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Headlights streaking through the darkness and swirling rain, the panel truck sped across the rain-polished airfield to the Antonov transport and braked to a stop at the tail. The four young men stepped from the truck and rushed up the loading ramp. In seconds, the ramp closed and the ground technicians signaled the pilot with flashlights. Turboprop roar penetrated the quiet and comfort of the limousine as the transport slowly taxied to the take off strip.

In the back of the Mercedes limousine, Pazos turned to Quezada and Rivas. "Your boys will be in Baalbek tomorrow. Cuba, France, Libya, Lebanon, then Baalbek. Their rooms and comforts are ready. They will begin their instruction immediately. It is all arranged."

"They are good men," Quezada told him. "Very young, but intelligent and cunning. They are all from San Salvador, all experienced with fighting. They trained at my school three months."

"I read through your folder on them. I have no doubt of their ability. Now we need only to discuss the Embassy."

"The American Embassy," Rivas stressed.

"Why can it not be the National Palace?" Quezada asked. "A successful attack on the palace would kill all the leadership of the government."

"Why not, indeed?" Pazos knocked on the glass partition and the

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car accelerated away. "I think our friends in Lebanon wanted an attack on Americans. That is what we discussed." He glanced at his watch. "In time for the reception. I hope you will join me. It will be a relief from the isolation and hardship of your school in the mountains--"

"I am watching every report from San Salvador," Quezada told him. "From every agent, every informer. Even the newspapers for important events. Big events, where all of them will be in one place at one time. What if we get a chance to hit them all at once?"

"It is possible we could choose such an opportunity," Pazos nodded. "A time when one attack will satisfy all of our revolutionary aspirations. Perhaps the night of a diplomatic event at the Palace. Or a ceremony. The Americans could not fail to attend if the--"

"The Americans own Salvador," Rivas interrupted. "To bomb the embassy is to attack the true leaders of the regime. Kill the generals, kill Duarte-- who in the world will care? The masses of the world know nothing of the gangsters of Salvador. But kill an American and every radio will tell the story, every newspaper will display his photo, every television will show the blood."

Pazos laughed. "Who is the student and who is the teacher? Octavio, you watch this girl, she will some day command both of us. But I did not invite you to Managua to flatter your beautiful student. The training of the launcher team will not be difficult and in a few weeks they will be ready. So, we have a month to

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arrange for another team of men to enter the embassy."

"What? Into the embassy? That is impossible!"

"It is possible. The Americans still speak with journalists, do they not? And journalists carry recorders and video cameras, correct?"

"The electronics will be inside a camera?"

"Correct. Do you have a man with the education and appearance to pass as a journalist? I can supply the documents and the false background and the equipment. A second and third man will accompany him as the cameraman and sound recorder. They will be a news crew."

Lurching over speed barriers, the limousine entered the lights of a checkpoint. A Sandinista officer spoke with the driver. Soldiers in slick plastic raincoats shone flashlights through the tinted windows, the beams pausing on Rivas for several seconds. Then the officer motioned the driver to continue. The limousine passed through two chainlink gates woven with barbed wire. Soldiers in a concrete bunker powered up a steel cross bar, allowing the limousine to turn onto the highway to Managua.

"I can find the men. But I will need time to check their backgrounds, then train--"

"A month. Is that sufficient?"

"Only a month to find and check these men and then train them? No. All my contact is with young fighters. From the villages. From the slums of San Salvador. You are asking for men who already have technical training. The launcher crew was no problem, but this news crew is different. I will need more time."

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"I anticipated the problem. I will find other comrades to do this duty--"

"Who?" Quezada demanded. "Who will you recruit? You risk the lives of my men if you use any of the shits from your organization in--"

Rivas stopped him. "I can do it. I speak English. I look like one of those goddamned starlet journalists. I can walk in there and--"

"You cannot risk returning." Quezada told her. "The danger is too--"

"Why?" she demanded. "Why is it dangerous?"

"My dear Lydia," Pazos smiled to her. "You are so brave. Only last week you were wounded and already you volunteer for yet another attack on the Americans. But please, let me find someone else for the attack on the Americans. You cannot take all the glory for yourself."

"What risk will there be? Will the four with the launcher know who I am? Will the Americans detect the transmission from the camera? When we get the camera, we will check that. But what risk will there be? If my identification is good, I will walk in, talk with the fascist, and walk out. If they will not give me time to talk with the ambassador, I will stand at the gate and talk. I saw journalists do that. When the launcher is ready, I will make the call from far away and watch the rockets come down from the sky. It will be safe, much safer than the attack at the cafe."

"No," Quezada told her. "No. They have your description now."

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If you apply for an interview with the ambassador, you will walk into a trap. It is not brave what you are saying, it is foolish."

Pazos spoke calmly. "We will hire, through a company we create, a known journalist and his news crew and send them to conduct the interview. We will exchange their camera for a camera containing the transmitter. In that way, we can--"

"You don't think they know their own equipment?" Rivas asked, incredulous.

"Their camera will be damaged beyond repair. Our camera will be the replacement."

Quezada shook his head, no. "I cannot accept that. What if they turn the camera on to check it? The rockets will destroy a hotel. What if they use it in the city? The rockets will destroy a slum. Only the innocent will die. No, we cannot trust anyone but one of us to do this correctly. It must be one of us, with a proven background and some training with cameras. It will take time, but I will find someone. And it will not you, Lydia."

"Who else can do it? I look the part. I already know the area of the embassy, the security and the routines. The soldiers will only look at my body, not at my face."

"Not you, Lydia," Quezada repeated.

"Listen. Forget the interview. It is not important that we get clearance to talk with the ambassador. When the launcher is ready, I can fly into Salvador and go directly to the embassy with the transmitter. I can talk at the gate. We can video tape the visa office. The Americans have no photographs of me. With a new

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hairstyle and makeup and identification, they will never recognize me."

Pazos laughed. "You are so determined. But I do not believe you are correct about the risk. The danger is extreme. The Salvadorian army knows you were the leader of the unit. They know you killed two soldiers and escaped." Opening his briefcase, he took out a photocopy. He snapped on the overhead light. "Keep this for yourself, a souvenir. Read it. It is a bulletin they distributed to their officers. Your description, even a guess at your background. Perhaps they will discover your true identity and then they will have photos."

"Old photos. From high school. Because I speak English, they guessed I was in the United States. Me and a million others. Let them search the visa files."

"Nevertheless, if you return, it could go very badly for you. Stay here, in Nicaragua. You have done your duty as a front line fighter. But Octavio, you are right. To control the camera, we must have a team in whom we have absolute confidence. Two men who are not linked to any other organization. But that does not mean we cannot employ an outside news man. The man we hire-- as a commentator, as an interviewer-- can request the appointment with the ambassador. I will give this some thought. Will you both accompany me to the reception?" He glanced at their fatigues. "Do not be self conscious of your uniforms. The President often comes to these affairs in uniform, much in the manner of my esteemed President Castro. I can even introduce you as Cubans, which would

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explain everything and anything, if that would be amusing."

Quezada said only, "No." Looking through his own reflection, he stared out at the shacks and businesses lining the highway. Fluorescent tubes illuminated the crowded interiors of corrugated tin cafes, smoke drifting from wood fires. People took shelter from the rain in the cafes and in doorways. They stared at the passing limousine. Quezada reached up and switched off the reading light. "No, we won't be going to that reception."

"You do not wish to attend. But what do you say, Lydia? Do you share the revolutionary distain of Octavio for the decadence of the foreign community? If you hesitate because of your uniform, you may change at the Las Colinas house. We have a stock of clothing there for women-- formal wear, casual clothing, shoes, everything. For the event of women operatives needing the correct clothing for an operation."

"And what will I do for transportation back to--"

"It would be better for you to avoid returning tonight. Stay at the Sheraton. We have an open account there. Return in the morning when the roads are safe."

"Why not?" Lydia asked. "I'll--"

"Borge forbids it."

"Why does the Interior Minister concern himself with whether Lydia goes to a party or not?"

"Because she is involved in foreign actions. In the Salvador killings. If she is recognized or photographed, there would be trouble for Nicaragua."

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"His secret police will not be at the--"

"His men are everywhere. We cannot risk trouble with Borge, do you understand?"

Pazos turned to Rivas. "Colonel Quezada has spoken. He dictates your answer. How unfortunate. You escaped the regime in Salvador, only to surrender to a regime in Nicaragua. When was the last time you had the pleasure of a film? Or a gathering of friends? But then, those pleasures conflict with the discipline of the revolution. Ah, here is the office. Last chance to reconsider. The barracks or the--"

"No, Pazos," Quezada stated. "We won't go against Borge. What if he threw us out of Nicaragua? Where would we go? Cuba? Miami?"

The limousine slowed to a stop behind their parked truck. Quezada stepped out, rushing through the rain and knocking at the drivers window. He looked inside. Standing in the rain, he looked in all directions-- the streets, the isolated office building, the grass-overgrown lots of buildings destroyed by the earthquake. At the end of the street, light came from the windows of a restaurant.

He jogged away, his one arm swinging in stride. Pazos laughed:

"The colonel is not so cunning. He leaves me here alone with you to whisper promises of nightlife and gaiety. Do you really accept the joyless life of the soldier?"

"Yes. No. It is what I must accept. What choice is there? Borge writes the law. Go against him and I go. But forget that. I want to carry that transmitter."

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"Must we continue to argue that? No. Octavio says no. And I say no. The risk--"

"The risk is acceptable."

"What a lovely young woman-- and so ruthless. Even with your own life. What I said about you becoming a commander was not flattery. Though your liaison with Octavio is unfortunate-- you must realize that-- with your intelligence and daring, I know you will somehow--"

"I work only with Octavio."

"Your loyalty is commendable, but misplaced. True, Octavio was a hero. He suffered grievous wounds for the cause of the revolution. But he is already a character of the romantic past. He thinks he can fight the Americans as he fought Somoza, with rifles and pistols and the courage of a few dedicated, courageous fighters. Noble warriors of the people against the evil soldiers. He is wrong. The Americans are not Somoza. Their weapons and their CIA can defeat any heroism. But they cannot defeat what they cannot fight. The world saw the defeats of the Americans in Lebanon. Defeats inflicted by the mysterious Jihad. Marines, businessmen, tourists, teachers, whatever-- the war of the future is to drive all Americans out of our lands. By any means. Are we not in agreement, you and I?"

Rivas nodded.

"Then forgive me if I suggest that your blind loyalty to Octavio is blocking your advancement in the struggle. You heard him tonight. He would not risk the bombardment of a hotel. Who would

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be in the hotel but Americans and their bourgeois lackeys? Kill them all-- as you did with the so-called innocent bystanders at the cafe."

"My loyalty is not blind. I recognize his strength. And I know it would be easier to persuade him to change his strategy than to find another commander of his training and experience."

"I can replace him with a telephone call." Pazos glanced toward the restaurant. A block away, the silhouettes of the one-armed Quezada and four soldiers crossed the lighted windows. Leaning toward Rivas, he touched her thigh, running his hand up the inside of her thigh. "But you, you are--"

Slapping his hand away, she grabbed for the door. He clutched her arm and she turned, her other hand reaching out to claw him. "Take your hand off me. Do not touch--"

"You? Who fucks a one-eyed cripple? You reject me? Listen, pretty girl. You are smart. Think about it. If you want glory, if you want the world to recognize you as the enemy of the Americans, you must work with me. I give the assignments. I work with the sponsors of this war--"

"Octavio will not always work for you. He will--"

"He is nothing. That slum cripple, with his noble ideas of revolution and victory. He has never left Nicaragua-- only for a year or two for a camp in Cuba. He knows nothing of the world. Does he speak Arabic? Or even English? You girl, you come to me when you want to be a leader-- now go! Go to your pathetic hero--"

Pazos shoved her away. Throwing open the door, she stepped

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into the rain. She walked to the truck and stood there waiting for Quezada and the soldiers. Keeping her back to the limousine, she laughed, knowing that Pazos watched her back and lusted her. Quezada and the soldiers ran the last few steps to the truck. The limousine sped away as the joking, shoving men fought for the window seats. Quezada waited for her to tell him:

"He did it," she whispered. "The pig wants me. Promised me the leadership of the world revolution if I fuck him. But also, he--"

"Only of the world? Not the moon and the stars?" Quezada hugged her against him. "Soon we will be done with him. Soon."

"It must be soon," she added. "Because he hates you. Because you are what he will never be. I fear for you if we do not hit him soon."

Quezada smiled and nodded, rain running off the black nylon oval of his eye patch. "When it is possible. Until then, we play his game."

Pazos went the the walled and guarded Cuban Embassy compound on the Camino del Sur. The Cuban DGI men at the gate passed the limousine immediately, directing the driver to park with the other cars at the end of the circular drive. But when Pazos walked to the entry, he veered away from the crowd of guests and presented his identification to the soldier at the stairway to the offices.

Rushing upstairs, he nodded to the clerks and technicians on

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duty as he continued to the room outside the communications rooms. A young man in a loose white guayabera-- the Carribbean equivalent of the sportscoat-- typed at a desk. His close-cut hair and wide shoulders identified him as a soldier assigned to the coding office.

The young man recognized Pazos and passed him a pad of lined paper.

Using a numerical identification to route the message to Colonel Atallah in Syria, Pazos confirmed the dispatch of the four Salvadorians. Then he added: VOLUNTEER FOUND/ INTERVIEW IMPOSSIBLE/ WILL COME DAMASCUS/ DISCUSS CHANGE.