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When the rain paused, Lydia Rivas heard the far off hammering of machineguns and the dull thudding of mortars. She sat up from the rotting car seat and pulled the sheet of plastic tight around her body. Around her, she saw that her comrades still slept-- aguardiente and capsules of Secondal taking them far away from the cold and rain of this shack on the roof of a garage in Perquin.

She sat in near-darkness, listening. Lantern light came from the stairwell, the faint yellow light gleaming on the salvaged fenders, windshields, and crates of used auto parts cluttering the rooftop. Beyond the junk, the rain streaked down from the dead black of the night sky. No lights came from the houses and shops. The guerrillas had cut the power lines in 1979, leaving the town in the mountains without electricity, telephones, or a telegraph.

The sounds of fighting seemed to come from the south. She looked into the night, thinking she might see the distant flashes of mortars. Nothing broke the absolute black.

The rain returned in a sudden downpour, beating down on the corrugated steel roofing of the shack. A curtain of water ran from the corrugated sheets, splattering on the concrete. Sitting in the darkness, cold, fleas crawling through her clothes, her body stinking of sweat and diesel, she waited for the rain to pause again.

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This would be her last night in El Salvador. Tomorrow, Honduras and--

Light appeared in the street. Frantic, she found her Uzi submachinegun on the car seat and clutched the pistol-grip, her eyes scanning the rooftop for the black silhouettes of commandos. An engine roared, metal rattled. The noise could only be soldiers in a truck. The all-night curfew allowed only the army on the streets--any civilian risked execution on sight. Then the concrete roof shook twice as the tires of a heavy truck hit a pothole in the stone pavement. She relaxed as the troop truck passed.

The lantern in the garage went out. More lights passed in the street, the tires of trucks crashing into the pothole. Rivas listened as the noise of the engines faded. Finally, she heard only the sound of the rain.

Holding the plastic above her head, she stepped into the downpour. Cold water soaked her shirt. She felt her way through the darkness with the tips of her soaked tennis shoes. Flashlights waved inside the garage, the weak light allowing her to start down the stairs.

"Who's there?" Someone whispered.

"Marianela."

"Come down and listen to the radio." She recognized the hoarse voice of the truck driver. "It is a very interesting program."

A candle lit the garage. She saw a local teenager named Roman at a table with the driver. By the light of a candle, they adjusted the dial of a radio and passed headphones back and forth.

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Roman wore the coveralls of a mechanic but held an M16 rifle. In the cab of the truck, another man snored.

The middle-aged driver, a pale, thin man with an alcohol-ravaged face and red bleary eyes, gulped from a bottle of aguardiente. As she stepped into the light, the eyes of both men fixed on her chest. She looked down and saw that her soaked shirt revealed form of her breasts. Ignoring their stares, she took a chair at the table and casually crossed her arms to cover herself.

Finally raising his eyes from her breasts, the driver tore off the headphones. "Listen, girl. The army fights against the night."

She slipped the headphones over her ears but she heard only static. But after a moment, a voice spoke in a quick code of letters and numbers. Rifles and machineguns fired in the background. Another voice repeated the message to confirm reception and a third voice cut in, the young man speaking quickly, almost in panic. Rifles fired in long, full-automatic bursts. Men shouted and cursed.

"A battle!" The driver laughed.

"All those soldiers shooting thousands of communists from Nicaragua."

"Be quiet," the Roman hissed. "They can hear you in the street."

"Was that where the trucks went?" she asked.

"Reinforcements! They expect a grand battle, a world war!"

"There are only four," Roman told her. "We sent them to make trouble. Three rifles and a grenade launcher and listen to the trouble they made. Tomorrow, the soldiers will be searching the

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mountains for the brigade--"

Laughing, the driver offered the bottle of aguardiente to Roman. The teenager shook his head, no. The driver offered the bottle to Rivas. She pushed the bottle away and he caught her hand and tried to pull her to him.

Rivas pointed the stubby barrel of the Uzi at the driver's face. He released her hand. "I bring you to safety and now you threaten me? What kind of thanks is that?"

"You were paid," Roman told him, looking at the drunken driver with distain. In the candlelight, the teenager's face had the calm, stoic expression of a man many years older.

The driver turned to the wall and lifted the bottle high. "My darling gringa, do you want a drink?" he asked a calendar hanging above the workbench. On the calendar, a blonde anglo in a cheerleader skirt posed with her red-nippled breasts outthrust. The calendar date read 1973. "Will you drink with a man who has lost everything to the war? Who exists now only in melancholy and loneliness?"

"You have not lost it all." Roman shoved the old man. He tottered back in his chair, then fell forward. "But if the soldiers hear you, you will. Be quiet and sleep!"

"The hero and the beautiful girl," the driver sneered. "Without the old man to chaperone. So romantic, Roman and his Juliet--"

"Shut up and sleep." The teenager glanced at his watch, then turned to Rivas. "In an hour, it is light and a truck comes. You and the others must be ready. Go, go now, wake them."

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As Rivas hurried up the stairs, the driver shouted out: "My lovely little rich girl! Come back, I--"

A rifle clattered and Rivas heard a groan. Glass broke. She looked back and saw Roman with his rifle in his hands, standing over the driver. The driver tried to rise. Roman raised the butt of the rifle, threatening to smash the bleeding man in the head again. Rivas continued to the roof and stumbled into the rain.

Rich girl. She had heard it before. Always the comrades thought of her as the beautiful rich girl. Never as a fighter, never as a woman who had abandoned the comfort and privileges of the elite to take up the rifle, to throw her destiny into the revolutionary struggle. Yet she had risked her life for night after night to lure the Marines into the trap on the Paseo Escalo??n-- more than her life if the the police had captured her and taken her into the horrors of the torture cells where death came as a mercy.

Looking to the south, hearing the faint sounds of the fighting, she wished she could have joined the squad of fighters who alone attacked the army, gambling their lives to throw panic into the outposts and divert the soldiers from the road to the north-- no, she would not fight like that, crawling through the darkness with a rifle, perhaps dying unseen and unknown, only one more corpse in the war. If she must, yes. But she thought of all the actions possible in the capitol, with the cameras of news teams there to flash the blood and horror of revolutionary justice to all the televisions of the world--

Then the rain came down and she stood in the cold rain

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cursing-- not her beauty, for her beauty had trapped the Marines and her beauty would again serve the struggle. She cursed the stupidity and arrogance of the pretenders who called themselves fighters and denied a rightful place in the struggle for women of imagination and daring. Men fought in the revolution and declared their alliance to all the other comrades of the world-- but their Soviet ideology changed nothing: they remained chained to hundreds of years of male arrogance. They thought only they could fight, as if aiming and firing a rifle or a pistol required a man's strength. Castro, the Sandinista commandantes, the Salvadorian leaders, the individual guerrillas-- all of them.

To strike the fascists of her country she must first prove herself to the leadership of the struggle. Prove herself to be more than a beautiful girl from a wealthy family. Only then would she win a place in the future of the revolution.

Loud laughter woke Niles. Though the falling rain, he heard voices a few steps above him on the on the crest of the hill. One voice talked over the others. The man mimicked the sound of an automatic rifle and then parodied, "Don't kill me! Please, no, no, no--"

The man made the sound of the machinegun again, then pronounced, "That is how we killed the gringos."

Dead Marines.

Niles listened as the loud mouth continued his entertainment of

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the guerrillas. He told them the action had won the attention of the media everywhere in the world and the action had cost only one-- and here he used an odd word-- of his pollolitos, meaning 'little chickens' or 'little boys'. But no matter. Now they would all be movie stars in Europe.

After a few minutes, the voice drifted away, the loudmouth and other guerrillas walking north on the ridgeline.

The sentries speculated on the easy duty of a Zona Rosa action. "That's the war to fight. Attack in a truck. Sit in a dry house and watch the news on television. Be a big man to all the world."

"They won't be stupid like that anymore," another guerrilla countered. "Now they will stay in their embassy. They will never come out."

"Don't they have airplanes? Shoot down the airplanes at the airport. Don't they have a country? Attack in their country. They attack us. Attack them"

An hour passed. The rain died away. Niles saw the eastern horizon graying with dawn. Then, in the silence and calm, he heard movement on the road one hundred meters below him. Brush blocked his sight but he heard boots splashing through the mud and metal clinking against metal. He recognized the sound of a belt of cartridges clacking against the receiver of a squad automatic weapon. A squad leader issued a command in a low voice and he heard the soldiers thrashing into the roadside brush.

Above him, a silhouette appeared against the graying sky. One of the sentries looked down at the road, then turned away. The

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sentries resumed their conversation. Silently, slowly, Niles slid backward through the mud, following the same path he had taken up the hill. He paused every few seconds and rearranged the trash and leaves, erasing all trace of his passing as he snaked back to the other Marines.

Before dawn, a battered pickup truck left the garage and lurched a few hundred meters through the streets to a rutted dirt lane. Lydia Rivas lay flat in the back of the truck, a black plastic tarp over her back. She peered out through a rusted hole in the side of the truck. Chickens fluttered and a dog barked as the old man driving the truck backed into a garage made of warped boards and scraps of sheet metal. The old man dragged the double doors of the garage closed, then limped to the back of the shack and eased aside a sheet of rusted corrugated steel.

Rivas went first. She checked the pouch holding two spare magazines of 9mm cartridges for her Uzi, then crawled out the hole and slid down a muddy hillside to the half-darkness of a ravine choked with mud and trash. She heard the others cursing as they thrashed through brush.

Splashing into water stinking of excrement, she crouched and waited, her eyes searching the tangled brush. Behind her, she heard kicking through the trash and breaking branches. A shadow moved. She pivoted and pointed her Uzi.

"Don't," a young man told her. He seemed to wear mud. Mud

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plastered his clothing and equipment. Only his Galil rifle remained clean. "I'm your contact."

"Where now?"

"This is shit!" Rivera called out.

"Be quiet!" the guerrilla hissed. "Are all of you here?"

Rivas counted and nodded. "All six of us. Where do we go now?"

"Now you walk." The guerrilla pushed through branches, following the flowing mud and trash. In some places, they dropped into holes chest deep. Rivas kept her Uzi above the water. Above the ravine, she saw steep hillsides strewn with trash. Smoke drifted from cooking fires. She heard the voices of children and women calling out to one another. To the other side, she saw white-washed walls and tile roofs.

The ravine opened to a fast-flowing brown river. Across the churning water, Rivas saw hills and open fields. Retreating, she pushed into the concealment of the brush and trees along the riverbank. But the guide hissed to her:

"Here." He pointed to a rope. "Move fast." Knots secured the rope to the exposed roots of trees along the water. Cinching the sling of her Uzi tight, Rivas pulled herself hand-over-hand through the current, using all her strength. The force of the current and the harsh fiber of the rope hurt her soft hands but she moved fast--any Army patrol had a clear view of them.

A hundred meters ahead, another guerrilla waited. Without speaking, he motioned her into the brush. They crouched there in

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silence as the others came.

"I lost my pistol," Rivera complained. "That was a good Browning--"

"Shut up," Rivas told him.

The mud-smearred guerrilla came last. With a knife, he cut the rope away from the roots, letting the current carry away the short lengths. Then, holding his Galil above his head, he crouched down in the water, letting the water sweep over his head, washing all the filth from his hair and uniform and equipment. Clean, he grinned to his comrade and Rivas. He avoided looking at the others from the city as he pointed to a trail running parallel to the river.

They pushed through the rain-heavy overhanging branches and walked to the north. Rivas took second in line, ten meters behind the pointman.

LOUDMOUTH LEADER AT 500-- NOISE ON ROAD 515-- WHAT YOU HEAR/SEE?

A shatterwork-pattern of shadow and brilliant dawnlight patterned the pad of paper. Printing out the words, Niles questioned Stark. They sprawled in the mud under the branches of the fallen tree. They could not chance whispers with the sentries positioned above and guerrillas below on the road. APPRX PLATOON DEPLOYED, the lieutenant answered in his precise hand-lettering. OVERHEAR ZERO VOICE.

BOZO JOKED OF KILLING MARINES-- THINK WE GOT GANG!

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The lieutenant nodded. He pointed outside. An arm's distance away, Vatsek and Alvarez maintained their watch of Route Seven. The lieutenant motioned passing the field note outside for the non-coms to read. Niles nodded and started out with the note.

A hiss from Vatsek stopped him. Seconds passed. Two shots popped in the distance. Two shots answered from the ridge above them. One of the sentries shouted out. Shots sounded somewhere to the north.

"G's coming up the road," the sergeant whispered.

Niles snaked into the glaring light. A clear eastern horizon allowed the rising sun to illuminate the landscape, creating a vista like a tourist postcard: undulating lines of green and brown mountains, shadowy mist-filled canyons, the trees and brush around the Marines glittering with millions of hanging raindrops. But banks of clouds remained overhead. The black western horizon indicated the approach of another storm.

Squinting into the glare, he saw a line of men and women struggling through the mud of the road. Two carried rifles and wore camouflage fatigues. He counted six others in street clothes-- four young men, two women. A woman leading the line carried an Uzi submachinegun. He could not see what weapons the others carried.

Captain Niles grinned, scabs of mud flaking off his face. He pointed to the printing on the field note:

THINK WE GOT GANG.

Passing the note onto Alvarez, he handsignaled for a radio report and whispered, "Alert airborne."

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Stark took his position behind the Nikons. After keying the coded alert and receiving the confirmation, Alvarez slipped on head-phones and switched on the ultra-directional microphone. He and the Stark would man the technical equipment while Niles and Vatsek provided security.

On the road, the line of young men and women stopped at the edge of the surging river. The two guerrillas stayed apart from the six others. A young woman-- perhaps older than the others, wearing tight designer jeans, a mud-soaked shirt, and a scarf drawing back her hair from her fine-boned features-- stepped out onto an outjutting fragment of bridge and shouted. She raised her Uzi over her head.

"Comrades!" she declared. "I am Marianela of the Annihilation Squad. We are the ones who executed the gringo Marines!"

A middle-aged, overweight guerrilla in new camouflage fatigues stepped from concealment. "It's them. Get them across."

Captain Niles recognized the voice of the loudmouth braggart from the night before.

Guerrillas appeared on the road, some with ropes. In the next few minutes, the urban group struggled through the river. The braggart embraced the teenagers as they emerged from the river, kissing Marianela. She twisted away from his embrace and scrambled up the embankment to the other guerrillas. Niles saw the young woman stand several steps away as the braggart introduced the teenagers to the mountain guerrillas.

The cameras and microphone recorded the introductions-- every

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face, every name.

With his arm around the second girl, the braggart pointed up the slope. The teenage comrades gathered together.

"Down!" Alvarez whispered to the other Marines as the first guerrilla started up the mountainside. As one, the Marines went to the earth, covering their equipment, shifting to aim their weapons.

Thrashing through the brush, using their rifles to part branches, the guerrillas followed the switchbacking path up the steep mountainside. The local guerrillas divided their attention between the muddy trail and the sky, glancing up through the trees every few steps.

The overweight braggart led the teenagers. The teenagers stared around at the undergrowth, slipping and lurching, grabbing branches for support. Talking loud, pointing like a tour guide, the braggart told them they would be in Honduras today, Cuba tomorrow, Europe very soon.

As the groups passed, Niles studied their feet and pants, contrasting the faded, stone-washed fatigues and fraying boots of the older guerrillas to the jeans and tennis shoes of the teenagers.

The teenagers had not come prepared for a long-distance march. Either they did not have the equipment or did not know what to expect.

Amateurs, Niles thought. Student radicals gone terrorist. Teenage murderers of teenage Marines. Commanded by a loudmouth with the hots for the prettiest girl.

When the guerrillas passed the lookout position, silence

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returned. Niles nodded to Alvarez and the sergeant keyed his radio hand-set. Stark disassembled his equipment in a rush, first removing the film from the cameras and triple-sealing the rolls in plastic bags. On the radio, Alvarez received a confirmation code and signaled Niles.

Airborne.

Waiting until the others had repacked their equipment and shouldered the loads, Niles led the pursuit of the guerrillas. Vatsek remained behind for a moment to police the area, searching for bits of paper or forgotten gear, sweeping away marks in the mud and grass, rebending branches that had served as living camouflage. The touch-up took only seconds.

Niles followed the path toward the crest, then cut to the east, signaling Stark to continue straight up. Snaking into his position of the night before, Niles put the aluminum stock of the silenced Commando to his shoulder and rose to a crouch. He heard boots pacing on the crest, the soles sucking from the mud with every step. To his left, the captain saw Stark-- his M16 fitted with an Interdynamics silencer-- prone on the pathway. Niles crept forward, searching for clear ground in the litter of plastic and cans, sliding his boots through the grass and mud.

A few steps short of the top, Niles stopped. He saw a straw hat. He went prone and continued forward.

Two sentries watched the highway. One man had the weathered face and the sinewy, knotted-vein arms of a campesino. With his old G-3 rifle slung across his body, he stood with his scarred,

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blunt-fingered hands crossed over the receiver. The other man-- actually a boy-- had only one eye, his left profile a mass of keloid scars, the eye socket covered by a band of black cloth. They wore camouflage shirts, patched polyester pants, and military gear captured from the Army of El Salvador.

The one-eyed boy had his hand on the grip of his M16 rifle. Niles shot him first, the 5.3gram bullet punching into the boy's temple. Dying on his feet, he took one step and fell.

Startling, the older man spun as he heard the mechanical clack of Niles jerking back the charging handle of his Commando to chamber the next Interdynamics round. Niles rushed forward, pushing the silencer against the campesino's chest and firing the silent bullet through his heart. Simultaneously, he grabbed the heavy rifle and pulled it from the man's hands. The Salvadorian fell backwards, his eyes fluttering, his mouth opening to cry out, then he died with his shout in his throat as Stark jammed the muzzle of his rifle in the Salvadorian's right eye and fired a second point-blank round.

They moved fast, following in the footprints of the guerrillas. Rain fell again, the first drops rattling through the overhanging trees, then a downpour coming in a steady roar. But the low sun lit the ridge brilliantly, the trees glowing, the rain streaking silver as the Marines rushed north.

Niles saw the back of the last guerrilla and went down flat. Behind him, the other Marines stopped. They advanced in alternating dashes, the captain covering Lieutenant Stark until he received the signal, then sprinting past the lieutenant, the falling rain

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covering the sound of their boots

A kilometer later, they heard the distant rotorthrob. Guerrillas shouted to one another. Niles crept forward and watched the guerrillas scattering to cover. The teenagers from the capitol remained together.

On a signal from Niles, the Marines shifted forward and formed a line blocking the retreat of the guerrillas. Alvarez radio-keyed the code of their position.

Helicopters appeared from the clouds. Circling the mountain, the troopships followed the ridgeline from the south to the north as gunners tried to spot the guerrillas. A doorgunner raked the trees with blind auto-fire, the heavy 7.62mm NATO slugs tearing through the branches and hammering the earth.

No one moved. The machinegun fire continued a few hundred meters to the north. Unseen beyond the trees, a helicopter circled, the doorgunners firing wildly into the mountain.

The Marines and guerrillas heard the rotor-flare of a landing. The turbine shrieked as the helicopter lifted off, then another helicopter descended. Alvarez radioed the exact position of the guerrillas to the south of the landings.

Two rifle squads of Atlacatl airborne troopers blocked the trail to Honduras.

The leader of the Morazon guerrillas went to the urban squad. Niles watched the leader direct the braggart to take another route.

Confused, his mouth shut, the braggart thrashed from the trail, blundering down the steep slope. The teenagers followed.

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Niles crept to Alvarez. With the rotorthrob and machinegun fire to hide his voice, he whispered, "Tell them keep all fire off the west side of the ridge. The gang's going west. We will follow and disable. We will radio again for the soldiers to make the capture."

The Marines paralleled the descent of the teenage guerrillas. Rain continued, the mountainside flowing with runoff. Trying to lead the group, the braggart fell again and again. He rose covered with mud and cursing.

"The soldiers will hear!" A young man cautioned him.

A firefight on the ridge silenced them. Bullets zipped overhead, cutting through the treetops. The braggart dropped to his hands and knees on the slope. Niles saw the pretty girl named Marianela jerk at his collar:

"Get up!" She spat out. One handed, she pointed her Uzi at the distant firefight, her eyes searching for a target.

Maneuvering ahead of the teenagers, Niles crawled under a low bush. He watched the braggart over the sights of his Commando and waited. Firing continued on the ridge. The girl forced the overweight man to his feet. Another burst of stray fire startled the braggart and Niles squeezed off the shot.

The silent bullet smashed through the man's left knee. Screaming, he rolled in the mud, clutching at his shattered kneecap.

The teenagers took cover in the mud, crawling sideways behind the shelter of rocks. But no more bullets came. Marianela helped their leader to his feet.

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"Alfaro, come here. I can't carry this fat man alone. Shut up, Gonzalo! Stop crying!"

A boy rushed to the man's side. Staggering, they helped him down the mountainside.

Stark signaled Niles and continued downhill. As the teenagers lurched toward Niles, he went flat, molding himself to the roots and uneven ground under the bush. He watched the three urban guerrillas walk past him, their legs brushing past the branches of the bush concealing him. Turning, the soaked leaves under him making no noise, he aimed at the girl's leg.

Marianela paused, one foot up, the other downslope to brace her as he helped the wounded man down. The bullet punched through her ankle.

Screaming, falling back, she sprawled against a tree. The boy dropped the fat leader and went to help the young woman. She waved him away as she struggled to her feet: "Take him! I can still walk. If they get him, he'll betray all of us."

Niles waited. He watched as the young woman braced herself behind a pine and looked for the sniper who had shot her. But her eyes scanned the slope high above him. Riflefire continued on the ridge, the doorgunners of the orbiting troopships strafing the guerrillas as they retreated from the Atlacatl squads.

One of the teenagers screamed, his voice trembling with pain as he cried out for help. "My leg! Marianela, help. I've been shot, there's soldiers here somewhere--"

"Quiet!" she shouted back. Walking on her wounded ankle,

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gasping with each step, she managed to stumble after the others.

Niles moved again, this time at an angle to the mountainside. He crawled, sometimes slid, letting gravity pull him through the mud and rotting leaves, circling to the left of the teenagers as they struggled down the mountain. Their wounds had slowed them to a painful stumble.

The second girl cried out as an Interdynamics bullet wounded her.

"I'll kill you!" Marianela shouted out, firing wild, trying to kill the unseen sniper. 9mm slugs tore through the branches and whined off rocks as Niles joined his sergeants.

"Where's Alfaro?" A boy called out. "Alfaro!"

Vatsek pushed Alfaro's face into the mud while Alvarez looped green nylon rope-- of the same type used by the Salvadorian Army-- around the boy's ankles, then his wrists. Strips of tape-- purchased in San Salvador-- went over the boy's eyes and mouth. They left him there.

The three marines closed on their targets, immediately immobilizing and taping the braggart, then another young man, then the other girl. But Marianela and the last boy eluded them.

Dragging her wounded foot, Lydia Rivas clawed through the mud. Rocks scraped across her ankle and she shuddered with the pain but she continued down the slope until a ledge of rock sheltered her. There, she stopped and listened. Automatic rifles fired on the hill

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above her and helicopters continued circling above the trees.

Someone gasped and slid through the brush. She saw Tonio-- the boy who had driven the pickup truck of riflemen on the Escalo??n-- struggling through a tangle of brush. Blood poured from a wound to his right knee.

A bullet had punched into his knee, making running or walking-- even crawling-- impossible. A bullet had broken Gonzalo's knee. And a bullet had punched into her ankle. All non-lethal wounds-- that made escape through the mountains impossible.

The Army wanted them alive. When she had heard the helicopters, she had feared death. Now she realized they would not allow her to die. Rivas felt terror seizing her, overcoming her anger and adrenalin, paralyzing her mind as images of corpses disfigured and mutilated by torture flashed through her imagination-- capture meant hell.

Pressing her body to the earth, holding the Uzi ahead of her to keep the barrel out of the mud, she slid downhill. If she could reach the bottom of the hill, if she could hide

Tonio thrashed through brush as he slid and fell down the slope, gasping, crying out every time he jarred his wounded leg. He stared around him at the hillside. Bullets cut through the trees above him and he cringed, covering his head with his arms and rolling down the hillside. He cried out, "Marianela! Help me! I can't walk. Please"

Let the Army take him. Rivas stayed low and moved away from him. Looking back, she saw him pushing himself upright with a

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stick, trying to use the stick as a crutch.

A shadow moved in the grass. She saw the line of a weapon and an arm. Almost invisible in the mud and leaves, the soldier crawled from the brush, a weapon in his hands. She recognized the black tube of a silencer on an M16 rifle.

Rivas shifted, slowly turning, ignoring the pain in her ankle, forcing herself to breathe slowly and evenly even as the pain seared through her legs and back. The soldier pointed his rifle at Tonio and Rivas saw his black hands and face-- not black with camouflage face paint, but black by African heritage.

An American. The fascists had sent Americans to hunt down the killers of the Marines in San Salvador. On the Paseo General Escalona, she had not used a weapon. Now she would kill her first American-- and any other American soldier blocking her escape.

Slowly, she brought up her Uzi-- but too late. The falling rain covered the sound of the rifle as the American shot Tonio, her comrade screaming and falling, rolling through the brush. She jerked up her Uzi to aim and the magazine scraped on a rock. The American turned as she fired. ***

Firing betrayed the position of the assassins. Niles spotted Marianela prone in the mud, her Uzi's metal stock unfolded and shouldered. Blood flowed from her bullet wound. Less than twenty meters away, the last teenage boy cried and pleaded, dragging himself through the brush on his elbows. Both his legs glistened with blood.

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Marianela tried to kill Stark. The Marine lay flat behind the shelter of a low rock, trapped. Aiming two and three shot bursts at the lieutenant, the young woman skipped bullets off the rock protecting him, bullets tearing through his backpack, smashing cameras and lenses.

If the lieutenant moved, if he raised his rifle or tried to withdraw, she would kill him.

Niles passed his weapon to Vatsek with the one-word instruction, "Wait."

Shrugging out of his light pack and web gear, Niles crawled fast to the side, gouging his legs on rocks and dead sticks as slid down the slick mountainside. But Marianela moved, rolling down the slope, her Uzi locked in her hands. She hit a tree and gasped, but did not stop moving, crawling behind the tree for cover.

His speed down the slope made noise. Marianela looked back at Stark, then her head whipped toward Niles, her eyes locking on him as she brought up the Uzi. Throwing himself to the side, he heard the simultaneous blasts of the submachinegun and the rip of the bullets tearing past him-- and the firing stopped. The submachine gun empty, she jerked another thirty-round magazine from the pouch on her belt--

And Niles lunged at her, one hand going for her eyes, to cover her eyes, to protect the fiction that Salvadorians pursued her, but she battered his arm with the Uzi, hitting him once in the side of the head and their eyes met for the long instant as he grabbed her wrist and wrenched the weapon aside and drove his fist into her gut,

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doubling her. In seconds, the Marines had bound and taped her.

The Marines left the Salvadorians for the Atlacatl troopers to find.