

This chapter ended up on the cutting-room floor during final edits. I resisted letting it go because I really liked how these three scenes unfold. The purpose of this chapter was to show how the assassin Bizan took over the guise of the geologist Kahlid and to explain how the assassin obtained the explosives he would use later in the book.

In this chapter, I also introduced a minor character: a Eurasian woman wearing a Chinese dragon pendant (who deals in illegal arms trafficking). I hated to see her cut out of the story...so I resurrected her as Seichan for the Sigma series. So here is the never-before-seen chapter featuring an early rendition of Seichan...along with a bit of nastiness from Bizan/Khalid.

The chapter takes place in Buenos Aires, on the day before the team sets out for Antarctica.

Chapter 5

The next morning, Bizan Saljinn grinned as he crossed Plaza de Mayo, the main square of Buenos Aires, happy with his successful performance as Khalid Najmon. His hard heels tapped loudly on the broken stone. He had fooled them all. Nobody had raised even an eyebrow.

Bizan still remembered the real Khalid's shocked face two months ago in Cairo. The Egyptian geologist had swung his door open, expecting room service, and found himself facing his own mirror image. Same eyes, same hair, same features. Only the 9mm Glock with a silencer attached had finally wiped the shock from the geologist's face. After disposing of Khalid's body, Bizan stepped smoothly into his role.

He had been trained well.

His fellow teammates posed no threat to his plan. The team leader, Ashley Carter, was just a woman. Pre-occupied most of the time, she would be oblivious until it was too late. The other woman, Linda, was no threat

either. A pretty face and a body worthy of explorations, but no threat. He wet his lips as he thought of the nape of her neck, smooth and graceful. Perhaps once he eliminated the others. . .

Preparations had already been made to handle Major Michaelson and his guards. And Ben seemed no real threat either, by appearances just a thrillseeker and womanizer. No, perhaps he was being too overconfident. He sensed an edge to Ben, like a hard vein of quartz beneath the surface. Something worth watching.

He shook his head and crossed the Plaza, passing by the Casa Rosada, the presidential mansion. Supposedly sightseeing, a Minolta camera kept bumping his hip as he walked. Pausing by a sidewalk cafe, he adjusted his hat in the reflection of a window, while studying the crowd for any suspicious people. A small clutch of schoolgirls outfitted in plaid skirts and blue sweaters fluttered noisily behind him. No one else of note. His trail stood clear.

He shook his head, snorted a bit. They didn't even bother to post guards on the team. Naive.

Content that he was not followed, he hailed a cab.

The driver wore a blue kafiye turban. Palestinian. A fellow Muslim. The city was mostly Spanish and Catholic, but there was still a strong Muslim presence. Even the president of Buenos Aires was a Syrian Muslim. It seemed like a positive omen.

"Barrio Norte," he instructed the driver. "To La Bolivar Cafe."

The driver nodded and swore his way into the congestion of midday traffic. After a short trip of several blocks, he pulled in front of the restaurant. From the outside, the exterior was drab, just whitewashed brick interrupted by yellow windows, one of them cracked and repaired with tape.

Bizan entered the cafe and searched the scarred tables, stuffed now with hungry patrons. The babble of the crowd was deafening. The odor of vinegar and stale beer permeated the humid interior.

He had been told to look for a woman wearing a silver pendant of a Chinese dragon. Bizan spotted her across the restaurant, seated at a small table. She was small of frame but generous of physique, black hair, shorn in a severe crop, almond eyes, wearing jeans and a black sweater. She had the morning paper spread out on the tabletop, a cappuccino at her elbow.

“I’m Bizan,” he announced as he stepped up to the table.

She ignored him and continued reading, flipping a page of newsprint. Her only sign of acknowledgment was to kick a chair toward him with her heel. He sat down.

“You’re late.” Her voice was a sharpened icicle.

“My apologies,” he said.

She did not look up. “I do have other appointments.”

He breathed in her jasmine perfume. Intoxicating. “As do I.” He pictured her naked, her breasts bouncing as he enjoyed her.

She tested her cappuccino with a long-nailed finger, swirling. “Cold.” She finally looked up at him, her eyes poisonous. All thoughts of ravishing her dried away like sunburned leaves. “I don’t like cold coffee.”

He swallowed. A truly handsome woman, he thought, but with a spider’s eyes. Predatory. “You have what I asked for?”

“Of course.”

“Even the plastique?”

“German manufacture,” she said. “The best.”

“The gun?”

“Your usual. Nine-millimeter Glock.”

Bizan was impressed. “Your reputation is well-earned”

“I like my job.” She passed him a Minolta camera case, identical to the one he carried, but much heavier.

He traded his camera case, hefting hers over his shoulder, appreciating its weight. So much death in such a small package. Much like the female arms dealer before him.

He rose from the table. “You have been paid. Correct?”

“I wouldn’t be here otherwise.” She went back to reading her newspaper, fingering her dragon pendant.

He left, careful now to stop the camera case from bumping his hip as he walked. Only one more appointment until he could return to the hotel. This one would require patience.

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The apartment was in the La Boca district of the city, a middle class community of somber buildings with clean streets. Bizan remembered the directions. He turned into an alley. The window was on the second floor, easily accessible from a balcony. He examined the jamb and found the two wires, just as the dossier had described. He snipped the alarm wires with a pair of nail clippers, then jimmied the window open. He waited. No wail of an alarm. Only silence. Good. He crawled within the darkened kitchen.

The reek of cayenne pepper and fish almost made his eyes water. He heard someone whistling in a neighboring room and froze. He listened, ears straining. The whistler was not approaching. He slipped out of his walking boots, too noisy on the polished hardwood floors, and edged the kitchen door open just enough to peek through with an eye.

The hallway was carpeted in red.

He waited. The whistler, a maid, entered from a side room. She was dressed in a traditional black-and-lace maid's outfit, a feather duster in one hand. She proceeded down the hallway, away from the kitchen, to an entryway table, pausing to dust the knickknacks there. She looked to be in her early fifties. Heavy and slow.

With her back to him, he swung the door open. He whisked silently down the hall until he stood directly behind her. He preferred his targets to see him. To see what was coming. To watch the fear grow in their eyes. He held his breath.

She backed a step, bumping into him. With a gasp, she jumped away, turning toward him with a scream frozen on her lips. His hands were already wrapped around her throat, squeezing off her yell. He pinned her against the entryway door, using his weight to control her thrashing. He studied his quarry.

Yes, there it was.

The widened pupils, eyes bulging, tears at the corners.

Fear.

He squeezed until his knuckles whitened. Her face purpled, lips white. She slumped limp within his embrace, like a lover succumbed by passion.

He dragged her to a side room. The dining room. It took some effort to prop her into a dining chair. The old cow was heavier than she looked. He stepped back, breathing heavily, and checked her. Except for the bluish complexion, she appeared to be napping. Satisfied, he returned to the kitchen and collected what he would need. He placed a wine glass in front

of the dead maid and splashed some red wine into it. Then he took a deep draw from the lip of the bottle. A decent vintage.

Now it was time to wait again. The maid's employer should be returning within the hour. He crouched behind the oak dining room door, leaning on his heels. He absently scraped the tip of the butcher knife on the maple floorboards. This was the part he hated. Waiting.

* * *

As he climbed from the cab into the Plaza, Bizan checked his fingernails for blood. Damn hard to clean under the nails. Blood always seemed to soak into the cuticle. Luckily he had found a toothbrush in the master bedroom of the apartment. After a bit of scrubbing, his yellowed nails now appeared spotless.

The assignment went well. But such a waste of a beautiful body. Especially her breasts, small, the size of ripe apples, with wide firm nipples, were truly inspiring.

He glanced at his watch. In another two hours, the group would leave for the airport. Still enough time to shower and get some lunch. As he stepped across the sidewalk, he saw a shapely young woman crouched by the curb, feeding one of the city's many scraggly stray dogs. He recognized her. Professor Furstenburg.

"There's a boy," Linda said as it nosed her, begging for another scrap. "Good boy."

As he approached her, Linda's tender words and gentle attentions inexplicably aroused Bizan. "You have a way with animals."

She blushed and stood up, shooing the dog away. With a quick bark, the gaunt Shepherd loped away, its belly full, tail wagging. “Good morning, Khalid,” she said brightly. She eyed the camera at his side. “How was your sightseeing?”

He placed a hand on the camera case. “Took some great shots. The city is quite charming.”

“Where did you go?”

“Just wandering.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a flash of silver. “I ran across a street vendor. You know how they can be. He wouldn’t let me alone until I purchased something. I saw this.”

“What is it?” She leaned closer.

“A trinket.” He offered it toward her. “I hope you’ll accept it. Something to remember the city by.”

As she reached for the offered object, Bizan suddenly spotted the smudge of blood on its corner. Damn. He quickly wiped it clear on the sleeve of his dark jacket. Did she notice? “Excuse me, it had a bit of dirt.”

Seemingly oblivious, she accepted the gift. “Hey, it’s a little Chinese dragon.” She raised the pendant so it sparkled in the sunshine. “Thank you, Khalid. How thoughtful.”