

Following the natural features of the jagged West Beirut coastline, the Avenue de General de Gualle curves past a series of parks and beaches, runs straight along the Ramlet el Baida beach, then rises to a hill jutting into the Mediterranean. The ten story apartment tower used for offices by the UNESCO staff-- and the Popular Front militia commanded by Iziz Kalaq-- overlooked the Avenue de Gaulle and the north end of the Ramlet el Baida beach.

Shaffick Hijazi stopped the delivery van at the side of the avenue. Sergeant Vatssek rode with him. Both the sergeant and the Lebanese Army lieutenant wore street clothes and Syrian web gear-- the uniform of the Muslim militias. Niles had described the clothing of the Palestinians and the two men had dressed to match the description. Vatssek could not hide his size or foreign face, but he no longer looked like an American Marine.

They studied the front of the building. The foundations and parking lot of the office building had been cut into the hillside. From the avenue, Hijazi and Vatssek looked down on the entrance. Vatssek motioned for Hijazi to continue. Hijazi eased the van forward as Vatssek watched for the perfect angle on the Palestinians guarding the entrance of the office building.

"Stop, this is it."

The guards manned a sandbagged position outside the entry doors. One man paced on the concrete walkway. The other leaned back in a chair, reading a magazine. Unlike the gunmen described by Niles, the Palestinians wore keffiyahs-- the black-on-white patterned headcloths of the P L O. Vatssek watched for other guards in

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the sandbagged enclosure or militiamen inside the first floor lobby. Seeing no other men on the ground level, he scanned the ten floors of balconies. He saw no one looking down.

In the distance, the artillery fire and explosions continued. The Christian radio had denounced the random shelling as terrorism. A Phalangist colonel threatened unrestrained retaliation on West Beirut. The Islamic leaders vowed to unleash the massed firepower of all the militias if the Christians did not end their terrorism. The threats and counter-threats had cleared the streets of traffic. "Only four cars in the parking lot. Think the militia assholes closed down the city again?"

"There is talk of a truce."

"Truce, shit." Vatsek keyed a hand-radio. "In position. Wait one."

With a kit manufactured by the Swedish company of Interdynamics, Vatsek converted a scope-fitted M-16 rifle into a silent weapon. The black aluminum cylinder of the suppressor slipped down over the rifle's flash-suppressor and locked. Then he loaded the rifle with a magazine of twenty Interdynamic reduced-charge 5.56mm cartridges. The reduced powder charges propelled the 5.3gram bullets at the sub-sonic velocity of two hundred seventy five meters per second. The low gas pressure produced by the cartridges did not cycle the bolt, which eliminated the mechanical noise of the rifle. Vatsek pulled back the charging handle, then eased the bolt forward. He listened to the bolt chamber the first round. He thumbed up the safety and buzzed the others:

"Ready to go. Got two pukes in sight. No others outside. Don't see any on the first floor. Don't see anyone watching from up stairs. No civilians. This will be a walk in."

"Think so?" Niles answered. "We shall see. Moving."

"Watch for me," Vatsek said to Hijazi. He took a last glance at the avenue. Wind

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swept the exhaust from the cars and trucks to the west. Papers blew west. Then he levered open a vent window and pulled a dark blanket over his head and arms and the rifle. "The second they drive into the lot, you got to let me know"

Seen from the office buildings a few blocks away, Vatsek's blanket covered form inside the van would be only a shadow. A hundred meters away, the seated guard turned a page. The other man looked up at the van.

"Oh, shit."

"What?"

"One of the pukes is eyeballing us."

"The captain and the sergeant, their car--"

Vatsek saw the guard turn toward the parking lot entrance. Putting the plastic butt of the M16 to his shoulder, Vatsek squinted through the telescopic sight and set the crosshairs on the Palestinian's guard's temple. Vatsek had confidence in the zero of the sight. Lieutenant Stark had brought the Interdynamics kit from Washington three days before with the hand-radios and cameras. Shooting two 20-round magazines of the reduced -charge cartridges, the sergeant had proven to himself that-- allowing for wind-- he could put one of the low-velocity silent bullets within the 7-ring of a target first shot and every shot at one hundred meters.

But the man walked forward, taking several steps toward the parking lot. Vatsek put the sight on the reading man's forehead. He watched the smoke from the guard's cigarette swirl to the west. To allow for both drop and wind drift, Vatsek moved the crosshairs over to the hair above the man's ear.

"The car is stopped."

Vatsek saw the second guard watching the parking lot. Holding the crosshairs steady above the ear of the seated guard, Vatsek focused his will on the temple, imagining the thin bones and membranes protecting the brain and he exhaled, slowly

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easing the trigger back.

He felt the cartridge fire and watched the head of the guard jerk to the side. The man did not move. Leaning back against the sandbags, his feet propped up other sandbags, he seemed to sleep. The magazine slid from his hands. Vatsek pulled back the charging handle to chamber the next round and sighted on the back of the other guard's head.

Beyond the guard, he saw Captain Niles parking the battered old Mercedes. Vatsek put the crosshairs slightly to the left side of the guard's head and squeezed off the shot.

Staggering, the Palestinian fell-- but not dead. Vatsek jerked back the charging handle and aimed again, putting the crosshairs on the man's forehead as he struggled to his feet, his face twisted with pain and shock. The second bullet punched through his right eye and he fell. Vatsek chambered another sub-sonic round and watched the guard through the crosshairs until he saw hands lift the dead man to his feet.

"They are there." Hijazi started the engine and let the van coast backwards downhill.

At the parking lot entrance, he lurched forward into the lot, then parked the van to the doors of the stairwell at the side of the building.

Throwing open the door before the van stopped, Vatsek rushed to the door and tried the knob. Locked. Hijazi left the van with his Kalashnikov ready.

Palestinians opened the door and Vatsek grabbed the muzzle of a rifle, pushing the rifle to the side as he snapped his leg up to kick-- and he realized he faced Captain Niles in a bloody keffiyah.

"Be cool, King Kong!" Alvarez told him. He took the keffiyah off his head and passed the black and white cloth to Vatsek.

As the others went up the concrete and steel stairs, Vatsek wound the

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blood-damp cloth around his head and neck. He had served in Beirut throughout the summer and fall of 1983 but the Middle Eastern sun had not tanned his White Russian skin. And the sun only bleached his white-blond hair whiter. Leaving only his eyes showing, he wrapped the cloth across his face. He smelled the hair oil and mints of the man he had killed and wondered if the man's family lived in the Palestinian ghettos north of the airport.

They took the stairs quickly, going directly to the tenth floor where Kalaq the leader had his apartment and offices. There, when he heard the sound coming from beyond the stairwell door, Vatsek stopped thinking about the families of the men he had killed minutes before.

The woman's scream continued without end, piercing the concrete walls of the building, echoing in the ten floor high stairwell column.

Alvarez tried the steel firedoor. It did not open. Going to one knee, he peered into the three millimeter gap between the doorframe and the door. He studied the latching mechanism, then took out his knife. He slipped the blade into the gap and levered the mechanism. But the door did not open.

The scream stopped. In the silence, they heard laughter. Then, the scream came again. Alvarez struggled with the latch. The blade snapped. He jammed a blade into the latch and tried again.

As the scream echoed, Vatsek looked to Captain Niles. Niles stared at the locked door, his face showing nothing, but his eyes seeming to stare through the door at what happened beyond. And as Vatsek watched Niles, the scream shuddered and caught, then echoed again.

The captain closed his eyes, as if unwilling to imagine what happened. But Vatsek knew Captain Niles still saw the torture, eyes open or closed.

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Peeling away the plastic paper, Kalaq stood with Hussain and Mohammed and watched the image emerge from the chemical film. First came the brilliant orange of the highway flare. Then the white of the woman's body. In the conference room, Chardon shrieked and pleaded, her words incoherent and rattling-- her screams had torn her throat. Kalaq and two of his men watched the chemical process define the details: the strange twisted lines of her limbs as she tried to escape from the searing pain, the blood around the reinforcing rod hammered through her hands and feet and into the table, the faces of the fedayeen gathered around the woman.

"This will be very amusing to the Iranian." Kalaq passed the camera to his aide Hussain. "Here. Take more. For me. For all of us. Use all the film. I must have photos for the comrades in Damascus."

Mohammed stared at the image of the Frenchwoman suffering. "And one for me. I want to remember that woman."

Kalaq laughed and clasped the man's shoulder. "Was she not as I said? Did she not tremble like a young girl? You must come with me to Europe. The women love the fedayeen--"

Shots cut off his jokes. At the end of the corridor, Kalaq saw dust drifting around the emergency door. Plaster fell away from the doorframe. The interior surface of the door had buckled and warped. Behind him, Mohammed moved reflexively, punching the elevator buttons, then grabbing Kalaq and jerking him toward the opening doors of the elevator.

They heard the second burst of automatic fire as the elevator doors slid closed.

Alvarez reached into the bullet-smashed hole and pulled the door open, then

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Niles ran into the corridor. The shooting had warned the Palestinians. In the confined space, he and the other Marines had no chance if he did not hit fast and hard.

A group of Palestinians stood in the center of the building. Niles sprinted at them, spraying fire from his Kalashnikov, the high-velocity slugs gouging the walls, shattering ceiling lights, throwing the men backwards. When the bolt closed on the empty chamber, Niles threw himself flat on the carpeting.

Boots ran past him, Vatsek firing his rifle on automatic, raking the corridor. Hijazi followed. Niles jammed a new magazine into his Kalashnikov and shouldered the rifle, watching the doorways over the sights. A Palestinian appeared, rifle rising, and Niles squeezed off a single shot to the head as Vatsek turned and sprayed the doorway with a burst. Dead twice, the Palestinian fell back.

"Some of them got in the elevator!" Vatsek shouted out.

"We can't chase them." Niles ran to an open door and went flat against the wall.

A gunman inside the office fired out, slugs denting the polished stainless steel of the elevator. Plaster exploded in front of Niles' face as a line of bullets punched through the wall. Niles stumbled back and dropped down. Aiming from the floor, he angled his fire through the wall and up. A man screamed.

Vatsek rushed past the doorway and turned, firing two and three shot bursts into the office.

Stop firing! Niles shouted out in Arabic. Surrender and you live!

Moving too quick to see, Vatsek kicked something and then fired through the doorway again. Niles realized the sergeant had kicked a grenade back into the office. The bang shattered the windows and sent dust clouding into the corridor.

Niles dove through the doorway and hit a dead man. Crawling through the dust and smoke, he saw silhouettes against the window overlooking the Mediterranean. He fired low, dropping the men with bullets to the legs. They fell through the shattered

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sliding glass doors. Another burst came from the doorway and a Palestinian collapsed across the table.

The firing stopped and Niles heard only the gasping of wounded men. And despite the acrid cordite smoke in the air, he smelled another stink-- burnt flesh.

"Oh, Mother of God," Alvarez choked.

Standing, Niles saw Chardon crucified to the table naked, with her arms and legs outstretched. He saw the bullet hole in her head that had ended her life. Then he saw Vatssek look at the dead woman's crotch and then turn away. Smoke stinking of burnt flesh and phosphorous rose from her abdomen and Niles gagged on the stench and the understanding of what the Palestians had done to the woman.

"Check for weapons," Niles shouted out. "Find the ones that are alive and keep them alive. Search through those other offices. Fast! We got to get out of here."

He turned to the gunmen he had shot at the sliding glass doors. One of the Palestinians had fallen on an upjutting blade of glass. Already gray with blood loss, he would die in minutes. The other man, semi-conscious, called out to his god for an end to the pain of his shattered legs.

Niles looked to the balcony. An unconscious and bleeding man had a rifle in his hands. Niles reached out and took the weapon and a shot tore past his face. Looking out again, he saw Palestinian on the next balcony beating at a glass door with the butt of his Kalashnikov. A rifle fired inside the office and the Palestinian staggered back and flipped over the railing. Niles scanned the other balconies before stepping out.

Looking down, he saw a white van racing across the parking lot. Niles aimed and fired a burst. The van did not stop. Setting the fire-selector lever to semi-auto, he held the sights of the Kalashnikov on the roof over the driver and fired single shots until he emptied the rifle. The van turned onto the Avenue. Niles grabbed a fixed stock rifle and fired again as the van labored up the hill. But he did not stop the

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escaping Palestinians.

"We got one with a camera," Vatssek called out to the captain. "He has pictures of her with that flare in her--"

Going to the sergeant, he saw Vatssek holding a bleeding man against the wall, his huge hand clamped in the Palestinian's hair. Niles reloaded his folding-stock Kalashnikov. He chambered the first round and put the muzzle of the rifle under the the Palestinian's chin.

"I was told to photograph," the Palestinian pleaded in English, his words becoming a wail. "It was my commander who did that terrible thing. Not me. I beg you, don't punish me for the crime of my leader. I am not --"

Niles jammed the rifle muzzle into the man's throat. The coughing, choking Palestinian held up his hands, as if praying. He tried to fall to his knees but Vatssek held him upright. "Who is your leader?"

"Abu ... Abu Jihad."

Shaking his head, Niles turned to Vatssek. "He's lying. Do something non-fatal to him. Fast."

"Oh, yeah?" Vatssek studied the Palestinian for a moment, looking at his stubby legs and middle-aged paunch, his round face and double-chin. Then in one motion, Vatssek brought up his boot high and stomped down with all his strength on the knee of the photographer. The man screamed as the knee snapped backwards. Vatssek continued through to the floor, breaking the knee back to a ninety-degree angle.

Looking into the gasping and crying man's face, Niles asked again, "Who is your leader?"

Panting for breath, his body twisting with pain, he finally answered: "Iziz ... Kalaq."

"Where is he?"

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"The elevator. I saw ... I saw him in the elevator."

"Where did he go?"

"I ... I do not know."

"Lying again. Do the stomp, Kong."

Screaming, the broken leg flopping, pivoting on the other leg and trying to push the Americans away, the photographer struggled. Vatssek stomped the other knee and dropped the Palestinian to the carpet, both knees bent backwards.

"Where did he go?"

"Damascus!" He screamed out answers through the pain. "There are fedayeen ... a unit waiting there ... for orders from Rajai."

"Orders for what?"

"It is ... unknown. The Iranian keeps it all secret. The photos ... of the woman were for him. For him. He ordered the woman killed. I only did what ... my leader told --"

"How many fighters in the unit?"

"Many. Twenty, thirty. Rajai wanted many men. Kalaq said ... it would be a glorious victory against America, a strike ... to be remembered in the history of the world--"

"Where?"

"It is unknown. A secret. Only the Iranian Rajai knows."

"And Kalaq."

"No ... no ... he does not know. He said he will not know until he arrives at the-- at the place of assembly, where all the forces join together."

"What forces?"

"Comrades of the international struggle."

"Congratulations, comrade," Niles told the Palestinian. "You have won back your

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life. If you continue to co-operate, you will live. Sergeant, this comrade leaves with us."

"Not my comrade," Vatssek countered.

"Figure of speech" Niles called out to the others. "Hez-zoot, lieutenant. Gather papers, information, anything. We're getting out of here."

"These are offices," Alvarez shouted back. "I'm looking at filing cabinets of papers."

Hijazi called out. "Captain, please come here."

Niles hurried to an adjoining office. An inner office had been papered with color photos of the Marine barracks devastated on 23 October. The montage of photos showed the gray ruin and the splashes of blood, the crews of workers trying to rescue the wounded and recover the dead, the rows of torn and dismembered young men. He recognized photos of himself. In one, he comforted a teenager dying under a concrete slab. In another, he walked from the door of the Command and Intelligence offices-- Chardon had taken that photo. Niles went back to the crippled Palestinian. He kicked him in a broken knee:

"The office with all the photos of the bombing. Whose office is that?"

"The--" He gasped back pain. "The office of Kalaq."

"Hey-zoot, get what you can out of there. Empty out the drawers, find telephone numbers, whatever, anything personal. Sergeant-- can you get our comrade down the stairs. I think a booby trap on the elevators is a fact."

"Ten flights with that shit on my back?"

"Ten flights down."

"Will do. What about these others? The ones that aren't dead?"

Niles looked again at the outspread corpse of the young woman. He remembered Chardon holding him and shaking with fear as the Revolutionary Guards

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laughed. She had tried to make money off her radical contacts. Maybe she had tried to sell him out to the radicals or the Iranians, maybe not. But no one deserved the death she had suffered.

Crossing the office to a wounded man, Niles shot him.

One of the bullets had hit Mohammed in the back. Passing at an extreme angle through his body, the bullet tore through his lung and stomach before exiting through the left-hand pocket of his jacket. He had managed to continue driving for a block despite the wound. Kalaq pulled him away from the steering wheel and pushed him into the back of the van. He paused to wipe the blood off the seat before driving on.

Mohammed vomited blood and gasped out, "The University hospital"

"No! The Americans will go there. It was Americans who attacked the office."

"I must ... go to a hospital, Iziz."

"I will take you to our hospital. You will be safe there."

"It was ... Americans?"

"I am sure," Kalaq lied. "I recognized the one with the beard. The squads sent to capture him failed. They will be severely punished."

Kalaq drove over the concrete and earth planter dividing the north and south bound lanes of the Avenue. He did not want to waste time in the crowded streets of the metropolitan area. Flooring the accelerator, he raced south again, speeding downhill past the offices. He looked up at the tenth floor balcony but saw nothing extraordinary. No riflefire came down at the van. Accelerating to the maximum speed of the van, he wove around the few cars on the avenue and continued south.

Retching and gasping, Mohammed struggled to breathe. His face went gray.

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Kalaq glanced back at his comrade. He saw no life-- only the staring eyes and motionless chest of a corpse. He checked his watch-- he had no time to deliver a dead man to a hospital.

Ahead, where a line of low cliffs interrupted the shoreline, the Avenue curved east. Trash and the hulks of gutted cars covered the undeveloped area. Feral dogs searched through garbage. Kalaq stopped the van at the curve in the Avenue. He jerked open the sliding sidedoor and pulled out Mohammed.

The arm moved-- Mohammed still lived. But Kalaq had no time for his dying fedayeen. He must speed to join his unit in Damascus. He could not stop at a hospital. Nor could he delay in Beirut to avenge the criminal attack on his office. The national cause of his people and the glorious mission he undertook in the name of liberation required his personal leadership. His fedayeen waited for him to lead them into battle against the Americans.

Dragging the bleeding man across the hard-packed earth, Kalaq dropped him behind a heap of concrete and rusting metal. A pack of dogs watched.

Running back to the van, Kalaq sped away, rushing to Damascus.

In a cubical in the Marine Battalion Headquarters, Niles called Colonel Devlin in Washington -- waking him at 2am -- and briefed via a trans-Atlantic secure line. The electronics made the voice of the Colonel monotonic, unnatural. After he had detailed his observations from the Beeka, the story from Chardon, he then told of what the interrogation of the man captured in the Popular Front office.

"Thirty militiamen?"

"That's what he told me, Colonel. Thirty Popular Front gunmen waiting for a signal to fly out. They won't know where they're going until they get there. But they

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will be working with gangs from other countries."

"What countries?"

"No way to know yet."

"About Baalbek, it is your opinion not to attempt the capture?"

"It is very likely a one way trip. The woman got me in. Luck got me out. Luck and the disorganization of the Iranians. We can't count on that again. That's why the death of the woman is a catastrophe. She was the connection to the Iranian. The Iranian travels in and out of Baalbek. If we could track him in Beirut or in Europe, we could get him, no problem. But even if we went into Baalbek, there'd be the chance he wouldn't be there. Hate to talk negative but there it is."

"Can we assume the leader of the Popular Front unit also has contacts with him?"

"Yes, sir. The woman told me that the Iranian introduced her to the Palestinian."

"Then the Palestinian is another link."

"But he's in Damascus, waiting for instructions to fly out."

"If you could capture the Palestinian, he could direct you to the Iranian."

"Sir, I have the Frenchwoman's papers. Notes, addresses, phone numbers. I can backtrack through her work. I can find others who had contact with the Iranian. I'll find him eventually."

"You don't have the time. The President's pulling the Marines out of Beirut. You -- and all the Marines and all the soldiers of the multi-national force -- have reached the end of your service in Beirut."

"Sir, I'm out of all that. I'm operating on my own. I'm willing to stay on."

For a moment, he heard only line static as Colonel Devilin considered his offer. "Captain, you have been compromised by the Frenchwoman. We must assume the Popular Front and the Iranians will target you for capture or assassination."

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"Target me? I'm an American. All Americans are targets. What's the difference if they know my name or not?"

"Captain, you are a very brave and dedicated soldier. We will study the situation as it emerges. But the American presence in Lebanon is ending. Prepare for reassignment of your team."

"As a team? With the others?"

"Of course. If you remain in Lebanon, you will not work alone. If we employ you in other actions, your team will continue working together. You speak Spanish?"

"¡Claro que se!"

"And the other men?"

"Both sergeants. Check the file of the lieutenant for his Spanish. You need us in Central America?"

"There's a Customs Department case involving the illegal export of explosives. By an Englishman who works for the Iranians. Since this involves Iranians, the case was finally routed to my attention. Would you be willing to do this? A textbook Recon assignment?"

"An Englishman buying American explosives for Iranians? Any chance it's related?"

"We will be watching for the movement of the Palestinians into the area. How much advance time would you need act on this?"

"Send a plane. We'll go. Put the lieutenant to assembling the equipment we'll need. But when we're done, I want to come back to work here. I remember that we lost hundreds of men here and that we haven't got the murderers yet."

Syrian Army soldiers guarded the transit lounge. Inside, Kalaq and the thirty

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fedayeen of the Popular Front waited. All through the day, they paced or talked of the action or slept on the bare wooden benches. Crumpled packs of cigarettes and hundreds of butts littered the floor.

In the evening, soldiers brought a meal of lukewarm tea and bread with greasy rice. The officer supervising the guards refused to hear questions about their departure. After nine at night, Kalaq demanded to call the Popular Front offices in the downtown Cassion Hotel. The Syrians ignored him. Hour after hour, the fedayeen watched the lights of jets taxing on the airfield, the noise of the engines waking the men who slept. Other Palestinians paced and talked, arguing their future in shouts.

The activity of the airport continued while they waited, flight announcements echoing in the corridor, passengers rushing to other lounges. The people represented all the nations of the Islamic world, men in the traditional white, women wearing the gray chaadors of Pakistan, the colorful silk of South Asia, or the severe black of Iran. Others wore the styles of Europe. Kalaq watched them. They passed without a thought to the fighters held prisoner by the Syrians-- he, who would fight for the cleansing of their world of the Zionists and Americans, he did not merit their interest. Only a European with a backpack stopped to look into the lounge at the fedayeen. The soldiers shoved him on his way without a word.

After midnight, the sounds of the airport went quiet. Only Kalaq remained awake. He smoked his last cigarette and tried to sleep on one of the benches. But the chill of the lounge kept him shivering. He returned to pacing, alone, stumbling with fatigue. He had not slept for days-- organization details had kept him working throughout the past nights, the call to capture Chardon had come after only an hour's sleep, then the fighting and the long drive to Damascus. With the cold and his rage at the long, unexplained wait, he would not sleep this night.

Kalaq heard the soldiers demand identification, then a small man in a wrinkled

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black suit entered the lounge. He wore an old, fur-collared coat over his shoulder like a cape and carried a battered leather valise.

"Are you the contract workers from Lebanon?"

"Who are you?"

"Your travel agent. Who did you think I was?"

"I am Aziz Kalaq. Do you have a message for me?"

The agent glanced at a list. "No message. Only a ticket. To Italy."

"When will the plane come?"

"Tonight, tomorrow. There is a schedule with the ticket."

"Why have you come so late? We have waited many hours."

"Because this work took many hours. You think I have a computer? Wake the others."

As the men said their names, the agent checked a list and distributed the tickets. Some men went to Athens, then to Madrid. Others flew first to Cairo, then to Rome. Others went to Athens, then Rome, then Paris. No more than three men travelled on the same flight. The Palestinians turned to Kalaq. He signaled for the men to stay silent. The agent finished the distribution of the tickets. But when the agent left, Kalaq faced the questions of his fedayeen.

"The action will be in Europe?"

"Why is my ticket to France?"

"Why do we go to Italy?"

"They are scattering us everywhere!"

"My fighters! We are soldiers in a larger and grander plan. We must take the directions of the commanders. Understand that security does not allow for every man to know every detail. You knew this when you accepted your roles in the action. Now we know we are moving onward toward our destiny and our --"

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"You!" A Syrian officer shouted out. He pointed at Kalaq. "A telephone call for you."

"This will be the explanation."

Soldiers escorted him to a telephone in the corridor. "This is Aziz Kalaq speaking."

"Did you receive the tickets?"

He did not recognize the voice. By the quality of the line tone, he guessed that the caller spoke from Damascus. "Yes, but only to Europe." "Friends will meet your men as they leave their planes. They are to take the tickets and documents and continue. Is that clear?"

"What is the final destination?"

The line went dead. Kalaq clicked the receiver but the caller did not speak again. The soldiers took him back to the lounge. Smiling to his men, he declared:

"Our patience is rewarded. From here, we travel quickly."

Fifty kilometers south of Riohacha, Peter Deak spotted the truck and trailer on the highway. The electronic-pulse of the tracer confirmed his sighting. Taking the Piper Malibu up to a thousand meters over the swamps and rainforest, he cut his air-speed almost to stall. To the west, the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta towered high above his plane. His altitude gave him a view of the convoluted valleys and ridges of the eastern ranges of the Sierra Nevadas and the peaks of the Sierra de Perija in the far distance.

Deak, a career officer with the Drug Enforcement Administration and a three-year veteran of the dope wars in Colombia, kept the truck in sight as the Malibu bucked updrafts. But the small plane had much more speed than this surveillance

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required. The truck never made more than one hundred kilometers per hour on the gravel highway. Minute by minute, even at stall speed, the plane gained on the truck, then left it behind. As the truck started the long, zigzagging upgrade to the thousand meter high crest of a ridge, its speed fell to only a few kilometers per hour. Deak climbed to three thousand meters and radioed to San Juan Del Cesar, thirty kilometers to the south.

"This is Malibu One, calling from the River plus fifty." The River meant Riohacha, fifty the kilometers from the town. "Is the man waiting at the crossroads?"

"That he is. Repeat, he is at the crossroads."

"Then I'm coming in. He can do the roadwork."

Ten minutes later, he brought the Malibu down at the asphalt airfield outside of San Juan Del Cesar, a small town at an intersection of highways. One road cut straight south from the coast, then meandered through the mountains. The other road ran north-east through the long Cesar Valley to the Venezuelan border. Contrabandistas driving from the smuggling center of Maicao on the Venezuelan-Colombian border stopped at San Juan Del Cesar for beer and diesel fuel before continuing to the interior of Colombia with their untaxed trade goods.

The location of San Juan also served the D E A. Colombian nationalism required an isolated facility for the North Americans enforcing the drug laws of the United States. Using funds allocated by Congress for military aid, the D E A scraped the site out of the jungle, paved the airstrip, erected pre-fab hangers and offices, fenced the airstrip with chain link and razor wire, then applied tons of defoliant to the perimeter. A few platoons of Colombian soldiers guarded the norteamericanos from the local gangsters.

Heat radiated from the blacktop in silver, shimmering flashes. At eleven degrees north of the equator, the sun heated the field to incandescence every day

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before nine. Deak left the Malibu in the care of the technicians and walked through gusts of heat to the pre-fab quarters. He felt the heat of the asphalt through the soles of jungle boots.

A tall, thin man made thinner by the food and climate, Deak no longer filled the slacks and shirts he ordered through a New York catalogue. But he had not adjusted his waist or neck size because he liked the comfort of loose clothing in the extreme humidity of the Guajira Peninsula. The loose cloth fluttered around his legs and torso. Despite the comfort, the temperature and humidity left him wet with sweat in seconds.

The air-conditioned cool of the office came like a wave. Here, inside the foam-insulated sheet metal walls, the heat of the Colombian sun and the noise of the aircraft seemed distant. Deak saw Hector Alcaya -- the day officer -- studying teletype sheets while monitoring the radios. The humorless Cuban-American lived his work. A Marine Corps veteran, he had worked for a year as a Miami policeman before resigning in frustration at the impotence of law enforcement and the corruption of the community. He saw the drugs and the syndicates as a sin against God and country. Unlike Deak, Alcaya did not take the long view of the dope war:

"Look at this shit! These sons of bitches --" Alcaya pointed at a block of type on the long teletype sheet. "The Colombians billed the Administration for the use of a helicopter. A Huey! A Huey we gave them and we got to pay to use it."

"Makes sense to me." Deak took a liter of boiled water from the refrigerator. He dropped in a slice of lemon for flavor. "Think of all the money they lost."

"What money? Fuel and pilot time? We trained the pilots, we buy the fuel."

"A helicopter is a very valuable flying machine. They could be out moving coca paste if we didn't insist on enforcing laws. The operation may have inconvenienced them. Of course, they want us to pay."

"Sons of bitches. I say we nuke this shithole of a country."

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"We don't have the warheads to do it. Besides, there are still some decent people here."

"Who? I want to know who?"

Deak laughed. "Must be someone."

"Sodom and Colombia," Alcaya cursed.

"Relax. This is Guajira. You think like the States and you'll go crazy. Just to be here, we're winning. Any word from Jones?"

"He's north of the crossroads, waiting for that truck."

Deak considered the road downhill from the mountains. The road wound through valleys and hills. He did not remember any straight sections. "Truck won't pass him for another hour, minimum. And that's highballing. I'm going to go see a movie."

Weeks before, a raid on a jungle cocaine processing center had resulted in the seizure of tons of coca base, a processing factory, chemicals, and an entertainment center. Between shifts, the workers and guards had enjoyed an international selection of video tapes. Deak had personally overseen the destruction of the factory, using the kerosene and petroleum ether to incinerate the coca base and all the refining equipment. The colonel commanding the Colombian soldiers received the gang's weapons for resale to the death squads, the communist guerrillas, or other dope gangs-- and the D E A officers took the video players, projection screens, and library of tapes.

Walt Disney's Fantasia needed no subtitles or dubbing. Deak laid back in an easy chair-- taken from the personal quarters of a gang boss in another raid-- and relaxed to the music and brilliant colors. The irony of enjoying a luxury captured from dopers amused him.

An hour later, he com-line woke him. Deak went back to the office. Alcaya told

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him, "No truck."

Deak took the radio microphone. "Crossroads, how's your radio reception?"

"Great, Malibu. Hearing you fine."

"Not me. The other radio station. You got the beat?"

"That's why I called in, sir. Heard it coming, getting stronger all the time, then it leveled out."

"But you still got it?"

"I got it. No malfunction."

"Well damn. No more movies. See you in a while." Deak clicked off. "Got to go up there again. Maybe they parked for a siesta, maybe they broke down."

"And if they didn't?"

"I know where to look."

"Where?"

"Colombia."

Minutes later, at two thousand meters altitude, Deak followed the highway snaking through the low mountains. The impulses from the tracking unit in the container continued strong. The smugglers driving the truck had not found the pulse transmitter. Below him, he saw the intersection where a mud road to a village met the highway. He checked the agent watching the road:

"Crossroads, no traffic?"

"Yeah, traffic. Truckload of dopers hauling fertilizer to a farm."

"Don't jump to conclusions."

"Who else can afford fertilizer out here?"

"Your reasoning won't be admissible in court."

"Won't ever go to court."

"You young guys have an attitude problem."

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Deak watched the black line of the road cutting through the rainforest. On both sides of the road, yellowed or blackened areas marked the efforts of the Colombian Department of Roads to defeat the forest with defoliants and fire. He passed over a steel bridge. The bridge went over a small river snaking down out of the mountains. He did not know the name of the river. The local people called it the Santo, but they also used that name for another river five kilometers to the south. The true Santo ran five hundred kilometers to the south-west, in the Magdalena Valley. Leaving the bridge far behind, he gained altitude quickly, scanning the zigzagging of the road up the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevadas.

The pulse signal faded. Deak checked the signal. He had flown past the truck and trailer. Beneath him, he saw the vast panorama of forested mountains. Stark rocky crags with spots of snow crowned the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. The blue horizon of the Caribbean appeared to the north, he rose to five thousand meters, then banked through a long, slow turn, curving over the low mountains.

Reducing speed and altitude, he flew east-to-west, following the wide valley of a river. The pulse signal came strong. He saw the faint line of dirt road through the forest. Then he spotted the airstrip.

The gang had not cut a new airstrip. In the seventies, a marijuana syndicate had cut down the trees, burned the underbrush, and bulldozed a long landing strip. Regular flights had paid for the construction of a small village for the growers, processors, and laborers. Hidden between the mountains, cooled by winds down the valley, and with water from the river, the village did very well, making millions of dollars in the trade. But gang wars and government raids made the location-- very close to the highway-- undesirable. The syndicate abandoned the airfield. The first rains brought a regrowth of the saplings and palms. From time to time, other gangs cleared the brush and used the field for a few flights. But the development of hybrid sinsemilla

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marijuana in Hawaii, California, and Oregon depressed the international marijuana trade. The syndicates now concentrated on cocaine and operated from processing centers with less history and more concealment.

Deak scanned the edges of the clearings, looking for cars and trucks. A flash of reflected sunlight betrayed the truck and trailer. But a shadow covered part of the trailer. He focused binoculars on the trailer.

Men in green fatigues worked to cover the truck and trailer with camouflage netting. Deak did not change his speed or glide line. He continued west into the mountains, then circled back to the highway. Without breaking his radio silence, he returned to the San Juan Del Cesar airfield.

In the office, Deak unlocked the safe and took out a code book. He worked alone to write the message. The message went first to the Barranquilla office, then to Panama, then directly to Washington.

A courier hand-carried a decoded copy to Colonel Devlin.