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Sana'a Old City, Republic of Yemen, the Middle East

In black suits and dark glasses, the three men stand out among the throng. Even without ties, their top buttons undone at the throat, they couldn't look more western if they tried. Here, just inside the gates to this ancient heart of the capital, known as *Bab al Yemen*, people are dressed in customary robes, shawls and sandals. The women are veiled, while around their waists the men sport decorative daggers, or *jambia*, as is the local tradition.

'Hey, Americans!' A group of kids sitting on a step are the first to remark on the trio. Only one might speak a little English, but some others join in by firing imaginary pistols.

The three men move with a purpose, crossing the square towards the ornate basalt buildings and labyrinth of winding alleyways. They remain entirely unconcerned by the fact that their presence is causing heads to turn. Nor do they pause to take in the stalls selling boiled eggs, spices and flatbread. The man who leads the way, a heavy-set individual who is sweating noticeably, touches a finger to a tiny microphone clipped to his collar.

'Target sighted,' he reports. 'We have a visual.'

Minutes earlier, just outside the gates, the young

man they're following had climbed out of a cab. Within this walled quarter, most of the passages are just too narrow for anything but motorbikes and carts. He'd paid the driver, neglecting to tip as he looked around, before heading off on foot. The three men had waited for him to reach the main square before breaking their cover. Coming from different directions, they had converged in his wake without a word.

Their target moves at a brisk pace. He avoids all eye contact with market traders. Just keeps his head down. Even begins to weave around those in his path. To the men now closing the gap, this is no cause for alarm. Dressed in jeans and a casual shirt, with a canvas bag slung over one shoulder, this is one outsider who's as conspicuous as they are. Most probably he's bought into the fear that being in the open like this is an invitation to opportunist kidnappers. As it is, the people he's actually come so far to avoid are just seconds behind him. Biding time before they pounce.

The alley leads towards the central *souk*: a bustling market under slanting sheets to shade it from the sun. From dawn to dusk, this is where jewellery, sandals, carpets and leather goods are made and sold. Their target ducks left before he reaches it. This surprises the men. Immediately they rush for the corner. From there, they spot him passing a whitewashed mosque. He's moving a little faster now. On the cusp of breaking into a jog. Such is his pace that it's tough for the trio to keep

up without betraying their intention. It's also hard to know if it means he's onto them. Still, there's no way now that they can lose him. After so long on the run, Carl Hobbes cannot be allowed to slip away.

Dark, barren mountains surround Sana'a; a city spiked by teetering minarets. Minutes from now, the call to prayer will issue from them all, and the sound will thunder far and wide. By then, if the operation goes to plan, these CIA operatives will at last have their prize.

Unusually, they carry only side arms. An indication, perhaps, that they're expecting no trouble. Online, things were very different. As a hacker, the individual in their sights posed a threat to global stability. For months, intelligence had been warning that Hobbes could take down stock markets with a key stroke. The talk that he might hold America's air traffic control network to ransom had yet to be proven, but those guys were rattled. As for the military, every system administrator had been warned to expect a strike at any moment. And, when it came, so they said, it would be the virtual equivalent of a shock and awe campaign.

Away from computers and phone lines, however, the threat diminished considerably. As the agents on his tail can see for themselves, Hobbes is just some eighteen-year-old upstart. A troublemaker at large who'd been flashing up randomly all over their global radar like some damn UFO. Of course, it was only a matter of time before he made the mistake that brought

them here. When you're this high up America's Most Wanted list, there's no place on the planet where it's safe to use your real name. Not even here, on the southernmost tip of the Arabian Peninsula. You couldn't even *whisper* it without needles tweaking into the red.

For whatever reason Hobbes had given away his location, checking into a hotel as himself some days earlier, it's clear to the three agents that he's on full alert right now. All it takes is a glance over his shoulder, as if to confirm something he's sensed, and suddenly he's tearing through the dust.

The men behind him miss a beat in their scramble to respond. With people milling around outside the mosque, they're forced to go wide as they give chase.

'He's spooked!' The operative with the radio contact draws his weapon as he runs. 'We are good to go!'

Having studied the maps, these guys know their target could melt away at any moment. With so many blind corners, converging passages, courtyards and corrals, it's possible for him to vanish at the first opportunity. But instead of stealing the advantage, the idiot reacts like some startled rooster and simply bowls directly for his hotel.

A guard sits in a plastic chair outside the entrance. He holds a rifle half-heartedly across his lap. Still, he makes no move to intervene when the three men hurriedly enter the building. Having witnessed the lad

rush inside a moment ago, some young British visitor he's seen around the last few days, it's clear they're here for him. The handguns in their possession also persuade him to remain where he is. The guard might be here to safeguard anyone staying inside, but he's merely window-dressing. In this region, you take care of your own security measures. Besides, these three look like they're here to combat any threat.

'Gentlemen?' The woman behind the reception desk speaks with a classroom English accent. She is robed, with her veil folded back, revealing carefully made-up eyes. Most striking of all is her cool composure in the face of such a dramatic arrival. The three men have just crashed inside the lobby. They're panting heavily. Positioned in a fan formation. Handguns tipped upwards.

'Carl?' one of the agents calls out. 'It's over, Hobbes! Do the right thing!'

'Where did he go?' The heavy-set man snaps out his identification wallet.

The receptionist takes one look and appears to freeze. 'C'mon, lady!' he adds fractiously. 'The kid who just ran in here . . . Talk to me!'

Without taking her eyes off the men, she gestures at the elevator. 'He went to his room.'

'301, right?' He glances at his colleagues; panting still but with a hint of jubilation now. 'No need to tell him we're here.'

The men cut to the lift door. When it opens, the receptionist watches them hurriedly gather inside. As soon as the door closes, she punches the room number into the booking system. What appears on the monitor leaves her looking baffled. She turns and unlocks a cabinet drawer. From a hanging file, she pulls out photocopies of the passport details for every guest who has checked in. That many of the rooms are vacant just reflects the threat level here in a hotel once popular with westerners. It also means the few people in residence are no strangers to her. The receptionist begins to leaf through the wad, searching for the name on the screen, before grabbing her mobile to call the duty manager.

Hobbes. Carl Hobbes. That's what she had heard the man call out when they burst in here. It just isn't the name she remembers for the young guy they're after. He'd checked in as James Valentine, and the paperwork in her hand confirms this. What's weird is that the online booking system is showing the name she'd heard just now. She mutters to herself; urging the duty manager to pick up. Whoever he was, the guest in question had been notably demanding since he showed up. On his arrival, two days earlier, she'd assumed at first he was either one of those spoiled western rich kids – an ambassador's son, perhaps – or just edgy about his safety so far from home and not expressing it well. As the day wore on, and the calls to reception mounted, she had marked him down as someone who simply

needed to learn some manners. First the room service meal he'd ordered hadn't come with ketchup. Then came a complaint about the quality of the television picture. She recalls now that he's here for some university cultural exchange programme. Whatever his role in that, his behaviour meant she remembers him. One thing is for sure, however. Carl Hobbes is *definitely* not the name that arose when he checked in. She drums her nails on the keyboard's plastic housing, staring at the monitor. Finally, when the voice of her duty manager does come through, she is entirely distracted by a change to the screen.

'Wait a minute . . . *how*?'

Her hand is nowhere near the mouse, and yet the cursor has just drifted into the name field. It's as if some ghost spirit has seized control of her screen. An invisible presence who begins to delete every letter; working back through *Hobbes* and then *Carl*. A moment later the name is replaced by that of the high-maintenance young man three floors up. The one currently cowering as the door to his room is kicked down. Finally, a simple instruction appears. It lasts only as long as it takes for the receptionist to draw breath in shock, and then it is gone:

shhhhh ;-)