

## RECON STRIKE

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Light blazed from the west as the sun passed through a clear band of horizon, the red disc above the mountains and below the gray storm clouds. The slanting light illuminated the hills and forest overlooking the pastures. Leaning against a tree for support, Lydia Rivas watched the plane descending from the gray sky. Red sunset light flashed from the windshield.

A guerrilla spoke into the handset of radio. "It is clear. Our squads checked both sides of the field."

"Any wind there?" the pilot asked.

"Almost none."

"Coming in. Get him out there."

The guerrilla signaled two men. Rivas put her arms over their shoulders and they rushed from the trees, splashing through soaked grass. Engine noise tore the silence of the valley and the plane's oversized wheels touched the pasture, spraying water and mud.

Lurching across the pasture between the two men, Rivas reached the slowing plane. The pilot turned the plane around and a man ran ahead and jerked open the door. Rivas limped the last few steps, the pilot reached out to her, the hands of the guerrillas grasped her leg-- and she hit the seat.

The door shut. Revving the engine, the pilot grinned to her. "What a lovely surprise .... so this is why this is a very special

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flight."

As the plane soared away, Rivas pulled out the rusty revolver she had taken in trade for the dead soldier's M16 rifle.

"Why the gun?" the pilot asked.

"I will not be a prisoner."

"Oh, you are dangerous! May I be your prisoner?"

"Fly. There is nothing to say."

The pilot followed the contours of the mountains until the sky went black. Gaining altitude, he watched his instruments, slowly changing his compass heading from west to south-west as they flew blind through darkness and storms. Rain beat at the windshields, winds battered the plane. The pilot made no more jokes-- he kept his hands on the control yoke, his eyes constantly scanning the darkness and the glowing instruments. Voices and static came from the radio. Rivas forced herself not to sleep, holding the pistol at her side, between her body and the door, ready.

After an hour, the pilot switched radio frequencies. He listened to a conversation. "I think we're in Nicaragua."

"How much longer?"

"Minutes. If we can find the camp. You are very lucky. The head man said to bring you straight. No visits to the islands. No run around. There! That's Ocotal." He pointed to a pattern of lights to his left. "A few more minutes."

"How can you be sure that is Ocotal?"

"I know these mountains. There is nothing else out here ...."  
He recited a series of numbers into the microphone and waited. A

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voice answered in numbers. The pilot watched the distance.  
"There!"

Magnesium flares guided the pilot to the camp. Only after she identified the familiar lights of the hacienda and the barracks did she jam the revolver into her waistband. Headlights appeared on the gravel airstrip. The pilot brought the plane down and bounced across the ruts to a truck with drums of gasoline.

Rivas left the plane without a word, limping, pain jolting through her leg, trying to run to the one-armed figure standing away from the others. He reached out as she neared and she embraced him, her arms closing around the strength of his body. the smell of his uniform and sweat meaning strength to her, and for a minute she did not speak or move-- she only held him. The others refueled the plane. Quezada took her to a car, his arm around her, bracing her as she limped.

"I thought I'd lost you," he told her. "And I have lost all the others. When the check-in messages didn't come that night, I couldn't believe there was trouble. I refused to believe it. I went out and taught students. I curse myself for that. I could have flown all of the others out. If I had used our contacts and our transportation, instead of the shits the Cubans hire, there would have been no informers and no betrayal and the army could not have been waiting for your group there in the mountains--"

"It was Americans," she told him. "Without the Americans, the army could not have caught us. The Americans waited for us and then the army came in helicopters. Because we killed their Marines, they

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sent their special forces into Salvador."

"The Americans. And Pazos."

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"Pazos came here, his mouth running with words of sorrow ...."

In the darkness of his rooms on the second floor of the hacienda, Quezada talked as he paced the bare wooden floor. "I did not know yet if the unit had lived or died and Pazos already wanted another group of fighters for another attack. As if fighters were only bullets to load and shoot at the regime, worth only a few centavos apiece. What a loss ... only you come back, only you out of ten--"

"Who was it that reported the police taking the driver?" Rivas sprawled on the bed, the bandages on her ankle and fingers startling white against the shadow of her body. "I know it was not one of the unit. I knew nothing of the police taking the driver, taking Ce??sar until that night, when Paulino came. And when Paulino came, he told me police were around Julio and Martin. We could not go to the radios."

"It was the brother of Ce??sar. His brother went to a contact in San Salvador and the alert went to the Cubans."

"To the Cubans? Why?"

"The message of the capture of Ce??sar came through that network of shits the Cubans operate. Send a message for the Ministry of Exports and the Salvadorian Army command and army gets the word first. The little playboy bureaucrat at the Ministry-- Condori-- got the message and issued the orders to evacuate the unit. He said

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that he followed the instructions of Pazos. Instructions. Pazos did not even talk with me. He was out of the country, unavailable.

I had no chance to radio you. And now the Salvadorian army has my fighters. I lose nine fighters. And the Americans lose only four. There was no victory in that."

"They were the first Americans killed in the war. Everyone in the world knows of the dead Americans. And it was our victory. Ours. No one else in the struggle can claim it."

"Except for the Cubans. Pazos."

"What was the other attack? The other attack Pazos wanted?"

"Again on the Americans. Again he wants us to attack Americans and not the regime. Not the National Palace. Not Ilopango. This time, the American Embassy. And if I refuse, I lose his money."

"But how? We looked at the embassy. And the house of the ambassador. It will be impossible. Even a truck bomb is impossible, the embassy is a like a bunker--"

"Rockets."

"There are high walls. There are steel plates in front of the windows. There are wire screens. The rockets and grenades will never touch the--"

"Artillery rockets. A Soviet rocket launcher and forty artillery rockets, each one with fifty kilos of explosive. The launcher will be concealed in a truck and driven into San Salvador. Then they will be aimed at the embassy by electronic devices. Every rocket will hit the embassy, he says."

Rivas did not speak for a moment. "Finally. Finally, the

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Soviets give us the weapons we need. Now we can drive the Americans out. With this, with more launchers--"

"No. Not the Soviets. It comes from the Iranians. The Islamic Jihad. He went to Lebanon and they gave him the rockets and the launcher. Because of the killing the Marines."

"Why not us?"

"Because the Cubans told the Iranians that Pazos is the leader."

"That pig! A leader? He does nothing."

"He brings the money from Cuba. Now he offers me the rocket launcher. Without him, no money. No rockets." "Can you not speak directly with the Iranians?"

"It will be possible ... Pazos wants a crew of four men to go in the truck with the launcher. I must send them to Lebanon for training."

"Why men? Is it technical? Who can you send?"

"There is no problem with the crew that goes with the truck. I have four men here who go. Lobo who speaks very good English. The others a little. They know cars and trucks. I can send them to Lebanon immediately. They know nothing of electronics but Pazos told me that was unnecessary. After they return, I will talk with them. I will have a chance of going directly to the Iranians."

"What if they go directly to Salvador? There is a chance they will be killed or captured, that they will never come back here."

"If they go direct, I will tell them to speak with a contact in Salvador. They must have secure contacts if they hope to escape. I

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do not think Pazos cares if my men live or die after they fire the rockets."

"Tell them to talk with the Iranians. To tell them the truth about Pazos. That you are the real leader."

"And what if the Iranians report to Pazos what my men say? It will not be so simple to cut out the Cuban. There will also be a second team. They will have the responsibility of the guidance electronics. My men will know nothing of that."

"What are the guidance electronics?"

"He did not explain."

"Octavio, do you have any loyalty to this Cuban?"

"Why do you even ask?"

"Send the men to Lebanon. Let the Iranians train them. They can also watch and learn about the other team with the electronics.

If we can learn of the others, we can take them and the attack will be ours and Pazos will be unnecessary. After the victory, the Iranians must come directly to you. Because the pig Pazos will be gone. We will kill him."