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The intercom buzzed. Quezada picked up the telephone and heard dot-dash code in the background-- he knew Salazar called from the radio room before he heard the young man's voice. He splashed across the courtyard to the small office where Salazar leaned over the table, pencilling down the sequences as the monitor blared out the scratchy dot-dash staccato of the coded transmission.

Quezada understood a line about Americans. The transmission ended and Salazar replayed the tape, correcting his rough copy. Then he tapped out the confirmation to the distant radio.

"What is it about the Americans?"

"There was an attack. What it was, I am not sure-- one moment, sir. One moment and I will make sense of this."

Waiting as Salazar worked with the message and the code books, Quezada tried to think of nothing. He turned and stared out the office window to the rain flowing over the stones of the courtyard.

In times like this, when he remained in the safety of the school while his fighters risked their lives in action, he cursed his injuries. The loss of his arm and his eye made him an old man at only thirty one years old. Ten years before, wounded by the bullets of the National Guard-- his arm smashed, a bullet fracture in his skull, a hole through his leg-- they took him alive and tortured him until he prayed for death. He served the revolution by remaining

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silent. Months later, after the amputation of his arm, an exchange of captured diplomats for prisoners freed him. He went to Cuba as an emaciated, one-armed wreck of a man worth nothing in a battle. Refusing to abandon the struggle, he studied radios and learned to encrypt communications. East Germans taught him to organize networks of agents. The Cubans taught him the tricks of discovering government informers. He went to Tegucigalpa and ran intelligence operations in northern Nicaragua, bus drivers collecting information from sources in towns along their routes, Quezada typing coded reports with one hand, then dispatching the summaries to the Sandinista forces in the mountains.

In the last days of the Revolution, the National Guard executed an intelligence director in Managua and the Sandinistas sent for Quezada. He sped south with a staff of clerks and radio operators, the trucks loaded with equipment-- and Somoza's air force hit the convoy on the flat, exposed highway outside of Guapinol. A fleck of steel shrapnel destroyed his eye.

No more combat for him. He had fought and lost twice. Now he taught teenagers to fight in the wars of liberation. They fought in El Salvador and Guatemala while he waited to hear of their victories-- or deaths.

"I cannot decypher all of it--"

"What? Who sent it?"

"Marianela--"

Lydia.

-- but I cannot make sense of the last name. I think she has

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confused the codes--"

"She was not one of the technicians. What is it she sent?"

"That she fought the Americans. That she is free. In the mountains."

"Americans?"

"That word is positive. She repeated it."

"And what of the others? The others in her unit?"

"No word. Or no words that I can understand."

The telephone rang. Salazar took the call, then told the colonel, "It is the gate. The two Cubans are here."

"Radio back. Tell her to recheck her coding and repeat the message. Call me immediately when you have the information."

Outside, the rain had paused. Streams of water still poured from the roof tiles. Quezada went to the entry and watched as Pazos left the van. Condori waited at the steering wheel.

"Where are my fighters?" he called out.

"Octavio, I bring you grief. I would have called you the moment I received the reports, but you know the telephones are not secure. I do not want the CIA to hear what I say. So I came myself to tell you of this tragedy. The army attacked the comrades escorting your fighters from Salvador. What reports we have, and they are incomplete, I understand it is maddening not to know the fate of those brave young men and women, but the report is that they did not escape the attack."

The round face of the Cuban twisted into a theatrical expression of grief, his jowls quivering, his eyes downcast as he

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continued, "What terrible sacrifices the struggle takes. I hope that coming generations read of the wars of liberation with awe and reverence, knowing that uncounted millions of brave fighters suffered unimaginable hardship and death to break the chains of imperialism and capitalism, so that the peoples of the world would live in freedom and know the--"

"I want to know. Are my fighters alive or dead?"

"That, I do not know."

"Were they killed? Are they scattered in the mountains? Is the army hunting them?"

"That is possible! Our information was that they had been attacked by the Atlacatl and that they had failed to reach the meeting place. Of course it is possible they are separated from the others. There may be hope yet."

"Pazos, they had some training, some experience. But I trained them to work only in San Salvador. They had no equipment for the mountains. They know no one there. If they are pursued in the mountains, I don't believe they have hope."

"But some may return. We can hope. And if they are gone, that is cost of war. We must make sacrifices and look to the future. Some of us will be martyred, it cannot be avoided if--"

"Some of us make sacrifices, others make slogans. Come back when you have information on my fighters--"

The Cuban quit his act. "You, Octavio, do not issue the orders. I realize that the loss of this group of young people may be difficult for you, but do not risk losing this--" Pazos gestured

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around to the courtyard and offices of the hacienda. "--for a stupid outburst of anger. If you remember your role in the organization, you will remain a commander. If not, look for a position in Managua. Hundreds of veterans with disabilities work in the government. You can work in the bureaucracy. You can direct secretaries. You can charm the girls with stories of the war. You will not be lonely. Or you can hear of your new assignment, the next project to kill Americans, to strike terror against the facist--"

"You do not order me, Pazos. No assignments. No orders."

"No orders? Then no money. Or do you believe your government could somehow find the money to finance this camp? And if they are to provide the money, they will review the political implications of your camp. Are you willing to face that? You and I and your friend Borge are in agreement--" Pazos meant Toma??s Borge, Minister of the Interior and chief of the secret police. Borge also oversaw the various expatriate revolutionary groups headquartered in Nicaragua.

"-- but will everyone in the Junta agree that assassination and terror is the path to revolution?"

Quezada realized that the Cuban had won this confrontation. The DGI financed his school. Their money-- actually Soviet money-- paid his salary and the salaries of every clerk and instructor. Their money bought the weapons and the ammunition, the houses and cars for the units, the commuter planes that shuttled recruits between their countries and the school. Commandante Borges had agreed to the school if the financing came from Cuba. If Quezada

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rejected the money, then he must go to the Sandinista leadership for approval and money. Most of the Junta members had no knowledge of his school. When they travelled to other nations, they could truthfully deny any involvement in Central American terror.

"Your money," Quezada told him. "Does not buy the lives of my fighters. I do not send them out to death. So stop the stupid slogans."

"Octavio, my friend," Pazos grasped his shoulder. "Forgive me, this is a difficult moment for both of us. I tried to honor the dead and I only offended you. You knew those young people. I know you were very close to the girl--"

"That has nothing to do with this--"

"You think I only make slogans and go to parties? You are wrong. I also take my chances for the cause. When I travel to Europe, when I meet with our comrades in the Middle East, I risk my life. The CIA is everywhere. If we can forget our differences, if we can forget our losses in this disaster, we can fight together. Of course I do not think I buy your fighters. It is my pleasure-- and my duty-- to contribute to the international struggle. Please, let us end this argument. I bring you a new weapon. A weapon that will kill one hundred Americans at once, destroy their entire embassy, leave it only a ruin."

"What is this? A missile?"

"Forty rockets. A Soviet BM-21 rocket launcher."

"And will the Soviets send an artillery officer to aim the launcher?"

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"This launcher is different. There is a transmitter and a computer to aim the launcher. First the crew positions the launcher. Then an advance team will go to the embassy with the transmitter. The transmitter sends the electronic signal and the computer aims the launcher. The advance team withdraws to safety."

"There is no need for a spotter to correct the fire?"

"Every rocket is perfect. When the time is right, they radio or telephone the launcher crew to fire the rockets. Before the army can even start searching for the fighters, they will be gone."

"How do we know that the electronics and the computer work?"

"The technology is proven. I saw it work. In recognition of our victory over the Marines, the Islamic Jihad will send this gift to Salvador. Say the word, provide a crew to man the weapon, it is yours."

"Why do they not use their own fighters?"

"Mohammedans in San Salvador? Octavio, you joke."

"Colonel!" Salazar called out.

Rushing back to the communications room, Quezada heard another coded message on the monitor. "Is it her?"

"Yes, colonel. She is transmitting. But another message came in. From an agent in San Salvador. They have information on the"

"Where are they?"

"In prison."

Salazar gave him a typed page. The Salvadorian airborne troops had attacked the capitalinos and the escort group only a few kilo-

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meters south of the Honduran border. The soldiers had captured all of the urban squad. The agent reported a total of six prisoners. A courier would follow with additional information.

All of the squad taken prisoner-- how could that happen? They had carried weapons. The soldiers would shoot to kill. Had they surrendered? Impossible. They had executed American Marines. They knew the regime would make an example of them. Had the army somehow caught them sleeping? But even when they slept, they held weapons. Quezada had taught all of them that a pistol meant the difference between quick death in combat and a slow, miserable death in a cell.

But the army took them alive.

The dispatch of a courier meant information that could not be radioed. Without a doubt, the American spy agencies had recorded the coded transmission from San Salvador. Perhaps they had already broken the code. But the courier could not be scanned and decoded.

In a few days, Quezada would know the details behind the capture of the capitalinos.

Only Lydia Rivas had escaped. She had radioed of Americans. What did the Americans do in this?

"Marianela is repeating the message," Salazar told him. "She is free. She is with a force in the mountains. The Americans captured the others. The contact in Caba@as does not respond to her calls."

"That is because," Pazos said from the doorway. "We alerted all the contacts. The contacts in Caba@as are already gone. Why should they wait for the death squad?"

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"Radio the code for a plane. We will get her out immediately."

"So Marianela escaped?"

"Somehow." Quezada left the communications room and closed the door behind him.

Pazos put an arm over Quezada's shoulders. "It was not a complete disaster. You did not lose your beautiful Lydia Rivas. That would have been a tragedy for any man will blood in his veins. Come, let me tell you of this rocket launcher. Forty rockets, electronically guided, each with a warhead of fifty kilos of explosive"

Shacks and red mud streets blurred beneath the troopship. Niles pressed his face against the rain-streaked plexiglass and looked ahead. Against the gray sky and the hills of the colonias south of Tegucigalpa, he saw beacon lights flashing on the terminal of Toncontin International. He took his pack from the floor and slipped the straps over his shoulders. Stark and Alvarez followed his signal and assembled their equipment and weapons. Vatsek slept with his pack on, his M16/203 in his hands, his head against the bulkhead housing the transmission, oblivious to the turbine noise.

The pilot spoke through the intercom. "There's transportation waiting at the airport."

"Imagine that, limousine service."

"It's a truck." The pilot ignored Niles' attempt at a joke. Unlike the Alabama pilot who had flown the insertion flight, this

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pilot spoke without an accent, his words correct and neutral. "They want you out of this aircraft and into that truck immediately."

The horizon tilted as the Huey cranked through a half-turn and flared, then dropped to the asphalt in a high-angle descent. Niles saw headlights leave one of the Honduran Army hangers. A panel van sped across the rain-slick asphalt and stopped outside the rotor circle of the helicopter.

The pilot clicked on the intercom but Niles threw the headset off and stepped out the sidedoor. Running to the van, he threw open the double doors and shouted back to the others, "Move it! You want to make the cover of Time?"

"No journalists here" A voice commented.

Niles turned to see Colonel Devlin-- dressed in sunglasses, a Hawaiian print shirt, denims, and running shoes-- waiting in the van. A camera in a case hung by a strap over his shoulder.

"It is Mr. Marvel," Niles used the colonel's code name from their Vietnam operations. "You look like a journalist. I would not have know you."

"This is my tourist disguise. Just talked with the Salvadorian commander. He told me it was a perfect operation."

"My opinion exactly. We put them down, one through seven. They don't know what happened to them-- and neither does el commandante."

The other Marines stepped into the van, rain dripping from their boonie hats. Behind them, the helicopter lifted away, the rotors throwing a horizontal spray of rainwater against the van.

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"Gentlemen," Niles shouted out. "You all know our distinguished visitor."

Vatsek-- his fatigues plastered with mud, his face and hair and hands smeared with green and black grease paint-- raised his hand in a slow salute but the colonel extended his hand, shaking hands with Vatsek, then Alvarez.

The van sped away with the Marines. The colonel waited until the rotor-noise faded, then reached into a plastic bag under the van's bench seat. "Brought the squad a reward. For service beyond the call of duty--"

"Air express beer!" Vatsek took a can and jerked the tab. He gulped, foam running over his face and throat. Emptying the first can, he took another. "Four six packs ... why didn't you bring enough for the other guys?"

Devlin laughed as he distributed cans. "In Washington, they cater the meetings, but this is the best I could do for this conference. The Salvadorians made the pick-up. Not a single serious injury to the prisoners. How did the monitoring go?"

"Pictures and tapes," Niles answered.

Setting down their weapons, Stark and Alvarez shrugged out of their packs. Devlin noticed the bullet holes in Stark's pack. He examined the tears, slashes, and holes. "What happened to this equipment, Lieutenant? Looks like you encountered a chainsaw."

"A submachinegun, sir."

"An Uzi in the hands of a beautiful girl," Alvarez added.

"A girl did this? You were wearing this pack at the time this

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damage occurred?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are very fortunate to not to be a casualty."

"Not luck," Niles laughed.

"A rock," Vatsek added.

"However," Stark explained, embarrassed. "My Nikons were not so fortunate--" Smashed cameras and lenses spilled out of plastic bags. He found a smaller bag out and took out four canisters of film. "Group shots and individual portraits."

"And I got all their talk." Alvarez handed a cassette to the colonel. "They brag about shooting our men."

"Excellent."

The roar of a descending jet overwhelmed their voices. Tires shrieked as the airliner landed. The van continued along a straight road, then slowed. They heard a soldier shout out, "Alto!" The van stopped. The Marines did not speak until the van lurched into motion. Though the small windows in the double doors, Niles saw the beacon light and orange control tower of the Toncontin terminal-- they had not left the military side of the airfield.

"We're not going back to that hanger?" Niles asked. "No. Nor will you return to the base. As far as the base records go, you are reassigned."

"To where?"

"You'll be operating from ... a hotel here on the airfield. Our men took all your personal gear to the rooms."

"A hotel?" Niles asked. "We just walk in like this? Weapons

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and Atlacatl uniforms?"

"Maids and room service?" Vatsek took another beer. "Satellite TV? A disco on the roof? A weight-training room?"

Devlin laughed. "Not quite. I should have said, 'a transit facility'. Rooms, beds, showers. The most attractive feature is the high security. There are three guarded gates between you and the street. Also, there is a telephone with a scrambler. I can call you direct."

The van whipped through a half-turn and then reversed. Steel rattled against steel as an automatic door raised. The van backed into a garage. Devlin stepped out first, then motioned the others to follow. Niles saw only the blank walls of other buildings outside before the van pulled away and the door came down.

Inside the garage, Niles saw Vatsek's four-wheel-drive van and Alvarez' old pick-up truck. Tools and spare tires hung on the walls. A gas pump provided fuel.

"We operate out of here? What's the operation?"

"Against that gang's headquarters in Nicaragua--"

"Alright!" Vatsek laughed. "We're on them. Search and destroy."

"The U S of A gets serious!" Alvarez added.

"When will we hear what that gang knows?" Niles asked.

Unlocking a steel door, Devlin led them into a hallway. He pointed through doorways. "Put your equipment anywhere. All the rooms are the same. And all the rooms have televisions. The Salvadorians intend to hold a press conference and show the gang to

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the world."

"What? They're going to broadcast this? Look, colonel--"

"It was not my decision--"

-- as far as the leaders and the organization know, that gang is dead. Wiped out by an airborne assault. But if they know we took that gang alive, they'll break up their organization and scatter their people. We'll never track it back to the headquarters--"

"It was a political decision"

Niles looked to the other Marines. Stark turned away and put his rifle and pack of shattered cameras in a room. Alvarez shook his head. Vatssek curled his lip in a sneer and silently mouthed the words, 'Fuck politicians'.

A political decision. A political decision gave the murderers to the Salvadorians for a press conference-- instead of a long and exacting interrogation to expose every member of the organization. Niles had no confidence in the Salvadorian police or military to interrogate the gang-- the Salvadorians had a reputation for torture. A prisoner suffering a beating or burning or shock treatment said anything to stop the pain. And if information came from whatever suffering the Salvadorians inflicted on the killers, action on the information required another political decision from Washington.

Devlin continued into a lounge. He set his briefcase on a table and snapped open the locks. "We could do nothing to stop it. All I can tell you is that it was decided at the highest level.

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However--"

"You told me yourself that they had a network going from San Salvador to Cuba. Put us on it. Call north on that direct line and get that authorization. We'll take who we can before the Salvadorians put the gang on television. Give us the information you have and we'll track it back to the head man."

"Exactly!" Devlin took several folders from his briefcase. "I didn't fly two thousand miles to deliver that beer. Here are maps of Nicaragua and Palacaguina. Photos of the camp. Background information on a Cuban named Pazos. We think he's the director of the gang. Ten thousand dollars, ten thousand Lempiras. Don't get caught, but if you do, bribe your way out. There will be more money when you need it. Also, there will be back up personnel available to you. Specialists, security personnel on contract to the agency."

He pushed the folders of information and the stacks of cash across to Niles. "This will be exactly the action you wanted. You go into Nicaragua, you will take that Cuban, and we will close down his gang."