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Technicians in brilliant orange uniforms serviced and refueled the jet. Wearing a raincoat over his dirty camouflage fatigues, Niles waited at the cabin door, watching the the approach of a royal blue Cadillac limousine escorted by a Dodge sedan. The cars followed the service vehicle lane through the lines of parked aircraft, then slowed to a stop at the steps to the jet.

Two men left the escort car. Tall, square-shouldered, their hair cut military short, they wore overcoats and gray suits. One man stopped Niles at the door to the limousine but the door opened and Colonel Devlin motioned him inside. Niles sat on the rear-facing benchseat, his back to the glass partition separating the passenger seats from the driver.

"Captain Niles, this is Richard Todd. He's works with the Agency's Director of Special Operations." Niles shook hands with the thin, pale bureaucrat in a dark gray suit and black bow-tie. "He has offered his resources for this mission."

"We got the authorization?" Niles passed a stack of cassette tapes to the colonel. "Sir, those are recordings of the interrogations of the Iranian pilot and Kalaq. There are also tapes of conversations between the Palestinians in the terrorist gang. We've got to move fast to exploit the information."

"First, however," Todd interrupted. "I would like to ask what happened in Colombia. You had received instructions to allow the plane to take off for the target."

"As I explained to the colonel, there was a fire during fueling. One crew was loading explosives into the plane while another hand-pumped fuel from barrels into the wing tanks. The fire spread to the explosives and the plane went."

"A fire?" Todd repeated.

"Fire, then the explosion. Then the shoot-out with the Pasdaran. Apparently,

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Rajai wanted to liquidate all of the Palestinians involved with the plane. I imagine he intended to make the Pasdaran unit disappear also. Colombians did that for him."

"We will never know their intended target."

"We'll know when we bring back Rajai. We got that authorization?"

Devlin nodded. Todd continued questioning Niles. "You have a man with a truck waiting in Beirut. Can you contact your man again and give him a drop point if we provide a helicopter?"

"That would cut time. But we'd be risking the Syrians knocking us out of the sky."

"You'll be flying in a Soviet helicopter. Syrian markings."

Niles glanced outside at the guards standing in the rain-- Agency men. Todd explained their presence. And Niles knew that he and the other Marines now worked for Todd. But if he objected, he lost the chance to capture Rajai.

"The Agency does have the good stuff. I'll work it out on a map and call ahead. What about the uniforms and identification?"

"All that is ready."

"A Soviet advisor's uniform? One that'll fit my sergeant?"

"That's right," the colonel answered.

"Mister Marvel comes through. Just like old times--"

"Captain," Todd interrupted. "You're confident you can enter the area in Syrian uniforms?"

"Bet my life on it."

"The colonel told me of your improvised operations in the Muslim sectors of Beirut on 23 and 24 of October of last year."

"Don't know what you're talking about," Niles laughed.

Todd smiled, his gray face twisting to show his perfect teeth. Then he laughed also, the sound mechanical, like an electronic replication of a laugh.

Red light flashed in the windows as a civilian ambulance stopped at the jet.

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White uniformed medics went up the steps with a stretcher and carried Kalaq down.

"Be advised," Niles told Devlin and Todd. "That Aziz Kalaq is a sadistic, murdering son of a bitch. He's alive because we had to put questions to him. He deserves anything that happens to him."

"I'm sure you have the same opinion of Fahkr Rajai," Todd replied. "But we must have that man alive."

"I brought you Kalaq. We would have had an Iranian and the pilot of the plane, except that the Pasdaran squad shot them down. I will do whatever is necessary to bring Rajai back for interrogation."

"We trust you will. Remember however, this operation must remain covert. There is considerable troop movement in the area to cover your action. But if at any time, you believe you risk a confrontation, you are to withdraw."

"I'm no martyr. And I know what capture means."

"Only the extraordinary nature of this pursuit-- and your qualifications as an individual soldier-- motivated the colonel and I to seek authorization for this action. Good luck, Captain Niles. The men outside will help you with the equipment and uniforms."

"No heroes, Niles," Colonel Devlin told him. "If you don't capture him this time, we'll get authorization for another action."

"I'll hold you to your word, sir." Saluting, Niles stepped out.

Inside the limousine, Devlin and Todd watched the guards help Niles carry several heavy boxes from the trunks of the limousine and the escort car.

"File transfer papers documenting their reassignment to Honduras as trainers," Todd told Colonel Devlin. "Backdate the transfers two days. Prepare an accident report describing the crash of a helicopter. If we lose that squad of Marines in Lebanon, they died in Honduras."

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A change in the vibration of the engines woke Niles. He lay in the aisle as the leather jump boots of the other men walked around him. Vatsek's voice called out:

"That's not Lebanon down there. What a difference civilization makes."

Hands shook him. Lieutenant Stark told him, "Captain, we've started the descent."

The pilot's voice came over the cabin intercom. "Marines. Be prepared--"

"We ain't Boy Scouts--" Vatsek shouted back.

-- to exit immediately. Your transport is waiting, rotors turning."

Niles stood up, straightening his Syrian fatigues. He put on his Soviet-style greatcoat and turned up the collar. The coat covered him from his ears to his knees. His load-bearing-webgear buckled over his coat. He walked back to the mirror in the door of the washroom and modelled the uniform for himself. Behind him, the other men assembled their gear and checking their weapons.

"Looking good," Alvarez commented. The sergeant wore an identical uniform-- same coat, same webbing, same boots. "We look regulation. Syrians never looked this good."

"But we still look like Americans."

"Worked that night in Hayy al Sollom. And we got the winter working for us. Wear the helmet and a scarf, wear your face paint, wear gloves over your hands, you can pass."

"And don't talk," Niles added. "Come daylight or bright light, we got real trouble."

"Come daylight, we're out of there."

"Yeah." Niles squeezed a dab of brown camouflage grease -paint into his hand and rubbed it onto his face, darkening his skin. In the mirror, he saw Vatsek-- in a Soviet uniform with the shoulder insignia of a radio-technical officer-- pick up the PKM machinegun captured in Colombia. Niles went to the conference table. "Sergeant Vatsek, do you intend to go everywhere in the world with that weapon?"

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"Yes, sir. It is my friend for life."

"Corporal Javanbach." Niles motioned the young man over to him. "Shaffik will be bringing a collection of fatigues and miscellaneous gear in the truck. You will be getting out of that uniform and becoming a Revolutionary Guard. The Revolutionary Guards man checkpoints around--"

Loud engine whine stopped his explanation. As the pilot took the jet down for landing, Niles buckled himself into a seat. The lights of a town flashed past. He saw the scattered lights of hangers and then the tires skidded, a line of runway lights blurring past. As the plane shuddered to stop, the pilot spoke again:

"Thirty seconds to your helicopter. Please be prepared to exit when this aircraft stops moving." Niles stood and slap-checked his Syrian webgear.

The plane finally rolled to a stop. Outside, Niles saw the silhouette of a bus-sized helicopter with jet engine housings forward of the rotormast-- a Soviet MI-8 troopship. He wrenched open the door. Frigid air struck him. Snow swirled. The low throb of rotors cut through the whine of the jet engines. Niles looked for the step-ramp-- but saw no one in the area. He dropped down to the slick, icy asphalt, signalling for the other Marines to follow.

A flashlight waved from the sidedoor of the MI-8. Niles jogged across asphalt, the blades cutting the air above him. A gloved hand reached out to him and hauled him into the interior. Niles shouted out, "Shalom!" But the crewman chopped his hand past his visor-- no talking-- and turned away.

Niles helped his squad through the sidedoor. He gave the thumb's up to the silent crewman and the helicopter lifted away, freezing rotor-storm blasting through the door. The crewman pulled the sidedoor closed. Vibration and the turbine roar of the engines echoed in the metal interior. Leaning against a round window, looking through streaks of snow on the plastic, Niles saw the lights of apartments and streets flash under him, then he saw the darkness of the Mediterranean. The helicopter banked and dropped down to a few meters above the ocean.

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Not speaking, each man alone in the darkness and noise, the Marines flew north. Niles slouched on the web-work bench and thought of a hundred ways to fail--the Syrians monitoring international calls, a map error by the pilot, a breakdown of the truck, the arrest of Hijazi at a checkpoint. And if his squad actually reached Baalbek, the kidnapping of the Iranian would be a miracle. The coded transmission to Baalbek five hours before had confirmed that the Rajai waited at the radio. But did he still wait? Or had he left for Tehran? Niles had no way know until they entered the villa.

A fist tapped his shoulder. Vatssek's square hand pointed to the coast, where the sprawl of lights marking Beirut glowed under storm clouds. The helicopter continued north another two minutes, then turned east, gaining altitude. Rising and falling, lurching, the helicopter followed the Jounieh highway through the mountains. A flashlight glowed, Alvarez cupping the flashlight in his hand to check his pack and the long-range radio. Then Alvarez held the light for Stark as he tested the scanner. Niles took out his hand-radio and clicked the transmit. He held the radio to his ear as the others shouted back through the encoded circuits.

The helicopter bucked and shuddered, flying through the absolute black of clouds. Niles left his seat and looked forward to the pilots. He saw a video screen of terrain-following-radar displaying the electronic topography of the mountains. Then the form of the crewman blocked his sight of the controls. Waving his flashlight over the Marines, the crewman pointed down.

As if on signal, the helicopter dropped out of the clouds, a gray landscape of hills and snow-pale fields appearing outside the round ports. Niles looked out at a line of headlights on the highway. They had reached the center of the Beeka where the east-west straightaway of the Jounieh highway intersected the highway to Baalbek.

"One minute!" Niles shouted out. He plotted an approximate compass-bearing by the highways and looked to the north-east. He saw a gray smear on the storm-clouds-- Baalbek. "Hey-zoot! Any codes on his frequency?"

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"Zero!"

"Strak-man! You got the scanner operating?"

Vatsek pointed at Stark. "That's you, Lieutenant!"

"Yes, sir!"

"What do you hear?"

"Arabic. Russian."

"-- and Farsi," Javanbach shouted out. "The Iranians curse the Syrians and the Soviets."

"Why?"

"I don't know. They only curse."

The helicopter banked sharply. Below, Niles saw a parked truck flashing its headlights, the beams shining on a narrow, snow-covered road running along the railroad tracks-- the same service road he and Chardon had used the night they escaped from Baalbek. Paralelling the main highway, the service road continued to within five kilometers of the town.

A point of searing red light flickered and red glowing smoke billowed up from the snow. Niles turned back to the other men. Holding up his Kalashnikov, he jammed in a magazine. The crewman threw open the sidedoor as the helicopter descended.

Snow exploded as the rotor-storm swept the road, the lights of the trucks going gray with flying snow. Niles waited until the landing tires hit earth and he jumped out, coming down hard on the rutted, frozen earth. Jerking back his rifle's bolt handle to chamber a round, he rushed away from the helicopter and dropped down, the rotor noise and blowing snow making hearing and sight impossible. He stared into the wall of gray, swirling snow and heard the turbines shriek as the helicopter lifted away. The rotorthrob faded to the west.

The headlights went off. Silence returned. The flare sputtered out in the mud of melted snow. Niles watched the night, looking for movement and listening. He

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heard only the wind. Turning, he saw no movement by the truck and he rose to a crouch.

"Hijazi! ¿Que pasa?"

"Nada, Old Man!"

Niles ran to the cab of the truck. He glanced inside and saw the silhouette of the young Lebanese lieutenant. Rushing to the canvas-covered back of the stake-side truck, he swept his penlight over the cargo area. Boxes marked Marboro, Johnny Walker, Smirnoff, and Levis stood against the sides. Then he waved the beam of the tiny light over the road. In the crusted snow, he saw the ruts of the tires and his own bootprints. He called out, "Into the truck!"

The other Marines left the snow. As they hurried past him, Niles questioned Hijazi. "What is all the traffic on the roads? This is two o'clock in the morning."

"There is a mobilization of Syrian forces."

"Is Israel attacking?"

"Perhaps the air force. I saw no armor. Only anti-aircraft guns."

"Have they hit Israel? They expecting a counter-strike?"

"No, no attacks, no incidents, nothing. Who can know why the Syrians mobilize?"

"You brought the clothes and equipment?"

"Yes, but you came in uniforms."

In the back of the truck, Vatssek laughed. "Wow, check this out. Alright! Smirnoff."

"Up front, Godzilla. Leave that vodka alone."

Shining the penlight on Hijazi, Niles saw that the young Lebanese officer wore a Syrian uniform. "One of my men will be dressed as a Pasdaran."

"Yes, they are on the roads also."

"How many? What are they doing?"

"Nothing. Syrians control all the checkpoints this night."

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Vatsek climbed into the cab of the truck. "What's all that in back? Did we come to kill? Or party?"

"The cigarettes and liquor explain why I have this truck. I tell soldiers the liquor is for their officers and the soldiers ask no more questions."

"Thanks for coming, Shaffik. We couldn't do this without you. Now move it. Stop short of the highway. I'm going to need your voice."

Niles stepped into the rear of the truck. The truck lurched away, bumping over the rutted service road. Crouching down with the other men, he asked, "What's going on with the radios?"

"Nothing," Alvarez answered. "Zero in, zero out."

"Any Farsi on the scanner?"

"Yes, sir," Javanbach told him. "Outposts checking with their commander. Walkie-talkies only."

"Corporal, see these fatigues here? This equipment?" Niles pushed a box to him. He pulled tattered fatigues and a wool stocking cap out. "These clothes are your Revolutionary Guard uniform. Put that hat over your hair." He turned to Alvarez and Stark. "Okay, I want to try to determine if Rajai is there. Going through those checkpoints is scary and I don't want to do it if the man's gone. I'll have Hijazi make a voice transmission, in the clear, saying that they're fighting the Colombian Army."

"It won't sound right," Alvarez countered. "No distance."

"We'll put it through the walkie-talkies, then into the microphone."

"Sir," Stark interrupted. "Why don't you call him on the telephone? We've got his phone number."

"We'd have to go through the checkpoints to get to a phone." "No, sir. Perhaps not."

"No?" Niles took out a folded satellite photo of Baalbek. "There's the town." He pointed to the bottom edge of the photo. "There's the highway and the Syrian checkpoint. There's no where to call from out there."

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The lieutenant studied the photo as the truck swayed. "There are two industrial shops on the highway. This photo does not show the section of the highway to which I am referring. One was bombed out. But the other is still there."

Niles unfolded another photo showing the town and the countryside.

Stark pointed to the highway running south from Baalbek. "There. Perhaps a kilometer before the checkpoint."

"We'll try it. I don't want to chance those checkpoints until I know that man is there."

As the daylight faded, Sayed staggered through the trees. A root caught his boot and he fell, the shock making his head pulse with pain. He swatted the flies away from the wound and pushed himself to his feet. Despite his pain and blood loss, he forced himself to continue. He had hidden from the soldiers throughout the day, then escaped from the airstrip. But if he did not find the trucks before dark, he died in Colombia.

Sayed walked three steps across the ruts before he realized he had reached the road. Looking down at the dirt, he saw tire tracks. He broke into a run, stumbling and falling, dragging himself to his feet and continuing, following the tracks west.

The litter stopped him. Plastic tarps, cartons of food, and wooden ammunition boxes lay on the road. In the clearing, he saw the pans and plates from the meal that morning. Iradj lay in a scab of blood swarming with ants and flies. The drivers had somehow shot him.

All the equipment and provisions of his unit lay in the dirt. The drivers had taken nothing. They had left the rifle of Iradj, the few magazines of ammunition, the Turkish cigarettes, and boxes of Iranian tea. Then they had swept the trucks clean of trash and cigarette butts-- leaving no evidence to link them to the Iranians. Desperate, panicing, Sayed kicked through the boxes and plastic tarps. He found the padded backpack containing the radio.

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Taking the radio under the cover of the trees, he switched on the power. The indicator light glowed. He unrolled the antenna and threw it into the branches above him. Flipping through the code book, he scrawled the codes of phrases to communicate the explosion of the plane and the attack by the Colombian troops.

Through the cut in the canvas, Niles watched Hijazi and Javanbach at the gate. Snow swirled through the glare of the naked lightbulbs hanging above the parked trucks and cars. His breath clouding in the air, Hijazi argued with the guard. Niles heard the guard explain that he could not allow strangers to enter the parking lot and Hijazi demanded that guard open the gate. Niles heard the truck's door open.

"Hey, Captain!" Vatssek hissed through the canvas. "That shit has no respect for a uniform. What do you do say we shoot him?"

"Sergeant. That man is doing his job. Give him a minute, he'll respond to persuasion."

Standing on the side-slats, Niles looked toward the Syrian checkpoint. Billboards and the curve of the highway blocked the soldiers' sight of the truck. Looking to the south, Niles saw only empty highway and darkness. No trucks, no cars approached. Only troop trucks and transports moved during the Syrian mobilization.

"What we will do, is threaten to shoot him."

"Captain!" Stark punched a button on a cassette recorder as a static-scratchy code came from the scanner. "It's the Iranian frequency. Another transmission coming in."

A code series blasted from the monitor, the dot-dash sharp and free of static.

"That's the confirmation from the radio in Baalbek. Recording the message."

Niles knocked on the cab. Vatssek looked back through the rear-view window. Pointing toward the car repair lot, he hand -signed for him to call back Hijazi and Javanbach.

Words hissed from the monitor.

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"Is that Arabic? Do you understand that?" Stark asked.

Vatsek shouted out in Russian. Turning up the volume, Niles listened to the voice. Distortion and static blurred the words. He understood nothing. "Not Arabic. And it can't be the Palestinian radio. We burned it."

"The Pasdaran unit?"

"Why not?"

Boots scuffed on the bumper and Javanbach climbed into the back. Niles knocked on the cab again and told Vatsek, "Wait."

Hearing the radio, Javanbach sat on the planks and leaned close to the monitor. The transmission alternated between voice and code. But no more code came from the radio in Baalbek.

"He is begging for an answer," Javanbach translated. "He is wounded, his men are dead or captured, he is alone, the Colombians deserted him, he begs for the director to send help to him. But there is no answer."

"He's calling the director?"

"But there is no answer."

"But there was an answer. The radio in Baalbek sent back a confirm. And now there's nothing. That's our man. If it was an office flunky, he'd radio for him to use code. But Rajai just pulled the plug. He's letting his man in Colombia talk into space. The shit, leaving one of his men out there."

"We're going in?" Alvarez asked.

"That's it."

Alvarez plugged a cassette recorder into the long-range radio, changed the band, and tuned the frequency to the faint voice screaming from Colombia. He started a second recorder. Then he switched the scanner back to the local frequencies. Farsi voices spoke. "I'm locking in on the Revolutionary Guard radios. If they're watching the man's street and they spot us, we'll know about--"

"Wait-- they are calling for guards," Javanbach translated the communications.

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"They demand Revolutionary Guards and two trucks immediately. An emergency. They leave for Damascus immediately ... the checkpoint leader refuses ... and they tell him it is on the authority of ... Rajai."

"There he is," Niles told the others. "Now we get him."

Racing the engines of the cars, wiping ice from the windows, his guards prepared for the drive to Damascus. Rajai carried the boxes of files from his office to the white Mercedes. Two boxes went into the trunk. The third went in the back seat. As Akbar shouted into his walkie-talkie, demanding an escort of Pasdaran and trucks to the Syrian border, Rajai took a seat in the warmth of the Mercedes and waited as the men folded the steel stocks of their rifles and buckled bandoliers of ammunition across their coats. Four men got into the second car, a dark blue Mercedes. Akbar and a driver got into the front seat of his car. Exhaust clouding in the cold air, they drove from the gate.

"At the checkpoint," Akbar told him. "Others will join us. In two trucks with heavy weapons."

"More guards? It is unnecessary."

"The Syrians think there will be fighting tonight."

Rajai said nothing and watched the dark streets of the town pass. Few lights showed in windows. No other cars dared the streets. The headlights of the Mercedes showed walls crumbling onto the trash-strewn sidewalks. All the wealthy families-- of all denominations had fled, Christian and Muslim alike. Only the poor remained in this place of fanatics and war. The idea of the Americans attacking this dying town, this slum seemed a joke to Rajai-- and he realized that the ignorance, incompetence, and arrogance of the Americans actually made the attack possible, if not inevitable.

Colombian soldiers had destroyed the plane. If they took Kalaq prisoner, if Kalaq co-operated, if the Colombians released the information to the Americans, if the

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Americans pursued an investigation in Lebanon, if the Americans somehow learned of Rajai's office in Baalbek, then came the attack. Grandiose and vainglorious, a military spectacle staged for the honor and televisions of the United States, costing hundreds of millions of dollars in lost aircraft, squandered munitions, and pilot casualties as the jets met a storm of anti-aircraft fire.

To bomb an empty office.

Laughing at the joke, he took a last look at Baalbek, a town soon to be a focus of world attention as the fanatics of the Revolutionary Guard paraded the corpses of dead American pilots through the streets.

Tomorrow he began his work in Tehran. Despite the failure of the committee's operation, his future waited. His dreams, his actions would shape the future of his country, bringing war with America and the cataclysm of Year Zero, when war and invasion and liberation destroyed Iran, cleansing the nation of culture, religions, and history

Then began the rule of Rajai.

Kilometers away, the transport truck parked at the side of the highway. Javanbach monitored the walkie-talkies of the Iranians. Niles crouched with him, listening to the voices. From time to time, Arabic-speaking Hizbollah militiamen spoke on the frequency. The other Marines waited, ready, watching the highway for Syrian trucks or the cars of the Iranians.

Niles heard an exchange between two Arabic-speakers-- then another voice shouted over the transmission. Javanbach translated, "He's telling the Hizbollah to bring the car, they don't want to give up the car to the Revolutionary Guards. He says to stop the delay, the director cannot wait--"

"Cars coming!" Vatssek shouted out. "Civilian cars."

A transmission came from very near. "A Revolutionary Guard asks why the truck

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is not coming--"

"It's a Mercedes," Vatsek called out. "Two Mercedes and jeep with a recoilless rifle."

The cars sped past. Alvarez called out, "Look like Iranians."

Niles spoke into his hand-radio, "Go! Shaffik, put it in gear. That is them."

Engine whining at maximum rpm's, clashing the gears, Hijazi accelerated after the Iranians. Alvarez and Vatsek leaned out and looked ahead.

"Shit!" Vatsek kicked the railing slats. "What is this? We need a Corvette to chase those-- hey! Captain! Tell Shaffik to kill the lights and make maximum speed."

As he relayed the instruction to Hijazi, Niles looked back and saw headlights gaining them. "What--"

"Keep the radio on, when I give the word, Shaffik hits the brakes, hard." Nodding to the approaching Land Rover, Vatsek grinned. "Stand by, Lieutenant. I'll show you something they never taught at Parris Island."

Alvarez laughed. "Godzilla goes crazy!"

"Don't call me no Japanese lizard. Watch. Give me that pop-gun." Vatsek hung his PKM on the side slats and took the Kalashnikov from Alvarez. Palming down the safety-lever of the Kalashnikov, Vatsek called out to Stark. "Ready?"

"I understand," Hijazi spoke from the radio. "I wait for the signal."

The headlights gained on the truck. Highbeams flashed. Vatsek squinted into the glare, his left arm hooked through the side slats as he watched the open-topped Land Rover and the three Iranians riding in it. Two rode in the front, the third behind the pedestal-mounted Soviet PK machinegun. Vatsek's right hand casually held the pistol-grip of the Kalashnikov. Engine screaming, the truck almost kept ahead of the Land Rover. But the small, lightweight, four-wheel-drive Land Rover pulled up behind the transport, the driver peering ahead to pass.

"Hit the brakes!"

Even as Vatsek shouted, the tires screeched, the truck shuddering as Hijazi

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stood on the brakes. The Land Rover hit the heavy steel bumper of the transport truck and Vatssek fired down into the Iranians, killing the driver and passenger instantly, hitting the third Iranian with a one-handed burst as the man tried to grab the machinegun.

Hijazi maintained the skid, correcting from side to side as the heavy truck tried to sideslip on the slick asphalt. Jammed against the bumper, the Land Rover slowed with the truck. Vatssek held on to the side slats, watching and waiting as the vehicles lost speed.

"Got it!" Vatssek shouted out. He set the safety on the Kalashnikov and tossed it back to Alvarez. Dropping off the back of the truck, he went to the side of the Land Rover and pulled out the dead driver. Stark followed him. They dragged the bodies off the highway.

Niles hit the cab. "Go on."

The truck moved ahead. But the Land Rover stayed on the bumper. Vatssek and Stark ran after the Land Rover as Hijazi braked to a stop again. The bumper of the Land Rover had hooked over the trailer hitch of the truck. Vatssek squatted at the side of the Land Rover and gripped the bumper. He lifted the bumper free with the strength of his legs, then got in the Land Rover and stood behind the PK.

Sweeping aside the broken glass and blood, Stark revved the engine and shifted into first. Tires spraying, he passed the truck. Vatssek squinted into the freezing windrush and saw the taillights of the three cars. Checking the drum of cartridges, he jerked back the cocking handle and triggered a three-shot burst into the sky to test the weapon. He looked back and saw the truck falling back as Stark floored the Land Rover.

"Mister America to the Old Man," he said into his hand-radio. "Want us to stop the convoy?"

"Get point-blank to the one-oh-six," Niles meant the Land Rover mounted with the 106mm recoilless rifle. "Hit them, then stop the others. No fire into the Mercs. Don't know which one our man's in."

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"Will do. Make speed, Lieutenant."

"Be advised," Niles added. "They are trying to call the dead Pasdaran on the walkie-talkies."

"Nothing we can do about it." Vatsek held the steel post of the machinegun mount as Stark gained on the Iranians. The road blurred past, every pothole and crack in the asphalt rattling the aluminum truck. Ahead, against the yellow fan of the other Land Rover's headlights, he saw a silhouette stand. The tube of the 106mm recoilless rifle swivelled. Vatsek jerked the PK off the pedestal socket and sat in the glass of the passenger seat. Punching out the shattered windshield with his gloved fist, he laid the machinegun on the dash. The walkie-talkie squawked Farsi at his feet.

At one hundred meters, a point of light blinked from the Iranian Land Rover. A bullet slammed the fender, another clanged off the steel pedestal shaft. Stark cut to the left, then swerved back to the right, weaving over the highway as Vatsek put the sights on the center of the Land Rover ahead and eased back the trigger, the heavy machinegun jackhammering against his shoulder.

The recoilless rifle flashed, the rocket shriekroaring past Vatsek, exploding twenty meters behind him, the blast and fragments spraying into the fields. He did not take his eyes off the Land Rover as he held the machinegun on line, counting off three tracers-- no less than fifteen rounds-- before releasing the trigger.

A form fell, arms and legs flailing as the man hit the road and cartwheeled. But the rifle fired again and Vatsek felt glass slash across his forehead. He put the sights on the taillights of the Land Rover and squeezed off bursts as Stark zigzagged, swerving, braking, accelerating. Stark held steady behind the other truck for an instant and Vatsek fired a long burst, slugs tearing through the tailgate, shattering a taillight, a tracer streaking into a tire.

Lurching as the tire blew out, the Land Rover swerved to the left, slid sideways, then rolled, the Iranians flying from the flipping wreck. Stark cut to the edge of the highway to avoid the disintegrating tangle of metal. Looking back, Vatsek saw the

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transport truck clip the front end of the smashed Land Rover, sending it spinning from the road. Hijazi flashed his headlights and sounded the airhorn.

Ahead, the two Mercedes sedans accelerated, flying along the straight highway. Stark kept the pedal to the floor, the tires of the Land Rover vibrating. But the sedans made distance by the second. Vatsek keyed his hand-radio: "Captain, we're losing them. We can't keep up with them. Let me put some rounds into the cars while they're in range."

"Do it," Niles agreed. "Put it in to both cars."

Vatsek set the PK's rear leaf sight at maximum range and aimed in front of the lead car, the white Mercedes.

In the truck, Niles stood on the slats behind the cab. He slashed the canvas cover with his knife and tore a wide hole. Alvarez passed the PKM machinegun up to the captain. He laid the machinegun across the roof of the cab. Wind tore at his sleeves and coat, flipping his Syrian helmet away.

Tracers arced from the Land Rover to the highway fifty meters ahead of the white Mercedes. Tracers skipped off the asphalt. Niles saw the line of tracers angle down as Vatsek adjusted his aim. Bullets hit around both of the sedans. Niles compensated for the extreme distance and fired, trying to drop the heavy slugs down on the cars.

Firing a long burst, he watched the tracers streak above the Land Rover, then arc down. But the phosphorous of the tracers burned out before completing the arc. Niles fired blind. Hooking a leg through the slats, he faced into the windrush and held the sights over the taillights of the first car, dropping bullets down on the Iranins, hoping to score hits by numbers and probability.

The white Mercedes hydroplaned through a flooded section of highway, waves of water flying high. The tires lost contact with the asphalt and the Mercedes drifted sideways. The driver overcorrected, losing control, the car spinning. The second Mercedes slowed and swerved to avoid hitting the first.

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As Stark bore down on the spinning Mercedes, Vatsek shifted his aim to the blue Mercedes, triggering careful five-round bursts, seeing a tracer streak to target, then pausing and shifting aim and firing five more rounds as Stark slowed for the flooded stretch of highway. The driver of the white Mercedes finally brought the car to a stop in the field at the side of the road. Wheels spraying gravel and mud, he tried to accelerate.

Aiming through spraying water, Vatsek fired a long burst into the fender, hoping to score on the engine. Stark continued past the Mercedes. Vatsek jerked the PK machinegun free of the shattered windshield and turned in the seat, firing back at the Mercedes, a tight burst hitting the fender and tire. But a rifle flashed from the passenger side front window, slugs hammering the Land Rover, a ricochette humming past Vatsek's head.

The Land Rover skidded to the side, a tire flapping on the rim. Stark strained at the wheel, forcing the truck straight as he lost speed. Vatsek held onto the seat as the Land Rover shuddered and lurched, bumping to a stop.

"Vatsek! The other car!" Stark shouted out.

The blue Mercedes whipped through a turn. Vatsek found the PK machinegun between the seats. Jumping out of Land Rover, he set the machinegun on the hood and fired at the onrushing Mercedes. The PK fired twice, then jammed. He jerked the cocking handle back and felt glass crunch.

Rifles fired from the windows of the Mercedes. Vatsek dropped down behind the tire as slugs punched into the Land Rover. Stark went prone on the wet asphalt and fired a Kalashnikov under the frame, aiming at the onrushing headlights. Tires skidded. Vatsek jerked back the cocking handle again and the machinegun ejected a cartridge.

Iranians threw open the doors of the blue Mercedes, stepping out as the driver braked to a stop. Vatsek rolled to the side and fired into the windows, glass exploding, the driver dieing. Rifles returned the fire.

RECON

As the transport truck stopped, two rifles flashed from the stalled white Mercedes, bullets smashing through the windshield, slugs continuing through the cab, and splintering the slats beside Niles. He put a burst low through the front door of the Mercedes. Men left the other side. Taking shelter behind the sedan, they raked the truck again. Niles fired a burst into the front of the car, a tracer ricocheting away, the men dropping down. Two hundred meters ahead, he saw Stark and Vatssek exchanging fire with the Iranians of the blue Mercedes.

Niles pulled the PKM free of the canvas and followed Alvarez and Javanbach out of the transport. Hijazi dropped out of the door.

"Shaffik!" Niles shouted out. "You okay?"

"Okay, okay."

"You're bleeding."

"It is from glass. I am okay."

"Corporal, tell them they'll live if they surrender."

Crouching behind the steel bumper of the truck, Javanbach called out to the Mercedes. The gunmen answered with long bursts of full-auto, bullets hammering the truck, clanging off the bumper, shattering a headlight. Javanbach's leg kicked backwards and he fell. Niles lunged out and grabbed him, pushing him against the tire. He found blood pouring from a through-and-through wound above the corporal's boottop. When he touched the leg, Javanbach gasped-- shattered bone.

"Your leg's broken," Niles put Javanbach's Kalashnikov in his hands. "Stay here and shoot to wound. We want Rajai alive." Alvarez lay prone behind the rear double wheels. He watched the Mercedes over the sights of his rifle. Niles dropped down with him and flipped down the bipod of the PKM.

"This is it," Niles told him. "We close them down now."

To the south, they heard a long burst from a machinegun. Flame mushroomed into the sky as the gasoline of the second Mercedes exploded into flame.

"Godzilla got serious."

RECON

"I'm taking their feet off, be ready to rush." Sighting on the space under the white Mercedes, he fired a long, accurate burst into the narrow space. He saw tracers skip off the asphalt, the front tires popped, a form staggered away, then he hit the back tires.

No one fired back. Alvarez ran around the back of the transport truck and sprinted for the Mercedes. Jerking the PKM off the ground, Niles followed the sergeant. Orange light from the distant gasoline flames flared from the glass and polished enamel of the Mercedes. Niles saw Alvarez jerk back and a rifle fired. Niles sprayed a burst high over the car and cut around the front.

An Iranian with a Kalashnikov, his legs and coat soaked in blood, fired a Kalashnikov one-handed, trying to hit Alvarez. A dead man lay in the mud. The wounded Iranian sat with his back to the Mercedes, his legs shattered, his right arm limp. But he still fought. Alvarez splashed through the mud and ice behind the Mercedes, staying in a squat, the trunk of the Mercedes blocking the fire of the Iranian. The Iranian snapped a last wild burst at Alvarez and the bolt slammed closed on the empty chamber. He jerked the trigger again, then dropped the rifle and reached for the rifle of the dead man.

Niles rushed forward, kicking the rifle out of the man's hand. He looked down into the scarred face of the Revolutionary Guard. The man twisted away. Niles pointed the PKM at him and shouted out, "Stop!"

A pistol fired, a bullet slashing past Niles' left arm and ribs, the Iranian rolling again and bringing up the pistol. Niles and Alvarez fired simultaneously, the bursts of slugs throwing the Iranian back into the mud, dead. Alvarez looked inside the Mercedes. Niles threw the door open.

A small man lay curled in the footwell of the rear seat, his hands covering his head. Niles pushed aside a heavy cardboard box and pulled the Iranian out.

Niles recognized the beard and the styled hair. He had seen the small, elegantly-groomed Iranian the night of 24 October, outside the theater in Hayy al

RECON

Sollom where hundreds of Hizbollah fanatics chanted of death. Blood soaked the Iranian's tailored pants and coat. His breathing rasped. Niles checked him and found blood flowing from a wound in his buttock. Somehow, a bullet had found him where he hid on the floor of the Mercedes.

"He's hit. Already in shock." Niles shouted across the highway. "Shaffik get the truck turned around! Our man's wounded." Stark and Vatsek ran to the Mercedes.

"Grab him!" Carrying Rajai by his hands and feet, Niles and Vatsek took him to the truck. They laid him on the planks, then helped Javanbach up. "Question him," Niles told Javanbach. "Get something out of him. Tell him we'll take him to a hospital if he talks."

Starting the truck, Hijazi backed through a semi-circle. The truck tilted to one side, the bullet-hit right front tire riding on the hard inner core designed to keep the truck rolling despite minor damage. He wrestled the steering wheel around, gunning the engine while he waited for the Marines.

Niles squatted on the bumper, watching and listening as Javanbach tried to interrogate the wounded Iranian. Vatsek pulled up Rajai's shirt and found an exit wound under his right shoulder-blade. Pressing a compress pad to the wound, Vatsek put his ear to the Rajai's chest and listened. Javanbach shouted questions but Rajai did not respond. Vatsek looked up, shaking his head.

"Bullet went up through his gut, maybe his kidney, then through his diaphragm and lung. Sounds like his right lung collapsed."

"Damn it!" Niles shouted out. "All this and our man takes a bullet in the ass."

"We got something," Alvarez heaved a cardboard box into the truck. "That box is full of papers, with names and faces."

"Code out for the helicopter."

Running to the Mercedes, Niles saw Stark opening the trunk. The lieutenant opened two boxes and looked at sheets of paper. "These look like personnel files, sir."

RECON

"Take it, move it." Niles grabbed one of the boxes and ran back to the truck. Stark followed. They pushed the boxes into the back of the transport.

Inside, Alvarez tapped out a radio message. The truck labored against the bullet-shot tire to pick up speed. Javanbach read the papers with a flashlight.

"These are his files--"

"You positive?"

"Of men, of their organizations, of the work they did for him."

A camera flashed as Stark took photos of Rajai, full-face and profile. Vatsek put his ear to Rajai's chest again. He slammed Rajai's chest with his fist, then listened again. He put his huge, square hand to Rajai's throat and felt for a pulse, then shook his head.

"This shit's dead."

"-- here is one who worked against the Marines in Beirut. And here, a Palestinian from the United States."

"Sir," Stark held up a sheet of typed and hand-written entries. "This is the day by day documentation of his work."

"Yeah?"

"These files have more than we would have ever gotten from him through interrogation."

Niles looked at the thousands of pages in the boxes. "You see addresses there?"

"Addresses. Names, photos, technical skills, past actions."

"Well, how interesting," Niles commented. "Looks like we scored. Looks like we're coming back." He looked up to the men. "I got volunteers?"