

A swirling mist enveloped the helicopter. The skids scraped stone and Niles leapt out. The other Marines followed. In the translucent gray mist, Niles scrambled over the slabs of rock. He slid into a tangle of brush, slipped free, then dodged through the shadowy forms of trees. He threw himself flat on the matted forest debris. Above him, the D E A helicopter lifted away in an explosion of noise. The others formed a security star behind Niles, their boots touching, their eyes and their rifles covering the forest and the drifting mist around them.

The rotor-noise faded into the distance. Niles waited, watching the forest, his ears still ringing. In the pre-dawn light, he saw only the gray lines of tree trunks and the black spots of foliage. Silence returned to the ridge. He heard drops of water splattering through the ferns as mist condensed on leaves. Birds dove from branch to branch, the air-rush across their wings loud. The Marines watched the forest.

As the minutes passed, the overcast sky paled with the unseen dawn. Bird called out in territorial shrieks and whistles. The Marines remained silent and motionless, waiting, watching, listening. Finally Niles rose on one elbow and saw that Sergeant Alvarez lay to his right. He kicked his boot.

The sergeant flicked the radio key-set to transmit a signal back to the D E A airfield at San Juan Del Cesar. A click-code reply from the D E A radio confirmed the radio link.

Without a word, Niles moved, taking point. He led the line of men down the ridgeline, pushing through the ferns and hanging vines with his left hand, holding his short Colt Commando in his right hand, a round in the chamber, his thumb on the

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safety, as he listened for sounds ahead. But he heard only the birds and the falling drops of condensation from the branches high above them.

His eyes scanned for signs of human passing. But he saw nothing-- no trails, no trash, no tool scars on the trees. As more light filtered through the trees, he moved faster. The deep matting of rotting leaves silenced the footsteps of the Marines. Behind him, Niles heard the quiet sound of leaves on leaves as Vatssek used a fallen branch to sweep away the marks left by their boots. Satellite-generated maps and high-altitude photos showed a low mountain with a long snaking ridgeline. From the rocky crest where the five Marines had left the helicopter, the forested ridge curved south for three kilometers before twisting to the west and descending into a valley several kilometers wide. A river cut through the dense forest covering the valley. On the opposite side of the valley, the steep hillsides rose to the crest of a high mountain ridge dominating the area. Ten more kilometers of forested hills separated the peak from the airstrip used by the Iranians and Palestinians.

Niles wanted to cover all the distance to the airstrip before dark. He maintained a quick pace. But with daylight, the humidity and temperature in the windless forest increased. Sweat poured down his body, soaking his fatigues, making the black plastic of his Colt rifle slick.

Coming to the western hook of the ridge, they followed the slope down into the valley, gravity speeding their pace. The forest changed to triple canopy. Thirty meter high trees and tagua palms shadowed a second level of tree tops. Only spots of daylight broke through the two levels of trees and palms to fall on the ferns, wide leafed plants, and spiny shrubs growing on the ground. Liana vines snaked over the earth and covered the twisted trunks of the trees. In the semi-darkness, the motionless air stank of rot. Insects buzzed around the Marines. Niles set a compass bearing and maintained the pace.

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Three hours after the helicopter insertion, Niles felt water oozing into his boots. They had reached the center of the valley. Continuing, he looked for the river. The wet soil had rotted the roots of trees, causing trees to fall. Tangles of branches and arm-thick vines forced Niles to weave through areas of black mud and stagnant water. He felt insect bites on his hands and neck. Behind him, he heard one of the men slap at his fatigues. Niles pushed aside a branch-- and slime-glistening leeches clung to his sleeve and his green-patterned hand.

Niles moved faster, cutting straight through the stinking pools, mud sucking at his boots with every step. Fallen trees blocked his compass bearing. Checking for snakes, he went over the rotting logs, sometimes sinking as deep as his knees in the water and putrid muck. Then, through the trees, he saw daylight reflecting from water. He rushed the last hundred meters.

The river looked like a wide, slow-flowing swamp meandering through the forest. Niles saw no banks or current. But fifty meters away, he saw brilliant white, long-legged birds picking through the shallows of the opposite side.

Hand-signalling the other Marines forward, he took a ten-meter coil of o. d. green nylon rope from his pack. Every man carried an identical coil. Niles whipped a bow-line around his waist, then knotted his rope to Stark's. The three other men watched the darkness of the stagnant mud flats behind them. Stark passed an end back to Alvarez. Niles watched Javenbach. The young man seemed nervous but not fatigued, tying two quick knots, then passing the coils to Vatsek.

Birds flapped away as Niles entered the river. The current became stronger with every step. The water cleared and he saw small fish streaking past his legs. As the water level passed his knees, he watched for a drop off. He stepped carefully through rocks, then he walked in shallows again-- to a sand bar, he thought. But a few steps farther, his boots sank into the rot and black mud of the shore.

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Niles turned and signalled the four other men. They crossed as he coiled and unknotted the sections of rope. Grinning, he whispered, "Sorry" as he passed back their ropes.

Vatsek answered, "Colombian white water adventure."

Continuing, Niles struggled through a few hundred meters of swamp, then felt dry earth under his boots. He walked uphill, leaving the humid darkness of the valley floor behind as the gentle rise became a hillside. Niles checked the compass-bearing against the position of the river and his memory of the topographic map. He cut to the south-west.

The new bearing took them over the lower slopes of the mountain, allowing them to angle across the mountainside. After the oppressive heat and stinking semi-darkness of the valley, the shadowy hillsides felt cool. Niles set a quick pace through the forest, allowing noise in a trade-off for speed. At the end of the line of men, Vatsek worked fast, trying to obscure their tracks, pausing to sweep away a boot mark or rearrange leaves, then rushing to catch up. Niles knew they left some marks-- their hurry and the crumbling earth of the mountainside made bootprints inevitable. But the total absence of other people in the area made the sounds and the scattered tracks an acceptable risk.

Niles looked back and saw all the men soaked in sweat. Yet they moved quickly and quietly, their eyes always scanning, their rifles gripped in their hands. They showed no fatigue. He maintained the pace, ignoring his own fatigue. After flying from cold and snow of Lebanon to the tropical heat of the Colombian rainforest, then the sudden demand of the march on his limited physical conditioning, his endurance surprised him. He thought Alvarez and Vatsek-- despite their youth-- might be also suffering after their months of inactivity in the seige bunkers of Beirut, but he knew they would not complain or even admit it, not while an 'old man'-- a twenty-two-year

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veteran-- walked point. Stark had his youth and years of soccer competition. Javanbach had the recent conditioning of Parris Island. Before fatigue cut his stride, Niles wanted to make the ridge.

They climbed higher, passing the altitude of the first mountain. The forest changed, the trees thinning. Sunlight broke through the living canopy. Vines and grasses covered the ground. The growth concealed their tracks but made footing more difficult. The ferns grew larger, sometimes blocking their compass bearing with walls of spiked fronds-- thrashing through the ferns meant hundreds of cuts. To gain altitude as he avoided the obstructions, Niles scrambled straight up the steep mountainside, slinging his Colt over his shoulder and clawing at the vines with his hands.

When he felt a wind cooling the sweat on his face, he signalled the others to wait and clawed his way to the ridgeline. He stopped short, unslinging his rifle and advancing carefully, slowly and silently to the top, then went flat and listened. He heard birds and the trees creaking with the shifting of the wind. Behind him, one of the Marines kicked loose a rock. He listened to the natural sounds for minutes, enjoying the rest, then stood and walked through the trees, scanning the ground for any signs of others.

He saw nothing. Hand-signing Stark, Niles continued to the downslope. There, through a gap in the trees, he saw the expanse of forest and mountains ahead.

The forest continued into the distance, unbroken, undulating with hills and valleys, shadowed by masses of drifting clouds. A crease suggested the line of a wide river appearing in the satellite photos, but Niles saw none of the smaller rivers marked on the map. On the horizon, he saw the vast green plain of the Cesar Valley. Streaks of rising smoke marked towns along the highway running north-east to the Venezuelan border.

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He did not see the airstrip or the dirt road. Squinting into the glare, he looked for a clearing or a line marking the path of the narrow dirt road leading to the airstrip. His visual search spotted nothing.

Looking behind him, he saw the others cross the ridge. They formed a loose circle and watched the area, holding their rifles with one hand, reapplying camouflage paint with the other. Stark pointed to the west and whispered:

"Airfield?"

Niles shook his head, no. He pantomimed binoculars.

Stark shrugged off his pack and found his binocular case in two seconds. He offered the binoculars to Niles. Niles motioned for the lieutenant to look. Checking his compass, then setting the focus of the binoculars, Stark searched a specific sector with the optics. He found the airstrip. Pointing, he passed the binoculars to Niles.

The high-powered optics revealed a broken line of gray. From his position on the mountain, Niles could not see the long rectangle of the airstrip. But the slash in the forest had exposed the gray trunks of trees along the far side of the airstrip. Niles took an exact compass bearing, then unfolded his plastic laminated map. With his fingernail, he plotted a route intersecting the access road. He hand-signed the bearing for the road, then led the squad down the mountainside.

Niles raced the sun. Only four hours thirty minutes remained until night. Striding downhill, he used gravity to accelerate the pace, pushing himself to cover the distance. He did not stop for breaks. He guessed at his body's consumption of water and gulped from his canteens without stopping. The younger men followed his example.

As the ground leveled, he maintained his stride through the shadowed forest, the matting of rotting leaves silencing his boots. The small ferns and leafy plants hid his bootmarks. He made another kilometer before the sight of a shack stopped him.

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Dropping to a crouch, he waved the others back.

Trees arched over the shack. Years of leaves lay on the sheet metal roof, providing soil for weeds. Vines covered the clearing and Niles saw no foot trails. Vines grew over the rusting fenders of a derelict truck. Niles heard only birds and insects.

He saw no sign of occupation and moved ahead. Mounds of old trash-- cans scorched by fire, broken bottles, slabs of melted plastic-- forced him to pick his steps slowly. He walked behind the shack. The ruts of a road wove through the trees. Weeds and vines indicated no traffic for years. He signalled for Stark to bring the line forward.

Past the road, Niles saw overgrown rows of coffee bushes. Trees remained, but had been thinned-- coffee requires shade from the tropical sun. The remaining trees also blocked airborne observation of the marijuana scattered among the coffee bushes. The tall, leafy plants had gone to seed and died, unharvested. The line of Marines hurried through the rows, seeds showering them every time they pushed branches aside.

But apparently the few plants in the coffee rows had grown spontaneously. A hundred meters past the road, they came to the marijuana fields. Rows of thousands of plants, neglected for years, had become an impenetrable tangle of branches and leaves and drying seed-clusters. Niles motioned the Marines to detour. He did not want to chance the fields-- perhaps the gang had protected the their crop with booby-traps, perhaps the Colombian Army had closed the plantation with land mines. Staying in the coffee rows, they worked their way around the fields, then resumed the south-west march.

Throughout the next kilometers, marijuana appeared frequently. Roads no wider than a mini-truck or a motorcycle led to plots and fields. Plants grew in clusters

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or rows, screened from the air by overhanging trees. All the crops-- and the shacks, water tanks, and wells-- had been abandoned. Niles paused at the overgrown ruts, looking for tire marks or foot prints. He found no marks of recent traffic. Between the quick stops, he broke into a jog, trying to make up lost time.

The heat increased in the last hours of the day. Drinking the last of his third one-liter canteen to swallow a salt tablet, Niles passed a whispered question along the line: "How much water left?"

Weight had limited the water they carried to four liters each. Stark returned the answers, signalling Niles with his index finger, One. The others, like Niles, needed to refill their canteens. He checked his watch. Only an hour and forty minutes until sunset. Darkness would come sooner. He no longer had the energy to run, but he somehow had the reserve strength to keep striding to the south-west.

Another road stopped him. Swaying with exhaustion, he looked down at the clear-cut tire tracks in the earth. He walked along the road, studying the tracks. A flat toad lay in the road, swarmed by ants and flies. Pushing aside a branch, Niles looked at the broken stems-- the wilted leaves remained soft to his touch, not yet dried by the sun. He stepped back into concealment. The tires had different treads-- two vehicles had passed. The tire marks and the leaves that had fallen on the road indicated the vehicles had not returned. Looking up to the overhanging trees, he saw broken branches higher than his reach. That suggested high-backed cargo trucks to Niles.

Niles pointed to Vatsek and motioned the sergeant forward. Vatsek had more experience with vehicles. Niles pointed to the tracks in the road and asked: "What went past here?"

Passing his M16/M203 over-and-under assault rifle and grenade launcher to the captain, Vatsek went flat on the road. He peered at the tracks. "One truck with bald tires. The other's got decent tires but it's got a front-end problem. A shimmy in the

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steering linkage. Maybe just lately because the front tires aren't scalloped out yet."

"How much weight are they carrying?"

"Not a full load. Can't tell. I'd have to walk for a ways, see if they bottomed out."

"No time." He returned Vatssek's rifle/grenade launcher. "Think the Colombian armed forces would have good tires on their trucks?"

"Maybe. But they'd have trucks of the same make. I think, I don't know. You think the Colombian Army's out here?"

"I don't know. But the trucks mean someone is."

"Dopers, Captain. We're in Strawberry Fields out here."

"I don't know."

"How much farther?"

"Two clicks, as the crow flies. But we ain't crows."

Niles dashed across the road. He continued as quickly as he dared through the forest and marijuana fields. This close to the airstrip, he risked encountering sentries or booby traps. Every flutter of a bird's wings, every click from an insect made him pause. He avoided open areas and patches of ferns, but scanned those areas for the boot prints of the Palestinians. He saw no tracks until he reached the road leading to the airstrip.

Tire marks and boot prints marked the rutted dirt road. As on the other road, passing vehicles had snapped off the branches of overhanging trees-- Niles knew the shipping container of dynamite had done that. Other tires indicated mini-trucks. The boot prints and a cigarette butt meant a patrol. Niles passed a one word warning back:

"Enemy."

He watched the road for a minute, looking in both directions, studying the trees

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and brush where the road curved. He searched the shadows for sentries. No one watched this section. Finally, he took the five steps to cross the road. He turned and covered the other men, then cut toward the airstrip.

Moving a step at a time, he paralleled the road, his eyes never stopping as he scanned the pale, twisting trunks of the trees for movement. Shafts of sunlight angled through the trees, creating areas of light and semi-darkness. Birds called out around him. The bird noises reassured him-- birds fly or go silent when outsiders enter their territory. He continued walking slowly and silently-- watching and listening for the Palestinians.

Acrid marijuana smoke stopped him. Going flat behind a tree, he heard a man cough. He waited. Movement took his attention, then a light flared, the flame bright in a shadowed area. A man sat with his back to a tree, smoking a cigarette the size of cigar. He wore camouflage fatigues. A G-3 automatic rifle-- the standard issue of the Colombian Army-- leaned against the tree. Niles watched him drink from a can, then throw the can away. The man walked back to the road, puffing on the huge cigarette.

Continuing, Niles heard voices speaking Spanish. Metal screeched. Other voices shouted out in Arabic. As he moved toward the airstrip, slashes of daylight appeared through the trees. He saw a rectangular form. Men argued in Spanish and Arabic, shouting at one another without comprehension about drunkenness and damage to a truck. A voice shouted out in Arabic for quiet. Niles signalled for Stark to wait, then shimmied forward on his elbows, finding concealment behind a hundreds of empty shipping cans containing a residue of gray clay-- drilling mud, Niles realized.

He rose to a crouch and watched sunburned, sweating men breaking open wooden crates. They took out plastic-wrapped packages and threw the crates aside. A man called out instructions in Arabic-- and Niles recognized the curly hair, the mustache, and sharp features from the photos taken by Angelique Chardon.

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Returning to the line of Marines, Niles whispered one word: "Kalaq."

Looking into the container transport, Iziz Kalaq saw only the bare steel interior. His fedayeen had stacked the tons of dynamite-- still bundled in hundreds of black plastic bags-- in a long pile alongside the container, ready to load on the plane. He crossed the rutted field to the second container. Inside, a few crates remained. But two of his men worked continuously-- despite the heat and flies, levering off the wooden slats of the crates. Another man took the heavy packages of American C-4 plastic explosive to a long rectangular stack. The stack looked like a wall made of wide, flat bricks.

"All will be done before night," one of the sweating men told him.

Kalaq looked to the west. The sun stood on the high mountain peaks. Starting back to his pick-up truck, he called out: "Hurry. We cannot use lights."

Linda Gomez and the Colombians beat at the fender of the Japanese pick-up truck, trying to bend the sheet metal away from the tire. They talked Spanish and gestured at his driver, Raman, a faithful middle-aged fighter from Gaza. Grinning with alcohol and marijuana, Raman sat in the grass, watching the Colombians struggle to repair their truck. They looked up as Kalaq approached, their voices going low as they spat out Spanish. From their expressions, he knew they cursed him. Let them. Tomorrow he left this place.

"Your driver is drunk!" Gomez told him. "If he had driven into the dynamite, there could have been an explosion!"

"Girl, you know nothing. The truck would do nothing to the dynamite but break it. Fire a bullet into the dynamite. There is no danger." He took the battered G-3 rifle from the back of the pick-up and thumbed off the safety. "You want to see? Then will

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you believe me?"

"No! No! You are a madman! Are you on drugs?"

"No, girl. I am not a madman. I am the commander of this action. Remember that. And keep these bourgeois teenagers away from my fighters. You cannot expect us to remain forever tolerant of their insults. There will be a penalty. Raman!"

"Yes!" Rising to his feet, Raman staggered to him.

"Is there another truck?"

"Another truck?" Raman looked in all directions. "A truck?"

"Now we inspect the work on the landing strip." Kalaq pointed to the men dragging the last of the saplings and high weeds from the landing strip.

"A truck? There is a truck!" Raman staggered toward the semi-truck and trailer that had carried drums of aviation fuel to the mountain airfield.

Jerking him back by his shirt, Kalaq pushed him in the opposite direction. "Not one of those trucks. You are drunk, my friend. We will walk." Laughing at his driver's antics, Kalaq slung the G-3 rifle over his shoulder.

Then the Colombians laughed. Turning, he saw Gomez speaking with the teenagers, undoubtedly translating his misunderstanding with Raman. Anger flashed through him. To ridicule Palestinian comrades for the amusement of foreigners, to ridicule her commander Iziz Kalaq behind his back-- if she could sense his rage, she would not joke with the teenagers. Then he thought of the photos of the Frenchwoman, screaming, twisting and struggling to escape the searing pain, escape impossible-- and he laughed. Linda Gomez ridiculed him today, but tomorrow she returned to Lebanon. Now he must give the landing strip a final inspection.

The incoming transport plane required the removal of all the small trees and brush growing on the landing strip and a meter-by-meter inspection of the ground. For secrecy, the grass and weeds covering the strip remained. Kalaq and his fedayeen

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risked a confrontation with the Colombian Army if a patrol plane spotted the area cleared or burned off. Leaving the grass growing would not present a problem to the transport.

Kalaq wove through the knee-high growth. Under his boots, the earth felt flat and hard. The unknown smugglers who had prepared this field had done their work well, finding the plateau, cutting the narrow strip out of the jungle, then somehow packing the earth of the cleared field hard. Graded very slightly to the south, rainwater drained away without eroding the surface. Even after years of neglect and seasonal storms, the strip remained smooth under the even growth of the weeds.

Fedayeen with axes had cut the saplings and bushes off at the ground. Nothing remained to puncture the tires of the transport. Kalaq searched for stumps but found only scuffed earth and roots. And beer cans. The Colombians had returned early with a pick-up truck loaded with cases of beer. Judging by the number of empty cans, every man drank a case. But what did it matter? The men had labored throughout a long, miserable day of tropical heat and stinging insects. Let the men enjoy the small comfort of the alcohol-- there would be no combat here, only degrading and demoralizing labor. Their comfort and spirit came first.

As the day faded, Kalaq reached the far end of the airstrip. His men sprawled in the grass, silent with exhaustion. But they had finished. He went to the men and told them:

"Thank you for your patience today. You came to fight, yet circumstances forced you to work like peasants. I promise you this is the end of the indignity. I give you this promise, a promise to bring you joy. This is your last day and night here in this jungle. Tomorrow, we are gone."

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In the last minutes of light, Niles snaked through ferns and vines. He inched toward the shack with the long, improvised antenna strung through the branches of overhanging trees. Alvarez followed two body lengths behind Niles. They carried only electronics and pistols. Niles had no intention of using any weapons tonight. Until the plane arrived at the airstrip, he wanted information only-- recordings of names, dialects, and radio transmissions.

The Palestinians had not cleared a perimeter or even beaten down the grass. Brush, ferns, vines, and dense clusters of banana trees grew in tangled masses everywhere-- against the slat board shacks, near the open shelter strung with hammocks, to the edge of the grassy airstrip.

Niles expected booby traps or trip-flares. Flat on his belly, he crawled forward in stops and starts, searching the semi-darkness with his eyes, looking for wire or monofilament trigger-lines. Minute by minute, he lost light. Finally he moved through darkness. Ten meters ahead, he saw Palestinians walking by the yellow beams of flashlights. He heard men cursing the heat and insects. Others talked inside the shack with the radio. But Niles could not understand their conversation at this distance.

Cutting a fern frond with his thumbnail, he stripped the leaflets from the center stem. He continued forward through the seedlings and brush, waving the stem like an insect's antenna to feel for triplines. Turning over on his back, he passed the stem above him, checking for lines set high. Every time he advanced, Alvarez advanced. Alvarez carried the cassette recorders and the awkward tube of the microphone case.

Stark, Vatssek, and Javanbach remained a hundred meters back-- they did not understand Arabic. Stark monitored the band scanning unit. He wore headphones and listened for walkie-talkie transmissions by the Spanish-speaking Latinos working with the Palestinians.

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A double-click signal alerted Niles. He plugged the earphone into his left ear and heard Stark whisper:

"They are placing sentries."

Niles clicked his radio's transmit key to acknowledge the warning. He heard Alvarez acknowledge also.

Shouting in Arabic startled Niles. Feet kicked through the brush. His hand went to the knife in his boot and then he heard laughter. Against the light of battery lanterns, a form staggered. An arm jerked and Niles heard metal clink on wood-- a can. Four or five steps to his right, a Palestinian urinated. Trying to zip his pants, the man fell in his own urine. Men laughed. Niles watched the bright points of their cigarettes scratch the darkness as they laughed and gestured.

Flashlights approached. Voices spoke Spanish. The Palestinians went silent for a moment. In Arabic, one man talked of the playboy Colombian revolutionaries, with their hair styled in Paris and their politics from rock and roll music. In Spanish, the Colombians talked of the Arab clowns, risking the failure of the action with their drinking and marijuana smoking. The Colombians passed the Palenstinians and walked into the trees. Niles keyed his radio to alert the other Marines. Niles continued to the shack. He heard boots on the floorboards, the rotten wood creaking and sagging. A battery lantern lit the interior, the windows projecting rectangles of light onto the lush growth outside. Niles found trash littering the ground under the window. Listening to the voices inside, he carefully cleared a path through the trash, gently picking up bottles and cans and setting the trash aside.

The Palestinians talked of the heat and the Colombians. One voice called someone named Gomez a traitor to the Popular Front. Another man laughed as he told the story of crashing the pick-up truck into the trailers and how Gomez panicked, screaming that the dynamite would explode. Niles crouched an arm's distance from

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the shack, concealed in the brush, listening to the Palestinians. Though they spoke quickly and slurred their words, he understood enough to follow their ridicule of Gomez.

Then a voice said-- "Aziz, my commander. You tell me. Why were we dispatched to this boiling and infested place of suffering? Why did not they who conceived this action decide to load the aircraft in a city?"

"Because here, in this jungle, we are beyond the sight of the criminal C I A of the Americans. It is the need for secrecy. And I tell you this, I do not agree with every detail of this operation."

Niles recognized the voice from the tapes in the luggage of Angelique Chardon. After the Frenchwoman's murder, he had reviewed the cassettes of her interviews, listening again and again to the tape of Aziz Kalaq mouthing the propaganda of his terrorist gang. Now he heard the same voice and the same propaganda-- confirming his identification of Aziz Kalaq.

"Our Iranian comrades want to strike with the surprise and mystery of Allah. The Iranians want to deny the Americans the honor of revenge."

"The mystery is what we strike," another man commented. "When do we know?"

"Tomorrow, we know. And tomorrow we are gone. Gone to Lebanon to receive the welcome of heroes. We will know tomorrow at this time. We will know we have changed history."

"My commander," another man interrupted. "History is what is known. As you explained to us, what will do here will not be known."

"The Iranians fear the revenge of the Americans."

"Do we?"

"No! Have I not told you we have nothing to fear from the Americans? Do you think I only speak empty words, like the dog Arafat?"

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"No, my commander. I know you do not fear. You are my leader and the leader of all of us who are here. But is it not true we will remain anonymous?"

"I regret the secrecy. I rage against it. But is it not enough to know we are the men who struck out and defeated our enemies, that we are the men who changed history?"

In the light from the window, Niles saw Alvarez reach out to the rotting slat boards of the shack. The boards of the wall had rotted at the floorline. Light showed through cracks and spaces. Alvarez slowly pushed a black mini-microphone/transmitter through a crack. The mini-mike disturbed insects. Beetles ran over the green and black patterned camouflage paint of Alvarez' hand. With one finger, he pushed the device into the shack, then withdrew his hand and shook off the insects. Alvarez held up his other hand to a shaft of light.

Inside a minaturized receiver/recorder, a cassette turned. The spools paused as the voices inside paused. When the Palestinians spoke again, the voice-activated unit resumed recording.

Alvarez whispered the single word,
"Wired."

Kalaq waited for the time of the radio transmission. He sprawled across his cot, a can of hot beer in his right hand, one of the Koran-wrapped marijuana cigars in his left. The amber power light of the radio console lit the interior of the shack. Outside, he heard the voices of his men.

He took a long, deep drag of the intoxicating smoke and thought of silence. The Iranians demanded that Kalaq say nothing of this attack. Tomorrow, when the radios and televisions and newspapers of the world carried the story of his strike against the Americans to the nations of the world, Kalaq could not step forth to the

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cameras and journalists to accept the glory. He could not claim responsibility or even admit a role.

Silence denied Kalaq glory. Without the broadcast of the claim of responsibility, no one profited by the attack. The United States had many embassies-- destroy an embassy and they would only rebuild it. The profit came in the glory to the group responsible. If the attack remained a mystery, the Americans would threaten and investigate, but do nothing.

And if a leader took responsibility, the Americans would do nothing.

The year after Arafat ordered the execution of the American diplomats in Khartoum, the Americans allowed him to address the United Nations in New York.

And only weeks ago, after accusing President Hafiz al-Assad of Syria for participating in the bombing of the Marines-- Kalaq believed Assad provided the hexogene for the bomb-- the grinning dog President of America declared Assad to be a leader who worked for peace in Lebanon. The peace of a Syrian conquest. A Syrian peace for a Lebanon reunited with Syria.

Kalaq did not fear the Americans. The cowards. As he told his men, the Americans would do nothing-- even if a brave leader of the revolution declared his responsibility for the strike.

What would they do if Kalaq announced the victory tomorrow as his victory? Nothing. Perhaps they would send journalists and cameramen. To record his statements for the televisions of America, so that decadent and fearful audiences could stare at the image of the fighter who slaughtered their Marines and killed their diplomats.

Let the Iranians keep silent. Let them remain the unknown architects of mass assassination. Kalaq wanted no more roles in mysteries.

Tomorrow he took his place in the leadership of the Palestinian struggle. His

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people must forget the defeated Arafat, the impotent Habash, the ancient Abu Daoud, the dreaming Abu Iyad-- and follow Aziz Kalaq the Killer. The killer of Maronites, Israelis, and Palestinian traitors. Killer of the Marines in Beirut. Killer of American diplomats.

With this action, his silence ended. He announced to the world his role in the defeats inflicted on the enemies of his people. Forget silence. Tomorrow, when he returned to Lebanon, he declared himself the leader of this action. And also he made public his role in the slaughter of the Marines in Beirut. Why should Kalaq, the leader of the front-line fighters, remain silent?

He exhaled marijuana smoke at the orbiting mosquitos. With the glory of the strike against America, his name became another word for fear

"Kalaq! You clown!" Gomez shouted out as she rushed into the shack. "Your men are celebrating their victory already and you are taking drugs! Where is the discipline? The Colombian Army operates in this area. Agencies of the United States work with the army. We could be attacked at any moment and you and all your men are drunk. The Colombians cannot protect you. Control you men."

Thrashing through the hanging netting, Kalaq stood. "You forget that you speak to Aziz Kalaq, commander of this action. If my men want to drink their beer in this miserable place, I grant them that comfort."

"And tomorrow morning, will they work on the explosives and drink their beer? And smoke marijuana?"

"Of course not."

"Of course not because they will drink it all this night."

"If they drink it all, I will send for more."

"No! No more."

"You will do as I tell you. I am the commander."

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Gomez looked at her watch. "You are the commander? Kalaq, you are the leader of one squad of fedayeen. Drunken fedayeen."

"You question my authority?"

"We will question he who actually commands." She pointed to the radio.

"Rajai commands nothing. Rajai is only my clerk. He hides in Lebanon while we--"

"I will ask him. I believe he will instruct you to control your men-- no!"

He shot her in the face. She staggered back, blood spurting from the wound. Kalaq fired again and again into her chest. She fell backwards against the wall. Stepping over her, he aimed at the center of her short cut black hair and fired again, blood and brains exploding back from the bullet hole to spray his face.

Kalaq holstered his pistol. With the hot beer, he washed the gore from his hands and face. Men ran to the shack. Looking through the door, they stared at the corpse of the young woman.

"Drag that traitor out. Throw it in the jungle."

A Colombian teenager crouched down. Blood continued draining from the wounds to the woman's head and chest. He touched her throat to feel if her heart still beat. Turning, he stared at Kalaq. The teenager pushed through the Palestinians at the door. They heard him speak into his walkie-talkie.

"Did you hear?" Kalaq shouted at his men. "Drag that out of here!"

Two hundred meters away, Stark monitored the quick transmissions between the Latins. The Latins spoke very quickly in idiomatic Spanish but he understood that Kalaq had murdered Gomez. He understood the obscenities. The latins questioned one another in a confusion of voices and obscenities, one voice finally forcing the

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others to remain silent. Stark listened to the Latin speaking slowly. That voice made the decision for the group. Stark listened as the other Latins agreed.

The walkie-talkie frequency went quiet. Keying the hand-radio to alert Niles and Alvarez, Stark waited sixty seconds by his watch before telling them:

"The gang is breaking up."