

SO DI MARCIA

Don Pendleton's **Mack Bolain**

Path to War

**Fueled by power and greed,
American traitors plot a new world order**

Bolan fired two rounds toward the terrorist's head

“You're insane!” Kairoush shouted.

“I've never been more stone-cold. The next ones are for real,” the Executioner vowed. “I want to know about the North Koreans. I want to know where the backpack nuke is, or how I can get to it. Or I shoot to kill.”

“I will talk!”

And he did, spinning a tale so sordid its magnitude was difficult to absorb. Bolan was turning toward Dawkins when autofire rang out, the soldier flinching as he glimpsed a ragged line of holes dancing across the terrorist's chest.

Black-clad, armored storm troops surged into the warehouse.

“Freeze! Lose the guns!”

Bolan found himself staring at Commander Tachjine, the muzzle of the Moroccan's machine gun pointed at his chest.

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Do not seek evil gains; evil gains are the equivalent of disaster.

—Hesiod
c.700 B.C.

Man makes his own choices. He chooses to either travel the righteous path, or to go the way of Animal Man. Without punishment for conscious and willful evil acts, Animal Man wins. My job is to level the playing field.

—Mack Bolan

To the unswerving dedication of the men and women of the Department of Justice

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CHAPTER ONE

Kinbuvu Gaungalat considered the monster holed up in the apartment, and images of predators on the high savage end of the food chain leaped to mind. The former UNITA colonel may have staked his surveillance point from the dark end of an alley in Old Madrid, somewhere deep in the maze of cobbled streets choked with adobe apartment buildings, plazas, restaurants, bars, monasteries and convents, but numerous visions of feeding frenzies seemed to burn, alive and thrashing, the longer he stared at the wrought-iron balcony, nursing hatred, craving revenge.

And there it came, in living color, it seemed, as he felt the fire searing out from the core of his soul.

He envisioned the lioness on the savanna, her jaws clamped on the throat of a zebra as she took it down in a blast of dust and spewing blood. Then he pictured the crocodile, erupting out of brown waters in a great spume as its razor-sharp teeth clamped the neck of a gazelle that had fallen behind the pack in the river crossing, dragging it beneath the surface, drowning it in a death roll, the beast's throat filling with the blood of its victim before the real devouring began. He imagined next the white shark, its massive dark shape boiling, a torpedo with teeth the size of celery stalks, as it surged up from the depths of the waters around South Africa's Seal Island, a crimson cloud spraying the air before the creature splashed down to consume its meal in a frothy scarlet maelstrom.

Ultimate predators, driven by primal instinct to consume flesh to survive.

All of which, he decided, was simply the beautiful brutality of nature sorting out the food chain, the larger, more aggressive and dangerous animals ruling supreme, deciding, for the most part, what would live, what would fall prey to fill its belly. Something always, it seemed to him, had to die so something could live. And that held especially true, he concluded, in the world from where he came.

Only the predator he wished to kill had never displayed even a scintilla of such courage, much less any skill in those death hunts of wild animals. No, the monster in hiding was a mass murderer, he knew a coward who wallowed in the lap of obscene luxury while others risked their lives to carry out his homicidal dictates, swell his coffers with money earned on the blood of those he oppressed.

That in mind, Gaungalat reached into the dark vault of the gruesome past. For a moment he felt a stab of pain and bitter remorse as he weighed the awful truth about the living hell that was Angola. Like many of his countrymen he was Christian, a Roman Catholic, in fact, his ancestors converted by European missionaries who had passed on the teachings of their faith and their Bible down through the generations. Thus, recalling the Book of Revelation, he couldn't help but picture the former Portuguese colony as a vast and eternal plague of death, war, starvation and pestilence, delivered unto all—in spirit, if nothing else, as far as he was concerned—a terrifying preview of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. But had he not played a small part in the madness of genocide, razing villages where rival MPLA rebels were suspected of hiding large weapons caches, only to slaughter their women and children? he wondered. Had he not turned a blind eye when his soldiers vented anger and hatred through orgies of rape, torture and mutilation on helpless victims? Had he not, as overlord of the diamond mines of Cuango, personally flayed with bullwhip the impoverished miners and near to death?

He had, in time, aborted the course of the Four Horsemen, at least in his private corner of command and control, but not before dipping his hands into figurative rivers of the blood of the innocent.

So, then, was he any better than the monster he had come here to slay?

Oh, but he was, he told himself as he grasped the mini-Uzi hung in webbed nylon rigging beneath his long coat. Had he not turned his back on his old ways, rebelled against the monster, and nearly at the cost of his own life? Was he not sickened for years after by the mere thought of how he could have done what he did for so long to so many? Was it not all he could have done, in feverish dark nights of the soul, weeping alone, begging the God of his understanding for mercy and forgiveness, to have not taken his own life?

He fingered the compact subgun with his left hand, then shucked the other side of his coat higher up, feeling the empty space where his right arm should have been, grinding his teeth at the memory of the amputation, delivered to him for dereliction of duty, or so according to the monster. In his own war-torn nation he knew he wouldn't present himself such an aberration, where, he heard, it was estimated by the Red Cross and World Health Organization that almost forty percent of eleven million Angolans were missing a limb—or limbs—either blown off in a land estimated to be planted with twenty-five million mines and other boobytraps, or hacked off.

He shuddered, wondering about the horror, the why of it all.

Perhaps, he then decided, God had merely punished him for his vile transgressions, only to spare his life, guiding him here to deliver both justice and grant him redemption.

If that was true, he would find out soon enough.

Shoving the howling ghosts to the catacombs of memory, he watched as the doors opened and a white man stepped out onto the balcony. Feeling the added weight of the 9 mm Makarov pistol snug in his waistband and the machete sheathed against his thigh, he melted back into the deeper shadows. As the raucous noise of the city in high-gear search of the night's good times swirled into the mouth of the alley, Gaungalat studied the face of one of the monster's mercenaries. The man had a hard glint in his wary eyes, framed in a lean face swathed in scruff, as if he had just retreated back to civilization after spending weeks in the African bush. There was a noticeable bulge beneath his buff-colored camou jacket, the slender shape of a commando dagger in sheathe poking out just beneath the left side. The whole picture simply confirmed in his mind this was just another whore of war, paid to murder blacks while the paymaster raped his country of diamonds or oil.

Which left Gaungalat wondering just how far and how much he could trust his own source of intelligence.

It was strange, he briefly reflected, why the white men who had found him in his apartment in Luanda would plant him on the trail of the monster. There were many—indeed, too many of his countrymen to count—who wished to see the monster die a slow and agonizing death by machete. Why him? Why not? had been their answer. So, they had paid him, ten thousand dollars in U.S. currency, making arrangements to land himself and a squad of three soldiers of his choosing under his former command to slay the beast and his mercenary thugs. Intelligence from his own paymasters stated two mercenaries, the monster, two of his own lackeys on the target site. And, if their information was accurate, they were in the process of unloading uncut diamonds, as he checked his watch, noted the time of the alleged rendezvous.

In a way, the setup was perfect. He had never seen the cutout, but he could surmise he had been sent from Wilders International. But, who else, he thought, other than the London-based cabal who had a monopoly on much of the world's diamond trade would be sleeping with the monster? Angola, he knew, was responsible for at least fifteen percent of the world's diamond haul. Where there were diamonds there was Wilders. Where there was Wilders there was oppression, misery and death for the poor by hard labor, or worse.

For a moment he wondered if his thirst for revenge, the burning need for redemption had trampled all reason when he should have been just as suspicious of Westerners he was certain were CIA. Was

this a trap? If so, why? His hatred for the monster, his plans to create his own revolutionary army were no secret. And then there were rumors, whispering through the underground of former soldiers and officers in Luanda that the monster...

If they were true, then it was his task—no, he corrected himself—his destiny to stop the unthinkable before it became reality.

Gaungalat took the handheld radio from a coat pocket as the white mercenary retreated into the apartment. The team was parked two blocks north in a van provided them by his visitors from Luanda. Their escape route was already mapped out, but the more he thought about the predator he had come to kill, the less he cared if he made it out of the city alive, as long as he killed the man-beast. What was more life, when he considered the hell on earth the monster had helped create.

Critical, he decided, if his country would ever see any hope for real, and humane, change. If he didn't do a thing to extinguish the evil he knew dwelled...

He depressed the button on his radio, told the others in Bantu, "It is time."

THE PASSPORT AND VISA declared he was Francisco Alvandando, a Spanish National in America as a tourist. In truth, smiling to himself over the deception, he was Pakistani, and he had long since become Musa Mirba, recruited by his enemies to slay their enemies.

It was surely a strange and bizarre world, he thought, when the infidel became an ally, when he was asked to trust the enemy. So far, though, it had been easy enough to move freely about Washington, D.C., whiling away a few days and nights in strip joints, cash to burn on dancers and hookers, while he waited to be contacted by his handlers and told to move. No shadows were on his trail, as far as he could tell.

And he was now ready to strike down his designated targets here in the countryside of Fredericksburg, Virginia.

The targets here were high value. He and his brothers in jihad would pull off a mission that would shock and horrify their enemies, thrust terror and confusion, if nothing else, into the hearts of the highest infidel authority. Like the others, he was an assassin, trained in the camps of Afghanistan, skilled to move as silent as a ghost, infiltrating what high value targets believed were safehouses or fortified compounds. He had done this many times before, and in vastly more treacherous and hostile turf than the wide-open, so-called free society of America.

As he crouched behind brush at the tree line, tugged on the hood to match the rest of his black combat fatigues, he scanned the split-level home, some two hundred meters east. It sat alone on a grassy field that rolled in spots, but he had already determined after poring over the intel pics he would crawl until he reached the first hump. Supposedly the only sensors and cameras were placed around the immediate perimeter, but there would be no alert to his incursion, as his handlers claimed their man on the inside was in charge of security. For a second he thought he had to be insane to place his life so freely, perhaps recklessly in the hands of those he had long ago sworn to kill. If not for the exorbitant sums of cash they had paid his brothers in jihad back in Peshawar, with pledges to deliver small and large arms, with vows to aid and assist their future operations on American soil, he would have never accepted the mission, which, in truth, was their mission. When the Americans wouldn't state the reasons they wanted these selected high value targets dead, there had been some heated discussion, he recalled, laced with threats, and directed at the infidels if they were simply infiltrating him into America, only to arrest him. After all, he thought, touching the hilt of his combat knife, he was Al-Jassaca, and he and his two brothers were themselves high value targets on the list of the Americans' so-called most wanted.

Stealing one last moment to shore up his resolve, he checked the clear, velvet sky, noted the scimitar moon. Pride and confidence swelled his soul, as he believed—had to believe—God was

watching down, smiling, ready to sweep him with a Divine Hand to steer him safely through the night with the blood of infidels on his hands. Removing his hand from the hilt of his fighting knife, he stared at the engraving of the strange, frightening beast. The ivory handle was carved into the head of a bull, the body of a lion, the legs of a camel. According to Islamic lore, he knew Al-Jassaca was the supernatural monster who would mark all souls, both saved and damned, with a sacred seal on Judgment Day.

Why wait until then? Why not deliver his enemies to judgment at the feet of Al-Jassaca whenever, wherever, the opportunity arose?

Ready now, he gave the house another search. Light spilled from the edge of the north face, lower level, barely outlining the lone figure standing guard. Adjusting the lens on his night vision field glasses, he found the one sentry, stationed on the west side, armed with an HK MP-5 subgun, another operative allegedly posted on the east end, which left—if his handlers were telling the truth—the lone operative planted on the inside. Whoever the infidel traitor he would be his way into the CIA official lair. Of course, he was leaving nothing to chance or treachery. Between the AKM, the Makarov pistol for a side arm, a dozen spare clips for both pieces, the F1 frag grenades fixed to his webbing and the SVD Dragunov sniper rifle it should be more than enough if his handlers had decided to march him into an ambush.

If that was the case...

Why bother with stealth? he decided. Drop the sentry, sprint across open ground, hit them hard, a dark lightning bolt delivering sudden death. He would find another way into the house, other than the side door leading to the game room his handlers had told him would be open.

He dropped to one knee, lifted the Russian sniper rifle, already fitted with sound suppressor. Failure was never an option, but in the event he was killed, he found it vaguely amusing fingers of blame may point toward Russia. Confusion, stirring up strife was the next best thing to terror.

With virtually no wind, a stationary target at his killing touch, Mirba adjusted the PSO-1 scope, specially upgraded for night vision by his handlers. He framed the sentry's face, green in the crosshairs, so close it seemed he was but mere inches away.

He drew a breath, exhaled, finger taking up slack on the trigger. Judgment Day, he told himself, had arrived.

THE SENATOR'S POLITICS was a moot point. From where he sat, the Democrat from Florida, an infidel of voice and authority who headed some committee on so-called terrorism, would be dead as soon as the waitress delivered their dinner. Whether liberal or conservative, he was still a powerful demon who helped engineer the suffering and oppression of Muslims, and just by breathing the same air as his political opponents and constituents. Whatever his policies on the Middle East or his own country, he was still a poisonous serpent, one that needed trampling, even if he publicly voiced objections to the plight of Arab misery brought on by American military occupation and interference in sovereign Islamic nations. And his guest, an official from their Department of Defense, or so his handler informed him, was likewise a high value target.

Halud Demma sipped his coffee. Savoring the twin rush of caffeine and adrenaline, he weighed the setup. As fate had it, he was given a table within a few yards from where the curtained double doors kept the senator and the DOD man in isolation from the other guests, as they were granted complete privacy in the banquet room. The intelligence provided him by his handlers in Pakistan stated the senator was predictable in his dining habits. Same Italian restaurant in Virginia, same day, nearly the same time, give or take thirty minutes or so. One bodyguard for each man, side arms their only hardware. That the bodyguards were standing post just inside the doors, taking drinks and appetizers from the waitress once she knocked, would make his task that much easier. So far, it appeared their

strange and unnatural collaboration with the American intelligence operatives was panning out, though he wasn't about to take the mission for granted for one moment.

Which was why, at the last minute, he had acquired certain ordnance from a sleeper cell in the Foggy Bottom area of Washington.

He figured the targets would be granted sufficient time before the main course was delivered, but he found himself becoming impatient. They were special guests. VIPs, after all. Why rush them through a pleasant dining experience? What was another few minutes? It had been a fearsome strain on nerves alone just to make it this far, trusting his fate to men he would have normally shot on sight. Only their money, their willingness to betray their own country for undeclared reasons, hire assassins to do their dirty work...

The mullah had given his blessing, and that was enough for the three of them.

Finally the waitress went to the door, tray on her shoulder. Quickly, he palmed his cell phone, tapped in the sequence of numbers required to time the executions. Call it one minute and counting, he figured, and the six-ounce block of C-4 would cover his exit from one of the side doors in the banquet room. Indulging a last-moment smile, he thought himself clever, walking in, dressed as a clean-shaven businessman, the briefcase perched on the empty seat, doomsday ticking down to the last supper for all gathered.

He unzipped the small duffel bag at his feet, easy access now granted to the Czech M-25 submachine gun. Grasping the weapon, he stood and marched ahead just as the bodyguard filled his hands with plates.

RIKAZ HANAHZUD WAS the avenging angel of death for all Islam.

Trained in the Afghanistan camps, he had sharpened his skills to lethal perfection in the killing grounds of Iraq. How many Iraqis, betraying Islam by serving the Great Satan, had he slain? he wondered. How many American soldiers had he sent on to judgment with roadside bombs or sniped dead from a distance?

Not nearly enough, as far as he was concerned.

There were always more enemies, millions, in fact, that needed to feel the sting of death if Islam were to thrive, remove itself from under the bootheel of the Americans.

No, his mission wasn't the glorious big event he had often dreamed about in Peshawar, or fantasized about during the missions he had pulled off in the hit-and-run killing fields of Iraq, but the targets here in the condominium complex in Washington D.C. were high value. He had been told they were CIA officials, two men, he believed, who kept charting the genocide in Islamic countries. Whatever the reasons the American operatives wanted these men killed were insignificant in the long run. Any dead infidel, especially one who had the power to keep murdering his people, was a good infidel.

The pizza box and matching uniform had gotten him through the secured door when he buzzed the desk. A quick ride up the elevator to the seventh floor and he was now climbing the steps to number eight. He felt his belly churn with hunger as the aroma of pepperoni and onions filled his nose, aware he hadn't eaten all day. Anticipation, adrenaline and nerves had kept him edged out before the call from his American handler gave him the green light. Food could wait until the victory dance.

It was time, he knew, feeling the weight of the duffel bag hung over his shoulder, open for quick access to the hardware he would use once he crashed the door. Once it was done, he would descend the stairs, evacuate through the basement door.

He was in the hall, gripping the sound-suppressed 9-mm Makarov, when the two infidels standing guard at the door came alive. Falling into his best subservient act, he showed them a wide smile, chirping, "Pizza delivery."

They looked suspicious, turning his way, one of them lifting a hand, waving him off.

~~“This is a restricted floor, pal. And nobody ordered any pizza.”~~

He acted confused, shook his head, then one of them took a step toward him. Honahzad threw the box in the man’s face, the Makarov pistol up and chugging death.

THE HARDEST NATURAL substance on the planet was his ticket out of the life and into the sweet bliss of golden retirement in a tropical paradise of his choosing.

Mike Mitchell knew a little something about diamonds, and he found himself becoming impatient to the point of anger the longer the middleman from Wilders sat at the table, grunting, now and then, as he examined the uncut gems under the 10-power magnifier. No, he didn’t want to hear all the trade talk about clarity, brilliance of facets, color, carat weight and so forth. Nor listen to another round of patronizing babble from the man, how diamonds were the world’s best conductor of heat, with a higher melting point than any other mineral, all the gibberish about their being extracted from kimberlite beds, those pipelike intrusions formed by olivine, deep as eighty feet beneath the earth’s surface. He wanted his damn money.

Mitchell paced the apartment, chain-smoking, hating the setup more with each passing minute, fearing the worst, which was that his little game plan had been found out and someone on the home team was coming to yank his ticket. The ringer and his two cronies from Luanda, he saw, were more interested in the porn flick on the giant screen TV—one of several perks imported along with a case of whisky and Cuban cigars—than a business transaction with the Swiss cheese who called himself Herr Cabal he figured would net him three, hopefully four mil or more. With their AK-74s resting on the deck, barely within quick snatching distance, if they were concerned about security...

Look at them, he thought, chortling, swilling booze, lounging on the big couch, wishing probably they could jump through the screen and devour some light-skinned flesh, ignorant people thinking the bottom line here belonged to them. No way. This was his deal, earned on sweat, blood and balls of steel. A pound or more of rocks, smuggled, here and there, out of Angola the past year or so, stashed in a safe-deposit box in Madrid until he felt it safe to bring in his man from Wilders. And the idiots, he thought, he was sitting on for the organization he had slaved for as mercenary were one of several reasons he was bailing. The org’s end game, for one item, was unnerving enough, preposterous, even suicidal the more he thought about it. It was time to look out for number one. Fifteen years dodging bullets had earned him the right to walk off into the sunset with a bag stuffed with cash.

Mitchell felt his hand wanting to twitch to unleather the Beretta M-9 pistol under his coat, force Herr Cabal to hand over the briefcase he knew was stuffed with a down payment. He looked at Johannsen, sitting on the other side of the table, the big blond merc boring diamond-edged drill bits into the middleman, his AKM resting in his lap. One nod and they would force this show to a surprising ending.

“What’s the story?” he barked at Herr Cabal who took another handful of stones from the large silk pouch. A noncommittal grunt, a shake of the head, and Mitchell snapped, “Come on. Those stones are perfect, but you’re sitting there, acting like they’re cheap knockoffs.”

Cabal grunted. “Perfection is impossible. A ‘perfect diamond’ is an unacceptable trade term. What I am looking for are as few flaws as possible.”

“What’s the whole lot worth?”

“Did you know that diamonds are also found in meteorite?”

“All that’s very interesting, but answer my question before you really start to piss me off.”

Mitchell was taking a step toward the man, on the verge of slapping a straight answer out of him, when the front door crashed open. For a second he was paralyzed at the sight of four armed blacks charging the room, frozen long enough for the invaders to begin unleashing autofire. By the time he

palmed his Beretta, he glimpsed Johannsen tumbling to the deck, scarlet fingers spurting from his skull and chest, then felt the first few rounds tearing into flesh pitching him, back and down.

MIRBA SETTLED the severed head beside the man's notebook computer, placed the card with the image of Al-Jassaca in a spreading pool of blood. Quickly he wiped the knife on the man's shirt, sheathing the blade as he sensed a presence just beyond the doorway to the study. He slipped the AKM off his shoulder.

"You've had your fun. I suggest you vacate now."

It had been almost too easy, dropping the sentries, lopping off their bullet-shattered heads, then penetrating through the kitchen door. He wasn't sure what he'd actually expected—more hardmen, bells and alarms blaring, some type of resistance—but he had gunned down the CIA man with a quick burst of autofire where he sat, scrolling through what looked like an endless series of numbers. Not a stir in the house, until now.

Mirba, though, knew all along what he would do when he encountered the traitor. His part of the mission was finished, and so was the American, as he turned, found the shadow, armed with a pistol, looming tall and angry in the doorway. Witnesses, even paymasters, were always a liability.

"I'll take it from here."

And Mirba lifted his AKM, squeezed the trigger and blew the infidel traitor off his feet. The nameless adversary was grunting curses, rolling on his side, pistol tracking when Mirba drilled a 3-round burst into his chest.

All done, he figured as he took the laptop and dumped it in a nylon sack and began his retreat from the abattoir, as silent as a ghost.

THE CROWD BURST into a stampede with the opening rounds. Their terror and panic was pure sweet music to his ears, a taste of paradise, he thought as he surged into the banquet room swinging the Czech subgun to his three o'clock as Bodyguard-driver Two was digging into his coat for his weapon. Number One was already tumbling back, pasta and sauces flying through the air, when Haludba Demmahom hit the second guard with an SMG blast. He aimed for the face, having already noted the extra girth beneath the shirts, hit the grim snarl point-blank with. Number Two kicked off his feet, he advanced deeper into the room, found the two HVTs jumping from their seats. The DOD man was hauling his bulk for the exit door next when Demmahom gave him some lead, squeezing off a short burst that stitched him up the arm before his head burst apart in a gory detonation of red and gray. Advancing, he looked at the senator who had his hands raised, blubbering something Demmahom couldn't make out through the maelstrom of shouts and screams to his rear. A check of his watch, counting down to pay dirt, and he delivered 7.62 mm judgment to the senator, shredding his white shirt to a crimson rag, the man windmilling his arms as he jig stepped, tumbling over his seat, down and crashing to a twitching sprawl.

All computers and paperwork, he'd been told, were to be taken.

Not much time, as he kicked it into another higher gear, yanking the folded nylon pouch from the small of his back, dumping the laptop and two briefcases into the big sack.

Flipping the calling card with the picture of the beast of Judgment Day on their table, he made the fire exit door with seconds to spare. The thunderous retort of the explosion brought a smile to his lips. With any luck, he thought, what was a paltry body count would rise before he vanished from the premises, God willing.

THE FLASH-STUN GRENADE stole him critical seconds. As Rikaz Hanahzud charged down the foyer, his senses choked with dust and cordite, he held back on the subgun's trigger. He found them in the living room, on their feet now, as they hopped, deaf and blind, around the coffee table, screaming as he

ripped them apart with a long stuttering burst. They were crashing down as he took the corner post, peering through the smoke, watching the hall opposite the living room.

For some reason he felt disappointed, having hoped to encounter a larger group.

Two dead CIA officials, though, and their gunmen had to suffice for the moment. Tonight, four dead infidels. Tomorrow was another day. All this racket, he knew, was sure to alert the neighbors. Time to pack it up.

Whether the blast or a few rounds from his subgun, he found both laptops had been reduced to mangled shards. There was a way to retrieve what was on the hard drives—or so he hoped—though he wasn't sure of the procedure.

Later, once he was clear and free.

There were papers, some floating to the floor now, so he quickly filled his nylon sack with ruins and paperwork, then retraced his path. At the front door, he found the hall empty, dropped a card with the image of Al-Jassaca on one of the dead sentries, and marched away, hoping God guided him safe and unmolested through the night.

IT WAS A SICKENING display of pure savagery, but Ron Baraka had expected nothing less. The good news, from where he stood, slipping into the apartment, AK-74 up and ready, was their bloodlust had so consumed them they were blinded to all else except their machetes hacking off arms. One quick assessment and he could tell Guangalat had given the order to shoot low, gut shots or legs, but to keep a couple of them breathing long enough to become amputees. He understood a little Bantu from all the years he'd spent in Angola, knew Guangalat was in a mindless rage, feeling duped, no doubt, that the real Katanga hadn't stepped out from behind door number one.

Tough. Katanga was the org's meal ticket. It was the diamonds he had come here for, content to leave the dirty work to hired field hands.

Without warning, Merkelsen stepping up on his right wing, they cut loose with autofire, sweeping the Angolans, left to right, their lackeys unable to do much else besides lurch to their feet, shout in pain and shock, and it was done.

There was a groan, the pitiful sound marking the remains of the ringer as he rolled around in his own blood, glazed eyes searching out a mercy nowhere to be found. As Merkelsen swept the diamonds off the table, Baraka looked at Mitchell. The thief was dead. Lucky for him, he thought, or he might have tempted to do some on-the-spot surgery himself. How long and how much carat weight the man had stolen from him he didn't know, but a quick look at the size of the pouch and Baraka figured the thief had come here, part baby-sitter, but looking to walk off with a few mil in cold cash. Sashay off into the sunrise, waving a middle finger salute at the Organization.

It was, yes, about the money, Baraka knew, but there was a bigger picture to consider as he turned and followed Merkelsen for the door.

There were entire nations, perhaps even the world to conquer.

CHAPTER TWO

It was called the Serpent Tank, and from what Mack Bolan had gathered, he suspected it was aptly named. According to the cyberteam at Stony Man Farm, the ultracovert intelligence base in rural Virginia, it was a CIA slush fund, created for the express purpose of buying arms—small and large—information, and whatever in-country contract players that could aid and assist Company black operatives in tracking down the enemies of America and the free world. The trouble was, given his vast experience in dealing with the CIA, what with the double-dealing, double-speaking, backstabbing operatives he'd encountered over the years, he couldn't help but wonder how many snakes were in charge of the tank, and what some of the funds might actually be used for. The short list could include narcotics, arms, even WMD for enemies of America in exchange for a fat payday meant to vanish into numbered accounts.

As the man in black—also known as the Executioner—motored the Peugeot down the wide Boulevard du Forbin he recalled the brief from Hal Brognola—a high-ranking official at the Justice Department and Stony Man's liaison to the Oval Office—just before he set sail in the Gulfstream for Morocco. Three separate assassinations had snared the big Fed's keen interest, and when the President green-lighted the mission to hunt down the perpetrators, the soldier was wheels up, crossing the Atlantic to eventually land at a private airstrip just south of Casablanca. There, he was greeted by members of an FBI special counterterrorism task force, and also waiting on the tarmac was the Commander of Morocco's own Counterterrorism Task Force. Bolan's bogus credentials stated he was Special Agent Matthew Cooper, and he was in charge of the American contingent. The Moroccan commander was on hand to, ostensibly, smooth the way in, provide intelligence and so forth.

Details were sketchy, with no firm leads or clues as to the whereabouts of the assassins, and the soldier had a nagging tug in his gut he was going in blind for the first tags on his hit parade. What he knew was a CIA storm tracker—a Company operative who gathered and sifted through intelligence on the world's most wanted terrorists—had been executed, along with three operatives in rural Virginia. Their heads had been lopped off—standard operating procedure these days, it seemed, for extremist executioners—a calling card of a supernatural Islamic beast left behind, which presented at least a narrow window of opportunity as far as identifying the killers. Next there was a senator who headed the Select Senate Committee on Intelligence, his dinner companion—a high-ranking official from the Department of Defense—and their bodyguards gunned down, the suspect fleeing the scene, a ghost in the wind, but not before bringing down the restaurant's roof with plastic explosive, killing ten diners and employees, and wounding several others. Finally a team of CIA operatives, rumored to be in charge of the Serpent Tank, had been murdered in their D.C. condo, which supposedly doubled as some sort of clandestine after-hours office. As was the SOP of many terrorist attacks, the trio of hits seemed to go down nearly at the same time, according to police and FBI reports.

And all of the kills, Brognola informed Bolan, were the work of a trio of Pakistani assassins known to American intelligence agencies as Al-Jassaca.

So why launch the campaign in Casablanca, he had posed to his longtime friend. Known associates of the assassins had been discovered holed up in an apartment by Moroccan authorities who had pledged full cooperation with their American counterparts, vowing pretty much to bow out, let them bag Habib Mousuami and his brothers in jihad. It was strange, Bolan thought, that the Moroccans, after three recent car bombings, would so graciously step aside. Which put some bogeys on his radar

screen.

Trust no one.

Last, but hardly least, two Asian males had been spotted going into the target apartment by an FBI stakeout team, less than an hour ago. Who they were, what they wanted with Islamic extremists...

Well, Bolan had his own methods for extracting information.

It was awkward, manning the wheel, weighted down with the hardware he was taking to the party. The overcoat was customized to stow flash-bang, frag and incendiary grenades. More pockets were stuffed with spare clips for the shoulder holstered Beretta 93-R and the mammoth .44 Magnum Desert Eagle riding his right hip. An Uzi submachine gun was stored on his left hip. Accessible through a special-cut deep pocket. It may prove cumbersome, grabbing for hardware when he hit the front door, but full combat webbing and vest may attract the wary eye of the denizens of the night the alarm sounding to local authorities, slamming the brakes on his mission before it got off the ground. He had been assured by Commander Raz Tachjine, however, that he had complete authority in the city if Special Agent Cooper had any problems with some overzealous police.

The kind of trouble the Executioner was poised to dump along the waterfront and deeper into the area known as Medina would provide nothing but problems of the most bloody kind.

He saw the dome of the Great Mosque looming in the distance, cut the wheel to turn south on Place Mirabeau. It was a seedy part of the big city, the grimy whitewashed apartment buildings somehow oddly stacked and out of place, as they were lined behind rows of palm trees. Another few blocks and he spied the FBI stakeout team in its black van. They had grabbed a corner, just south of Boulevard Mohammed, perfect for watching the front doors to the apartment. Bolan took his handheld radio, patched through to the team leader to let him know he was in the neighborhood. A quick sitrep from Agent Andy Dawkins, and Bolan was informed the players were still hunkered down in their lair. Their standing orders were to sit tight, come in only as backup, or go through the front door themselves if he wasn't out in fifteen minutes.

The soldier parked, bailed and crossed the boulevard, navigating a quick flight through heavy traffic. He went through the front doors, climbed the steps to the second floor. The aroma of tea and tobacco filled his senses as he marched down the empty hall. He heard a baby crying somewhere and what sounded like a couple engaged in a heated argument from behind another door. All clear in the hallway. At least for the moment.

Bolan reached the target door. He knew the enemy was inside; since their phone had been tapped by his team for weeks, the number traced here to this apartment, and complete with eyeball confirmation.

He palmed a flash-bang, pulled the pin, but held down on the spoon. What the hell, he figured, go in the hard way, get the game jump started, all blood and thunder. Five jackals total were behind the door, he'd been told. One way to find out. He hated not knowing the layout of a target site, but if it was a standard two bedroom, figure foyer leading to the living room...

Digging out the Uzi, he lifted a booted foot, sent it crashing through flimsy wood, just beside the knob, falling back just as the door exploded in countless shards and splinters.

ANOTHER TIME and Special Security Agent Lance Dexter of the Department of Defense would have idled away the waning twilight hours strolling Baltimore's Inner Harbor, taking in the sights of the tall ships, girl-watching, swilling whiskey, eating lobster and crab at a waterfront restaurant. Given what he knew waited beyond the warehouse door, however, and any thoughts of R and R should have been banished from his mind. He was on a mission, and it wasn't ordained by God.

He looked both ways down the lot—all clear—then he shucked his sports coat higher up his shoulders, suddenly feeling the weight of the shouldered Beretta M-9. The heavy artillery—M-16, U-

and Colt Commando—were locked in the trunk of his black sedan. It was an unsettling feeling he experienced, out of nowhere, aware of the experiment under way inside, and he wondered if the human test subject might go berserk, require an extended lead punch...

Well, he had a job to do, and the shadow men overseas were eagerly awaiting his report.

Swiping his magnetic card down the keypad, he punched in his access code. A green light and he was in, the door automatically snicking shut behind. A grim Delta Force sentry, armed with an HK MP-5, nodded curtly as he marched past, quickly moved down the narrow corridor. At the end of the gloomy corridor, lit by only two hanging bulbs, a steel door barred the way to what he thought of as Frankenstein's laboratory. Another keypad; his access code punched in, only this time he was forced to place his right eye to the retina-iris scan. This part of the security routine always put his nerves a little on edge, as he imagined some sharp object would jump out of the lens and gouge out his eye. The way he understood it, the scan took a digital picture to compare with prior retina-iris scans. One of the high-tech DOD geeks had once explained each human eye had a unique pattern of blood vessels. The iris, the core part of the eye, was a complex weaving of countless connective tissue. In short, every human being had his or her own individual eye marking.

The steel door slid open and he was rolling in, finding the biochem genius—recruited by DOD especially for this task—washing his laptop with a wave of cigarette smoke. Briefly wondering what other vices or skeletons the man had in the closet, he spotted the giant ashtray, carved with the porcelain figure of a naked woman and piled to overflow with butts, within easy arm's reach of Dr. Teetel. The genius was squat, stoop-shouldered, with a gray Bozo hairdo. He always had the urge to address the man as Ygor, but figured in his own field and own right he was due respect.

Then Dexter looked at the test subject, dead ahead, stretched out on a gurney, just inside the glass bubble, naked except for underwear, arms and legs strapped. Two more whitecoats were glued to their monitors on each flank of the human lab rat, the subject wired to their laptops, skull and chest. Granted, the man had volunteered for the experiment, known the risks, but Dexter had to wonder about his sanity. No, scratch any psychobabble. Mr. Smithson had come to them out of desperation, pure and simple, a down-on-his luck mercenary, a degenerate gambler, cash-strapped, who been sought out by the Consortium, offered ten thousand dollars to become Ygor's monkey.

Dexter stood beside Teetel, caught a whiff of whiskey, flashed him a look, then peered through the boiling cloud. He was uncertain of what he saw on the monitor, but it looked as if the good doctor was playing computer games while getting tanked in the process.

Teetel twitched his head, a wet grin pasting lips. "Ah, Mr. Dexter. So good of you to come. You're just in time."

"What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?" he said in his perpetual squeaky voice.

"What do you mean, 'what do I mean'? You're getting paid top dollar, and it looks to me like you're wasting time, playing a kid's video game."

Teetel snickered, shook his Bozo mane. "Mr. Dexter, allow me to explain something. This is no game. What you see is a maze, yes. Those are insects, yes, but who are in the process of self-replicating."

"Self-what?"

Another shake of the head and Teetel went on. "We're talking about creating a form of artificial life here. We're in what science calls, 'A-life programming.' Beyond the synthetic steroid-methamphetamine I created for you people—so you could have your so-called supersoldiers—science wants to understand the bigger picture of evolution, the origins of life, the nature of learning and intelligence. In other words, we're seeking to create the perfect man here. What I am giving you, on the other hand, is a warrior who requires no food, no sleep, who is virtually impossible to kill—though

that concept alone is impossible—but, just the same, one who is just shy of the perfect man, or, for your purposes, the perfect killing machine. These insects you see are in the process of searching out their own energy-food source. They are reproducing—or cloning—themselves, transferring one cell's nucleus into another cell. As you can see, one or two vanish from the screen, as they are searching out simulated food through a complex series of mazes. Translation—only the fittest, the strongest, survive. Pure Darwin.”

“Well, that’s all very interesting, but what’s cloning have to do with the Z-Clops drug?”

“Z-Clops, good sir,” Teetel said, “has been infused with dopamine and endorphin derivatives, you know, the bio-chemicals relaying messages by way of neurotransmitters?”

Dexter clenched his jaw, resentful of the way the good doctor condescended to him. “I have a basic understanding of all that.”

Teetel pulled a bottle of whiskey out of his desk drawer and dumped a splash in a foam cup. “The dopamine-endorphin derivative infusion self-replicates itself by feeding on other neurotransmitters. In other words, your supersoldiers can go on and on and on. My chemical-molecular software program for Z-Clops is fairly based on this Survival of the Fittest program you now see.”

Dr. Teetel was either half in the bag, eccentric or crazy, but what did they say about genius? Dexter wondered as Teetel pressed the intercom button and told them to proceed. There was a thin line between genius and insanity?

“What I am telling you, Mr. Dexter,” he heard Teetel say as he watched one of the whitecoats inject Z-Clops into Smithson’s arm, “if I am successful here, with a synthetic drug that self-replicates while in the brain, there is a good chance I can eventually do that with human beings—self-replication, that is. And, no, good sir, I am not a ghoul, nor do I seek a Nobel Prize.”

Dexter wasn’t so sure about that as he watched the test subject, waiting for the wonder drug of the ages to kick in, Teetel hitting his cup when—

The first spasms were so violent it looked to Dexter as if Smithson was lifting the gurney into the air. He glimpsed Teetel go tense, jaw slack, saw the whitecoats wearing grim concern on their pink faces, then their test subject convulsed, the left arm suddenly breaking free of the strap. Smithson’s eyes bulged with what Dexter could only call wild-eyed fury, an animal-like bellow blasting clear through the reinforced glass. They were lurching back in there, set to run for cover, as the leg strap burst next, Dexter aware of what he had to do. There was only one way to subdue the test subject.

“Get that door open!” he shouted at Teetel as he unleathered his Beretta and rushed to the far side of the bubble. He was inside, just as the berserker burst another arm binding, the whites of his eyes rolling back in his head. Both whitecoats jumped on the screaming demon, one of them with a syringe in hand, shouting, “Don’t shoot him!”

Dexter was drawing a bead for a shot between the eyes when Smithson suddenly went limp. He stood, watching as they checked his pulse. “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

One of the whitecoats nodded, a defeated look on his face. “Cardiac arrest would be my best guess but we’ll need an autopsy.”

“Forget that. You failed.”

“No, we haven’t.”

Dexter wheeled, found Teetel on his back. “You haven’t, huh? I suppose you have a good explanation.”

“We injected him with too large of a dosage. Our mistake.”

“Your mistake? You didn’t know the risks?”

“We did, and he did, too. Understand, too, this man came to us, a lifelong alcoholic. His kidneys were weak, he had cirrhosis of the liver, two previous heart attacks, and there were indications he was in the first stages of lung cancer.”

“And still you went ahead?”

“He insisted. He needed the money. Or perhaps...”

“Perhaps what? That he was looking to commit suicide?”

Teetel shrugged. “Well, a man with his...lifestyle...that’s a distinct possibility.”

Dexter stowed his weapon. He gave what Teetel told him consideration; decided what the good doctor told him could well be true. For the most part, the soldiers he knew who pledged allegiance to the Consortium were young, figure in prime physical condition, and with a smaller dosage...

Without a word, Dexter brushed past Teetel, anxious to give his report to the shadow men overseas.

TWO POSSIBILITIES for enemy lightning response flashed through Bolan’s mind. One—the shooter had simply been standing post near the door. Two—the enemy had known he was coming. Either way, the Executioner knew there was only one option available.

Bulldoze and blast.

Spoon released, he pitched the steel egg, a sideways whipping motion that sent it flying through the smoking hole. Another thunderous retort all but obliterated what remained of the door. Bolan pulled farther back down the hall, covering his ears as the flash-bang erupted. A million candlepower going off like a supernova along with noise that could match an artillery barrage would have all but shattered the shooter’s senses, but Bolan needed his human barrier waxed, deaf, dumb and blind or not.

The soldier was up, bell slightly rung by the concussive retort, another flash-bang filling one hand as he went low around the corner, Uzi poking through the smoke. He found his man in jig step, backpedaling down the foyer, a big figure swathed in smoke, a massive SPAS-12 auto-shotgun coming up to draw blind aim. Holding back on the trigger, Bolan hit him with a rising burst, crotch to sternum, the SPAS-12 roaring one more time as he toppled back, a section of the ceiling coming down in a rain of dust and plaster.

That left four, if intel was on the money.

Combat senses torqued to maximum overdrive, Bolan bulled through the jagged teeth, caught the commotion around the corner. He hugged the wall, spotted an AK-74 swinging around the corner, flaming away. A short burst of autofire from a snarling figure in a katfiyeh, lead wasps zipping past the soldier’s ear, and the soldier drove the hardman to cover with an extended Uzi burst, lobbing the flash-bang grenade in what he assumed was the general direction of the living room. Bolan dropped back into the hall, autofire chasing him around the corner. They were shouting and screaming for all of two seconds when number two brain-cleaver sounded off, sure to knock them around every which way, senses on the verge of winking out.

There was no choice but to end it quick and hard. The soldier charged back in, tagged the howling demon with the AK-74 as he hopped around the corner, firing a brief spray and pray. The Executioner hit the edge low, peered around the corner to find the living room a smoking whirlwind of debris, three targets reeling around the couch. A live one would be nice, but the Asians were going for broke firing deaf and blind with machine pistols, the corner above Bolan’s head shaved off with wild rounds. The Executioner dropped them both with a quick burst of 9-mm Parabellum rounds, left to right, hot lead eating up their fancy threads. They were falling when the last one brought an AKM to bear, hollering something in Arabic. Bolan chopped him off at the knees, a hideous shriek flaying the smoke-choked air.

Time for all due haste, he knew, as he kicked all weapons away from the Arab stretched out on the floor, one eye on both bedroom doors. As good fortune had it, he was looking at Mousuami. A one-two sweep next, kicking in both doors, and he found both bedrooms clear. He went back to the moaner,

who was clutching at his mangled knees. It would have been a small coup, as he glanced at the mangled remnants of a laptop, but even still there might be a way for some cyberwizard to access the hard drive. Then he spotted the briefcase, pocked with shrapnel, but since it had been hidden behind the couch, settled on the floor, it had been spared the brunt of the blast. The Uzi stowed, he hauled out the Desert Eagle, opened the briefcase and found stacks of U.S. currency. Figure somewhere in the neighborhood of a million dollars, and it was a safe bet he had interrupted a nasty deal.

Bolan crouched beside Mousuami. A viselike grip to the throat, squeezing hard, and as the extremist's mouth opened, eyes going wide, the warrior rammed the hand cannon's muzzle into the man's mouth. "Nod if you can read lips and speak English."

Gagging, Mousuami nodded.

"Who were your guests?" Bolan asked, likewise mouthing the words, removing the weapon from the Arab's mouth, releasing some pressure on his throat.

Mousuami choked, then sputtered, "North Koreans."

"What was the deal here?"

A feral hatred, defiance cleared the glaze in Mousuami's eyes. "It does not matter now. You are too late."

Bolan placed the muzzled between the fanatic's eyes. "Last chance. The deal."

Mousuami was bleeding out, lapsing into shock. Bolan slapped his face.

"A dream for us. A nightmare for you." Mousuami laughed, eyes bulging with fanatic hatred. "The Suitcase from God."

"Is it here in Casablanca?"

"We have it."

Bolan felt his blood race hot. Beyond a biological attack, a backpack nuke with a wallop of anywhere from five to eight kilotons would prove the Western world the worst nightmare. Say anywhere from five to eight city blocks wiped out, and with fallout, or a strong wind blowing radiation...

"Where is Al-Jassaca? And don't tell me you don't know who they are."

Mousuami grinned, eyes rolling up in his head. "Try...Pakistan...if you know so much."

The game here was dead, Bolan knew. Before he left he would take the briefcase and laptop, the bundle of cash at least destined to fatten covert coffers for the war on terror if any information on the computer couldn't be retrieved.

The Executioner stood, sensing he would get no more information out of Mousuami who was retching and moaning, set to pass out. Cold-blooded killing normally wasn't part of his SOP, but the enemy was proving itself more vicious and savage with every attack, every abduction, showing not a scintilla of mercy or compassion, especially when it came to noncombatants. Besides, if he let Mousuami live he could reach out and warn his comrades in Casablanca, perhaps see yet another day where he could plot mass murder.

Bolan gathered in the briefcase and laptop, tucked them under one arm. Then the Executioner drew a bead between Mousuami's eyes, his finger taking up slack on the trigger to remove one more scourge from the planet.

RON BARAKA CAUGHT a bird's-eye view of the Gulf of Naples along the Amalfi Coast as he was escorted to the villa by two men in black wielding HK MP 5 subguns. After his report on the Madrid incident, he had been summoned to Italy by the men of the Phoenix Consortium. He had a few hours' downtime in the Learjet from Madrid to the private airfield they controlled outside Naples, the local authorities greased, he was sure, but that didn't mean he couldn't enjoy a few moments of the breathtaking view following the long ride in the van along the winding, treacherous cliffside roads. He figured they were

several hundred feet in the air, high above blue-green waters sprinkled with fishing boats and pleasure craft, the compound perched on the edge of a cliff, ringed by native vegetation. It was a fleeting sensation, the sudden longing he felt to be in a cabin cruiser, stretched out in a chaise longue, drink in hand, the lassies at his beck and call.

Someday, he told himself as another black-clad sentry opened the ornately carved teak doors, allowing him entrance to a marbled foyer, the walls fairly splashed with frescoes, the corridor lined with statues of what he guessed were Roman and Greek gods and goddesses. For the foreseeable future it was all business, grim and savage, he considered, to the point of...

What? Madness?

The good news, as far as he could tell, was that he'd been allowed to hold on to his twin Beretta M-9 piston in shoulder holsters beneath his Italian silk sports jacket.

As his escort led him down another frescoed corridor, chandeliers the size of small automobiles hovering above him, he briefly considered the past, what had led him to man the helm of what would prove the most ambitious undertaking—in terms of conquering foreign land—since the Nazis blitzkrieged across Europe and into Russia. He was now “retired” from active duty, but his track record as assassin, saboteur and leader of covert operations for the CIA, from West Africa to the Far East, had shot him to the front of the employment line at present. No wife, no family of any kind, there was only himself and his work to consider. That, and the monumental task set before him.

And what was he? he wondered. Black bag operations was all he'd known, but was he simply their cannon fodder? An errand boy? A hired gun? For damn sure, he wasn't like the Consortium, these men who called the shots from behind the front lines, never getting their own hands dirty, never having to dodge bullets or to worry about stepping on a landmine that could amputate on the spot. Hell, he couldn't even begin to count all the men—and women and children—he'd killed. At times, when he felt the wear and tear of the years, it seemed as if an army of ghosts was marching behind him—or the dead were eagerly waiting for him to check out to the other side, anxious to take back their pounds of flesh. And what were his motives at present? he wondered as another black-clad sentry opened the door to the room where the men waited. On that score, he wasn't one hundred percent certain. Money, lots of it, shot to the top of the list. Beyond basic greed, though, he couldn't say why he had agreed to lead the charge into a New World for the Consortium. Where they wanted power, were perhaps looking to dictate whatever their terms and conditions to the rest of the world, he simply wanted to secure whatever was left of his future, retire for good. They wanted Africa, all of it, and Angola was the springboard. Madness? he wondered again. Or was it?

They had the means, he knew, to pull it off.

And that, he thought, should have scared him into a sprint for the setting sun.

Striding toward the long mahogany table, Baraka ran a look over the five men seated on the other side. He didn't know their names, figured in the long run that was for the best, if it hit the fan and he was forced to go for number one. Considering their clout—the endless parade of contacts in the intelligence world, the way they could access intelligence and arms on the spot—clued him in they were former big shots. CIA? DIA? NSA? Pentagon honchos? He wasn't about to ask or to go digging around for information. In his mind, their ambition—delusional or not—made them every bit as dangerous as he was. Even if they only drew the battle maps in the safety of this cocoon, they knew enough bad folks around the globe to yank his ticket if he became insubordinate, careless or didn't perform to expectations.

There was no chair for him to sit, so he was forced to stand at attention, as usual. Mentally, he tagged the men according to appearance or vice, giving each one a look as they chewed on their own thoughts. Quickly, then, he gave the circular, whitewashed room a once-over. Other than a wet bar, there were two black-clad men manning what he knew was the Consortium's supercomputer. It was

above and beyond NSA quality, he had once been informed, with multiple processors linked and connected to a massive memory by a bus called a hyperchannel. Not only did it monitor all the world's hot spots, capable of hacking into the mainframes of every intelligence and law-enforcement agency around the globe, it controlled the Serpent Tank. In fact, when one of the many tank's accounts was electronically manipulated, cash could be ready and available in any Bank of America for any operative in about a dozen countries.

He knew. He'd seen cold cash in the six figures dumped in his hand in Luanda, Casablanca and Madrid to finance the ongoing operation.

Goatee got the ball rolling. "What is your take on the Madrid situation?"

"Renegade operation. One man going for himself. I have the diamonds in the van. Quite a sizable haul. I'd say he had about five, six million in uncut stones."

"Good," Pipe Smoker said, tamping fresh tobacco in his bowl. "There is no room in the Consortium for loose cannons."

Baraka found that statement somewhat ironic, since their army was made up of mostly mercenaries, disgruntled ex-Special Forces with a smattering of criminal rabble in it purely for the buck. "Wilders lost a man."

Cigar Man spoke up. "We will handle Wilders. Several of their executives are aware of the coming situation and they will accept the loss of one man who, as it would appear, wasn't a team player."

"We have other investors," Whiskey Man chimed in, "who are most anxious for us to proceed. Once your operators in Morocco have acquired the package, we will launch the operation within forty-eight hours. Do you see a problem with that?"

Baraka did, but he'd come this far, what was he going to say? "As long as we have the backing of our contingent in the Angolan Armed Forces—FAA—and UNITA, there should be no problem taking down the palace. I'm assuming you will want the sitting president executed?"

"We will hand him over to his shadow adversaries," White Suit said, "in the Angolan Armed Forces. According to our intelligence, there are some officers under our command in-country who have had family members 'disappear.' They believe the sitting president and some of his rabble are responsible."

"And they will want answers," Cigar Man said, "or retribution."

"What we need," Goatee said, "is to seize complete control of the diamond fields and as soon as the smoke of battle clears."

"And," Whiskey Man said, "the oil fields. Including the offshore platforms. Your men and trusted FAA officers will take charge of that area of responsibility. It will be difficult, considering we're but a few hundred strong, but not impossible. Once the situation is explained and passed on to their army, with cash incentives being distributed, we should be able to bring the army under our control."

Should, Baraka thought. Why did that make him so nervous? Loyalty wasn't a common trait among West African grunts, unless, of course, cold hard cash was distributed and they were promised a slice of the pie. All things considered, it was going to be messy, dangerous, with his own neck in a noose that could tighten at any time.

"As you know," Pipe Smoker said, "Angola is capable of pumping out two billion—count that—two billion barrels per day."

Cigar Man shrouded his grizzled face in smoke. "But they are presently only producing six hundred thousand."

Goatee cleared his throat. "In other words, we need to take the hands of the savages off the spigots."

"This is common throughout all of Africa, sadly even South Africa," Whiskey Man said. "When the Europeans bailed and the United Nations stepped in, anarchy swept the continent, complete

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