

RECON STRIKE

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In the air-conditioned darkness of the bar of the Damascus Sheraton, Pazos sipped Cuban rum mixed with American Coca-Cola. A musician played quiet jazz on an electric piano, improvising melodies and syncopated duets with an electronic synthesizer. Women talked in French at the next table. Blonde, their faces masks of make-up, the women touched and stroked the Saudi sitting between them. Rings flashed on their hands. Ignoring the chatter of his women, the Saudi drank and stared at the entry, waiting. Pazos waited also, but he waited alone, drinking his rum and coke, his eyes watching the faces of the travelers and Syrians in the bar.

Languages identified some of the foreigners as Europeans-- some spoke English, others French. A group of several men argued the future of the America's Cup in both languages, a tanned Frenchman lapsing into French as his English failed, but intermixing 'Aussie' and 'jib' and 'winged keel' as he explained the ideal design of a new racing yacht. His friends continued the argument in English. At the table past the Europeans, two men in sportscoats and slacks, their dark hair military short and their faces creased with scowls, leaned close together and spoke in whispers.

A young man in sunglasses stopped in the entry. Bearded, wearing a suit tailored in Europe, he took off his sunglasses and scanned the tables. He saw Pazos. Pazos nodded and finished his

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drink, leaving an American five-dollar bill as a tip.

In the lobby, journalists crowded around a Lebanese politician and a militia leader. Video cameramen stood on tables, focusing over the heads of reporters. Sound men held out microphones on long aluminium handles. Photographers elbowed one another as their flash units splashed the scene with instants of white light. Reporters shouted questions and held out miniature recorders to the two men.

A group of Iranian Revolutionary Guards watched from the sides. Awkward without weapons, they folded their arms across their chests and glared at women in skirts and thin summer dresses. Four Syrians in dark suits provided security for the Lebanese, their hands on the pistol grips of their folded Kalashnikovs as their eyes swept the crowd of foreigners and the people waiting in the lobby. Other security men stood at intervals in the lobby, watching the doors and the elevators over their newspapers.

Pazos noted the video cameras with a smile-- even the Syrian secret police, obsessed with security, allowed television crews into the privileged domain of the Sheraton.

The young man led him out a side door. In the parking lot, he saw the black Mercedes sedan in the rows of limousines and private cars. He went straight to the car. Attallah welcomed him with a handshake and a Marlboro:

"So, I see you again so soon, my friend Emilio. Perhaps we should truly start a business. With you flying endlessly this way and that, we should put your travel to a profit. What has Nicaragua-- other than bananas-- that we here in Syria would pay

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high prices?"

"Nothing. The country is a disease."

"You say that?" Atallah did not start the car. They sat in the parking lot and talked. "You who are devoting your expertise to the development of its exports?"

"Why don't you come and see? Sample their tasteless food, their shoddy goods, their stupid women. To think that there is talk of a war for that country is a joke. There is nothing there which deserves a fight."

"Then you are wasting your talents. Why do you not come to Syria and manage our exports. We need--"

"I am, am I not?"

Atallah laughed. "True. Except, of course, that I will always deny any part in our export venture. I will let the Jihad take the profit. And, of course, the Salvadorians. So you have the volunteers? But what must be this change?"

"The volunteer cannot expect an interview with the ambassador. To even request an interview would be suicidal."

"Suicidal? An ironic objection."

"Suicidal before the interview."

"Oh, I see. Why then do you chose to accept this particular volunteer?"

"Because she will not allow any other volunteer. She is the leader of the unit that killed the Marines in San Salvador. She is also the only one of the killers who escaped from Salvador. And it is a proof of her intelligence and her ...." He searched for the

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word in English. "It is hatred. She is a very strange one, a killer but intelligent. If she was not she would not have escaped."

"How is it that she escaped and the the others did not?"

"Two soldiers tried to fuck her. And she fucked them."

Choking on smoke, Atallah gasped and laughed, the scars the side of his face going white. "An interesting illustration of two meanings of that Anglo-Saxon verb. One literal. One figurative, I believe."

"Killed them with a stone. Took a rifle and escaped."

"Very exceptional."

"Oh, Nazim. You cannot know how exceptional. This woman is so beautiful, like a lovely flower. Her loveliness moves me to poetry, I think of only touching her, of caressing the delicate bloom of her youth. And I can't. She fucks this Nicaraguan cripple. He is her hero. He took her from the luxury of the Colonia Escalo??n and made her into a revolutionary in boots and camouflage. It is a sacrilege. A Madonna in camouflage."

"Are you confident of her background?"

"The Nicaraguan checked her. I checked her. She does not work for the Americans. Her father was some fool who talked about revolution in the university and the squads killed him. They sent her to Los Angeles, to the University of California. She came back a radical. She tried to join the guerrillas. She wanted buy a pistol and kill Americans.

"Did she?"

"The cripple got her first. He ran her through his training

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camp. And she hooked him. Now she is with him in everything. His disciple. She thinks he will make her a leader of the struggle. It is so disgusting. What a waste of a beautiful woman. That beauty embraced by that mutilated wreck, that peon in a uniform. It makes me sick to imagine. But now this beautiful woman and her cripple challenge my authority. They will not accept their positions as subordinates in the organization and I am sure they will eventually look for another sponsor. They already undercut my authority at every opportunity. It is very difficult. This matter with the camera-- they would not accept my guidance. As they have with so many other matters, they contested every detail. The Nicaraguan with his bourgeois concern for civilians. And her. She would not allow us to consider anyone else for the task of the camera. A thousand objections. Therefore, I decided to accept her as the volunteer, even though--"

"And because," Atallah commented. "Of the killing of the Marines, she is hunted by the Americans? That is why she cannot risk applying for an interview? And why she cannot enter the embassy?"

"That is it. But against that is her hatred and her ambition. She will not stop. Nothing will stop her. She will take the transmitter to the embassy. I have no doubt of this. She will die. That beauty will be lost. But the embassy will also be gone."

"What does she know of the transmitter?"

"I told her that it allows the launcher to find the target. She thinks she will go to safety and then signal for the launch of

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the rockets. The idea of watching the rockets fall excites her."

"But she will not enter the compound."

"That will be impossible. And, in truth, it may be impossible for any journalist we hire to enter. The Americans are becoming extreme in their security precautions. At a press conference with the ambassador only a few days ago, they allowed no journalist who they did not invite. And all the journalists were Americans."

"And what is it that you suggest?"

"Me? I know nothing of the electronics of your launcher and rockets. What can your technicians devise to make this possible? And I will convey the instructions to my insubordinate subordinates."

"And that is actually the difficulty? Your subordinates are insubordinate? Rebellious rebels?"

"Exactly. The cripple would fight the war by his obsolete bourgeois concepts of insurrection and armed struggle. She would share the glory of the attack with no one."

"I will speak with my Iranian. Your beautiful revolutionary will have the glory she is so determined to take."