

As the jet turned to the west, Niles looked back at the lights of Beirut. An escalation of the war of revenge between the militias had left many parts of the city without electricity. Without power, West Beirut remained black except for individual buildings with generators. Only kilometers away, thousands of lights defined the port and coast running north to Jounieh. Suburbs in the east remained lit. In the darkness south of the city, the crossed lines of the lights of the airport marked the Marine position. To Niles, the random pattern of the power failure created the image of a city shattered into sectors of light and darkness, the lights islands, the darkness like an ocean invading the land.

Exploding shells flashed in the blacked-out Western sector. That morning, the Shias or Druze or Palestinians had car bombed a Phalangist political office. The bombing had also killed or maimed several children walking to a school. The Phalangists took vengeance by firing hundreds of high-explosive shells into the slums of West Beirut-- innocent, random victims avenged by killing and maiming innocent, random victims. Niles counted the flashes of explosions and multiplied by the kilograms of explosive per shell. He thought of high-velocity steel fragments shearing through flesh. More bodies for the morgues, more bandaged masses of suffering for the hospitals.

Then he thought of his year there and realized he and the Marines had only fought a delaying action against chaos. Hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid, thousands of Lebanese killed in militia wars, the sacrifice of hundreds of young Americans-- all wasted.

"The City of Shit," Vatssek commented, staring out at the lights of ravaged

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Beirut. "Ragheads, Syrian Stalinists, Phalange Nazis, Iranian crazies, mystical motherfucking Druze-- hope I never see your hellhole again."

Niles laughed. He stepped across the aisle to a swivel seat. The Air Force had modified the jet's passenger cabin for in-flight conferences. At the front bulkhead, the jet had six swiveling, reclining seats around a table for senior officers and diplomats. In the back, two lines of fixed, non-reclining seats faced the wide aisle. Fold-out tables provided work areas for every seat.

Across the wide center aisle, Niles saw Alvarez watching the city recede in the distance. He remembered the morning Alvarez had lost his platoon. The young sergeant had the same expression on his face now.

"At a moment of reflection and profound regret," Niles commented to Vatssek. "Your obscene statement somehow --"

"Sorry, sir. I was just glad to be getting out."

Niles laughed again. "-- somehow says it all."

"And what's there to regret?" Vatssek asked. "We're alive. I know a lot of guys who aren't."

"True, sergeant. But there is also the fact that we went in there to give a country a chance. And we failed."

"Not us. We didn't fail. We gave the people a chance. But the Lebanese let the gangs and gang bosses take their country away. You think people in the U S would let them take over a city?"

"Vatssek, I don't believe you understand the complexity of problems. The colonial history, the religions, the dynamics of the religions and politics and class structure with the international forces."

"I don't care how complex it is. Beirut couldn't happen in the U S A. No gang would take over my town. I'd get together with the other guys and--"

"And make a militia," Alvarez interrupted.

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"There it is, Sergeant Vatssek. Contradiction Number One. They all think their militia is the solution to the problem. Contradiction One of a list of a thousand contradictions." Niles looked past the sergeants to Lieutenant Stark, who sat at a back work table flipping through a notebook. "Lieutenant, the cablegram said you would provide a briefing inflight."

Leaving his seat, the lieutenant walked to the front. As always, he looked like a Marine on a recruiting poster-- perfect shave, pressed fatigues, mirror-polished boots. But days and nights of work in Washington had left his eyes bloodshot. He went to the tables at the front of the compartment and stepped over cardboard boxes and black fiberboard transit cases stacked under the table.

"Tired, Lieutenant?"

"No problem, sir. I'll get some sleep as we fly." Stark looked at a page in his notebook. He paused for seconds, staring at the typed sheet, then turned and pulled down a rolling map of the Western Hemisphere.

"Four days ago," the lieutenant began, his voice slow with fatigue. "A Panamanian-registered container ship docked at the Colombian port of Cartagena and offloaded ten tons of a compound commonly called drilling mud. In fact, as determined by a combined Customs Department and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms investigation, the declared consignment of drilling compound conceals two tons of American-manufactured dynamite. The investigation began with the purchase of the dynamite by an Englishman who has acted in the past as an Iranian agent in the purchase of military ordnance for the war against Iraq. The investigation followed the dynamite from the United States, to Mexico, to Asia, then to South America.

"This dynamite has no military value.

"After the offloading of the container at Cartagena," Stark pointed to the port on the Caribbean coast, then traced a highway running east along the coast. "A truck then transported the container of drilling compound east through the mountains. The

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D E A maintained surveillance of the truck from the moment the freighter docked to the time the truck parked at a jungle airfield fifty kilometers south of the town of Riohacha.

"The area exports coffee, tobacco, and bananas. There is now some oil exploration. However, the area is infamous for marijuana plantations and drug syndicates. The airfield was at one time used for planes carrying out loads of marijuana. D E A officers familiar with the airfield report a number of structures remaining from the time of gang activity."

"That's where the dynamite went?" Niles asked.

"Yes, sir."

"And that's where we'll be going."

"Yes, sir. Via Barranquilla. From Barranquilla, a transport plane will take us to San Juan Del Cesar. A helicopter will be waiting for us there. The helicopter will insert our squad a few kilometers from the airfield. The helicopter and pilot will wait on call while we remain in the field."

"And what role," Niles asked. "Does the Colombian government have in this action?"

"No role. The government of Colombia will not be notified of our entry. Nor will they be notified of what we find. We will carry electronically encoded radios which make monitoring of our transmissions impossible."

"Encoded walkie-talkies?" Alvarez asked. "How do we decode ourselves?"

"The radio circuits encode and decode every transmission instantaneously. Any technician-- of the government of Colombia or the enemy-- will receive only static. Also, Sergeant Alvarez, as the squad electronics specialist, will carry a scanning unit capable of searching for and recording the transmissions of other radios. I will demonstrate the units during our flight."

Alvarez turned to the others. "Corps goes modern."

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"We will wear civilian-market fatigues, use civilian-market equipment, and carry black-market weapons which I purchased from a dealer in Miami."

"Very interesting," Niles looked back to Vatssek and Alvarez. "This does sound like a covert operation, does it not?"

"This is serious," Alvarez nodded. "Marines getting twentieth century radio equipment? Someone is serious."

Vatssek asked, "M-16's or Kalashnikovs?"

"New Colt Commando rifles," Stark answered. "One M-16 with an M-203 40mm grenade launcher."

"And over and under?" Vatssek reached out for the boxes. "That one is mine."

"All the Colt rifles have the new one-in-seven twist barrels. There are 9mm pistols. I can distribute the weapons for your inspection." He reached into a cardboard box and brought out a Colt Commando.

"I'll take that, Lieutenant." Niles jerked back the charging handle to confirm the empty chamber. "One question. The cablegram did not cover this. What do we do? What are the instructions from the Colonel?"

"Observe and report. Also, there is an extraordinary threat involved. International sources reported a number of Palestinians in transit, via commercial airlines, to Colombia. It is believed--"

"Palestinians? From where?"

"That remains uncertain. The Europeans would not co-operate and the Latin nations did not have the resources to trace the backgrounds of the suspects."

"What about Iranians?"

"Possible. Again, no co-operation from the Europeans. It must be assumed Iranians will be involved. If you look at the map, you will see that the airfield is within easy flying distance of both the American Embassy in Bogota and the Canal Zone. Or the Guantanamo Naval Base on the south shore of Cuba. There is speculation that the

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Iranians-- or their Palestinian proxies or the M-19-- will attempt to strike on or before this Wednesday. The President will deliver his State of the Union address Wednesday evening. A major terrorist incident could cast a pall over the address, which is, of course, covered by the international press."

"A hit could upstage the President."

"Correct, Captain."

"Can't have that." Niles turned to the sergeants. "Gentlemen, you've heard the briefing. You wish to volunteer for this assignment?"

"Ready to go," Vatssek answered. "Payback on some Iranians is okay with me."

Alvarez nodded. "No Congressional debate, no United Nations resolutions. Fly in, do it. Fly out."

"And it may involve Iranians," Niles added. "What about that Farsi speaking Marine, Lieutenant?"

"Waiting at Homestead Air Force Base, sir."

"Waiting?"

"For this plane. Didn't you intend for him to join the squad?"

"I want to talk to him before he goes with us."

"I brought his file, sir. And the comments of Colonel Devlin. The Colonel personally interviewed Javenbach. And conducted a background check. You will read much more there than is usually found in a Marine's file."

Niles glanced through the collection of personnel records. He motioned for Vatssek and Alvarez to look over his shoulder as he read the typed sheets. "Ali Akbar Javenbach. Born 1963 in Hesar, a village outside of Tehran. Father imprisoned by Shah. Died in prison. Uncle imprisoned by Shah. 1979, freed uncle during riots-- that's interesting. Older brother executed by Revolutionary Guards. Escaped with mother and younger brothers and sisters. Joined another uncle in the United States. Others in family disappeared during purges. Joined Marines on eighteenth birthday.

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Volunteered for recon after one year in service. Qualified. Expressed intense ideological commitment to the ideals of the United States. Volunteered when offered recon assignment--" Niles passed the folder back to the sergeants.

"I'll talk to him when he gets on the plane."

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Guiding the Piper Cub over the grass of the narrow airstrip, the pilot steered for the trees. The moon-faced, acne-scarred Latin grinned to Kalaq. Waiting for the small plane to slow, Kalaq watched the onrushing green wall of trees and palms. The propeller chopped through the tall grass, bits of wet grass and leaves plastering the windshield. Kalaq saw the individual pale trunks of the trees and the tangles of hanging vines and he shouted out in Arabic, then Russian for the pilot to stop.

The pilot laughed and the plane spun. Kalaq hit the windshield. The pilot reached across him and opened the door. Hanging by his safety belt, Kalaq looked out at a waving field of grass. Latins and Palestinians in green fatigues watched from a few meters away.

Still laughing, the pilot told him in English to get out. Kalaq did not understand. The pilot pulled the latch of the safety belt and shoved Kalaq from his seat.

Dropping down to the dirt, Kalaq heard the engine rev behind him. Prop wind whipped the grass. The plane rolled away and in seconds lifted into the overcast sky. As the engine noise faded, he heard Arabic.

A young woman walked to him. Very young, slim, she looked like a teenager in her olive drab fatigues. She wore an Uzi slung over her shoulder.

"Aziz Kalaq?"

"Where are my fedayeen?" He studied the young woman, her pretty features, her short cut hair, the smooth untanned skin of her hands.

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"You are the first of your group. Your men will come by truck or by plane. Today, tomorrow."

"Who are you?"

"They know me as Linda Gomez. Like you I am with the Popular Front. But I came on the ship with the explosives. I speak Spanish and I will translate for you to the Colombians."

"I want a rifle. And a uniform." "Come."

Gomez led him to the trees. Trucks, trailers, and pickup trucks lined the end of the clearing, where the shadows and branches of the overhanging trees and palms provided concealment from airborne observation. Black and green patterned camouflage netting covered the trailers.

At one trailer, two Palestinians opened buckets of gray clay. They pulled a black plastic bundle out of every bucket. Then they threw the buckets of clay into the jungle. Piles of black plastic bags surrounded the trailer.

"What is that?" Kalaq asked her.

"Dynamite. Two tons."

Kalaq looked at the airstrip-- and instantly, he understood how the Iranians would strike. "With a plane. Two tons of dynamite in a plane. The Americans will not know of the attack until they are dead."

"Very imaginative, yes?"

"But why dynamite? It is trash. It is only good for making roads. Why did they not--"

Gomez laughed. "They did. That trailer, there. It came today. It is all C-four. Three tons of American C-four plastique. It will be an explosion like the barracks in Beirut."

Calculating the power of the dynamite and the plastic explosive, Kalaq imagined a plane hurtling out of the sky and a white flash. And he laughed with Gomez.

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"They will die. So many of them will die. And all the world will hear of yet another victory."

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Working by the headlights of trucks, Air Force technicians ran hoses from the fuel truck to the wings. Other technicians checked the engines. From the window of the jet, Niles watched the young Marine stride through the lights of the service vehicles.

"Here comes the new guy."

Lieutenant Stark spoke into the intercom telephone. Outside, the engines continued whining. "The door will be open momentarily."

Niles sewed the cuffs of his new Taiwan-made camouflage pants. He wore the shirt of his new fatigues and the faded and patched camouflage pants from Beirut. He looked around the cabin at the litter of boxes, plastic bags, beer bottles, and weapons. Vatssek slept in a V I P chair tilted back to horizontal, his new boots on the armrest of another chair, a beer bottle clutched in his fist. Across from Niles, Alvarez loaded magazines from two boxes, steel-tipped 5.56mm SS109 cartridges from one, tracers from the other.

"I don't know," Niles said to the others. "If that Marine will want anything to do with this squad. Covert unit or international trash detail-- he will have a legitimate doubt."

"Sir, it's one thing to talk about payback--" Alvarez loaded magazines as he spoke. The brass of every cartridge glistened with oil-- he had taken all the cartridges out of their factory-packed magazines, then wiped the brass with a clean rag soaked with lubricating oil. Now he tediously reloaded the magazines. "But this kid may be an extreme case. If he thinks he can put down the locos who wasted his brother or the others in his family, maybe we've gotta pass on him. Whether we need him for the language or not."

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"Psychological problem?"

"They killed his people."

"His file didn't report any problems."

"Not many Revolutionary Guards hanging out at Parris Island. Can't unload on them if they aren't there. But if we go up against a unit of the Guards and the kid goes kill crazy, no bueno."

At the door, Lieutenant Stark wrenched the release lever and motioned for the Marine to step into the plane. The young Iranian immigrant wore starched camouflage fatigues. As instructed, he carried nothing-- no personal effects, no equipment. Standing beside Stark, Javanbach appeared slight. His head came only to the lieutenant's shoulder. He saluted the lieutenant:

"Coporal Javanbach."

Niles transferred the needle and thread and new pants to his left hand as he stood. He shook hands with Javanbach, then point to one of the seats. "I've read your file. You are a very outstanding young Marine. Excellent scores on every test you take. What exactly did the lieutenant tell you of this unit?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Nothing? And you volunteered?"

"Sir, Lieutenant Stark told me I would be needed as a translator. We did not discuss the unit, sir. We did not discuss the assignment, sir."

"Maybe we'll need a translator, maybe not. We don't know yet."

Woken by the voices, Vatsek lurched forward in his chair, spilling foam over his crotch. "Aggh, god damn it-- oh, sorry. We there yet?"

Niles and Alvarez laughed. Stark threw a towel to the sergeant.

"A few more hours," Niles answered. "Corporal, I read in your file that you left Iran shortly after the Revolution. Did you fight against the Shah?"

Javanbach hesitated. "Yes, sir."

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"But then you left. Why?"

"The mullahs declared the Islamic Republic. The brother of my father-- my uncle had been many years in the prisons. He told of the teachings of the mullahs and of their insanity, of the insanity to come to the nation, of the end of all hope for those who did not accept the words of the mullahs as the words of God. I knew but I did not believe. But after the return of Khomeini, they took my brother. He had been very brave. He had fought for the revolution. But they shot him. Then I believed what my uncle told. My father was no longer living. I had the responsibility of my family. I could not wait and hope. One brother of my father had come here to the U S A to escape the Savak. He accepted us. It was very difficult, but America is our home and our country now."

Niles finished the last stitches on his pants leg. Knotting the thread, he cut it with his knife. "Your file says you got your uncle out during the riots in Tehran. How'd you do that?"

"It was not difficult. It was the days of the fighting at Doshen and Farahabad. The Fedayeen and the Mujahedeen were victorious at Doshen and they distributed weapons to everyone. And everywhere, there was fighting-- the Javadan Brigade fought with the Mujahedeen and Fedayeen and the cadets and the men in the streets and so forth and so on. I heard of attacks on Evin Prison. I thought Gasr would be next. I went to the prison and watched and waited. Mobs came and there was fighting and the soldiers and guards left the prison. I freed my uncle without firing my rifle. It was not difficult."

"You just waited?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Two days."

"And nights?"

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"My uncle waited three years. My wait was nothing."

Niles grinned to Alvarez and Vatsek. Alvarez nodded. Vatsek leaned forward and asked:

"So you were with the fedayeen?"

"No, sir. My brother was Mujahedeen. He fought for liberty and socialism in Iran. I only fought. My brother had hope but the fanatics murdered him. After that, I did not hope. I took my mother and brothers and sister away."

"You've been through all these questions before," Niles asked. "When you joined the Marines. When you talked to the Colonel. Right?"

"It is difficult for Americans to understand what happened in that country. They ask many questions."

"And what if you went up against Iranians?" Niles finally asked.

"I hope there is never war between our country and Iran. The young men know nothing of the United States and go to the army only because the mullahs threaten the penalty of death. If they knew of America they would fight the mullahs and the fanatics of the Pasdaran."

"And what about the fanatics? The Revolutionary Guard?"

"They are the enemy of everything that America is. The old mullahs take young men with no education and no hope and make them martyrs. They took my friends who hated the Shah and hated the corruption and made them the Pasdaran. I hope it will never happen that I see my friends who are with the Guards. Because now they are the enemy."

After Javanbach finished, Niles and the others said nothing. Alvarez loaded cartridges, each round clicking against the thin steel of the magazine he held. Finally Niles asked the corporal:

"So you volunteered for this without knowing where we'd go or what we'd do."

"Yes, sir."

"This is not a Marine Corps operation. We can't wear uniforms where we're

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going. Once we're in, we're on our own. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you volunteer for this?"

"Yes, sir."

Nile turned to Stark, "We got any of these made in Taiwan fatigues for the corporal? And equipment? And a rifle?"

"I anticipated the corporal accompanying our squad."

Niles pointed to the boxes. "Assemble your gear, Javanbach. You're on your way to Colombia."

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Mosquitos droned against the netting. Smoking a Colombian cigarette, Aziz Kalaq lay in the darkness listening to the static of the radio frequency. He pressed the light on his wristwatch again. Minutes more to wait. He heard the voices of the other fedayeen in the night-- cursing the insects and the heat, laughing of the coming strike against the Americans.

Kalaq felt sweat trickling over his face. Sweat ran through his hair. His sweat-soaked fatigues clung to his body. Reaching through the netting, he found the plastic jar and drank the warm water, hating the taste of the purification chemicals. He longed for ice and vokda. The crazy clerk Rajai had not included any alcohol in the supplies for the Colombians and Palestinians-- no beer, no liquor, no cigarettes. Kalaq bought cigarettes from the Colombian guerrillas guarding the airstrip but the tobacco tasted like burning wood.

Voices approached. He heard Spanish. Boots sounded on the rotting planks of the steps and a flashlight waved through the interior of the shack.

"Is there a message yet?" Linda Gomez asked in Arabic.

"No. We must wait for the time." Pushing aside the netting, Kalaq left the cot.

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His cigarette touched his pants and the ember hissed against the wet cloth. Two quick drags brought the glow back but one side of the cigarette remained soaked. "A few more minutes."

"Your men are complaining."

"It is very hot here." Kalaq went outside. The air seemed cooler. But the insects buzzed around his head. He flicked his cigarette into the night. Finding the repellent in his fatigues, he applied the chemical to his face, neck, and hands. He felt insects crawling on his sweaty skin. "In Lebanon and Syria, there was snow."

"Your men want beer and cigarettes. They want the Colombians to drive to a village to buy what they want."

"No. Buying for thirty or forty men would alert the police. That cannot be allowed."

"That is what the Ortiz said. And look." Gomez put the flashlight on the man standing with her. One of the guerrillas held a bloody cloth to his lip. Blood had stained the Colombian Army uniform he wore. "One of your men hit him. This is very bad. Ortiz had his rifle but instead he walked away. Some of your men are smoking marijuana. And they all have weapons."

Kalaq gripped the Colombian's shoulder. "Tell him I apologize. Identify the man who hit him and I will see him punished. After this is done."

She translated his promise. Pointing her flashlight toward the voices and laughter a hundred meters away, Gomez repeated her warning. "They are smoking marijuana. It is a danger to the action."

"Where did they get it? Who brought it here?"

"It grows everywhere."

"Ask how we can get them the cigarettes and liquor. Without betraying all of us."

"Only by sending a truck to Maico or the coast. We talked of this. If the truck

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goes to San Juan, they will be seen. But if they go to the Riohacha or Maico, they will be gone all the day."

"We have two more days here. If cigarettes and beer will stop this trouble, it is nothing. Send them tonight."

"That is not possible. There are many bandits. There are gangs. One man or two men cannot travel at night."

Laughter came from the night. Flashlights approached, the beams whipping wildly over the grass and vines covering the ground. The radio operator appeared. He carried a flashlight in each hand. His stupid laughter stopped when he saw the bleeding Colombian.

"Go to the radio," Kalaq told him. "It is time. Send the message I wrote."

The flashlights lit the interior. Kalaq heard a chair fall. A code sequence came from the radio monitor. After a moment, the operator keyed a response in code.

"We will get them what they want," Kalaq told Gomez. "Send the Colombians to that town. The town that is near."

"But it will alert--"

"Alert who? How can it betray us? If there are bandits and gangs, let the Colombians say they are another gang. Let them say they are buying for a month. It does not matter. We will be gone in two days."

"It is against instructions."

"Those are my instructions. Do as I say. Send a truck to get the cigarettes and liquor. Why make the time in this hell difficult?"

He heard the operator keying the coded message. Leaving the woman, Kalaq went to the radio. He watched the operator fumble through the two lines of letters and numbers. A quick response came. Laughing, the operator keyed the message again. Finally, a confirmation came. The operator scribbled down a message transmitted from Lebanon. Then they heard only the static.

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Kalaq read the series of letter and number codes. The letters and numbers referred to the pages and lines of a phrase book he carried. Rajai had another book. Without the books, the codes meant nothing. Kalaq flipped through the pages of his book and found: All continues as scheduled ... aircraft comes ... two days ... dawn. "Very good problem with the Colombian. Who hit him? Why?"

"Odeh speaks French. The Colombian speaks French. Odeh asked with great courtesy, as a comrade, if the Colombian or one of his comrades, would take our dollars and buy a few items we did not receive in the supplies. But what is the answer? A lecture on security and discipline. We who have fought all our lives, lectured by a teenager. Odeh silenced him with a slap, as if he were a child."

As they neared the voices, Kalaq smelled the acrid marijuana. He had often smoked hashish in Beirut, but not the leaves of the plant. The voices of the men went quiet as Kalaq and the operator thrashed through the ferns and vines.

Though the shack had no floor or walls, a palm frond and sheet metal roof provided shelter from the sun and rain. Posts and thick cross-members supported the hammocks where the men slept. Canopies of netting covered the hammocks, sheets of netting hung in the place of walls. Kalaq pushed through the sheets of mosquito netting and stepped into the smoke. "Odeh! Where are you?"

"Here."

"Don't slap that boy again. He came crying to me and I had to hold his hand and call his mother on the radio."

The men laughed.

"And why did you not come to me about the cigarettes and beer? I have only one pack. How can I provide for all of you? Tomorrow, the truck goes to the village. If you had told me today, you would have what you want tonight. You must wait until tomorrow. There will be no ice or cold drinks but be patient. We will be out of this jungle in two days. Only two days of work and we return to Lebanon."

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As he walked out, his flashlight swept across a row of boxes. Wads of leaves covered one box. He saw what looked like a cigar rolled of white paper. He took it as he passed. Behind him, lighters flared and smoke clouded in the hammacks. The men talked and laughed again. Kalaq found the track through the undergrowth, kicking through the tangles until he stumbled up the steps of the shack.

Inside, the radio hissed with static. He gulped more of the chemical-stinking water and something living fluttered in his mouth. He spat the insect out. As he checked the water with his flashlight, insects flew at the beam. Beetles and moths walked on the warped walls of the shack. He went back to the cot, carefully closing the curtains of netting.

He examined the paper cigar, shining the beam of his flashlight directly on the paper. He saw words on the paper. Someone had torn a tissue-thin page from a Koran and used the page to wrap a wad of leaves. Kalaq laughed as he lit the hand-rolled cigar. Rajai had not included cigarettes and liquor with the supplies. But the Iranian clerk undoubtedly included a Koran.

The harsh smoke scorched his throat. But he pulled down drag after drag, filling his lungs with the intoxicant. He no longer felt the heat and his sweat-soaked fatigues. The static buzz of the radio became a distant sound, only one more insect in the swarms circling in the darkness.

Discipline. The discipline of his fedayeen. How could he maintain the discipline of his fighters in this hell? They had offered to give their lives in an attack against the Americans. Instead, Rajai sent them into a miserable jungle to work like common laborers, unloading cargo from trailers and cutting the brush growing on the landing strip. The buckets and crates contained explosives and the drums fuel for the plane-- but what did that matter? Rajai had recruited Kalaq and his unit as fighters-- not as labor. After travelling for two days and nights, from Syria, through Europe, then through Central American and South American airports, his men stepped from the

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trucks and went to work sweating in the tropical heat. And Rajai expected them to slave at the demeaning work without even the small comforts enjoyed by laborers.

So what if they demanded beer and cigarettes? So what if they smoked marijuana? If the drug kept his men laughing through this affront to their courage and devotion, let them smoke all night.

Tomorrow, Kalaq sent the Colombians for whatever his fedayeen desired. And for his vodka.

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Rajai changed frequencies. In the predawn silence, the electronic hiss of the radio seemed loud. Rajai put the confirmation message from Kalaq in his briefcase with the code book. The next communication came in a few minutes. He went to the glass doors and looked out at the courtyard.

Snow swirled through the lights. Rajai listened to the hiss of the radio as he watched the snow falling through the bare trees of the villa. On the far side of the property, where the wealthy Sunnis who owned the villa had quartered their servants, a shadow moved. He saw the outline of a man with a Kalashnikov-- one of his Revolutionary Guards pacing to warm himself in the last freezing hours of the night.

The wait started now. The coded report from Kalaq confirmed the movement of the explosives, the supplies, and the squads of Latins and Palestinians. Tomorrow the squads worked to assemble the explosives for the arrival of the aircraft. Then, the next day, as the sun rose in Colombia on the twenty-fifth of January, the plane landed at the airstrip. In less than fifty hours, he learned of success or failure in the attack on the American target that the committee of mullahs and Revolutionary Guard commanders in Tehran would not yet reveal to him. Rajai knew he would not learn of the target until the victory.

And until the victory, or the failure, he remained in Baalbek. The committee in

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Tehran wanted the responsibility for the attack to fall on the radical gangs of the Beeka.

Code interrupted his thoughts. He heard the dot and dash code identifying the Revolutionary Guard unit dispatched to Colombia. Returning to the radio, he keyed the response, then waited as the transmission flashed to the opposite side of the earth. Another sequence of electronic signals came. Rajai noted the letters and numbers. The radioman off the coast of Colombia then repeated the sequence. Taking the second code book from his briefcase, Rajai flipped through the pages and found the lines.

Leaving ... ship .. trucks ... ready ... Insallah.

Rajai tapped out the confirmation code. The radio went silent. Returning to the windows, Rajai looked out at the snow and thought of Kalaq, the loud and erratic leader of gunmen who talked of conquering Israel and driving America from the Middle East, who bragged of every petty murder of Lebanese or Jews.

Though Kalaq had waited all his life for glory, the braggart would never enjoy the fame of this attack. When the plane carried the explosives away, before Kalaq even learned what military base or embassy the plane destroyed, the role of the Palestinian ended-- without recognition, without glory. A joke, Rajai thought, a joke.

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Warm rain in his eyes, Sayed stood at the door to the cabin, listening to the exchange of radio codes with their director in Lebanon. The wind carried an intermittent rain off the Carribbean. Despite the wind and night, the tropical rain felt hot. He held a plastic sheet over his pack and rifle, rain running over his face and arms, sweat running over his body. On the deck forward of the freighter's superstructure, he heard the voices of the other men in his unit. He thought of the Iraqi Front and prayed silently, Let us succeed, let me prove myself to the mullahs, let

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me win freedom from the Front, I want no other reward. The radio buzzed with another sequence. The technician called out to him, "Sayed! The message is received."

"Then we go."

The technician turned off the power and disconnected the antenna wires. He slipped the portable transmitter into the padded, waterproof pack. Sayed lifted the heavy radio pack, holding it while the operator put his arms through the straps.

Sayed rushed down to the deck. Clutching plastic tarps over their shoulders, the Revolutionary Guards crowded the railing of the freighter. They watched the cargo launch rising and falling on the surface chop.

"Into the boat." He led the young men down the rusting steel stairs. The launch rolled with the wind chop. Judging the rise and fall of the deck, Sayed jumped, then went to the wheelhouse. The other Iranians jumped, their rifles and packs clattering. Speaking California Spanish, Sayed asked the boatman:

Any patrol boats?

The Colombian answered in fast, slurred exclamations. Sayed told him to repeat his answer very slowly.

No patrols. My men saw no patrols.

Sayed saw the last man step off the stairs. He signaled the boatman.

The deck vibrated with the knocking of the motor. Windchop bumped the launch against the steel of the freighter, then the launch moved away, water churning. Sayed watched the freighter disappear into the night as the launch pitched through the choppy water. Ahead, he searched the darkness for any sign of the coast.

Ten minutes later, the boatman spoke into a walkie-talkie. A voice answered, then lights flashed on and off-- headlights. Two tiny yellow lights remained to guide the launch to the shore. The boatman turned to Sayed and explained in very slow Spanish:

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We do this many times. Beach to ship, ship to beach. Very good business.

Much money. No problems.

In the rain, the coast of Santa Marta remained only an irregular smear of darkness. The boatman steered for the yellow lights. A horn sounded ahead. The boatman switched on his running lights and Sayed saw a pier. At the bottom of a ramp, a floating dock rose and fell on the ocean swells. The launch thudded into the tires ringing the dock.

Sayed glanced to the luminous dial of his watch. Six hours to dawn-- enough time to transit the coast road and start into the mountains.

Two men came down the ramp from the pier. The boatman threw ropes to the men and they lashed the launch to the dock. Sayed stepped over the railing onto the slick planks of the dock, then ran up the ramp. He saw the trucks at the other end of the pier. Twisting the sheet of plastic to cover his rifle, he pushed down the fire-selector and slowly pulled back the cocking handle to chamber the first cartridge.

Sayed wanted nothing to go wrong, not here on the beach, not on the highway, not in the mountains. His commander in Khorramshahr had recommended him for this action despite the doubts of the mullahs from Tehran. Arguing that Sayed had returned by his own decision from the United States, then proved his loyalty and courage on the Iraqi Front, his commander had told the mullahs to ignore the few years of decadence in California. If the mullah needed a loyal soldier who could speak English and Spanish, take Sayed.

And the mullahs did take Sayed away from the blood-drenched trenches of the Front to the calm of a long ocean cruise to Colombia. And the execution of the Palestinians? It would be nothing. He had killed in California, executing the old man who recognized him during a liquor store robbery-- but no one in Iran knew of that murder. His commander knew only of his killings on the Front. Sayed killed as told, without question-- Iraqi wounded, deserters from the Guard, civilians suspected of

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spying, whoever. The Palestinians and their Colombian allies had betrayed Iran, therefore they died-- Sayed did not question how they had betrayed Iran or why or when.

This cruise to Colombia took him away from the Front. If he pleased his commander and the mullahs, perhaps he would not return to that madness.

Sayed wanted no problems. Tomorrow or the next day, when the plane left the airfield, he killed the Palestinians and the Latins. Then they returned to the freighter for the long cruise back to Iran-- another month.

In total, months away from the madness and horror of the Front. Though Sayed did not dare to ask, he prayed for a greater reward.

Never to return to the Front. Insallah.