

RECON STRIKE

07

In the back booth of the Las Vegas, Niles leaned back against the wall and poured the third Cerveza Salva Vida down his throat. The wall vibrated with the bass of the Mexican ballads blasting from the jukebox. He put the empty beer bottle in the clutter of dishes on the table and signaled for another.

While he waited, he returned to his writing, slowly and exactly guiding the pen across the back of a tourist post card, right to left, forming the sweeps and loops of the Arabic characters. He checked each line against his pencil copy before adding the card to the others inside an envelope.

Headlights flashed across the interior of the restaurant as a bus left the Danli?? terminal. The engine noise overwhelmed the jukebox. Across the highway, buses and mini-vans parked at a curb.

Passengers ran through the glare of headlights, the lights projecting their silhouettes through swirling dust and smoke. When the jukebox cycled records, the noise of the terminal came-- bus helpers shouting out destinations, vendors whistling to get the attention of passengers, airhorns blaring, the low vibration of idling diesel engines.

The waitress brought his fourth bottle of beer. A teenager with curly hair and a moon face daubed with startling red lipstick, she wore a tight mini-skirt over heavy thighs and a round belly.

RECON STRIKE

Her low-cut blouse exposed balloon breasts. Smiling to Niles, she levered the cap off the bottle and foam sprayed over her chest and face. Giggling, she wiped the foam off with her hand, her hand moving swells of breast, leaving smears of dust and diesel soot.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"Far away."

She put one knee on the bench seat opposite him and leaned on the table with her elbows. The angle revealed her breasts to him. "You look like a soldier."

"Me?"

"Only soldiers come here. And journalists. And bible workers. I don't think you teach the bible."

"I'm only a tourist," Niles lied.

She laughed, her pendulous breasts swaying within her blouse. "The last bus is gone."

"Last bus to where?"

"Back to the capitol."

"The schedule said there is a bus at--"

"The schedule says. But no bus goes at that time. I think you must stay in Danli??. I know a good place for tourists."

Looking past her breasts, Niles saw Sergeant Jesus Alvarez in the doorway. The tall Marine from East Los Angeles wore a beret over his short-cut hair and a nylon jacket over his wide shoulders.

Except for his sharp Mexican features, he looked like a Honduran. Niles slid out of the booth and put a twenty Lempira bill on the table-- enough for the dinner, five beers, and a half-day's wage tip

RECON STRIKE

for the waitress. He smiled to her and took another beer from the cooler. "For the bus."

Alvarez waited in a battered Chevrolet pick-up truck. Swinging open the door, Niles passed him the extra beer and got in. He glanced back at the Las Vegas and saw the moon-faced girl watching the truck pull away.

"Hey-zoot, I thought I'd die," Niles laughed, speaking English for the first time in days as the truck lurched over broken pavement. "That is the truth. I thought I'd die in those mountains."

"They get hit, sir?"

"No. But it was only luck and Sandinista incompetence that they didn't. The leader called himself, El Martillo. Should've been, Carnicero-- the Butcher."

"He make contact?"

"He's out there killing people" Niles drank his beer and watched the forested hills sparkle with the lights of houses and settlements. "Lot of women crying tonight, maybe a hundred kids without fathers. But you don't win a war by making martyrs for the revolution. And the first well-trained counter -insurgency unit he runs into, he is history."

"You hear the radio?"

"That contra unit knocked down two of those new Soviet troop helicopters. That make the news?"

"No, sir. A gang murdered four Marines in San Salvador. Embassy guards."

RECON STRIKE

"Assault on the embassy?"

"Hit a sidewalk cafe. Four Marines dead, two other Americans, eight local people. This was two nights ago. The night I dropped you off."

"Embassy Marines ... no weapons, right? Out on the town and they got shot?"

"A woman set them up."

"They know who did it?"

"Some gang."

"Guerrillas or death squads?"

"Guerrillas. Communists."

"They get the gang?"

"No, sir, not yet. But there's a jet coming down from Washington. I'm to take you to the airport. The restricted side."

"A jet from Washington? What time?"

"Lieutenant Stark called them after we got your call from Danli??."

Niles opened the glove compartment and found his watch and identification. "Where are Stark and Vatsek?"

"At the camp."

During the hour and a half drive west, Niles told Alvarez the story of his days with the contras. He finished the story as they turned from the Carretera del Oriente to the chain link and razor wire gate of the military base. Honduran military police stepped out of the sandbagged bunkers, M16 rifles in their right hands, the muzzles pointed straight up. On the roof of the bunker, two

RECON STRIKE

soldiers lounged beside a 50-caliber heavy machinegun-- capable of stopping any vehicle not protected with armor-plate. Niles and Alvarez showed the soldiers plastic -laminated cards identifying them as American trainers. One soldier looked from Niles' face to the card, then shone a flashlight on his face and studied him. The soldier called out to the other:

"This one is a Marine?"

Niles laughed. Finally, the soldiers pushed the gate aside. Inside the camp, Alvarez drove past rows of wood-framed tents on raised plank platforms. The temporary barracks sheltered recruits from the sun and rain, the platforms raising the tents above the earth and allowing air to circulate under the floor -boards. The framing supported the canvas covering throughout all the tropical rainstorms. Despite the air circulating through the nylon-mesh sidewalls, the tents became canvas sweat-boxes during the day. In the evening, as wind sweeping from the pine-forested mountains cooled the tents, soldiers sat on the steps, cleaning rifles, sewing up tears in their fatigues, and polishing their boots by the lights lining the gravel streets.

In the center of the camp, a cluster of tents served as housing and offices the US personnel. Niles left the truck and went to the door of one tent. He banged on the door-- no answer. Through the mesh wall, he saw the personal possessions of Sergeant Leon Vatsek in semi-disarray-- a Korean satin robe embroidered with dragons and lightning strikes, a weight bench improvised of welded steel pipes, a barbell set made of pipe and blocks of concrete. A near-naked

RECON STRIKE

Grace Jones, her lithe black limbs and torso polished with sweat, glared down from a color poster. With pen and ink, Vatssek had carefully placed a Soviet PKM machinegun in her hands.

Niles cut across the camp street to the light of a small pre-fab plywood office for the Recon training team. The fluorescent light inside the office drew hundreds of insects, the moths and beetles and mosquitos swarming on the screens.

Inside, he saw all the battalion papers in rectangular stacks, forms filed in labeled notebooks, the black plastic of the desk top gleaming, an eraser and pen in a precise position beside the typewriter.

The Lieutenant Stark had quit for the night. Methodical and exacting, the lieutenant always left his office in perfect order. Nothing in the office detracted from the spartan austerity. No photos of his family in Washington, D.C. No photos of girl friends. No pin ups. No ashtrays. Only office equipment, materials, and his name plaque on the desk: 2nd Lieutenant Richard Stark, U S M C.

Then Niles saw the note taped to the desk: Soccer field until 22:00.

"Strak Man's out kicking the ball around."

Three hundred meters from the office, past a line of old UH-1 troopships, Alvarez parked in a row of troop trucks alongside a lighted field. Two teams of soldiers ran across the field, their feet throwing dust with every step, dust exploding when they kicked the soccer ball. Niles spotted Lieutenant Stark immediately. In white shorts and a white shirt, the slim black man flashed through

RECON STRIKE

lines of opposing players as he led his team's offense for the striped 4 X 4 beams of the goal. A crowd of young men in the green shorts and green t-shirts converged on him and the lieutenant kicked the ball over their heads to a soldier in a white t-shirt. With a sharp jerk of his head, the forward sent the ball through the rectangle of the goal.

Alvarez honked the truck's horn and flashed the lights. Stark left the game. A university graduate, 2nd Lieutenant Stark intended to serve six years in the Marines before going into the Foreign Service. A tall, slender black man with the good looks and grooming of a Gentlemen's Quarterly model, he had the image the media demanded. He had served in Beirut from November 1983 to January 1984, then transferred with Captain Niles to Honduras.

"There's Vatsek" Alvarez pointed to the other end of the improvised soccer field. At the sidelines, Vatsek stood surrounded by a crowd of off-duty Honduran soldiers, his white-blond hair and pale skin like a white flame under the lights. A dedicated body-builder, the muscles of his shoulders seemed to flow to his neck, the circumference of his neck almost equal to his head. One man shouted and the group of men laughed.

"What kind of trouble is he making now?" Not waiting for Lieutenant Stark, Niles walked quickly to the crowd of Hondurans. Vatsek stood in the center of the Hondurans. He wore dusty, sweat-muddied camouflage fatigues and dirt-plastered combat boots. Taking His his pale Slavic features looked evil.

Two young soldiers stood back from the crowd. Niles recognized

RECON STRIKE

the two teenagers from a class of trainees. He asked them, "What's the problem here?"

"They do not believe our teacher can fight all of them," one teenager started.

"All at once," the other added.

"But we believe"

Joking to one another, some of the young men in the crowd put up their fists.

"Ready to go, pukes!" Vatsek declared, taking another gulp of beer. He held up his left hand-- his wrist thicker than the arms of most of the men confronting him-- and made a fist. Then he stepped back into a karate sparring stance and spat out the single word, "Attack!"

The Hondurans laughed. Some stepped forward. One young man shoved another into the circle.

Too fast to see individual motions, Vatsek tore through the soldiers, kicking their feet from under them, throwing them down to the right and left. He did not use his right hand throughout the hand-to-hand combat demonstration-- his right hand held the can of beer. One boy pulled back his fist to punch the rampaging American and Vatsek shoved him in the shoulder with his open left palm, the force of the blow spinning the soldier into the dust. Another soldier attacked him from behind. Vatsek jammed an elbow into the soldier's gut. The teenager staggered back and Vatsek snapped a classic back kick into his chest, throwing the soldier backwards.

One of the downed teenagers tackled Vatsek. Falling forward,

RECON STRIKE

Vatsek executed a judo roll and came up in a crouch. The last standing soldier rushed him and Vatsek grabbed his jacket, jerking the teenager off his feet and throwing him down hard on the grass. Vatsek finished his beer, then raised his fists above his head and roared. On the ground, the Hondurans laughed.

"To the truck, Godzilla."

"Back in time for my demonstration. What did you think?"

"Why don't you pick on people your own size?"

"Hey, that was fair. Me against a platoon."

Lieutenant Stark waited at the truck, wiping the sweat from his face and arms with a towel. He snapped a salute. "Good evening sir, I'm glad you returned so quickly. I assume it was successful?"

"Yeah, I got back."

"Colonel Devlin was very concerned that you might be unavailable for another week."

"What's going on?"

"The colonel did not inform me. But he is in-flight--" Stark looked at his watch. "In fact, he may already be waiting at Toncontin."

"Then it's time to go." Niles got into the pickup truck. "Didn't mean to break up your games tonight, gentlemen. But don't make any plans for tomorrow night. We could be working."

At the military gate to Toncontin International Airport,

RECON STRIKE

Honduran soldiers got in the back of the pickup truck. They directed Alvarez around the south end of the runways. Following the curving expanse of concrete away from the passenger terminal, Alvarez drove slowly toward the rows of planes and helicopters parked near the military hangers.

A soldier banged on the cab. "That is the airplane."

Alvarez stopped at a C-140 JetStar, a small commuter jet powered by four aft-mounted engines. Lights glowed inside the curtained ports. The soldiers in the truck called out to the two soldiers standing at the ramp and the guards allowed Niles to pass.

Going up the steel stairs, Niles knocked at the port set in the door. A face looked out. Moments later, the door swung open.

Colonel Anthony Devlin wore the uniform of the executive--conservative blue suit, blue shirt, black tie. Beard stubble shadowed his severe, patrician features. Gray hair streaked back from his temples. A career officer in the Marine Corps, he had served with the Joint Chiefs of Staff as a spokesman before his recent transfer to the staff of the National Security Council. He welcomed Niles with a handshake.

"How did it go?"

"I'm lucky to be alive--"

At the front of the plane, a thin, pale bureaucrat in a gray suit and black bow-tie waited at the jet's conference table--Richard Todd represented the CIA's Director of Special Operations. A second man, very young, with black hair cut in the severe Marine style, wore a sports coat and slacks. He sat at one of the side

RECON STRIKE

seats, clutching a briefcase.

Niles looked at his own clothes-- his dusty nylon jacket, his dirty sports shirt, his wrinkled slacks, his dust-colored boots. Rubbing a hand across his beard stubble, Niles felt grease from his chicken dinner in Danli??.

"Alvarez didn't tell me this would be conference."

Devlin lowered his voice. "What happened with Martillo?"

"A one-man disaster. I'll hire some of his men, but he's no one we want to work with."

"We'll work that out. Don't tell that to Todd. Or this man Montes when he shows up."

"Montes? Who's he?"

"Agency man with the embassy here. Delayed by a party. He thinks Martillo is on his way to Managua."

"Maybe in a body bag."

"Here's what we have as of now on the terrorists who murdered our men in San Salvador." Giving Niles a folder, he led him to the table. "Mr. Todd, you know Captain Niles, Recon. He has just returned from Nicaragua."

"It's a pleasure to meet with you again, Captain."

"Agency taking my one and only Farsi-speaking Marine?"

"The doctor says the corporal's ready for duty."

"How's your leg, Javanbach?"

"Very good, sir. One hundred per cent. I ran the Quantico course with a fifty pound pack. I am ready."

"The corporal," Todd told Niles. "Has been translating and

RECON STRIKE

keying the files you captured in the Beeka. We now have every name, photo, and biography computerized and cross-indexed. I don't believe we could have interrogated that Iranian and gained the same volume of information."

Javanbach snapped open the briefcase and passed Niles a sheet showing a page of computer-generated photo and text.

"Looks good," Niles added. "But we lost Rajai,"

"Unfortunate, but given the circumstances, perhaps unavoidable."

"And that means we lost the connections to Syria and Iran."

"True." Todd glance from Javanbach to the senior officers. "Perhaps the corporal would like to speak to his friends outside--" Todd pointed out to the trucks.

Niles grinned. "He's telling you to get out."

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir" Javanbach saluted and pivoted to exit.

"Wait. Here--" Niles took the envelope from his pocket. He licked the flap and sealed the envelope. Checking the Arabic of the address a last time, he took his pen and block-printed BEYROUTH, LEBANON / PAR AVION. "I want this mailed from France. Nothing is to identify that letter as coming from the United States or an English-speaking country. Got it?"

"Yes, sir. I'll forward it tomorrow, sir."

"And don't cut your hair anymore, don't shave. You're no good to us if you look like a Marine. Now out."

The three men waited until the door closed.

RECON STRIKE

"Isn't it perhaps dangerous," Todd asked. "To correspond through the mail with your sources in Lebanon?"

"She's not a source. But I still got to be careful. Not good for a Shia woman to be getting letters from an American."

"Of course. Mr. Devlin, can you explain the Salvadorian situation to the captain?"

"Before Alex Montes gets here," Devlin told Niles. "Let me say that your sources are producing. They are servicing the electronic scanners and forwarding the tapes to our technicians for analysis. They also report whatever they observe. In total, they provide the best street-level and small unit information on the Revolutionary Guards in Baalbek that we are now receiving from any source."

"That's good, that's great," Niles nodded. "I knew they'd be dependable. And they're risking their lives--"

"They certainly are," Todd agreed.

"But it doesn't mean a thing if we don't act on the information. Five months now I've waited in Honduras and no action. The murderers of hundreds of United States Marines are still out there killing more Americans. The government that sent the Marines to Beirut to die may have forgotten, but I haven't. The only way to stop those gangs is to hit them and we're still waiting here in Honduras."

"Your point is taken." Todd glanced to Devlin. "I have heard much the same quite often from Colonel Devlin. But we cannot send Americans into that area--"

"Why didn't anyone say that when the politicians sent the

RECON STRIKE

battalions to the Beirut Airport? Two hundred forty one men dead for nothing--"

Devlin cut him off. "Mr. Todd doesn't make policy. But we got action for you if you want to hear about it."

"Yeah? Tell me."

"First, the killers were Salvadorian but the command was Cuban. With links to Syria--"

"Syria?"

"Agents report a meeting between a Cuban intelligence chief now working in Managua and a Syrian army intelligence officer. The Syrian, a colonel named Atallah, appears in the files you captured in the Beeka in January. He worked with Rajai. Interception of communications link the guerrillas in San Salvador to the DGI in Managua to the Cuban in Damascus--"

"?Que pasa?" A voice boomed. "Am I late? Looks like a Marine convention out there."

"The Cuba to Syrian link must wait," Devlin told Niles. "This is Alex Montes"

A tall, wide-shouldered man strode down the center aisle of the jet. Square-jawed, his back-combed hair only one tone short of blond, Montes looked like a tan, athletic Anglo. But his voice had the rich Latin undertone of a lifelong Spanish speaker:

"Captain Niles, I am honored to meet you. The colonel speaks very highly of you. Thinks you are a brave and dangerous man. He said he saw you in action."

"We go way back."

RECON STRIKE

"The colonel told me of your adventures in Nam."

"And Laos and Cambodia," Colonel Devlin added. "The captain is no stranger to cross border operations."

"South-east Asia and now Central America," Montes continued. "And always a volunteer. I only wish we had battalions of men like you."

"This man does get around," Niles admitted.

"Action in Nicaragua?"

"Mr. Montes," Devlin explained to Niles. "Works closely with Sergeant Martillo and many of the other commanders."

"Well," Niles hesitated, thinking of what to say. "Martillo got his bodycount. Wiped out two or three militia squads. And he got two of those Soviet MI-8 troopships. Only one man wounded in his unit that I saw."

"Martillo does it again!" Montes laughed. "He's one of my most aggressive commanders. Always in the thick of it."

"Two helicopters?" Todd asked, incredulous. "Did you see any of the gunships? The MI-24?"

"Yeah, but they didn't see us, so I'm here to tell you about it."

"Watch the headlines, Captain Niles," Montes continued. "We're putting a lot of support behind Martillo and the other guys. In a few months, we'll have a completely different situation down here. They'll be taking a piece of Nicaragua and keeping it."

"A successful mission," Devlin commented, ending the conversation by opening his folder of photos and telex print-outs. "We

RECON STRIKE

will need a report when it is possible-- let us go on to the Salvadorian gang of terrorists."

The colonel spread out several eight-by-ten black-and-white photos on the conference table. Niles saw stark, flash-lit scenes of a sidewalk strewn with corpses, broken dishes, and overturned tables. Black pools of blood spread over the concrete. Salvadorian police held back crowds of onlookers.

"A street cafe. Didn't those Marines think they could get shot? How often did they go out?"

"Quite frequently. And it seems, often to the restaurants and nightclubs in that particular part of the city."

"Yeah, I've been there. El Paseo General Escalona. La Zona Rosa. It's the place to meet girls."

"One of the Marines happened to leave the table just before the attack. He said a young woman called them to the table. They talked and she left. She promised to come back."

"So they waited"

Devlin described the killing by the gunmen in the uniforms of the Salvadorian Army. "A call came to a local radio station only a minute later, claiming responsibility for attack for the Mardoqueo Cruz Combat Unit of the Revolutionary Workers' Party. There had not yet been an news release at the time the station received the call.

Information received since that time confirms they are in fact responsible."

"Responsible for straight out murder" Opening his folder, Niles saw a topographic map of the Salvadorian-Honduran border. A

RECON STRIKE

series of high-resolution satellite photos showed roads and trails.

"Morazon."

"The territory is dominated by the Peoples Revolutionary Army. We have information that the unit responsible for the murders will be taken out of El Salvador. They will be smuggled by truck to Perquin. Then, via this road--" Devlin pointed to a satellite photo. From the rooftops of the remote town, he traced a line through the mountains to a dry river. "At this point, they will then meet another unit which will escort them into Honduras, with the eventual destination of Cuba or the Middle East."

"This information is positive?"

"The Salvadorians captured four members of the urban unit," Todd explained. "Our analysts are working closely with the interrogators. The information on the transportation, route, and destination comes from our sources in Salvador and Honduras."

Niles studied the lines and whorls of the mountains, comparing the topographic maps to the satellite photos. He waited for the next question.

"If we provide helicopters and equipment," Devlin asked. "Can you intercept the unit?"

Niles nodded.

After Niles left the JetStar, Todd turned to Montes. "What is the procedure if the guerrillas kill or capture those men?"

"I know Niles," Devlin protested. "There is no enemy who is

RECON STRIKE

his equal. He will not be killed. His men won't be killed and no one will be captured. I would not have suggested sending him in to make this interception if there was a chance of failure."

"No one in history has been invulnerable," Todd answered. "Not even Achilles. There are always casualties. If not in action, then by accident. I'll rephrase my question to Mr. Montes. What is the procedure if we lose those men?"

Montes laughed. "Only four grunts? We can write them off as killed in a training flight."