

“Too literary,” Philipson said. “But I like the word ‘project’.”

“Here’s some,” Potter said. “Project repair, project undermine, project eliminate.”

The agency car was pulling up to the CIA headquarters.

“Let’s decide when we get upstairs,” Philipson said. “I’ve got a man in Ashgabat who can do the job for us, but first we need to work out the details, and no slip-ups this time,” he said looking at Potter who nodded, then looked away.

“Not foolproof enough. They might not take it seriously.” Philipson put two fingers to his forehead and closed his eyes. “Here’s a thought,” he said after a minute. “What if the broker were caught bribing some Turkmen official to sign off on the deal? Wouldn’t that cause Niyazov’s people enough concern to postpone the buy?”

“It would surely knock the broker out of the picture and that by itself would result in a delay,” Lomantano answered. “That would buy us some time to water that seed and make it grow.”

“Nice” was all Potter could say.

Philipson grinned. “Unless, of course, we could make it look like the broker was trying to seduce Niyazov’s daughter. Now, that would be foolproof.”

Potter grimaced. “Seriously?”

“Just kidding,” Philipson replied. “I don’t want the guy to be drawn and quartered, but if he has to spend a few weeks behind bars on a bribery charge, now I could live with that. You?”

Potter nodded. “You bet.” If it saved her job, she had no problem with such an outcome.

“We need a name for this little project,” Lomantano said. “Any suggestions?”

“Operation Undermine,” suggested Potter.

“Now that’s the first decent thought I’ve heard out of your mouth,” Philipson said.

Potter’s nostrils flared.

“Hey, relax,” Philipson said. “I’m just kidding. Get a sense of humor.”

“Operation is cold war term anyway,” Lomantano pointed out. “What about ‘Project Recovery’?”

“Here’s what has to be done,” Philipson said, tired of waiting for the two State Dept. officials to come up with a solution. “We have to get the Turkmenistan government to kill the deal from their side.”

Potter perked up. “Okay,” she said. “And, just how do we do that?”

“That’s the problem,” Lomantano said. “Maybe we could convince them that the broker was screwing them.” He chuckled at the thought. “Say we convince them that he’s overcharging them or that he’s selling them an inferior system. They’d back out and probably start from scratch with another broker and a different set of business partners, right? And that would give us at least another year?”

Potter thought it over for a moment. “But how do we get Turkmenistan with whom we are barely on speaking terms to kill a deal that they initiated?” she asked the two men.

“Again, I don’t think we can impugn the equipment,” Philipson replied. “If RRI ever found out it came from us, so many heads would roll, 23rd street would resemble a bowling alley.”

Lomantano shook his head. “Not a pretty picture,” he said.

“And, it would be very hard to convince the Turkmenistan government at this point that the broker is overcharging them,” Philipson continued. “Presumably they’ve gone over his numbers with a fine-tooth comb. No, the only viable option we’ve got is to convince Turkmenistan that the broker is screwing them without pointing to anything concrete that can be easily denied or refuted.”

“Okay, but how do we do that?” Lomantano asked.

“How about digging up some dirt about the guy’s past business practices and planting a story in the media questioning his integrity?” Potter suggested.

Potter stopped and turned to answer. "Yes, Madam Secretary." She waited a second, then seeing Stone had turned her attention to something else, left the office. She knew her face was beet red. She hoped she wouldn't see anyone she knew on her way out of the building.

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In the car on their way to CIA headquarters, Philipson asked Lomantano and Potter for suggestions on how the deal that Potter had mistakenly approved could be sabotaged.

"The contract was awarded to RRI. What if we convince them to back out of the deal?" Potter wondered.

"Why would they do it?" Philipson demanded. "It would effectively end their business dealings in that part of the world. Secondly, what grounds would they have for doing so that would not make it look like the U.S. government was behind it?"

"We could threaten them with loss of bigger deals down the road," Potter suggested.

"Not likely," Lomantano said. "Plus, if RRI pulls out, Niyazov will just buy elsewhere, and he doesn't have to buy from an American company."

"What if we convince RRI to delay their delivery?" Potter said. "We could reimburse them for each month they delay."

"That would have to be a last resort . . . Maybe to stall while we put something more definitive in place," Lomantano stated, "because again that could damage the company's reputation, and no amount of money would make that right."

“I don’t care on what grounds,” Stone replied her voice rising. “Let me be very clear. You not only need to kill the deal, but you need to do so in a way that can’t be traced back to the U.S. government or to this agency. Got it?”

Both Potter and Lomantano nodded.

“You understand the consequences if this goes through, right?” said Bryce Philipson, Lomantano’s CIA counterpart who had come over from Langley for the meeting.

“President Niyazov has made it quite clear that he is opposed to U.S. surveillance flights over his airspace. We’ve been able to conduct flights for the past year because right now the Turkmenistan military, such as it is, cannot detect our planes. Once the Turkmenistan military gets its hands on the radar system that you have approved to sell to them, they should be able to build a system in six to nine months capable of detecting our flights. If that were to happen, Congress would have the president’s ass wrapped in a sling so tight he could go swimming in a pool of piranha and not feel a nibble.”

“But how can we stop the deal without withdrawing the license?” Potter asked.

“I’m not going to tell you how to do it because I don’t want to know the details,” Stone interjected. “What I want to hear from you in less than a week’s time is that it’s no longer a problem. So the two of you need to go back to Langley with Mr. Philipson here and find a way to kill the deal without making it look like we’re behind it. That means this meeting never happened and nothing you do gets put on paper. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Madam Secretary,” Lomantano and Potter answered in chorus. Stone motioned with her hand that they were dismissed.

“Don’t mess up Potter or you’re finished!” Stone said as Potter was leaving the office. “You hear me?”

## The Expendable Man by Peter G. Pollak

Chapter One: 11:00 A.M. Tuesday, May 1; Washington, D.C.

“One more fuckup like this and you’re history. You know that, right?”

State Department South Asia regional manager Lois Potter was on the proverbial carpet. She had authorized the sale of a modern radar detection system to the government of Turkmenistan ostensibly to be installed at each of its two international airports. She had failed to clear the deal with the Defense Department, however, which had gone ballistic when they learned of the impending sale. They were sure the Turkmenistan military would try to get their hands on the system to reverse engineer it for military purposes.

The packet that Potter had prepared containing the deal particulars had been routed to the wrong desk at Defense and she had not bothered to find out why she hadn’t heard back from them before approving the sale. Now ten days before the deal was to be consummated in Turkmenistan’s capital Ashgabat, officials at the Defense Department were on the warpath and so was Secretary of State Constance Stone.

Potter was standing in front of Stone’s desk with her immediate report, Andy Lomantano. During the meeting that took place before he escorted Potter to Stone’s office, the most attractive option Lomantano proposed for her next posting was the U.S. Embassy in Outer Mongolia. Potter wasn’t sure there was such an embassy.

“The sale of this system jeopardizes Defense’s surveillance flights out of Uzbekistan over Iran and the region’s other West-loving countries,” Stone was saying. “So my lovelies, the deal must be stopped, cancelled, killed. *Capisce?*”

“Understood,” Lomantano said, and then stuttered. “But . . . but, on what grounds?”