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A bus roared past on the avenue, the wheels smashing down on the broken pavement, the cantina shuddering with the impacts. Black and white images of Salvadorian soldiers and United States Marines flashed on the television, music from the jukebox blasting away the voice of the narrator. Staring at the television, the old woman who owned the cantina ignored the loud talk and shouting of the two young men, her only customers that morning. The young men, dressed in new shirts and polyester slacks, drank and raved and waved their arms. Sometimes they leaned across their table and whispered. On the television, video stories from the hometowns of the dead Marines alternated with the somber faces of American politicians issuing statements from Washington, D.C.

The two young men shared a bottle of aguardiente, a tasteless, colorless liquor distilled from sugar cane. David Vargas poured more aguardiente into the glass of his brother, Cesar. Already drunk, his eyes wide, Cesar raised the glass toward the television and shouted out:

"Dead gringos! Kill them all! Revolutionary justice!"

Glancing at the two young men, the old woman almost smiled, her toothless mouth moving. But she said nothing. She turned back to the television and stared at a scene of teenage lovers running through a field of flowers. The singing and music from the jukebox

paused. Outside, a sound truck blared a patriotic slogan, the amplified voice louder than the motorcycles and unmuffled engines. "That us. We are killing gringos. Here in the capitol. What does it count to fight in Chalatenango? Kill a soldier there? It is nothing! Nothing! Kill a gringo here and all the world knows!"

David shook his head, no. "The squads operate here. They took our brother, our cousin, our friends from school. If I had not gone to the hills, I would be dead."

"Then why am I safe?"

"You went to Nicaragua."

"Or Cuba. Wherever it was. They never told me. Fly there, fly back. But I tell you why. The unit gave me a new name and new papers. We operate alone. No other groups. And now, now in the capitol, because the fascists are taking the orders of the gringos, there are no more death squads. And you, you still fight in the hills. Where they bomb, where they use the gunships, hundreds of soldiers. You starve and suffer. But here, here we stay in apartments and fuck our girlfriends and when the time is right, we hit the sons of bitches and all the world knows. Do I tell the truth? Would I lie to my own brother?"

"It is bad out there," David nodded. "We fight and run and the people tell the army and they send the gunships. Men die shooting their rifles at the sky."

"The war will not be won by preaching to the campesinos. They're too stupid. Give them a tortilla and you are the boss. The war will be won here in the capitol. Come with me. I will take you

to Paulino. We can use a man who's good with a rifle. Because the next time--"

Cesar turned to look at the doorway and the other tables. No one else had entered the cantina. The old woman stared at the television and fanned flies from her hair. "Next time, we make a big hit. Paulino took pictures of the embassy and the mansion where the pig ambassador lives. I drove Paulino and that rich bitch Marianela around. Like tourists. They didn't tell me, but I know. Next time, it's big."

"What about money?"

"Good money! An apartment. Clothes. And I drive the taxi when I'm not with the unit. I always keep some of that money for me. I'll share with you. We can both drive the taxi. We can make money and win the war! What do you say?"

"Can we talk with this Paulino? I don't want to--"

"Done! We go now--"

"I don't want to tell my commander I want to go unless it is for sure."

"We go now," Cesar stood, the chair falling behind him. He held onto the table to steady himself. "Drink, finish it. The rich boy won't give us any shit. I want you in the unit and that is that. So we go. It is arranged."

David went to a mirror hanging on the back wall and smoothed his hair. He straightened his shirt collar. A new shirt, pale blue, long sleeved, yet cool, he had bought it the night before from a Chinese importer. "In a minute. I've got to go to the pisser."

Staggering out the back door of the cantina, he followed a pathway through trash and broken glass. Slat board fences and sheets of corrugated steel divided the lot from the other lots. He heard the banging of hammers on car fenders and the screech of a cutting wheel. At the back of the lot, four uprights of lumber, roofed with plywood, and walled with sheets of plastic served as an outhouse. Filth and black swarms of flies covered the concrete base of the toilet. Nauseated, he stepped behind the outhouse and urinated against the fence.

The mid-day sun glared down on him, but the alcohol put the tropical heat and the stink of the cesspool and the traffic chaos far away. He remembered years before, drinking beer at the beach and dancing and trying to kiss the high school girls and staggering home drunk in the darkness-- like a different life.

Tables crashed in the cantina. Men shouted out, "Police!"

David hit the fence, trying to climb but falling as the boards and sheets of plywood collapsed. Chickens squawked and flapped, he scrambled to his feet and ran through a winding courtyard of shacks.

A woman washing clothes in a bucket looked at him and looked down, as if she had not seen him. He thrashed through wet clothes hanging on a line and came to a brick wall. A gate blocked the way to the street but he kicked it aside. A few more steps took him to the dirt street.

Walking-- he forced himself to walk-- along the narrow street, he passed trucks and vans. Cart men struggled to haul loads of fruit and vegetables from the trucks to the stalls of market on the

intersecting boulevard. David wove into the crowds of women carrying bags and zigzagged through the stalls. At a booth, he bought a fifteen centavo plastic bag and a cheap soccer shirt with a white body and orange sleeves. Dodging into a doorway, he took off his good blue shirt and pulled on the cheap t-shirt. He concealed his dress shirt in the bag. He stood there thinking of his brother in the hands of the police-- and he vomited, spewing out the aquardiente.

"Get out of here, you disgrace!" A woman cursed. "Take your sickness away. You should be working."

Turning his face away from the woman, David stumbled through the market. He bought sunglasses from a vendor. Then a frozen bag of juice. Biting off the corner, he sucked on the ice and wandered back to the avenue of the cantina. A crowd of teenagers and children stood on the sidewalk.

In the center of the block, National Police squad cars parked on the sidewalks. Shopkeepers stared from their doorways. Policemen searched his brother's taxi. He saw four policemen drag his brother-- bleeding, his head rolling on his shoulders-- from the cantina to a squad car.

They had taken his brother. He could do nothing to save him. But the capture of his brother meant danger to the other members of the urban unit. He owed those comrades a warning. Standing there a moment longer, the cheap sunglasses hiding his tears, David took a last look at his older brother, unconscious and bleeding, never again to walk free or to fight the regime.

For an hour, David took buses through San Salvador, walking from avenues to cross streets, then taking other buses before knocking on the door of his contact and telling of his brother's capture.

Then he left San Salvador, returning to the war in the Chalatenango.

In the mountains of Morazon Province, a People's Revolutionary Army radio post received the coded message from San Salvador. The operator recognized the identification phrase and retransmitted the message to Nicaragua.

Machines in the in the offices of the Ministry of International Development in Managua automatically recorded the transmission. Raul Condori returned from lunch and decoded the relayed message. Following the instructions of Pazos, he coded the information, added instructions, and keyed the message to Cuba. In Cuba, the communications officer followed the instructions, typing one copy for the Directorate General of Intelligence, the Cuban equivalent of the American CIA, and a second copy for secure retransmission to Damascus where Emilio Pazos, the commander of the operation in San Salvador, where he met with Colonel Nazim Atallah. ***

Her blow-dryer whirring in her hand, Lydia Rivas watched the evening news coverage of the ceremony at Ilopango Air Force Base. The television showed politicians and officers crowding a review stand set on one of the runways. An honor guard of Salvadorian Air

Commandos in camouflage fatigues and berets slouched beside flag-draped caskets on wheeled stands. General Ochoa intoned a solemn statement in memory of the assassinated Marines, dedicating the Armed Forces and People of El Salvador to the continuing struggle for Freedom. Security men in suits and black sunglasses faced outward from the review stand, watching the Air Force commandos and the crowd of onlookers.

The electronics of the television altered the colors of the assembled soldiers and dignitaries. The green of the camouflage uniforms, the red and blue of the flags, the sun-flashing gold of the officers' uniforms-- the scene had the unreal look of a tourist postcard. The camera zoomed in on the General's sweating face to catch his final declaration: "Patriotism and Liberty, or Death!"

Rivas ran her hand through her scented hair and laughed. A band struck a funeral march and the Air Force commandos shoved the caskets to the waiting transport plane. At the cargo doors, a second honor guard of United States Marines stood at rigid attention.

Knocking startled Rivas. Dropping the hair-dryer, she picked up her Beretta from the table and pointed the pistol at the apartment door. "Who is there?"

"Paulino."

"What is it?"

"An emergency."

Opening the locks with her left hand, she held the pistol ready. Paulino Rivera closed the door behind him. He wore tennis

whites and carried an equipment bag. Rushing past her, he turned up the volume of the television. The funeral march covered his panicked whisper:

"They got Cesar. The one that drove the taxi cab."

"How long ago?"

"This morning."

"What? Why wasn't I told?"

"I got it from the Party. They sent a messenger to me."

"Because they think you're the leader. Pretty Paulino, the leader. Wait outside. I'll get ready. We'll go to Julio and use the radio."

"There are police watching his place. We've got to call him, warn him about--"

"Forget him. We'll go to Martin, use his radio. Get confirmation and instructions--"

"We don't need to. The Party got instructions from Managua to get us out through their network."

"That's not the procedure. We must radio our commander for instructions."

"Forget One-Eye! The Party will get us out tonight. It's all arranged. I can't go back to my place and Cesar knows what you look like. The police are already looking for us. They'll be here next."

Rivas considered the risk of using the contacts of the Revolutionary Workers Party. Cuban-financed, with hundreds of members throughout the country, with urban squads fighting in the cities and

guerrilla units in the countryside, they had the organization to evacuate her group. But the security forces assigned agents to infiltrate known organizations. In Nicaragua, Quezada had told her not to use the Cuban group. Yet if she waited for instructions, she risked capture.

"We go. And Paulino, until we return to our commander, your ambition is fulfilled. You will pretend to be the leader of our group. Now get out while I get ready."

Minutes later, they ran from the apartment house in matching tennis whites. Her sweater covered the Beretta stuck in the waist band of her shorts. Rivas wore an oversized purse over her right shoulder. She walked with her hand in the purse, gripping her Uzi submachinegun. She carried her tennis racket in her left hand. At the gate, Rivas stopped and scanned the quiet, tree shadowed street.

A streetlamp shone on the corner, the amber light shattering through the trees. They saw no one walking. A few cars parked near one walled estate where a silhouette with a rifle paced at a gate. Lights shone from the guard positions of several estates.

"Walk slow. Laugh."

Rivera forced a laugh as he crossed the sidewalk to the parked Fiat and opened the door for her. Then they accelerated away, speeding through the residential streets. Rivera whipped through turns, studying the rear-view mirror for trailing surveillance. He turned onto a boulevard and wove through the traffic.

"Down," he told her.

"What?"

"Down! Put your head down. They said you are not to see where we go. It is security."

Pressing her face to her knees, she felt a coat go over her back. Then the little Fiat swerved through a series of turns to disorient her. Rivera switched on the radio. Blind, the music blasting into her ears, she rode doubled-over for several songs and commercials-- perhaps fifteen minutes. The Fiat left the smooth boulevards of the central city and bucked and lurched, beating the back of her head against the dash, as Rivera continued into one of the slum districts. Despite the radio, she heard the roaring of diesel buses and smelled the particular rot and human filth stink of a turcurio-- one of the cardboard and scrap metal slums spilling down the steep ravines that cut through the city.

A final whipping right turn took the sportscar into a building. Steel screeched as a roll down door shut off the noise of the street. Finally Rivera clicked off the music and allowed Rivas to sit up.

"We are here! The People's Fortress!"

Laughter rang in the empty auto garage. Tools and junk parts lined the walls. Worklights hung from the high ceiling by cables. Squinting against the white glare, Rivas saw a second floor and walkway overlooking the work area. Forms with weapons looked down at the newcomers. Television voices and music came from a doorway.

A silhouette appeared in the doorway. The man leaned on the walkway railing and called down to her:

"Are you ready to go to Cuba?"

After she left the car, the man who talked of Cuba took her aside. Middle aged, stinking of cologne, his gut straining at the sparkling sportshirt he wore, he introduced himself:

"I am Gonzalo, the leader of the unit that will help you. I am organizing your trip to safety. What is your name, comrade?"

"Marianela."

"Oh, Marianela the brave one. Come, come with me. I do not want to be overheard." He led her into an office stacked with boxes. He leaned close to Rivas and whispered. "I said Cuba for the others to hear. But you will go another country. A country far more radical."

Rivas stepped back, eyeing this fat man who claimed to be a unit leader. Soto edged closer and whispered. "I do not want to be overheard by the others. We must always consider security. You have a future unlike all the others. And you must prepare for your role in the triumph of the revolution. I have received instructions from Cuba, from the director himself, and you will go far in the--"

"Who is this director? What is his name?"

Soto laughed. "A name would be a violation of security. But I can tell you that he is impressed by the little group you fight with. You will receive more training. A new identity. And a new role-- I can say no more now. You will see."

Rivas reached under her sweater and touched the Beretta in her waistband. If this fat man tried to molest her in this filthy room, she intended to smash him with the pistol. He saw the grips of the

Beretta jammed into the front of her shorts.

"An Uzi and a pistol! You are truly a dangerous one. But you will not need your weapons now. We will keep you very safe."

And he touched her, his hand stroking her hair and she jerked away, her hand pulling the razor free, but he had already stepped away. At the door, he turned and gave her a clenched fist salute.

Gonzalo Soto left by the basement door of the garage. A series of broken concrete blocks provided steps down to the path. The path ran between the foundations of the buildings facing the street and the turcurio shacks spilling down the ravine. Dim yellow glow from the papered-over windows above him lit his way through the trash and weeds.

Beautiful! He thought of the rich girl in her tennis uniform, her dark shining hair spilling over the white. Big ones. And those long, long legs. No wonder Rivera had her stop the gringos. Who wouldn't stop if she said a word?

But Rivera said she acts like a nun. A beautiful nun but cold like one. Always talking about killing. Or looking in a mirror, like a revolutionary starlet.

Smoke acrid with burning plastic drifted up the ravine. Coughing, Soto staggered along the path. Music and voices and the cries of children came from the hundreds of shacks below him. A drunk wailed. The noise and the stink of poverty filled the night.

Why would she risk her beautiful life for the poor? Why didn't

she go back to the north and marry a rich yankee? Why didn't she forget the Revolution?

Forget the questions! Once he got her away from the others, when he had her in hiding alone, then he'd put it to her. Run out on him in Tegucigalpa? And straight to an Honduran Army barracks? Run out on him in Cuba? Yes, she could do that. Fidel himself would claim her. And then every Party functionary down the line until the post office clerks had her. Then they'd export her to Libya. Screw her in Honduras. Me or the Honduran Army, rich girl. Then I'll give you to Fidel.

Soto had never joined the Communists. He managed singing groups and traveling entertainers. He never had time for politics. But his brother had been an active member of the Revolutionary Workers Party. The night Soto found his brother's headless corpse, he abandoned his wife and fled for the United States. Mexican immigration sent him back to Guatemala the first time. The second time, he paid a smuggler to take him to Chicago. U S immigration sent him back direct to San Salvador. His wife had moved in with an sergeant of the National Police. Soto saw his wife big-bellied with another man's child and fled, knowing the jealousy of a policeman would be fatal. The Party offered him false identification and a salary if he managed the business details-- money, cars, apartments, jobs-- of teenagers working in the city. He took the work. By skimming the money, he had saved almost enough money for an air ticket to Canada. Now he had this hurry-up job to get the killers of the Marines out of El Salvador. This job meant a chance to steal

more money. With a ticket and a political persecution story, he had a chance to live in Canada. After this, he escaped his country for the last time.

At a rutted dirt lane, Soto cut uphill to the street. He dodged through the vendors crowding the corners and ran through the intersection. He hurried along the street of shops to another corner. There, women waited at a bus stop. He pressed back into a doorway and watched the street.

A pushcart vendor jingled a stick of bells. Running children taunted one another. Two mechanics worked on a car parked at the curb. Soto saw no one who looked like a surveillance agent but fear made him suspect everyone, even the children. No one had trained him to be a subversive and he knew he would not live to make two mistakes. He tried to look into the passing cars and trucks, but in the night and headlights, he could not see faces.

Screeching brakes and rattling sheet metal announced the arrival of a bus. Soto waited until the women boarded, then dashed across the sidewalk. He paid his centavos and squeezed through the standing passengers-- his hand on his wallet-- to the back door. The bus passed a line of waiting taxis and Soto stepped down.

A taxi took him to a cafe. He paid and rushed inside. Waiting until he saw the taxi pull away, he went out the cafe's back door. Running the length of the alley, he crossed a street and went into the office of a trucking company.

"Finally, you are here." Antonio Manos-- the owner-manager of the company-- flashed a gold-toothed grin and turned off a television. A boney sixty-year old man with his thick gray hair

swept into a stiff pompadour, he glanced at Gonzalo's sweat-patterned shirt and sweat-streaming face. "Did you see the program about the Marines?"

Soto stepped back, his eyes fixing on the gray television screen. Then he took a jerking step toward the inner door that led to the garage area. "Where's the truck? When can I get the truck?"

"You said you needed a truck, a very special truck. And I have that truck ready. Come--" Opening the door for his compatriot, he motioned him into the garage.

A slat-sided flatbed truck carried a load of woven-plastic sacks. The hundred-pound sacks of fortified bulgar wheat bore the stencilled handshake and shield logo of the United States. "Look in the bags. Every bag has that shit rice they send."

"Every bag? If the soldiers open one and find rocks, they will search the truck--"

"Every bag. I bought it from the government at a good price. It is fit only to feed to campesinos and pigs so the soldiers will not want much of it. We will use it again when we must use the truck. Very convenient, I think."

"Where do they enter?"

"Here." Opening the driver's door, he reached behind the seat. A latch clicked and he pushed forward the seat. A second latch released a plywood sheet that covered a crawl hole.

Soto looked inside to see a wide, long compartment. "The soldiers will find this!"

"Pardon me, but no, they have not found it all the times we

used it. We have used the truck many times for rifles and ammunition."

"Into the liberated zones?"

"Everywhere. At the borders. At the department checkpoints. In the city. And that was with bananas and coffee and boxes in the back. With those bags from the United States, the soldiers will take their money and let the truck go through. Will you be inside?"

"No."

"Then what is your worry?"

"It is my life if they're caught."

"Oh"

"How long can they stay in there?"

"To where?"

"The mountains."

"Chaltenango? Morazon?"

"The mountains. The border. Five or six hours."

"That is nothing. We have carried wounded men all the way to Nicaragua."

"Nothing can screw up, understand me? I will waiting there and if they do not--"

"I am experienced in this, Gonzalo. Trust me." Throwing an arm over the shoulders of his compatriot, Manos escorted him to the alley door. "You call me when it must leave. And it is done, trust me."

After the sweating, overweight conspirator darted into the alley, Manos went to the telephone. Now Manos knew. Soto had responded to the Marine question with an abrupt jerk, as if Manos had slapped him. Then he said that his life depended on the fighters escaping-- because he would not be in the truck, that implied he would be executed by the leadership. Finally, that he would be waiting in Morazon-- that meant his entire cell would evacuate the capitol.

The Marine assassins. Only the killers of the Marines would merit the expense and trouble.

Antonio Manos had worked for the gringos three years, helping them monitor the smuggling of weapons from Nicaragua to El Salvador.

With the payments for information, he had already bought a house in Texas.

Dialing the number of his North American contact, Manos calculated the value of the information. The price of a swimming pool? Perhaps an American car?