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A crescent moon lit the mountains. Outside the truck, after hours of highway noise and the voices of the other men, Niles heard only the wind surging through the trees. His eyes searched the trees and brush. Light came and went as clouds swept across the moon. He crouched a few steps from the truck, listening to the wind, feeling the wind on his face, the wind cool and fragrant with rain and life, the river-rushing sound of the wind a vast chord of night moving through the forest and the mountains as the atmosphere flowed over the planet.

For weeks he had worked in the stink and chaos of Tegucigalpa, interviewing Nicaraguan contras, crosschecking their stories against Agency background records, judging whether they bragged or lied or told the truth as they knew it. Now the others waited in the truck a minute longer while he enjoyed a long moment of peace--

Sheet metal scraped. The truck driver hawked spit and stepped out in the road with a short-barrelled shotgun in his hands.

Old man, Niles thought, you ain't here to meditate. He waited for a moment of darkness, then pulled open the cargo doors of the truck. The Marines and Nicaraguan contras stepped down, the soft rasping of the fatigues against their canvas packs seeming loud, the steel-on-steel clatter of weapons like hammer strikes.

Niles waved his blue-lensed penlight across the cargo floor.

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Nothing remained but the stacks of cardboard boxes. The boxes-- the plastic liners stapled, the flaps taped shut-- contained all their street clothes and identification: the eight North Americans and Nicaraguans crossed the border as anonymous soldiers without names or countries, wearing Soviet-made Sandinista uniforms, Soviet boots, and carrying Com-Bloc weapons.

Walking straight east, Niles left the ruts of the dirt road and angled up the slope. The weight of his pack forced him to lean forward, straining against gravity-- Niles and all the other men carried a combat load of weapons and ammunition, equipment, and freeze-dried rations for ten days. The line of men followed him, their boots making no noise on the rain-soft earth.

Aerial photos had shown two ranges of mountains between the Honduran border and the terrorist camp outside of the Nicaraguan town of Palacaguinca. Pine and oak forest covered the mountains. Decades of logging operations had stripped the lower hills, leaving the land eroded and covered with scrub brush. Where farmers had worked the land, the satellite photos showed small fields of corn and vegetables and coffee. Cattle grazed in pastures. Informers reported Sandinista patrols. But the contras had not exploited this section of the border-- so close to the Pan American Highway and the Sandinista garrison in Somoto-- as an infiltration route. With no contras in the area, the Sandinistas had limited their defenses to casual patrolling and the posting of squads of militia in the villages. They had not mined the mountain trails, as the contras operating around Jalapa reported.

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A few kilometers from the truck, before crossing the border, Niles veered up the mountainside. He walked until he came to a a ridgeline knoll he recognized from satellite maps. In the lowlands, he saw the lights of San Marcos de Colo??n and El Espino. Hills blocked his view of Somoto. Waiting for the other men, he found a line of sight through the trees and counted two knobby forested ridgelines to the west. He continued a hundred meters to the east, then broke sound discipline with a quick whisper to every man:

"We're in Nicaragua."

Blanco-- the fighter who had joined the war against Somoza as a boy of twelve, then turned against the Sandinistas after the revolution-- took point. He led the contras and Marines into Nicaragua, along foot-worn trails soft with mud and mule droppings.

He knew these mountains. Born in a shack south of Ocotal, he had smuggled weapons, food, medicine, and messages from the villages to the Sandinista units hiding in the mountains. Blanco claimed to not only know the mountains but to even many of the people by name. Niles had questioned him intensely during the interviews in Tegucigalpa, testing the loyalty of the young man to the anti-communist cause, then using Agency techni cians to question him while wired to a polygraph machine and drugged with pentithol and methamphetamine. Niles had interrogated all the contras in the same way-- and they had all convinced him of their loyalty.

Zutano-- meaning, What's his name-- had not fought on either side in the revolution. But the Sandinistans had persecuted his family because of an uncle in the National Guard. After a political

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cadre from Managua invalidated their land title and forced the family into a resettlement cooperative, Zutano joined his friend Blanco in the resistance. Zutano spoke some English, learned during his years in a Peace Corps school.

Vibora-- meaning Rattlesnake-- had operated radios for the Sandinistas in the last year of the revolution. After the overthrow, his officers recommended him for advanced training in Cuba. But Vibora had married his sweetheart and did not want to leave for the year in Cuba. He lost the chance for the training in the Cuban and Soviet schools. Then his teenage wife ran off with one of his officers, flying to Mexico to live in the capitol of Spanish-speaking America while her new lover worked with other Central American revolutionaries. Vibora went by bus to Mexico to bring back his wife and Sandinista security men beat him bloody and threw him into the streets. He never returned to Nicaragua. Taking the bus to Honduras, he joined the contras.

Omar had fought in the National Guard. Enlisting in the last months of the regime, he had never completed his course at the Elite Infantry Training School. The war had forced every soldier into combat. When Niles checked the record of the intense and brooding young man, some officers in the contras reported doubts on the loyalty of Omar. They reported that he often slandered National Guard officers. Niles had questioned him on this and Omar told of last desperate struggle for Managua, officers already gone to Salvador or Guatemala or Miami, the soldiers and non-coms fighting to the end as the officers issued pompous declarations from asylum.

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Since then, Omar had hated the rich officers and politicians even more than the Sandinistas-- at least the communists fought their own wars, Omar told Niles. After interrogation under drugs, Niles had accepted Omar.

However, for Omar and the three other contras, the real test of loyalty came now, in Nicaragua.

Throughout the night, Blanco stayed on the trails high on the ridgelines, far from the isolated settlements and the Sandinista outposts. Families still lived in the mountains despite the dangers of the war, working the abandoned coffee plantations, grazing a few cattle, laboring at fields of corn and beans. The line of men maintained a quick and even pace, never pausing for more than a few seconds as dogs occasionally barked in the distance.

Five hours after leaving the truck at the Honduran border, Blanco dropped to a crouch at the side of the trail and waited for Niles. He whispered, "The highway."

They had reached a north-south road running between Somoto and the high mountains. As Niles went forward with Blanco, the men formed into an outward-facing security line-- each man a few steps from the next, every other man pointing his weapon in the opposite direction.

Road work crews had cleared the brush and trees on the hillsides to deny concealment to contra ambush units. Niles looked down on the road. The setting moon cast long shadows over the ruts and mud, the hillside below Niles in complete darkness, the far side glowing in soft blue light. To the north and the south, bends in

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the road limited the view of any lookouts to this one short section of road. Niles cupped his hand over his watch and pressed the light button-- only an hour remained until dawn.

"Wait," Niles told Blanco. "Watch." Snaking backwards, he returned to the others. "Hey-zoot?"

"Here."

"Scanner?"

"They are out here. I got listening posts talking, platoon leaders checking in."

"Distance?"

"Within a few klicks."

"We're crossing the road, then taking a break." Moving along the line, he told the other men. "Strak-man. You and me first. King Kong back up."

Cloth brushed cloth, branches scratched across weapons. The two Marines and other three Nicaraguans took positions over the road. Blanco led Niles and Stark down the embankment. The young contra crept down slowly, his rifle ready in his hands, his head pivoting.

Walking silently but quickly, Niles stepped beside Blanco and whispered. "Act like a Sandinista. There are no contras here. You are tired. This is a long patrol."

With his Kalashnikov swinging in one hand, Niles continued to the road. He kept moving-- denying any militia rifleman an easy target-- as he strolled across the road. He checked the ruts and mud for bootprints. He saw only tire tracks. Water pooled in the

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tracks-- Niles judged that rain had fallen during the preceding day, no later than the afternoon. Stooping down, he ran his fingers across a track cutting across the ruts and felt a thin brittle crust of mud intricately textured with the patterns of the tire.

The truck had passed since the rain in the late afternoon--sometime during the night, the wind drying the track.

Blanco scrambled up the slope, followed by Stark and Niles. Using the last minutes of moonlight, Niles slipped through the brush and trees, searching the area for any marks of patrols or outposts.

He found only cow trails. Going higher on the ridge, he came to a trail patterned with hoof marks. His fingers found grass-sprouts standing in the tracks-- days had passed since the horses left the hoof prints. Above the trail, at the ridgeline, gnarled pines and oaks twisted through upjutting rocks. He went to the top of the rocks. The rocks viewed the twisting line of the road, moonlit pastures, and a cluster of yellow lantern lights in the distance. Niles returned to the men and led them up the mountain to the rocks.

There, concealed by the stunted trees, they slept in turns as shifts of two men maintained a watch.

Omar watched the American who called himself, Viejo, the Old Man. He studied his movements in the darkness, his easy walk that made no noise and left no bootprints on the trails, how he carried his rifle, how he wore his equipment. Omar had recognized the American as a soldier that first night more than a month before,

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when the scarred, hard-muscled stranger put on the FDN fatigues and stripped a Kalashnikov by touch-- the American had not needed the kerosene light, his hands moving quickly to open the cover, pull out the springs and bolt, then reassemble the Soviet rifle as easily as breathing. Unlike the pasty white journalists and phony mercenaries, the old soldier carried a pack for a night and a day without a complaint, not even a complaint about the shitty beans and the greasy meat from cans. Friends in the second platoon of the gas-bag sergeant told Omar how the American helped Blanco make a tricky place for firing rockets, working half the night, cutting branches with his knife and digging in the dirt like a peon. Then the rocket hit on the helicopter. Some of the loudmouths said they hit it, Blanco and Zutano said the old man hit it. But Omar had seen himself how the American moved when the gunship came, no stupid macho heroism, no whining-dog shaking and shitting with fear, just cunning and experience and motion, finding the gully and getting shelter for wounded Luis, finally going flat himself-- and the whole time not panicing, always watching the smoke for the Sandinistas and keeping his Kalashnikov ready.

This American knew war. If only the United States would send more men like him. Instead of the fat shits from the Cia who could not speak Spanish and did not know the story of Nicaragua but only talked of Cubans and Russians. Or the ones who spoke Spanish like professors and wore suits and watches and carried briefcases, making a man in a uniform and old boots feel like a begger.

In the capitol, when Viejo interrogated him, Omar knew why. He

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respected the suspicions of the American. Had not the Sandinistas put spies in all the contras units? Omar answered with the truth to every question, telling him of his brother dying in service with the National Guard, of his other brother refusing to surrender his farm to the cooperatives and dying when the masked assassins came in the night with machetes and pistols. He told the American the truth about hating Somoza even as he trained in the Guard. Like his brother had said, defeat the communists, then march on the Palace. Then Americans questioned him with the machine and the injections. No problem.

He wanted to learn from the Americans-- and he did. Hundreds of small things. Like the little bending of his Kalashnikov selector lever. Viejo showed him how to spring the lever away from the receiver, then put a piece of plastic plumbing tape in the hinge of the lever-- and suddenly, the selector moved silently, without clacking. Then, with a drill from a jewelery shop, the American who looked like a son-of-a-bitch Russian and even talked Russian drilled tiny holes in the backsight of the Kalashnikov and one in the front.

The Russian fixed a tiny bead in each hole with a drop of super-glue-- and the beads glowed in the dark, so that he could aim in the blackest night. And then the Mexican one showed him how to repair boots with the same super-glue. And the black one who talked Spanish like a Frenchman changed the straps on the packs and changed the metal rings for plastic and suddenly the pack did not cut his shoulders and made no noise when he walked.

And now he went into Nicaragua with the four Americans, moving

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like shadows along the trail, no talking, no noise, no smoking, no trash. The old man had all the trails in his head and walked through the night without making a wrong turn, knowing the way almost like Blanco.

After walking all night, they slept for a time and ate-- and all their trash, even their piss and shit went in hole where no patrol would ever find it. In the day, Omar and Blanco went out with Viejo, searching for the Sandinistas. They walked slow and quiet across the steep hills, never stepping on a trail. The old man showed him how to ease his boots through the grass and ferns and leafy chocon covering the ground, parting the cover with his boot, then putting his weight down so the boot made its print in the dirt under the cover of the leaves and could not be seen. Where the boot prints showed, Viejo used a stick to brush a footprint out of green grass. With a pine branch, he wiped footprints out of dirt-- and then scratched the dirt so that it looked right. No prints remained where they walked.

They took a place overlooking a line of shacks along the road. Sandinistas sat in the shade of a truck, talking with the local people and demanding the documents of whoever traveled on the road. The hours passed and the American did not move, he only watched.

A platoon of Sandinistas stumbled down the other side of the road. The soldiers sprawled on the roadside while their officer talked with soldiers at the checkpoint. Omar watched the Sandinistas. He saw the American writing in a little book.

Calling his soldiers together, the Sandinista officer sent them

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east. The officer walked in the center of the line, a radioman a few steps behind him.

Viejo signaled Blanco and Omar. Crawling backwards on their bellies, they rubbed out the marks of their watch and scattered dry leaves. Then they walked east, paralleling the trail the Sandinistas walked. Omar felt his hair rise with what they did-- the three of them following a twenty man platoon of Sandinistas in their own territory. Only three against twenty if it came to a fight. But the American walked along the side of the mountain, weaving through the brush, stopping and listen before walking from cover to cover.

This one had balls. Blanco looked to Omar with a wide, nervous grin, his eyes moving side-to-side like Cantinflas about to panic. Omar had to nod. Who would not be afraid?

Omar prayed to God the American did not make all of them meat for the dogs.

The American dropped. Blanco tripped a step and did the same. Omar went flat in the rotting weeds and leaves and wondered what--

Soldiers came up the mountain. He heard the squeaking of packs and the rattling of metal. Omar put his face into the weeds, forced his body to the ground, trying force his whole body into the dirt and disappear like a mole.

Jesus, Omar prayed, I am one of your faithful. I will prove it. I will buy a carved likeness of you and spend months painting it, I will use the finest brush and make your blue eyes as transparent and as deep as the morning sky if you will grant me some

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drafted soldiers from the city who know nothing of the hills and only look at their feet as they walk--

He heard their boots scuffing the dirt and rocks. They walked quickly, cloth rubbing, equipment in their packs rattling with every step. Omar held his breath, they seemed so close, but he knew the American lay up there even closer.

The gang of them seemed to take all day to walk past. Ants crawled over his hands and he felt a fly sucking on his neck-- Omar let it suck. Finally he heard the sounds of the platoon going away and he raised his head.

The old man motioned for him and Blanco to come on. For the first time the American used the walkie-talkie he carried, whispering into it and waiting, then whispering again. He put away the radio and he went to the trail. Looking at all the bootprints left by the Sandinistas, he stepped on the soft dirt and made his own boot print. It matched the prints made by the communist boots. Grinning to Omar and Blanco, he started after the Sandinistas, walking fast and silent on the trail.

Blanco looked at Omar with fear on his face but they said nothing and they followed the crazy American-- and Omar knew the American had gone crazy. To walk on the heels of a platoon? What if one of the communists stopped to piss? It would be a shitload of bullets in all directions. But he followed.

Your likeness Jesus. And a likeness of the Blessed Mary, Omar promised. Painted with the finest enamel in a church in a free Nicaragua. If only I can live through these lessons from the old

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man