavatory. The flight attendants, Dr. Smith included, were attempting to direct traffic and mostly being plowed under. The baby had shut up. Anarchy reigned.

“Your government sank the nuclear submarine U.S.S. BURNSIDE off Devil Reef in Massachusetts and then filled their media news with only lies about it. Our people are dying down in that place. You elected the ones who do this thing to us. Sacrifice must be made to Dagon and Great Ktulu-ili-mo’ku to repay for then. Ryl’yeh surfaces this night off the Forbidden Atoll. Draw near and know.”

Even when I was seventeen, I spoke better English than these guys did. I shook my head and then looked over at the kid. His eyes were rolled up to the whites, and he was jittering in his seat. Waite paid him no mind at all.

I moved toward the kid, and he pushed me deliberately away with great force. The move was made to look random. He really was playing opossum. I took my cue.

The world narrowed down for me. There was no one else on that plane. A cheap Skilcraft pen had fallen onto the seat from the kid’s pocket. I reached for it, not understanding what I saw out the window.

It was like the Northern Lights were going on outside, a fantastic rainbow stereopticon flicker-play, a spectral fantasy above the clouds. Mists of unknown hue swirled around the plane, faster and faster. All I could think, over and over, was *Kill the head and the body will die...*

I took two steps diagonally behind Waite, yanked his head back and shoved the pen up his nose with a palm-strike. The sound it made when it hit cartilage was like a boning knife paring a rack of lamb. Just for chuckles, I tore out both his gills with my bare hands. I got cut up quite badly, but at the moment I could have cared less.

I felt his essence surging and lapping around me, seeking to gain a foothold as it died. I was humming a different chant now, focusing my energy into my pelvic floor and pushing the intruder out through my feet.

“No one in my body but *me*,” I snarled. My teeth chopped down on each other hard. Waite slumped to the floor, leaking black ichor all over my gym shoes. But it was not quite Game Over.

Shoving my way through the throng, I reached the cockpit door. It hadn’t completely locked. *Fools*. I kicked it in.

A trembling, scaly thing manned the controls. It looked like it belonged in a carnival. Three extremely leaky bodies in white shirts and gold epaulets cluttered the floor. The creature was looking hungrily out the window and snuffling up the last of the pilot’s cocaine, rolling it around on toothless gums with one webbed finger.

It saw me and got to its feet. I moved on it, then—

PONK. The coffeepot connected with the back of its head, and the critter went down.

“*Allah malekhya, habibi*,” the punk kid said from behind me in a good accent. The thing started to get up... and the kid kicked it boredly in the head with one Doc Marten boot. It made a hrrumping noise and went down again.

“Put your jaw back in place, and blink,” he instructed me. For the first time, I really noticed how careworn his face was, distantly pondering the terrors it must have witnessed as he spoke again. “I grew up in Arkham. I saw shit going on like this at my *high* school, man. These guys musta thought they were dealin’ with a buncha amateurs. Now you—” He waited.

“I figured you were in some kind of Black Ops, since you didn’t have a million war stories for me.” His eyes were pleading. “Can you fly?”

I was already frowning at the altimeter and sitting down. “Leave that to me.”

Doctor Smith was standing behind him, looking relieved, holding a first-aid kit for my bloody hands that now gripped the controls. All the other flight attendants broke into a ragged cheer that instantly stilled the chaos in the seats. Then the passengers began to cheer, too.

I wondered how loudly they’d cheer if they knew my family trade. We’ve been assassins since the Crusades. We follow the Sufi path. What that means to those with our calling is simply a hunger for clipping spooks. Especially big-money spooks like the one who just got done bleeding cod liver oil all over my sneakers.

But ten million dollars could buy a lot more Reeboks. *C’est la guerre*. Without asking, the kid sat down near the cooling clay of the co-pilot and grabbed the radio.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday,” he rasped, “This is Flight 180. I have no idea where we are, but we got a good pilot. Tell me what’s up...”

My money would be in the bank by the time I managed to land, take three showers and hunt for a bottle of emotional bleach. But after that night, as I promised myself, I was done.

At the thought, my tear-ducts decided to start working again.

*“So do not become weak, or sad,
and you shall triumph if you are indeed believers.”*

—Koran 3:139

