

Blocking the light from the moon and stars, the dense interwoven canopy of branches created a night of depthless black. Ali Akbar Javanbach watched the darkness. He saw no movements or shapes other than the vague shifting forms generated by his own eyes as he stared. Only sounds broke the black-- leaves rattling through branches, the scratching and rustling of insects, and the movements of other Marines as they shifted in their sleep. From time to time, he heard animals pass, their small quick feet unmistakable.

Sometime after dawn -- the Marines had learned from a microphone -- the plane would come.

After two years of training, Javenbach finally faced the enemies of his new country-- Palestinian mercenaries sent here by the fanatics who had taken Iran from the Iranian people. The seizure of Iran had not satisfied the mullahs and their gangs of Revolutionary Guards. The fanatics wanted the world. Americans did not understand this. When they talked with Javanbach of Iran, they asked why the mullahs hated the United States, why young Iranians volunteered to die in suicidal attacks, why the people of Iran destroyed the dictatorship of the Shah only to surrender to the crueler, far more murderous regime of the Ayatollah. Americans did not understand the psychopathic hatred of the mullahs for any people or nation or faith offering escape from the prison of the Islamic Republic.

Americans talked of preachers in small towns terrorizing children with threats of hell. They called these loud-mouthed and intolerant men, 'fundamentalists'. But the traditions and laws of the United States limited the power of men who claimed to

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speak for God. Americans did not comprehend the culture that produced the mullah and how the word 'fundamentalist' could never describe the ignorance, the obsessions, the twisted faith of the mullahs.

Javanbach thought of the aged and senile mullah who had denounced his father for educating his daughters. Scuttling through the streets in his gray robes, the mullah quoted lines from the Koran memorized in his youth as a response to any question-- the marriage of a daughter, the payment of a debt, the books read by children. Javanbach remembered his father correcting the mullah's failing memory and interpretation. The mullah took revenge by telling ignorant and illiterate street boys-- who could not read the Koran-- to scream 'unbelievers' and throw stones at the Javanbach home. Javanbach saw the same response years later when the leaders of the revolutionary movements attempted to form a government after the exile of the Shah. The mullahs took power by denouncing as 'unbelievers' anyone who questioned their rule -- but after the revolution, the mullah's gangs did not shout and throw stones, they murdered.

And as the mullahs gained power, the dark ages returned to Iran. Americans believed they faced a nation of conflicting factions. In truth, Javanbach told them, they confronted a disease. Americans negotiated and waited, believing the factions of Iran would agree to rejoin the modern world. But a plague does not negotiate. If Javanbach had believed the revolution would mature to a government of laws and reason, he would have stayed, even fought for change. But he saw no hope for Iran between the insanity of the mullahs and the attacks of the Marxists.

Now he had the duty of fighting one gang of killers dispatched by the mad priests. He must not fail his new country. He knew that the others doubted his loyalty. Any slip in his discipline, any hesitation to act would confirm their suspicions. He could not fail. America deserved his courage and any sacrifice this duty required.

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Only three years before, his family came with nothing-- no money, no gold-- from an enemy nation. At a time when thousands of Iranians paraded across television screens cursing the United States as satan, Americans tutored the Javanbach family in English, taught them bus schedules, and arranged for college classes. Americans and their government expected the Javanbachs to work and improve themselves, but demanded nothing else -- no one demanded their abandon their religion, no one forced Christian or Jewish holidays on them, no one broke into their home to enforce American customs. Even if his mothers and sisters had wanted to wear the chaador, the symbol of enemy Iran, no policeman or Christian priest would have torn the veil away.

No American-- born and living all their life in liberty-- understood his debt to his new country. He had talked with immigrants from many nations -- Russian Jews, Vietnamese, Nicaraguans, and Ethiopians. The other immigrants understood. After the oppression and fear of dictators of whatever ideology or religion, the immigrants valued freedom more than life.

Javanbach only wanted an opportunity to prove himself equal to the gift of freedom.

He thought of this as he watched the darkness. The lives of all the other Marines depended on his vigilance and he never stopped in his search for movement or sound. Then his eyes fixed on a line. He saw the form of tree, a black form against an almost-black background. Looking at the forest canopy, he saw a few specks of reflected gray light, the first light of dawn.

The minutes passed, the forest emerging from the darkness. He saw the forms of the other men sleeping in the brush around him, their boots near his, their rifles in their hands and pointed outward.

He had trained for the honor of fighting for America for two years. Trying to

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think of when he decided to be a soldier, he remembered a night in his first months in the United States when he watched the inauguration of the new president on the color television of his uncle. And with shame, he remembered the simultaneous release of the diplomats and embassy personnel held prisoner in Iran. He had understood all the Farsi insults and taunts screamed at the cameras. In contrast, the inauguration seemed so calm and sane, stately, a symbol of a powerful nation that he prayed would accept him despite his place of birth. He watched the ceremony and social events in the capitol, marvelling at the polite transfer of power from one group to the opposing group. Soldiers in fine uniforms had stood at attention in the background, rifles in their hands -- but unlike in Tehran, they did not point their rifles at the people of the nation.

Since then, he had developed a fascination for television coverage of formal government events -- the speeches of the president, the foreign receptions, the State of the Union speeches every January. And at every event, behind the dignitaries at the center of the screen, he watched the ceremonial guards.

The ever-present honor guards had sparked a fantasy in his mind -- guarding the President of the United States. He imagined himself at attention in the background, his uniform perfect, his body and face rigid, his mind focusing on all the real and conceivable threats to the life of the President. From this fantasy came the idea of joining the armed forces. Perhaps the President personified the United States. When he later talked with recruiters, he never mentioned his dream of becoming a ceremonial guard-- he knew they would suspect him of plotting to assassinate the President. Instead, he volunteered for the Marine Corps. He proved himself in the basic skills, then volunteered for Recon. He wanted to prove himself a trustworthy and brave man, an American, worthy of the rights and liberty of an American, even if born in Iran.

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And often he thought of appearing in the ceremonies -- a naturalized citizen trusted to hold a rifle in the presence of the President of the United States of America. But that would come later.

He realized that he would miss tonight's State of the Union address by the president. Perhaps his uncle would videotape the presentation for him, three thousand kilometers away in the jungles of Colombia.

The faint whirring of the miniature recorders interrupted his thoughts. Javanbach looked to the band scanner unit. Alvarez had used black tape to reduce the power lamp to a speck -- only a tiny point of light glowed, indicating the circuits operated. The LED frequency read-out displayed numbers. As instructed, Javanbach shook Alvarez awake:

"Scanner."

In the graying light, he saw Alvarez touch the recorder linked to the scanner, then the receiver/recorder units monitoring the transmitters placed in the airstrip shacks. Alvarez put on the headphones. Then, muffled by the distance, he heard a man shouting in the airstrip shacks. Alvarez listened.

A shadow moved beside them. Captain Niles crouched beside them, hand-signing a question to the sergeant.

"This is it," Alvarez answered in a whisper. "Coded message coming in. El Goon Numero Uno calling for the radio operator. Captain, your Arabic is better--"

Niles put on the headphones. They waited in silence for minutes. Sunlight broke through the upper canopy, the branches glowing green. Vatsek and Stark sensed the movement of the other men and woke. Finally Niles whispered to the others:

"Radio man sending out code. Code coming back." A minute later, the captain smiled. "Radioman asked Kalaq for the code book. Kalaq carries the code book.

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We've got to get him and that code book. The radio man's reading out the message ... Aircraft ... come ... thirty minutes ... next transmission ... in zone of operation ... That's it. Alvarez, code it to San Juan. Gentlemen, we go to work."

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During the thirty minute wait, Kalaq readied himself for the responsibility of dispatching the aircraft at the Americans. He changed to clean fatigues. He combed his hair. Without a mirror, he could not see himself -- another detail the clerk Rajai had overlooked. Finally, while he waited for the radio operator to return, he smoked a marijuana cigarette and drank a beer.

The radio operator stepped through the door of the shack at the moment the dot and dash code came from the monitor. As the operator wrote down the transmission from the incoming aircraft, Kalaq paced the rotting floor of the shack. He feared the next hours. Any one of a hundred obstacles threatened the operation-- if the Colombian Army interfered with the loading and take off, if the pilots forgot their vows of martyrdom, if the Americans somehow intercepted the aircraft before the target, Aziz Kalaq lost his rightful position in the leadership of the Arabic Revolution.

Flipping through the pages of the phrase book, the radio operator decoded the transmission: "The aircraft ... comes ... the zone of operation ... five minutes."

"Our long wait ends. Now comes the time of glory." Kalaq emptied another can of beer down his throat. Taking a sack of smoke grenades and the heavy G-3 rifle, he left the shack. The rising sun shot lines through the ground mist. Across the hundred meters of weeds, he saw men still sleeping in their hammocks. He aimed his rifle at the treetops and fired three times, the booming of the heavy caliber rifle shattering the silence.

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Men staggered from the shelter with rifles. Others swung out of their hammocks. Kalaq called out. "The plane comes now! Assemble! A few hours of work and we return to Lebanon!"

Kalaq thrashed through the grass and brush of an overgrown road to the airstrip. Looking to the east end of the airstrip, he saw no one at the parked trucks. The Colombians had the responsibility of guarding the road and the airstrip. But he had not seen a Colombian since he executed Gomez. Perhaps the reality of an execution shocked them and they had fled to the safety of their discos and revolutionary cafes. Their desertion meant nothing-- he and his fedayeen did not need security for their last few hours in the jungle.

Walking into the open ground of the long airstrip, he looked at the eastern horizon. No plane approached. He continued to the center of the airstrip and threw a smoke grenade. Red smoke billowed from the grass, clouding into the still air. He listened for the plane but heard only the hissing of the smoke grenade and the distant voices of his men. He waited a few minutes before throwing the next grenade.

Propeller roar came from the north-east. He ran to the edge of the cleared strip and watched the sky. The noise rose to a thunder and an old four-engine airliner appeared above the trees, one wing tip tilted to the ground as the plane banked in a circle around the airstrip. Kalaq saw the forms of men through the cockpit windshield. Around him, his fedayeen ran through the high grass, waving their arms at the plane. The old airliner disappeared to the west. Kalaq waited for minutes-- had the pilot lost his courage? Then he heard the noise of the engines returning.

Seeming to clip the treetops at the west end of the airstrip, the airliner came down for the landing. The tires cut into the grass, the propellers throwing clouds of debris, the plane shuddering. The Palestinians watched the plane roar past them, the wings vibrating and flashing with the sun. At the far end of the landing strip, the

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plane slowed to a stop. Slowly, ponderously, the plane pivoted, the tail section almost touching the parked trucks and trailers. The engines died.

The silence lasted only seconds. Another plane landed. The twin engined commuter plane bounced over the grass, the propellers dissipating the last of the red smoke as the small plane whipped through a turn and taxied to the west end of the field. Two men left the plane. The pilot remained at the controls.

"Muhammed! Salah!" Kalaq pointed to the commuter plane several hundred meters away. "Take your rifles. Go ask their identity. I will be with the others, loading the dynamite."

Doors opened on the airliner, a passenger door behind the cockpit and a cargo door near the tail. Men in the plane called out to the fedayeen, shouting for them to make a loading ramp.

Kalaq walked to the east end of the airstrip. He did not hurry -- as a leader, he must maintain the appearance of command. He watched the confusion, crewmen shouting directions to his men, his men searching for the means to improvise a solution.

Considering the position of the cargo door to the piles of dynamite and plastic explosive, Kalaq saw the problem. The pilot had not correctly positioned the plane. He went to the nose of the plane and shouted up at the white-haired pilot:

"You! Pilot! Move this aircraft! Did you not see the material you are to load? Why did you turn the loading door to the wrong side?"

The pilot did not respond. At the back, Kalaq saw one of his men moving a truck and trailer. The man backed the trailer under the fuselage. Other men stacked crates against the trailer to form steps. Despite the confusion, the crewmen and his fedayeen managed to improvise a ramp to the cargo door.

"Kalaq!" A voice called out. "Is it you? Here?"

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He turned and saw a man he knew only by the name Ghassan. A Palestinian of always-changing allegiances, Ghassan had trained for Black September in 1971. But the leadership had not assigned him to the justice units executing Arab enemies or to the teams striking against the Zionists in Europe. They passed over him again when they choose the team to strike against the Zionists at the Munich Olympics. Denied a role in that victory, Ghassan left Black September for the more radical Palestinian groups striking at Israel from the camps in Lebanon. He worked with the Syrians and the Iraqis on special projects -- bombs, rockets, and remote -controlled detonators. After the evacuation of Beirut by the main-force P L O, Ghassan appeared in the Bekaa with the Iranian Fahkr Rajai, working on the design of the bombs to destroy the American and French barracks.

"We work together again." Kalaq embraced his comrade. "What is your assignment this time?"

"The gift," Ghassan smiled, pointing at the airliner. Unlike Kalaq, Ghassan looked like a soldier. He cut his hair very close. In Lebanon, he wore Syrian Army fatigues. Here, he wore slacks and a Hawaiian sportshirt.

Muhammed and Salah, the fedayeen Kalaq had told to question the men from the commuter plane, called out to him. Muhammed pointed to Ghassan, "He is one of us."

"But the other will not speak," Salah told him.

"I will question him. Help with the loading. Who is he who came with you?" Kalaq asked Ghassan, looking at the balding, middle-aged man who approached.

"That is Jean-Paul," Ghassan laughed. "Who says he is French. But is not."

Above them in the airliner, the old white-haired pilot stood in the passenger door and called out in Farsi to the man called Jean-Paul. Kalaq studied the Jean-Paul's features.

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"He is Iranian. Is he not?"

"He will not say. He tells nothing to this technician. He says only, secrecy, secrecy. But I know he is not Arabic."

Jean-Paul and the old pilot argued in Farsi. Another crewman stepped into the doorway. The three men argued in shouts.

"Iranians. This is my last operation with them. Soon I direct my own actions."

"Kalaq, you are one of the fighters. And in the future, we fight together. But now, I must work for th Ayatollah and prepare the gift to the Americans."

"I will introduce you to the comrades. I am directing their work out here. But in the aircraft, they must know to take instructions from you."

"No, my friend. Secrecy. They are not to know my name or that I am wiring the charges. The comrades in the aircraft will assist me and relay my instructions. I am sorry to impose the difficulty, but I must do as the Frenchman tells me."

"The Iranian."

Ghassan laughed, "The man with the money."

Walking up the ramps of boxes, Ghassan stepped through the cargo door. Fedayeen and crewmen stood on the flat trailer, the groups of men talking and gesturing, pointing to the piles of explosive. Kalaq did not interfere in the arguments. Calm, he waited for his friend Ghassan to take charge of the aircraft crewmen. Then Kalaq would direct the labor of his fedayeen. Watching the men, he saw the old white-haired pilot slowly, awkwardly stepping down the ramp of boxes. A voice shouted in bad Arabic: "You! You who are doing nothing!"

Kalaq turned and saw that Jean-Paul shouted at him. Ignoring the Iranian, he started toward the other men. But the Iranian ran to him, shouting and shaking his fist:

"You! Stop! Do as I tell you. I need you to help the pilot."

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"I am Aziz Kalaq, commander of the fedayeen. Who are you?"

"That does not matter. That man, that pilot --" Jean-Paul pointed to the white-haired pilot. "Assign men to guard him. And men to work. The pilot says there is a ditch in the field that must be repaired before he can take off."

"We inspected the field. There are no ditches."

"He says there is. He must inspect the field himself."

"How can he inspect it? He cannot walk."

Jean-Paul spoke quickly to the old pilot. To answer, the pilot walked away, slow but determined. "And he must be guarded. He is to be martyred in the action and he cannot be allowed to escape."

"An unwilling martyr. I will guard him myself. Allow me to start the men to work. I will return immediately."

On the ramps, a group of fedayeen formed a line. One man took a black-plastic bundle of dynamite from the pile and passed it to the next. The dynamite sped through their hands to the crewmen in the door. Then came the next bundle and the next. A crewman threw empty plastic bags out of the airliner. Kalaq walked through the sweating men, encouraging the men -- but they did not stop to listen. Another group of fedayeen rolled a barrel of fuel across the grass. A crewman walked onto the wing with hoses and a hand-pump with which to top-off the plane's tanks. Kalaq returned to the Iranian. A hundred meters away, the pilot walked through the grass, peering down at the flat, hard-packed earth.

"All is in order. I am free to assist you."

"Then go! Go!" The Iranian told him. "Look there. He has already escaped."

"That old man?" Kalaq rushed after the pilot, laughing at the idea. "Don't escape, old man. You can't escape from this hell. You could walk forever and never escape. Fly your plane into the paradise of martyrs. Only then shall I receive the glory

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of your sacrifice."

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Prone in the brush at the side of the airstrip, Javanbach stared at the McDonnell-Douglas DC-4. Images and memories juxtaposed in his mind: the obsolete propeller-driven DC-6 transport that carried his family from Karachi to Turkey, a map of the Americas in his citizenship class, a newspaper photo of an old prop-driven passenger plane that had flown from Colombia with tons of marijuana and landed in on a highway in Kansas.

The four-engined DC-4 had a cargo capacity of several tons. With careful fuel use, the plane could fly to the United States -- Javanbach had no doubt of that. The DC-6 transport plane from Karachi, loaded with tons of cargo and passengers, had flown for thousands of kilometers without a stop -- Karachi to Kuwait, Kuwait to Istanbul.

If the Palestinians completed the loading of the explosives early in the day, the plane could fly the few thousand kilometers to Washington before the end of the State of the Union speech by the President, then crash into the assembled leaders of the United States, killing the representatives, the senators, and the President.

The assassination of the American government, televised to the world.

Javanbach shimmied backwards into the brush. Ten meters behind him, concealed in the trees, Lieutenant Stark continued monitoring frequencies on the band scanner.

"I know the target," Javanbach whispered.

"Are there Iranians there? Did you overhear hear it?"

"The State of the Union speech. By the President. Tonight. It is only three thousand kilometers away. Two thousand miles. That plane can fly from here to

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Washington with tons of explosive."

Stark touched the hand-radio Javanbach wore on his webbing belt. "Talk to the captain."

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The Palestinians threw the black plastic bags from hand to hand along the line of men. One of the bags broke, spilling sticks of dynamite. Men stepped back, startled by the sight of the explosive. A teenager snatched up the loose sticks and tossed the sticks to the relay line. The men shouted jokes to one another as they passed the individual sticks of dynamite through the cargo door of the old airliner.

Every shout boomed through Niles' head. He turned down the volume of the pre-amp on the shotgun microphone and tried to follow Kalaq as he ran after the white-haired pilot. But the noise and voices of the men working next to the airliner overwhelmed the microphone. He heard the voice of the Iranian called Jean-Paul, shouting Arabic at the Palestinians playing with the sticks of dynamite.

His hand-radio clicked. Glancing to Alvarez, he saw the sergeant cup his hand over the earphone he wore and listen. The sergeant keyed a confirmation. He turned to Niles and pointed from the hand-radio to Niles, hand-signing for Niles to talk. Niles shook his head, no. Alvarez whispered the single word:

"Important."

"Watch Jean-Paul the Iranian," Niles whispered. "Try to record any talk with Ghassan. He might be the leader." Leaving Alvarez with the microphone and cassette recorder, Niles slowly slipped back through the discarded cans and gray clay to where Vatssek waited with their equipment.

"Strak-man and teen-wonder worked it out," Vatssek whispered to him.

"Teen-wonder?"

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"Javanbach."

Niles plugged in his earphone. Keying his radio, he whispered: "This is the old man. What's so important?"

"Captain, this is the corporal. I believe I know the target. That plane --"

"Lieutenant!" Niles interrupted. "Are you absolutely positive these radios cannot be intercepted?"

"Yes, sir. Absolutely, sir. Without one of our radios to decode the transmissions, anyone monitoring our frequency will hear only electronic noise. I tested the radios myself, sir. I'd stake my life on the security of the encrypting circuits."

"You are, your life and our lives. Continue, corporal."

"Sir, that aircraft is very old, but it can fly to Washington in eight or nine hours. The State of the Union speech is tonight. The President. All the Senators. The Representatives. All of the leaders together on television."

"Of course ...." Niles went silent for a moment, considering the simplicity of the attack. The combined technical resources of the Coast Guard, the D E A, the Air Force stopped only five or ten per cent of the drug flights entering the United States. The converted airliner would fly north, then hide in the air traffic around Washington. Entering the restricted air space of the capitol at maximum speed, at a hundred meters off the ground, the pilot would aim for the lights of the Capitol Building. The Secret Service would have less than thirty seconds to hit the airliner with Stinger missiles. But would a hit from a small missile stop the airliner? Thirty or forty tons of high-speed metal? Maybe not. Once the pilot started his straight-line kamikazi run, that airliner would not stop. They could do it. So obvious.

"Good thinking, corporal. Maybe you guessed it. Hey-zoot, you still there?"

Key clicks answered.

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"I'll come up and take back the microphone. I want this information coded to San Juan for relay north. Also forward this information. Second plane brought an Iranian. Monitored conversation identifies him as paymaster of technical specialists now assembling explosives. Request permission to capture Iranian and technical specialist. Also, request permission to destroy the plane here. Repeat, destroy."

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The propeller drone of the plane alerted Sayed. Exactly as his director in Lebanon had told him, the noise of the propellers came from the east thirty minutes after sunrise. He did not see the plane but he heard it circle the airstrip two kilometers to the south. A second plane landed a minute later. Sayed hurried through the camp, shouting out to the men:

"Into your squads!"

The Revolutionary Guards kicked out their cooking fires. Gulping the last of their tea, finishing their rice and canned meat, they threw down the aluminum dishes-- they would not need their mess kits again. All non-essential equipment remained here. After the action, they carried only their weapons back to the ship waiting off Santa Marta.

Sayed shouted at the PKM gunners. "Call your men together. You are the leaders! You know your men."

The shouts of the four machinegunners added to the noise. With the heavy belt-fed PKM machineguns hanging by slings from their shoulders, the team leaders staggered through the trees, finding the men in their fire teams.

At the trucks, the Colombian drivers watched. They smoked their first cigarettes of the day and watched the foreign militiamen. Sayed went to the drivers. In his bad Spanish, he told them for the tenth time:

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You wait here all day, understand me? We return before night.

Of course, General. We will wait. But what if you do not return?

Turning his back on the laughter of the drivers, he took Iradj aside. Suffering a chest wound early in the war against Iraq, the young man had never completely recovered. The voyage through tropical heat had aggravated the old wound and he had coughed blood. Sayed did not want the coughing to betray the other men as they infiltrated the airstrip. He had decided to leave Iradj with the trucks, watching the drivers.

"Do not take your eyes away from those men. Do not allow them to approach you. They are dishonest. They are criminals. If they try any tricks or they try to leave before night, shoot them. We will all depend on you."

"I shoot--" Coughing interrupted Iradj. He spat, then coughed again, doubling up as he hacked. He spat again. "I shoot them? But then how do we return to the ocean?"

"They are paid to wait until night. If they try to leave before night, shoot them. We will drive the trucks ourselves."

Sayed went to the four fire teams. Each team had five men, a PKM machinegunner and four men with Kalashnikov rifles. Three men in each group carried ammunition drums for the machineguns. The last man carried a replacement barrel for the PKM. All the men carried packs with rations and water for the day. Sayed hurried through the groups of Revolutionary Guards, checking the weapons and the walkie-talkies of the machinegunners. He found every detail in order-- these men had all fought on the Iraqi Front, where errors meant death. Shouldering his own pack, with his rifle in his hands, he addressed the Guards:

"Remember! Silence and patience. In the next hours, we will take our positions. Then we wait. The damned Arabs are to complete their work. The aircraft is to go.

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But then, when the aircraft is gone, all Arab hirelings of Iraq die. Wait for my word and fire. Any Arab that we do not kill immediately, we must hunt down and kill. We cannot return to the ship and we cannot return to Iran until we kill every one of the lackies of the monster Saddam."

Sayed led the line through the shadowed rainforest. In total, his twenty men carried sixteen automatic rifles and four heavy machineguns -- and they would strike by surprise, cutting down the Arabs and their Latin mercenaries in a murderous cross-fire. Sayed expected -- and the director in Lebanon demanded -- total annihilation. The director had ordered that the Arabs and Latin mercenaries cease to exist. If an Arab escaped, if one of the Latins lived to tell the Palestinian Revolutionary Front of the attack in Colombia, then his unit had failed.

And failure meant Sayed returned to the Iraqi Front.

Rushing south to the airstrip, his body flowing with sweat after only a hundred steps, he refused to consider failure. He marched to victory. Freedom from the front. Insallah.

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Against the brilliant greens of the airstrip and the trees, the old pilot man looked already dead. He had no color in his face, the skin dead white, his eyes lined by black sags. Kalaq followed him for hundreds of meters as the old man examined the earth of the airstrip. The pilot said nothing as he paced, staring at the earth, kicking aside the grass and weeds, looking at the trees at the edges of the airstrip.

Kalaq tried to question the pilot. "Do you speak Arabic? Can you tell me what the target is? Can you cast light on what the Ayatollah holds secret?"

The old man turned and walked away quickly. Kalaq watched him, incredulous. Did the old man dream he could run into the jungle? Finally Kalaq followed him.

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"Think you can escape? How can you escape the will of God? Is that not what you Iranians say?"

Glaring at Kalaq, his eyes sharp, his jaw clenched, the old pilot turned again. He continued toward the west end of the airstrip. He ignored Kalaq. A few meters later, he kicked something in the grass and pointed.

An automobile wheel lay in the grass. The work crews had missed the wheel when they cleaned the airstrip. Kalaq saw that the tracks of the airliner's tires passed over the wheel. Kalaq jerked the tire out of the grass and weeds. Running, he rolled the wheel to the edge of the airstrip. The pilot resumed his inspection. Kalaq ran back, coughing and spitting. He lit a cigarette and paced behind the pilot.

"This must be one of the jokes of Rajai. No one knows the target. They can tell me nothing. But now I meet with he who does know the target and he does not speak my language. That clerk Rajai would think this funny."

The pilot stopped again. He stared at Kalaq. Then he looked back at the distant airliner. He walked a meters to one side. Replotting a straight line from the airliner to the west end of the airstrip, he altered his path.

Kalaq laughed. "Old man, you Iranian, you are only one more device of suffering in this hell. The heat, the insects, the Colombians, the secret. I ask you this, Iranian. Fly directly to your martyrdom. Do not permit the Colombians or the Americans to shoot you down. Let nothing stop you. For if you do not succeed, I will never know the answer. I will return to Lebanon and wait but never know, because until the television shows the flames and the dead, it will remain a secret, even to those who--"

"Quiet!" The pilot told him.

"What? You do speak my language. Now answer my question. What is the target?"

"I do not know." The old pilot stopped. Watching Kalaq for a response, he

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spoke in slow, halting Arabic: "Walk. If they see us stop, if they see us talk, it is suspicious."

"Talk, old man."

"Palestinian, I give you your life. Promise you will not interfere with that flight if I speak."

"Why do you accuse me of interference?"

"Listen to me. If I do not fly that airplane against the Americans, the fanatics kill my children and my grandchildren. But I think they kill my children and grandchildren even if many Americans die. Promise me there will be no interference and I will give you your life."

Kalaq stared at the old man. "I want this victory. I want the strike against the Americans. Why would I interfere with the airplane?"

"The fanatics deceive you. You will not know. Never know. You do not return to Lebanon. They silence you. You will die."

"What? I am the leader of the fedayeen. I plotted this with the Iranian who commands the action. I am one of the leaders. They cannot --"

"If you are a leader, why do you not know the target? Do you think the fanatics will leave you -- a gang of Palestinians -- to tell the Americans who attacked them? Think, Palestinian. The fanatics want their secret. Death will silence you forever. That is why you die."

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Niles converted his Colt Commando to a silent rifle. He dropped out the magazine, then slowly pulled back the charging handle to eject the cartridge from the chamber. He pushed in the magazine of reduced-charge Interdynamics rounds. Finally, he slipped the aluminum suppressor tube over the muzzle of the rifle.

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Beside him, Vatsek loaded a 40mm high-explosive round in his M16/M203. He slowly closed the sliding barrel of the M203 and set the safety. Vatsek and Niles waited, watching the Palestinians refuel and load the airliner.

Fifty meters away, a Palestinian pumped aviation gas from a barrel. A long hose from the hand-pump went straight up to the wing of the old airliner. A crewman crouched on the wing, holding the hose in place. Two other men rolled another barrel of fuel through the high grass.

At his web belt, Niles felt the click of his hand-radio. He clicked an acknowledgement and cupped his hand over his earphone. Stark told him:

"Request to destroy denied. Repeat, request denied by highest authority. Air Force will intercept threat. Colonel requests that we capture leaders for interrogation. He sends congratulations on mission accomplished."

Niles stared at the airliner, watching the gang loading the explosive. He thought of the arrival of the second plane after the airliner. Monitoring the conversations of Kalaq, he had identified Jean-Paul the Iranian and Ghassan the specialist. Ghassan called the Iranian the paymaster. Perhaps the Iranian led this action, perhaps he only paid the gangs working for the Iranians -- either way, he worked with the commanders in Tehran. Niles knew-- he would bet a month's pay-- that the commuter plane would take the Iranian and the bomb specialist out before the airliner tried to get off the ground -- which meant he lost the connection to Iran. Only Kalaq would remain. Kalaq had the code book but Niles doubted knew who had organized and funded the attack. Kalaq complained of knowing nothing.

Under the wing, he saw Jean-Paul the Iranian take a walkie-talkie from his pocket. The Iranian listened, then walked away from the loading of the plane. He called out to the men in the cockpit of the airliner. A man shouted down to him. Speaking quickly into the walkie-talkie, the Iranian hurried toward the west end of the

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field where the small plane waited. Niles felt his hand-radio click again. Stark told him:

"Captain, the scanner monitored a walkie-talkie exchange in Farsi. The corporal says the pilot of that Cessna informed the Iranian -- his name is actually Minatchi, not Jean-Paul -- that the airliner pilot is talking with Kalaq. They are alarmed because they did not know that the pilot spoke Arabic."

Niles clicked an acknowledgement. He watched the Iranian running for the other end of the airstrip and he realized --

Hit them now.

Taking his hand-radio from his web-belt, he curled around it to cover his whisper. He clicked the key to alert the men. Despite Lieutenant Stark's assurances of the fail-safe encoding, he did not use the names of the other Marines. "Gentlemen, there is about to be a fuel transfer accident. Lieutenant, corporal. I want you two in motion for that Cessna. I want you to capture the Iranian, that Palestinian Kalaq, and that white-haired pilot. If you get them, we can prove Iran is responsible for this shit. I want you in motion right now, go!"

"Yes, sir. Moving."

"Hey-zoot, Godzilla. Prepare to evacuate."

Niles screwed a hearing-protector into his right ear, hoping the earphone in his left ear would give some protection. He pulled back the charging handle of his silenced Commando to chamber the first Interdynamics round. Raising the rifle, he sighted on head of the crewman crouched on the airliner's wing. The crewman held the hose in the fuel port.

"Ready?" Niles asked Vatsek.

"Ready since October the twenty-third."

On the wing, the crewman leaned forward, looking inside the tank. The silent

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bullet punched into his skull and he fell forward and lay still, instantly dead. The fuel hose slipped out of his hand. Aviation gasoline spurted from the hose, gasoline flowing over the wing, then splashing onto the trailer where the line of Palestinians passed dynamite hand-to-hand.

"Now!" Niles hissed.

The launcher popped and the heads of the Palestinians whipped toward the sound. An instant later, the grenade exploded with a flat crack. High-velocity steel-wire shrapnel cut down men, others shouted out in panic as the gasoline flashed. Niles and Vatsek did not stay to watch.

A rifle fired, one of the gunmen raking the trash heap with full-automatic. Niles signalled for Vatsek to continue back. Chambering another Interdynamics cartridge, he snapped the silent shot into the face of the Palestinian. The gunman put his hand over his eye and staggered. The other men scattered, running from the flames.

Niles moved back fast, putting trees between him and the burning airliner. He felt his hand-radio clicking but did not stop. Rising to a crouch, he paused to scan the forest behind him -- the tangles of seedling trees and ferns, the hanging liana vines, the deep shadows -- then turned and sprinted.

Kalashnikov fire tore past him, his reflexes throwing him sideways and down as the high-cyclic-rate automatic fire of M16 rifles answered the ComBloc weapons. Niles shimmied forward. A Kalashnikov fired and Vatsek's M203 launched high-explosive. The shrapnel left a wounded man screaming until another burst of M16 fire cut him off. His hand-radio clicked and clicked until he answered.

Stark's voice came fast. "-- says there's other Iranians operating out here. Scanner's picking up radios."

"No shit!" Vatsek answered. "We just killed five of the crazies."

"Lieutenant," Niles spoke over the others. "Stop talking and make those

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captures."

"Yes, sir --"

Niles crawled through a wall of thorny ferns and looked into the muzzle of Alvarez' rifle.

"Sorry, sir. Tried to warn you. A squad of Iranians walked into us--"

"Time to go, sergeant. Where's --"

Vatsek dodged through the trees, his M16/M203 in one hand, a Soviet PKM machinegun in the other. A pack hung over one shoulder. Despite the weight, the hulking sergeant moved fast. "Look what I found--"

"Drop it, sergeant. No time for souvenirs. We've got to make distance."

"Ain't a souvenir, sir. Hey-Zoot, here. High explosive in the forty tube." Vatsek passed his M16/M203 over-and-under automatic rifle/grenade launcher to Alvarez. He slipped the pack over his head. The blood-soaked pack held another 250-round drum of heavy 7.62x54mm ammunition. "And look at this --"

Vatsek passed a walkie-talkie to Alvarez. Alvarez switched off the power and put it in his pack with the squad's long-range radio.

"Sergeant!" Niles hissed, pointing back at the airliner. "You got tons of burning av-gas and explosive back there. You waste time carrying that and you waste your life!"

"Captain!" Vatsek pointed into the rainforest with the muzzle of the PKM. "We got unknown numbers of Iranians out there. I don't carry this and they got us out-gunned! Take the point, sir! Waiting for you, sir!" Vatsek jerked back the cocking to confirm the loading of the machinegun. A cartridge flew free. "Long life through superior firepower!"