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Emilio Pazos left the Customs terminal of Damascus International Airport. A middle-aged, overweight Cuban, he dressed in a tropical-weight tan suit creased and wrinkled by the long flight from Havana to Madrid to Rome to Damascus. Though he claimed pure Castillian blood, he had thick Caribbean features and glossy black curly hair slicked back with pomade. His face glistened with smeared pomade. Shouldering through the chaos of passengers hurrying from the exit, he watched for the young man assigned to meet him.

Porters followed Pazos from the exit, grabbing for the suitcase and garment bag he carried, calling out to him in Arabic and French. He ignored them as he scanned the sidewalk and traffic lanes. A group of Iranian women shrouded in chaadors crowded from the exit doors and the porters left Pazos. The porters took the battered suitcases of the group, following the shouted instructions of a travel agent directing the women and the porters to a bus parked with the taxis and private cars in the lot.

Only official cars parked at the curbs of the traffic lanes. Here, in Syria, the nation that had invented and perfected the car bomb as a weapon of terror, police and soldiers enforced the laws prohibiting the parking of unauthorized vehicles at government buildings. At the entrance to the arrivals terminals, traffic

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police directed civilian traffic to the public lots. Police ordered even wealthy merchants to park their Mercedes sedans among the hotel vans and rusting taxis. Only the limousines of government and foreign officials stopped at the curb near the terminal buildings. Soldiers in the green and rust camouflage fatigues watched a black Mercedes idling near the exits. Pazos looked through the tinted windows but saw only a silhouette. Then a voice called out in Spanish:

"?Se@or! ?Se@or! Su amigo esta?? aca??." A plainclothes security man rushed to him. Despite the young man's sunglasses and beard, Pazos recognized him as the young man he expected-- a military aide he had contacted on previous stops in Syria.

"We'll speak English. Where is he?"

"Come," the young soldier walked Pazos to the Mercedes and opened the passenger side front door. "He waits."

"Atallah?"

"Finally they release you from their pointless inspections. Please put your luggage in the back. Forgive me for not offering my assistance but it is better that I do not leave the car."

Colonel Nazim Atallah of Syrian military intelligence flicked his cigarette into the street and shook hands with his Cuban visitor. A gaunt, balding man, with a hooked Arabic nose, he displayed long, tobacco-yellowed teeth when he smiled. A livid scar hooded the corner of his right eye-- a wound suffered in the Israeli retaliatory raids of November 1983 for the truck bombing of their headquarters in Tyre. The Israeli bombers had come within milli-

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meters of killing the man responsible for delivering thousands of kilograms of explosives and detonators to the Shiite gangs of Baalbek, explosives which the Shiites then delivered by truck and suicide driver to the French and American Multinational Peacekeeping Forces in Beirut and the Israeli headquarters in Tyre.

The colonel did not wear his uniform today. Instead, he wore a French-tailored gray suit highlighted with gold cufflinks and a Rolex watch. The imported suit, the gold, the Mercedes, his apartment in France-- though he used his image of wealth in his duties in Syria, Lebanon, and Europe, he did not buy the luxuries with his army salary. He avoided the spartan life of a career officer by capitalizing on the socialist economy of Syria and the cargo capacity of his trucks returning from Lebanon. His trucks carried weapons and munition to the allies of Syria operating in the Beeka and the trucks returned with consumer goods for the black market of Damascus-- American cigarettes, Japanese electronics, French delicacies. He offered Pazos a smuggled Marboro as he steered with one hand through the traffic.

"You of course know of the attack on the Americans in Salvador. It is in all the newspapers."

Pazos laughed. "Yankees!" He took a long drag on the cigarette and exhaled. "The stupidity and arrogance of the Yankees is beyond understanding. They prop up that puppet regime, they terrorize the masses of El Salvador, they strut and posture on the boulevards. And yet they react with indignation when the vanguard of the revolution strikes back."

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"My congratulations to the vanguard." Atallah accelerated away from the confusion of the airport complex, following the highway north-west to Damascus. "But why only four soldiers? Why not the American ambassador? Why not the embassy?"

"Why do you ask me these questions?" Pazos smiled to Atallah. "The Ministry of International Development has no contact with the revolutionaries in El Salvador."

"Of course not. But I thought that you, as a man knowledgeable in that area of the world, might answer my questions. I cannot ask the television or talk to a newspaper."

"The embassy in San Salvador is impossible. It is a fortress. First, matters of visas and immigration are processed in a different area by Salvadorian hirelings. If fighters attacked that office, they would only kill other Salvadorians. Then, anyone who enters the area staffed by Yankees must have clearance, which is very difficult to receive. Even with clearance, there is an electronic search for weapons and explosives. I heard that a unit planned to pose as a news crew and take in a bomb--"

"As in the attempt on Pastora, in Costa Rica."

"That was a crime of contra against contra," Pazos said. And again he laughed. "But the Americans are not as stupid as Pastora. They used electronic sniffers and dogs to check the equipment. And after the bombings in Beirut, they prohibited all parking within a block."

"How unfortunate. Even Americans learn. That forces the fighters of the world to become inventive. But enough of this talk

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in the abstract. Tell me, how goes your work in Nicaragua? With the development of the export projects? What will be the price of the bananas?"

Both men laughed at the joke. Officially, Pazos had come to Syria with contracts detailing the sale and transshipment via Cuba of bananas and beef for Syrian and Iranian distribution. His briefcase contained the contracts-- in Spanish, English, and Arabic, with schedules of shipments and deliveries. If a delay with his interconnecting flights had forced him to leave the transit lounge of an airline and pass through customs, a search and examination of his papers would reveal only a complicated commercial enterprise. The Americans had succeeded in intercepting couriers and photographing documents many times. Pazos had not risked the success of his future attacks by carrying a page of information or a photo of a target or the name of a fighter-- all that stayed in his office in Managua. Only his memory and imagination travelled with him.

"The price will be acceptable to all parties. Less than the Americans paid Nicaragua, but more than enough to cover the additional shipping expenses. But that is a detail for the agents. Tell me of this product and this demonstration."

"Be patient. Tell me of your other development projects. I believe I will take a strong interest in that region in the future."

For the next hour, Pazos talked in generalities as Atallah drove through the dusty urban sprawl of Damascus. Pazos wanted the support of the Syrians in his actions but did not want to risk

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compromising the attacks. Atallah understood this. He listened and commented but did not demand details.

They reached the Syrian armed forces base at Daraiya, a high-security installation surrounded by concentric rings of barbed wire, minefields, bunkers, and anti-aircraft guns. The perimeter protected office and barrack complexes of the elite units of the Syrian Army and Air Force.

At Daraiya, President Hafez al-Assad maintained battalions of Special Forces commandos on continuous alert. These troops-- and their squadrons of helicopter transports and gunships-- did not wait in expectation of an Israeli surprise attack. The elite airborne units guarded against any possible challenge to the rule of al-Assad by opposing Syrian political factions. In the event of a prolonged power struggle, runways four kilometers long allowed direct flights from the Soviet Union of Ilyushin cargo planes.

Atallah cleared the several guard posts and drove to a separate high-security compound. An eight-story building housed the offices and technical facilities of the intelligence services. A helipad served the needs of the officers, providing transportation to all units in Syria and Lebanon. Atallah parked his Mercedes at the helipad.

"To the Beeka now."

A Soviet Mi-8 troopship took them over the Damascus to Beirut Highway and through the mountains dividing Syria from Lebanon. Deafened by the noise of the turbines, Pazos watched as Atallah consulted with a crewman, looking from a map to the landscape below.

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The helicopter circled an area, then descended. Atallah opened a briefcase and motioned for Pazos to look inside.

"Examine it."

The briefcase contained a simple gray box. Pazos picked it up and turned it over in his hands. Lightweight, fabricated of sheet metal, the box remained open on one side. Inside, Pazos saw a rack of plastic circuit boards and heavy batteries. Wires ran to a simple switch marked ON-OFF.

"What is it?"

"You will see."

Atallah flipped the switch and closed the briefcase. The helicopter bumped down. A crewman slid aside the sidedoor. A storm of dust swirled inside the helicopter. Atallah stepped out and Pazos saw him set down the briefcase in the rocks and dry brush of a mountain ridge. The ridge viewed the expanse of the Beeka Valley and the mountains beyond. Returning to the troopship, Atallah switched on a walkie-talkie. A shrill tone cut through the rotor noise.

"It is transmitting," Atallah shouted out.

A short flight took them to a dirt road cutting through the foothills of the valley. Following Atallah, Pazos stepped down to the stones and rutted earth of the road. Sand blinded him as the helicopter lifted away. He felt grit clinging to the pomade in his hair.

"Now we drive again." Atallah opened the door of Land Cruiser waiting at the side of the road.

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The electronic tone droned from the walkie-talkie as Atallah drove west, following the dirt road west a few kilometers. He turned on a dirt track winding across hillsides of abandoned fields. Only concrete slabs and scattered bricks remained of a farmer's home. A heap of rusting metal with tank tracks and an outjutting cannon barrel indicated a past battle in the area.

A kilometer downhill, another road cut across the fields. Pazos saw a diesel truck lurching across the ruts and holes, laboring to pull a trailer. A pickup truck followed the truck and trailer. Atallah switched channels on the droning walkie -talkie and spoke in language Pazos guessed to be Farsi. A voice answered. He switched back to the electronic tone and parked the Land Cruiser. Passing a pair of binoculars to Pazos, he pointed to the truck and trailer:

"Watch the men."

Through the binoculars, Pazos saw that the diesel truck towed a flatbed trailer loaded with a cargo container. Both trucks stopped. Men in old fatigues and civilian shirts left the pickup truck. They opened the doors of the cargo container and took out tools linked with cords. In the quiet of the foothills, the faint noise of gasoline generators drifted across the fields.

"There, you see that mountain?" Atallah pointed to the east. "That peak. That is where we left the briefcase. About eighteen kilometers, more or less. And a thousand meters higher in elevation. If I challenged the finest Cuban artillery officer, the finest in your nation, do you believe he could hit that briefcase

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with his first shot? One and only one shell?"

"It would not be possible."

"With a rocket?"

"Impossible."

"Watch."

Pazos returned the binoculars to the truck and trailer. The men walked on top of the cargo container, the electric wrenches in their hands. They removed a line of bolts from the container. Dropping their tools, they climbed down the sides and stepped away from the trailer.

The panels of the container opened, one side falling, the roof and the other side slowly lifting away. The roof and side panel passed a balance point and fell, exposing--

A Soviet multiple-tube rocket launcher. Unlike the other Katyusha rocket launchers he had seen, this launcher did not ride on a truck. As Pazos watched, the launcher swivelled, the tubes rising.

Flame flashed and a rocket screamed overhead. Pazos turned and watched the distant mountain peak.

The electronic drone from the walkie-talkie cut off, dust and smoke churning upward from the peak.

"From eighteen kilometers," Atallah told him.

Disassembled 122mm rockets lay on wooden tables, the solid propellant fuel and the warheads removed. A wood and steel clamp

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held one rocket casing in position under a drill press. On another table, clear plastic wrapped a compact assembly of electronics. Four tiny fins stood out on shafts.

"This is the terminal guidance module," Atallah explained, lifting away the plastic. "Come, look at it closely. What do you read?"

Peering at the components, Pazos saw reorder codes and company trademarks. On one motor, he read, MADE IN USA. "This is American? How did you get it?"

"The parts are American. And Japanese and European. There is nothing Soviet."

"Except the rockets and the launcher."

"Of course. But the launchers are everywhere. Beirut. China. Africa. Nicaragua. Even the Israelis use them. What is significant is the guidance system. A very ingenious system, if I may say. Invented by an Iranian"

Pazos paced through the improvised factory as Atallah talked. A large concrete garage with a high ceiling, the interior of the building still smelled of diesel, and gasoline, and solvents. The front had rolling steel doors almost two stories high to allow trucks with trailers to drive from the highway into the service area. Though improvised, the factory looked organized and efficient.

"An Iranian who had been trained by the Americans to maintain the Shah's Hawk missiles. But for his system, he used only civilian electronic components. It is all very simple and very inexpensive.

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His system balances simplicity against cost and complexity to achieve very impressive accuracy-- as you saw. A fighter places a transmitter at the target, then turns on the signal. The signal activate a small computer at the launcher. The computer calculates the direction and range, then aims the launcher and fires the salvo of forty rockets. As the rockets descend, each rocket homes on the signal of the transmitter, the steering fins on the nose guiding the rocket to the target."

Glancing out the back door of the garage, Pazos saw flatbed trailers loaded with containers. A welding kit stood beside a ladder. A long scorch line ran along the corner of a container where the side panels met the roof. He and Atallah had interrupted the conversion of another cargo container to conceal and transport rockets.

"An ingenious system," Atallah continued. "However, it disappointed the Iranians."

"Why?"

"It has no value on the Iraqi Front. It requires a martyr to place the transmitter. And the minefields of the Iraqis do not make that possible. Also, the rockets do not have the range to avoid Iraqi artillery. Therefore, they decided to use this weapon on other fronts."

"Where?"

"Can you not," Atallah asked. "See the value of this weapon against an embassy? The transmitter is not a weapon or a bomb. We can conceal it within a video camera or a recorder. If a martyr can

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take a video camera to an interview, perhaps with the American ambassador"

Turbines screamed outside as a flight of helicopters passed over the office building. Atallah paused. He tapped another cigarette from the pack and lit it from the one he smoked. Pazos waited for the Syrian to speak again, watching Atallah stub out the butt, then looking away, his eyes scanning the hundreds of Arabic, English, and French books on the shelves. The noise faded, quiet returning to the office. Typing continued in the outer office. Seconds passed. Pazos looked down at the intricate geometric and floral patterns of the Persian carpet-- like the books, the Rolex, and the Mercedes, a display of the colonel's wealth.

"Can you provide a crew who speak English?"

The question surprised Pazos. "Why English?"

"Will your men speak Farsi?"

"No."

"And we do not have technicians who speak Spanish. Only English. The technicians will train the Salvadorians to maintain and prepare the launcher."

"But what of the Americans? When they find the launcher and the crew, they will know it is not a Salvadorian attack. They will strike out at who--"

"Strike out at who?" Atallah looked to the ceiling and clasped his hands together, praying. "Allah the Compassionate, the

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Merciful, shelter me from the revenge of the Americans, from the rage of their clown who is a president, for his rage, for his declarations of justice to come threatens me with death by my own laughter--- Please, Emilio no more jokes! Did you see him after the bombing in Beirut? Hundreds of their Marines dead. Hundreds! As I watched him speak his scripted lines on the television, I was racked by laughter. It threatened my heart. But let me tell you why I do not fear even my own laughter. Here--"

Atallah took a folder from his desk. "I anticipated your concern. There is the documentation on the launcher you saw today."

Pazos leafed through the pages. He saw photocopies bearing the seal of the Soviet Union. "I don't read Russian."

"Or Portuguese? Or Afrikaner? Or Ethiopian? The Soviets shipped a launcher and a truck to Angola. South Africa captured the launcher during one of their attacks. South Africa traded the truck, launcher, and rockets to Ethiopia for grain. Grain sent to feed the starving people of Ethiopia. Is that not interesting? This launcher will be used against Americans and American charity paid for the launcher? On the freighter, Palestinians dismantled the launcher and dumped the truck into the ocean. In the Port of Aseb, Ethiopia, they covered the launcher with sacks of coffee. The freighter took the cargo to the Mediterranean. The Palestinians paid the captain to stop at Tripoli. They unloaded the launcher and it went to the Beeka."

Atallah pointed his cigarette at the folder. "It is all there, far more information than their CIA or journalists will ever know."

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Who will the Americans accuse of supplying these rockets to the Salvadorians? The Islamic Jihad? The mysterious gang they cannot find. The Soviets? The super-power they will not attack. The South Africans? Or Ethiopia?"

"How will he transport the rockets to El Salvador?"

"Say the word and it will be done. You send a crew for training. We will provide the launcher, the rockets, and the transmitter. We will build the transmitter into the device of your choice-- camera, recorder, whatever. You find the martyrs to carry the transmitter and decide the day. Those details of the victory will be your responsibility. Do you foresee any difficulties with the Nicaraguans and the Salvadorians? Will they possibly object to this?"

"I am their director. Who are they to object?" Pazos ran a hand over the pomade of his hair. "However, this question of martyrs is there some other way to place the transmitter?"

"Perhaps 'martyr' is a poor choice of words," Atallah corrected himself. My English is less than perfect. As is my understanding of Catholicism. Most Salvadorians are Catholics, yes? And Catholics do not rush to their paradise. Perhaps the word 'volunteer' is better. They might be told their responsibility is only to interview the ambassador. And martyrdom would come as a surprise."

Pazos laughed. "I can find volunteers."