

Parallelling the airstrip, Javanbach ran through the forest. He thrashed through tangled growth and vines, birds startling away. His rush and noise violated all the teachings of his instructors-- but he continued running, knowing that he risked his life, trying to gain distance on the gang leaders. The far off hammering of a heavy caliber automatic weapon stopped him.

He turned and saw Lieutenant Stark pointing toward the airstrip. Javanbach veered through twenty meters of trees. At the edge of the open ground, earth movers had left mounds of soil. Years of matted grass covered the mounds. He went flat in the grass and ferns. Parting the weeds with his rifle muzzle, he scanned the open ground.

Fifty meters away, directly opposite him, the gang leaders-- Kalaq the Palestinian and Jean-Paul Minatchi-- stood with the white-haired pilot. They all watched the east end of the airstrip.

Flames rose from the airliner. In the distance, Javanbach saw men running. Shooting broke out, rifles firing bursts of full-automatic.

At the west end of the field, only two hundred meters away, the Cessna pilot sprinted for the twin-engine commuter plane. Javanbach went to one knee and sighted his M-16 on the Cessna's right engine. But he did not fire. He looked at Kalaq and Minatchi-- if he shot out the engine, he alerted the men the captain had ordered him to capture.

"Corporal!" Stark crept from the trees. He still carried the backpack of electronics. Dropping down flat, the lieutenant held out headphones. "Give me a quick translation of this ...."

## RECON

As he watched the Cessna pilot climb into the cockpit of the plane, Javanbach listened to a cassette tape of static-blurred Farsi voices shouting to one another over walkie-talkies. Javanbach recognized the voice of the leader telling the others to hold their fire. Then the leader called out again and again for Yusef. Yusef did not answer.

Electric starters whining, the props of the Cessna turned, the engines sputtering, then revving. Javanbach saw Kalaq and Minatchi run for the Cessna. The old pilot stood alone in the center of the airstrip, watching the airliner burn. Throwing off the scanner headphones, Javanbach raised his rifle again.

A flash lit the windshield of the Cessna. Javanbach snapped a glance to the airliner and saw a wing flipping away from a rising ball of flame. He sighted on the right engine of the Cessna and fired a burst as the earth-shaking roar of the explosion hit. The roar covered the muzzle reports.

But the prop continued spinning. Engines revving at full power, the Cessna bounced across the airstrip. Kalaq and Minatchi waved their arms to stop the pilot. Javanbach sighted on the head of the pilot.

Before his finger touched the trigger, glass sprayed from the cockpit. The pilot jerked sideways. The left engine sputtered and stopped. The Cessna veered to the left as the sheet metal of the plane's fuselage dented and flexed. Flame sprayed from the right wing. The plane continued in a wide arc, leaving a stream of burning gasoline in the grass. Metal screeched and the right propeller stopped.

In the sudden quiet, the hammering of machineguns drifted across the airstrip. Kalaq and Minatchi watched their escape from Guajira burning.

Stark keyed his hand-radio. "This is the lieutenant. Automatic weapon fire has destroyed the small plane here. What is the source of the weapon fire?"

Alvarez reported, "That gang of Iranians. They're wiping out everything that moves. Did you make the grab?"

"They're running this way!" Javanbach dropped down flat. Kalaq and Minatchi

## RECON

wove through the high grass, Kalaq sprinting erratic zigzags, the middle-aged and overweight Iranian lagging behind. Javanbach heard high-velocity bullets ripping through the grass. Bullets skipped off the earth and hummed over his head, cutting through branches.

Screaming with pain, calling out to Kalaq, Minatchi fell. Kalaq did not stop. Lieutenant Stark motioned Javanbach back into the trees. Stark pointed to himself then to the left. Javanbach nodded and crawled right, keeping his head below the top of the overgrown mounds. Bullets punched into the trees as the machinegunner hundreds of meters away tried to bring down Kalaq. Looking up, Javanbach watched the Palestinian sprint to the right, then cut left and smash through a tangle of brush only a few steps away.

Javanbach rose to one knee and scanned the sun-streaked shadows of the forest. He heard Kalaq coughing and stumbling. Steel clattered. Javanbach keyed his hand-radio and whispered, "This is the corporal. I am following Kalaq."

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The explosion slamming his ears, Niles dropped flat. Fragments roared over him and he felt a wave of heat. He stayed face down as metal rattled down through the trees. Branches fell. Men screamed, others shouted out.

Raising his head, Niles saw a scene of flames and swirling gray smoke. The trees lining the east end of the airstrip burned. Forms moved through the smoke, staggering away from the fires. Looking back, Niles saw Vatsek throw aside a sheet of metal. Alvarez checked Vatsek's back for injury and the two Marines rushed forward to Niles, dropping prone beside him and looking for wounds.

"I'm okay," Niles told them. He pulled the hearing-protector out of his ear. Despite the protector, he heard a high-pitched whine.

"Big bang," Vatsek commented, speaking next to Niles' ears but sounding far

## RECON

away. "Gang got their money's worth."

Machineguns fired from across the airstrip, heavy-caliber bullets tearing through the trees and palms.

"The Iranians." Alvarez shifted his position, crouching behind the protection of a meter-thick trunk.

Acrid smoke drifting from the burning trees and wreckage blocked the light. The Palestinians shouted to one another in the smoke, a shout stopping with a grunt as a man took a bullet in the back. Others fired back blindly at the gunners. The Marines waited as the Palestinians retreated.

Niles pointed straight ahead. Vatssek flipped out the bipod legs of the PKM machinegun. Niles shook his head, no. Checking his Colt Commando for damage, Niles sighted down the long aluminum suppressor tube -- straight. He slapped the base of the Interdynamics magazine, then advanced through the semi-darkness, watching for the Palestinians. He felt his hand-radio click but did not stop. Behind him, Alvarez whispered into his radio.

Leaves and fragments continued falling around Niles. The ringing in his ears altered the small sounds, every sound becoming a threat. He depended on his eyes, scanning the smoky darkness for shapes and movement.

A Palestinian-- a G-3 rifle in his hands-- crouched near the edge of the airstrip, looking across the open ground to the opposite treeline. A voice called out in Arabic, asking if he saw the attackers. The Palestinian answered, no, then turned back to watch the airstrip. Niles sighted the Comando on the back of the gunman's head and dropped him with a silent Interdynamics slug. He pulled back the charging handle to chamber another cartridge and moved forward. The voice called out again. When no answer came, the form of a second gunman appeared in the smoke.

Stepping back, Niles switched his grip on the Commando, putting the short rifle to his left shoulder as he eased around a tree knotted with lianas. He heard

## RECON

movement and stepped sideways, bringing up the rifle-- and his boot caught on a vine. Twisting as he fell, he brought up the Commando.

The Palestinian turned. A beardless teenager, he wore baggy camouflage pants and a sweat-soaked t-shirt. He held a G-3 automatic rifle. The sight of the falling American startled him. He took two steps back as he brought down the muzzle of the heavy rifle.

Niles pointed the Commando at the teenage fedayeen's chest and snapped off the shot. But the under-powered Interdynamics slug hit the G-3 rifle, punching through the plastic front handguard and ricocheting from the steel barrel. The smashed slug slashed across the Palestinian's chest. Staggering back, blood spreading from the long, shallow wound, the Palestinian aimed his rifle at Niles and died as Vatsek triggered a long burst from the PKM.

Firing the heavy machinegun like an assault rifle, Vatsek rushed forward, holding the muzzle on line with the teenager's chest. The bullets tore through the boy's body, the impact of bullets flipping the rifle aside and throwing the boy back into ferns.

A pistol popped, a bullet zipping past Vatsek. The hulking sergeant dropped to one knee and raised the PKM to his shoulder. He tracked a form in the smoke and fired a three-round burst, a simultaneous burst coming from Alvarez. Niles saw a man spin back.

Alvarez crouched beside the captain.

"They know we're here now."

A wild spray of 7.62NATO tore through the foliage as Palestinians fired their G-3 rifles at the sound of the Marine's weapons. Niles twisted the aluminum suppressor off his Commando and jammed it in his pack. He changed magazines, loading his rifle with full-powered cartridges, then sprinted to the west, dodging through the forest, Vatsek and Alvarez a few steps behind him, while the Palestinians continued wasting ammunition.

## RECON

Niles stopped at a rutted and overgrown trail that had once been a road leading from the airstrip. At the other end, he saw the shack housing the Palestinian radio. He slipped back into the brush and signalled Vatssek and Alvarez to stop. Then he keyed his radio, "Lieutenant. This is the Old Man. You got those prisoners?"

"We're following Kalaq," the lieutenant answered. "He succeeded in running into the jungle. The other leader and the pilot did not."

The ringing in Niles' ears forced him to turn up the volume of the radio. "Which way is he moving?"

"We split up. I think they're going east along the side of the airfield."

"Back to the radio."

"Perhaps, sir."

"And the Iranians?"

"Machinegun fire destroyed the Cessna. I saw the Iranian leader fall. I don't know about the older pilot. He's somewhere on the airfield."

"Find them. We must get that Iranian. And Kalaq and his code book."

Niles signaled Alvarez. The sergeant crouched next to him. As Vatssek watched the area, Niles asked: "Do you have the frequency of the gang's radio?"

"Got it ten times."

"Louder. I'm having trouble hearing."

"Me, too. Wonder why? I got the frequency."

"You think you could fake a coded answer if Iran sends in another message?"

"They don't send coded messages. I think it's Morse numbers and letters. I think that code book's got lines of jive, indexed by numbers and letters. The two messages this morning were the same except for one sequence. They can't send information, but the system's good enough for what they're doing, you know, alerts and things like that."

Automatic weapons fired a hundred meters behind them. Niles heard the

## RECON

distinctive cyclic rate of Kalashnikov rifles. The G-3 rifles of the Palestinians returned the fire. Then came long bursts from a PKM machinegun. The Palestinians did not fire again.

"It's that E-rannie gang putting down the bomber gang--" Alvarez started.

Single shots from Kalashnikovs popped as the Iranians killed wounded.

"-- and they are taking no prisoners. Try to figure this one out, captain."

"Could you fake a message?"

"If I got that code book. What do you want me to say?"

"Nothing. I want a fix on their headquarters. Vatssek! You got forty millimeter flares?"

"Red star parachute."

"Give me one more high-explosive and the red flare."

"Can't see the flare in the daylight."

"That so?" Taking the M16/M203 from Alvarez, Niles sighted on the shack. He put the high-explosive grenade through the door. The pop sent dust clouding from the windows and walls. Reloading the M203 tube with the flare, he launched the flare into the interior of the shack. Red chemical glare lit the interior, smoke billowing from holes in the roof. Putting the second high-explosive grenade in the tube, he set the safety and passed the assault rifle/grenade launcher back to Alvarez.

"Oh, yeah," Vatssek nodded. "Pyro-action."

"That radio station is hereby off the air," Alvarez added.

Niles crossed the narrow road and signalled the others to follow. "Now we get that code book."

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Corporal Javanbach heard firefights hundreds of meters away. He rose from a crouch and took three slow and silent steps to the cover of a head-high palm. With

## RECON

the muzzle of his rifle, he shifted a frond aside.

Kalaq stood in a green expanse of broad-leafed plants. Blood steamed down his face as he stared at the shadows of the forest around him. He swept his heavy rifle in a semi-circle, aiming everywhere. Turning, Kalaq stomped through the lush growth. Javanbach saw the Palestinian slip behind the trunk of a tree and watch for a moment. Then he continued, his boots loud in the leaves and small plants.

As he moved away, Javanbach felt his hand-radio click. He did not risk a voice answer. He crouched and watched the forest. Clicking the transmit key, he plugged in the earphone and pushed it into his ear.

Captain Niles asked, "Corporal? Are you following Kalaq?"

He answered with two clicks, yes.

"You're close?"

Two clicks, yes.

"Is he going back toward the buildings?"

Three clicks, no.

"He's running?"

Two clicks, yes.

A rifle blast shattered the silence. Javanbach dropped flat as Kalaq fired two and three shot bursts, the bullets ripping through branches and small trees. All of the bullets went in another direction.

"He shooting at you?"

"No, sir," Javanbach whispered.

"On our way. Stay close to him. You lose him, he's gone."

Hearing Kalaq run, Javanbach walked as quick as the ground vegetation allowed, his eyes scanning shadows ahead. A slight wind swayed the higher branches, bringing the acrid stink of burning gasoline and rubber. He heard the clatter of plastic and metal-- a rifle hitting a tree. Javanbach saw Kalaq suddenly illuminated by a shaft of

## RECON

light. Angling behind a tangle of brush, Javanbach rushed forward, gaining ten meters. He heard a hacking cough. He peered through the screen of leaves and saw Kalaq leaning against a tree, coughing and choking, spitting out long streams of mucus.

Javanbach moved fast. Timing his strides to the coughing, he circled the Palestinian. He heard boots cracking forest debris and froze, but too late. Thrashing through the brush, Kalaq wiped his face with one of his fatigue sleeves as he stumbled. Javanbach rushed him.

The noise of boots sprinting startled Kalaq. Panicked, he turned and looked back, then whipped around and saw the Marine but could not raise his G-3 before Javanbach straightarmed him, throwing him back against a tree. Javanbach jerked up a knee at Kalaq's crotch but Kalaq twisted, smashing the plastic stock of the G-3 across the Marine's ribs. Javanbach whipped the butt of his M16 around and missed Kalaq's head, hitting the tree, the plastic and aluminum rifle bending where the stock joined the receiver. Javanbach swung again and again, beating Kalaq with the plastic stock. Kalaq tried to block the blows with his left arm. Javanbach beat down the arm and slammed him in the face.

Stunned, Kalaq fell. Javanbach hit him across the back of the head, finally snapping off the stock and buffer tube of the M16. He crouched on Kalaq's back, forcing his face into the matted leaves, trying to wrench his arms behind him. Kalaq pulled his pistol and twisted, throwing Javanbach to the side as he tried to point the pistol. Javanbach grabbed his arm as he fired.

The 9mm bullet punched through Kalaq's foot. Screaming, Kalaq fired again, blindly trying to find the Marine with bullets. Javanbach fell to his side and kicked, his boot contacting Kalaq's hand and throwing the pistol meters away. Javanbach rolled onto the screaming man and drove a fist into his solar plexus.

Gasping, choking, Kalaq struggled to breathe. Javanbach hit him again, then

## RECON

turned him over and ripped his fatigue shirt off, knotting the torn shirt around his arms, binding his feet with the sling of the broken M16. Pointing the G-3 rifle at Kalaq, Javanbach keyed his hand-radio.

"I took the Palestinian leader."

Niles answered from a few steps away. "Yeah, you took him." Going to the semi-conscious prisoner, Niles checked the pockets of the Palestinian's fatigues. In his right thigh pocket, he found a notebook. Numbered, handwritten lines covered the pages.

"Shit!" Vatssek spat out. "It's in Arabic."

"Of course, sergeant," Niles laughed. His laughter stopped when he saw an instant photo between the pages. The snapshot showed Angelique Chardon screaming against pain she could not escape. Niles returned the photo to the notebook. "Now let's get this prisoner back to the airfield. Alive."

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On his belly in the grass, Lieutenant Stark searched for Jean-Paul Minatchi. He stayed flat, never raising his head, using his hands to probe ahead as he crawled over the flat, hard airstrip. Though the high grass concealed him, the grass offered no protection from bullets. If the Iranian force spotted him, he died.

Firefights continued as the Iranian force swept from the east end of the airstrip around to the south side. He heard shots from the G-3 rifles of the Palestinians-- but the Iranian force responded with overwhelming fire from their Kalashnikov automatic rifles and PKM machineguns.

He no longer heard the ripping sound of M16 rifles. Minutes before, he had monitored the radio conversation between Captain Niles and Corporal Javanbach. While they pursued the Palestinian leader Kalaq, Stark had to find the Iranian paymaster of the terrorists, Jean-Paul Minatchi, before the Iranian execution squads

## RECON

started their final search of the area.

A man groaned and called out-- Stark did not recognize the language but he veered toward the voice.

Flies and the rich smell of blood stopped him. His hand found clotted blood. Angling away from the voice, he followed the smeared blood to fly-swarmed shoes and pants. Blood soaked the clothing of the dead man. Stark stayed an arm's length away as he circled around-- a scab of clotting blood surrounded the corpse.

Minatchi had bled to death. A bullet from a PKM had destroyed his right thigh, severing the femoral artery and breaking the femur. Stark heard the other man groan again. Quickly, he searched Minatchi. He found a French passport, airline tickets, thousands of United States dollars in rolls of hundred dollar bills, and a notebook of hand-written pages. All the personal effects went into his pack with the scanner unit. As a last detail, he turned the deadman's face to the side and took a photo for identification. Then he crawled toward the other man.

The white-haired pilot, a man approximately sixty years of age but looking older, lay where the bullet had dropped him. Blood frothed at his lips and from a hole in his chest. Waving away the flies on the pilot's face, Stark pressed his fingers to the carotid artery for a pulse-- the man's heart fluttered. He checked the wound. He saw that a bullet had punched through the old man's chest and exited from his side, tearing through the right lung. Considering the man's age and bad physical condition, Stark wondered how the pilot had the strength to continue breathing.

Stark keyed his hand-radio. "Captain, this is the lieutenant. Bad news."

"What?"

"The Iranian is dead. The pilot is dying. Through and through lung wound, shock, pulse failing."

The old man blinked and turned his head to Stark. "Soldier ... your country is America, soldier?"

## RECON

"Sir, the pilot can speak English."

"Then talk to him. You got a recorder? We've got Kalaq and it's time to get out of here."

"Yes, sir."

"I was a pilot ... for the airline of the Shah ... I speak English because I was a pilot ... I tried to escape from the insanity of Persia ...."

Shrugging out of his backpack, Stark found the scanner and disconnected the cassette recorder. He held the recorder close to the old man as he spoke. In a quiet, failing voice, the pilot told the Marine lieutenant of the prison, the threats, and the promise of life for his family if he gave his life in the Holy War.

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Vatsek and Alvarez lashed together an improvised litter for Aziz Kalaq, tying the semi-conscious prisoner-- gagged, blindfolded-- between long saplings. To the east, sporadic shooting continued. They no longer heard firefights-- only fire from individual rifles. Niles watched for the approach of the Iranian force, counting the minutes the sergeants took to prepare the wounded man for transport.

"Sounds like they've wiped out the gang," Alvarez commented.

"Isn't that too bad," Vatsek laughed. "Yeah, it is. They'll come looking for us."

"Don't know we're here."

"Maybe." Alvarez hissed to the captain. "We're done."

Niles left his concealment. "Stark found the others. Only the pilot's alive and he's dying. Code out for extraction."

"Where will be the pick up?" Alvarez pulled out the long range radio.

"Airfield. Extreme west end."

"They'll try to hit us, sir."

"Tell the pilot to bring all the smoke he's got. We can't carry this prisoner out if

## RECON

we got those Iranians behind us."

"If they know we're here." Vatsek pulled off his bandolier of 40mm grenades.

"For the corporal."

"And this." Alvarez passed the captured walkie-talkie to the captain. "Maybe he can jive them somehow. Get them running around in circles."

"Get that helicopter." Taking the bandolier of shells and the Iranian walkie-talkie, Niles wove through the trees and vines to Javanbach. He praised the corporal in a low whisper: "Good work on the capture. Here-- Vatssek took this radio from one of the Pasdaran squads."

Javanbach switched on the walkie-talkie. Only static came from the speaker.

"We're getting out of here immediately. I'm calling the helicopter down on the airstrip. I have no doubt that the Pasdaran will try to knock us down. Use your imagination, if there's any way to give us thirty seconds or so, that's all we need."

Nodding, Javanbach hooked the walkie-talkie on his belt webbing. The radio squawked and a voice spoke. "They are searching for more Palestinians. The leader asks if the machinegun was found."

Alvarez returned the long-distance radio to his pack. "Helicopter coming." He and Vatssek gripped the poles of the litter and started away.

"We're almost out of here. Monitor them, corporal. Alert me if the situation changes."

Glancing at his compass, Niles took the lead, cutting back to the airstrip. He rushed ahead through the trees and brush, then stopped. He watched and listened for movement. The ringing in his ears had faded to a faint metallic whine superimposed over the silence of the shadowed, windless forest. He listened for shooting in the distance, trying to determine the location of the Iranians. But he heard no more fighting-- the Revolutionary Guards had annihilated the Palestinians. Niles continued, rushing ahead, stopping and watching, then advancing again.

## RECON

In less than five minutes, Niles reached the airstrip. The Cessna had burned down to ashes and smoking metal. He did not see Lieutenant Stark. At the far end of the airstrip, shimmering with the morning heat, he saw flames rising from the masses of twisted metal that remained of the airliner and trucks. Blackened, blast-stripped trees surrounded the wreckage.

A skirmish line of men in camouflage green walked through the grass with rifles, searching the airstrip.

"Lieutenant," Niles whispered into his hand-radio. "You with that pilot?"

"No, sir, I'm on my way out. He's dead. This was absolutely an Iranian operation. The pilot--"

"Tell me later. We're running out of time. Get out of there." Niles turned to the other Marines. He pointed to the west end of the airstrip. "There. Against the treeline. Alvarez, call the helicopter down so that the wreck gives us some cover. Tell the man to do a circle and throw out all the smoke, then come down right there. Javanbach, break in on their frequency and make things difficult. No matter what--" Niles pointed at Kalaq. "-- that shit goes out with us. He's the only connection we got left. Vatsek, I'm glad you picked up that souvenir. Think we'll need it. Go, gentlemen."

With a groan, the sergeants picked up Kalaq. The Palestinian twisted against the ropes, trying to free his hands. Niles gave the prisoner a light punch in his bullet-smashed foot. Behind the gag, Kalaq screamed. They carried Kalaq away.

Niles dropped prone on the old earthmover mounds and watched the line of men search the airstrip. In the heat shimmer, the specks flowed and shifted.

Stark called out from the grass. "Coming in."

"Move it," Niles hissed.

Rotor-throb came from the east, the throbbing increasing by the second until the noise became an overwhelming, unending thunder. Olive-drab Hueys veered

## RECON

across the open sky of the airstrip. Stark scrambled over the mounds a few meters from Niles. Niles ran to him.

"Move," he shouted. "Our ride's here."

"Did you call the airborne?"

"Sir, I don't know who that is."

They ran along the treeline. One helicopter banked over their heads. Through the open sidedoor, a crewman threw smoke grenades, one after another. White smoke clouded from the canisters, obscuring Niles' view of the Iranians.

Rifles and machineguns fired from the ground. Weapons answered from the helicopters. Niles angled across the airstrip, sprinting. He saw Vatsek and Alvarez run from the trees carrying the litter. Above them, the helicopter descended, the grass seething and whipping in the rotor-storm.

As the skids sank into the grass, Vatsek threw the litter inside. Alvarez and Javanbach climbed in and secured Kalaq. Vatsek ran around the nose of the Huey and dropped to a crouch, putting the PKM to his shoulder and searching for targets. In the deafening noise, Niles heard Alvarez shouting. He did not understand until a bullet smashed the plexiglass of the sidedoor. Vatsek fired sweeping bursts, firing blind through the smoke. The others pulled him back and he sat in the sidedoor as the helicopter lifted away, leaving the screen of smoke below. Niles and Stark held the sergeant's packstraps as he aimed down, ripping the treeline with the PKM.

Two Iranians left the cover of the trees to follow the helicopter with their rifles. Vatsek put the sights on a man and held the flashing muzzle steady. One man fell back. The other Iranian ran for the treeline, Vatsek following him with the sights, dropping him, then spraying the area, chopping branches, firing straight down as the helicopter left the airstrip behind. They pulled Vatsek inside and slammed the bullet-shattered sidedoor shut. Niles shouted to the American crewman. "Where'd the Airborne come from?"

## RECON

"Colombian Airborne," the American shouted back. A sharp featured Chicano, he wore mirrored sunglasses and a Houston Oilers t-shirt. "Army commander at Barranquilla got some calls last night. Calls to the DEA. Calls to the police. Anonymous but they had every last detail on the gang."

"I know who made the calls," Niles shouted back. "A gang of Colombians. The ex-associates of the gang down there."

"And we got a call from a general. Some colonel was stalling on acting on this airstrip. Could've been paid off. Happens all the time. General sent helicopters into San Juan at first light. We held up their fueling long as possible. That's when we got your pick-up call. For once, it worked out right. And what you did to that gang looks great. Wish I'd brought a camera."

"We didn't do it. Fuel accident. Burned themselves up."

The DEA man laughed. "Whatever you say."

"Radio ahead. We need an immediate flight out."

"Already did. We got to get you hotshots out of here. You and your prisoner. Don't want any problems with the Colombians. Got all the problems we need already."

"Radio ahead to Panama. Request a flight to Washington. With a chemical interrogation specialist."

Niles crouched over Kalaq. He watched the Palestinian's chest heaving with the quick, shallow breathing of panic. His shoulders and arms twisted against the ropes binding him, as if he thought he could escape from the helicopter.

Of all the Palestinians and Iranians, Niles had only captured this one terrorist--this coward and loudmouth who had somehow participated in the bombing of 23 October with the Iranian named Rajai. He stared down at Kalaq and thought of the horrible death of the Frenchwoman. Did she die for working with Niles? Or for what she learned when she worked for Rajai?

Picking up one of the empty brass casings from the PKM, Niles pressed the base

## RECON

of the cartridge against Kalaq's temple, like the muzzle of a rifle. The Palestinian went rigid. Only his mouth moved. Niles pulled down the strip of cloth gagging him and heard Kalaq pleading for his life. Leaning down, Niles shouted the Arabic question into Kalaq's ear:

Where is Rajai?

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Static hissed from the radio. Rajai stood at the filing cabinets, sorting through a year of accumulated papers documenting his operations with the militias and political factions of Lebanon. His appointment to his new office in the Foreign Ministry ended his work in Lebanon. After the conclusion of the aircraft bombing of the Americans, aides assumed the duties of recruiting agents, fighters, and technicians-- his position in the organization no longer allowed him to risk capture and interrogation.

Now he culled through his files. Rajai did not trust others to read and evaluate each folder of information. Nor did he want to risk shipping the files through Lebanon and Syria to Iran. He must do the work today, while he waited for the reports from the units in Colombia. When he returned to Tehran, the files returned with him in his car.

He went through the hundreds of folders name by name. The files detailed the training, careers, and his personal evaluations of fighters and technicians who operated from units in Lebanon. He had employed some of these men in his operations-- the training of the Hizbullah gangs, the assassinations of militia leaders opposed to Syrian and Iranian intervention in Lebanon, and the bombings of the Americans and the French. He wanted to employ the men in his future operations. Their files went into a box he would carry to his new office in the Foreign Ministry.

Other men had no further value to him. Reading the name of a Popular Front technician, he compared the fedayeen's name and age to the list of Palestinians

## RECON

dispatched to Colombia with Iziz Kalaq. The man's name appeared on the list. Rajai took one sheet from the folder-- a sheet with identification photos, a detailed physical description, and a column of dates and assignments. He kept only the single page. He threw all the other papers from the man's folder into the box of discarded papers. Why maintain a complete file on a dead man?

Rajai checked the time and calculated the time in Colombia-- only an hour after dawn. The fedayeen had not yet completed the loading of the aircraft-- there would not be another coded transmission until the plane had taken off for its target.

Taking the box of discarded files, he stepped out of his office. The wind whipped snow through the bare trees of the villa. At the gate, a guard stood behind the shelter of the wall, his back to the warmth of a scorched and smoking oil drum. Rajai walked across the courtyard to the oil drum and dumped the hundreds of sheets of paper into the glowing coals. For a few seconds, flames rose higher than his head, carrying ash and burning paper into the wind. Rajai stepped back and watched the flames, staring as flames formed the images of flaming cities, then the fire receded to a mass of ashes in the blackened metal. When nothing of the papers remained to betray him, he returned to his office.

Only a hiss came from the monitor. Turning up the volume of the radio, he heard faint voices in the static. He listened but could not understand what they said. He checked the time again-- four or five more hours remained until the plane left the airstrip in Colombia. Depending on the flight time to the target, Rajai had the remainder of the day to work. Soon he learned of the success or failure of the attack on the Americans.

Until then, he waited, reading through his files-- assembling the personnel and squad leaders for a future attack.

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## RECON

Sprawled in a lush tangle of thorned ferns, his senses spinning, Sayed heard the throbbing of a helicopter. Blood flowed over his face. Flies flitted in his eyes and buzzed in the clotting blood. Waving the flies away, he searched for the wound. His fingers found a bullet-gouge in his scalp. Looking at his watch, forcing his eyes to focus, he saw that two hours had passed since the explosion of the Palestinian plane.

Rifle-fire continued-- but only from the M16 rifles of the Colombians. Sayed did not hear his men firing back. He had not heard the popping of a Kalashnikov rifle since he regained consciousness. Colombians shouted to one another and he understood that they searched for men they called terrorists.

He slowly shifted his position. Pushing his rifle ahead, he snaked deeper into the ferns, enduring the scrape of thorns on his hands and arms, silently unhooking his fatigues from thorns. Flies found the blood clotting in his hair but he did not waste motion flicking the flies away. Deep in the center of the tangle, in the green shadows, he lost sight of daylight.

Clicking came from his walkie-talkie. Someone spoke Spanish and then the transmission stopped. The Colombians had found one of his fire-team's radios. Switching off the power of his walkie-talkie, he set it aside. He could not risk trying to communicate with any of his men.

Spanish voices approached. Sayed heard boots kicking through the leaves and sticks matting the ground. An M16 rifle fired, a long burst of high-velocity bullets tearing through the ferns. Sayed steeled himself and did not move as the soldier fired again, bullets ripping through the fronds. A man shouted out and the soldier answered in the rapid and slurred Spanish Colombians spoke.

Sayed waited as the voices and rifle-fire of the soldiers continued into the distance. He lay without moving for almost an hour, listening and watching. He heard voices hundreds of meters away. But no soldiers remained in his area. Turning, he tried to rise to a crouch and his vision faded and he fell. He lay still again, only

## RECON

semi-conscious.

The Colombians had destroyed the Palestinian unit and wiped out his own squad of Pasdaran. If he wanted any chance of escaping from Colombia, of returning to Iran, he must radio his director and tell him of the attack. He drank from his canteen and waited. When he regained his strength, he would return to the trucks.

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In the cockpit of the executive jet, Niles crouched behind the pilots. A coil-cord stretched from the encrypted radio to the headphones Niles wore. He stared out at the horizon-spanning blue of the Caribbean as Colonel Niles spoke to Washington, encoding circuitry reducing the voice of Colonel Devlin to an electronic monotone.

"If you are absolutely certain this Fahkr Rajai is in Baalbek, I can argue hot-pursuit. But I do not believe I can gain authorization for a search. Can I assure the National Security Advisor that this will be surgical? A quick and precise seizure? With absolutely no chance of exposure? Exactly as we discussed last month?"

Niles rubbed the days of beard stubble on his face. Green grease-paint and Colombian dirt came away on his hand. "Well, sir ...." Glancing at the pilots, he saw them talking to one another. He spoke vaguely in case they listened to his conversation. "Ah, I don't know about absolute. But this is it. This fellow we picked up in Colombia answered all my questions. I got an address. I got directions. The man we want will be there for several more hours. Considering that I've been there, considering that your weatherman tells us there's bad weather, snow and all that, considering that we can call ahead for transportation in and out, I think I've got a chance of catching him while he's there. This won't be a noisy visit, if you know what I mean."

"You don't anticipate opposition?"

"Maybe he'll have two or three friends there. But there won't be a party. Not like the downtown office. That would be the Fourth of July."

## RECON

"Then this will be as we discussed before? Infiltration. Seizure. Exfiltration."

"Yeah. We talked about it. And after my first look-see, I explained why I couldn't do it. But things have changed. We've got the address and we know the man is there. In fact, he's waiting for a message from us now."

"The message from the code book?"

"That's it."

"I will propose this exactly as we discussed. I don't believe there will be any hesitation on his part to authorize. It was the advisor's proposal to capture this individual for interrogation."

"I'll be here. Next two hours."

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Rajai glanced at his watch-- eight in the evening Lebanese time, twelve noon in Colombia. The schedule dictated that the plane must leave in the next hour. But he heard only static from the radio.

Outside, his guards paced in the snow, walking to the heat of the fire in the oil drum, warming their gloves and coats, then returning to the darkness. Rajai had no more paper to dump into the oil drum. He had worked throughout the day and evening to reduce his files to only three cardboard boxes of folders. The boxes held a year of work in Lebanon and the start of years of work in the future as he exploited his contacts to form the cadre of new operations.

The guards left their concealment and stood at the wrought iron gate. Headlights passed in the street, the tires of heavy transport trucks vibrating the tile floor. Light reflected on the chrome of an antenna as one of his guards-- Akbar-- walked out of the gate. Watching the street, Akbar spoke into the walkie-talkie.

Akbar talked with the other guards, then crossed the courtyard to the French doors of the offices. He knocked at Rajai's door. Only then did he see Rajai standing

## RECON

inside the door, staring face to face at him.

"Yes?"

"Our men at the checkpoint report Syrian reinforcements of anti-aircraft crews. And ammunition trucks. There may be danger for you tonight."

"The Syrians fear for nothing. There will be no attack tonight."

Nodding, Akbar backed away. Rajai locked the door. So the Syrians knew, he thought. They feared attack by the Americans. They feared for nothing.

Only this one last night in Baalbek. Tomorrow he returned to Tehran to begin his assault on America-- and his guards went to the Iraqi front. Alone with the hissing radio, he laughed at the irony of his reward for the loyalty of his men. But he could not risk betrayal. They knew of his year in Lebanon and they knew of his return to Tehran. Therefore they went to the front, to be martyred on their first day-- a sacrifice to security.

Code interrupted his thoughts. He heard the alert series. An instant after the last click, he keyed the reply. Then came the sequence of page and line numbers.

The plane ... flys ... to the destination.

Rajai sent the confirmation. Now he waited.