

## CHAPTER 1

"...in three, two, one."

"And now we turn to the international scene," the television anchorman crooned smoothly to the camera as soon as they had cleared from the ninety seconds of commercials. "Live from Havana is NTN correspondent Pat d'Orange."

In the upper left corner of television screens around the nation and around the world, the harried man representing the network came into view. Slowly, the computer generated image filled the screen in a fashionable manner that was reminiscent to many viewers as the "rematerializing" of a person on *StarTrek*.

The larger picture did little to enhance the impression rendered unto America. Yet, that was not the thought behind the mask of grim determination that helped the reporter mentally prepare his report and enhance his professionalism.

This was Bartholomew Patrick d'Orange's big chance and he understood what was riding on it. Not quite inept enough to be terminated and sent down to one of the local networks, nor good enough to be advanced to a more plush position, he had been sent to the Cesspool of Latin America in what the military would call a "tailgate" assignment. There were only three ways he was leaving the region: retired, dead, or on the coattails of a spectacular event that would allow him to prove his worth to the network. He believed, as did many inadequates, that he had just never received the break necessary for him to make it into the "Big League."

"John we've been here for the last few days for the State funeral of Cuba's recently-deceased ruler, Raúl Castro Ruz," he paused to allow the viewer time to comprehend that NTN was on top of the story from the beginning and not just by accident. "This morning,

approximately ten minutes ago, Rodolfo Vargas dropped dead as he was leaving the building, the apparent victim of an assassin's bullet."

"What made you come to that conclusion, Pat?" asked the anchor after being cued by the producer that he would flip back to him after the reporter's initial statement.

"There was no report of a firearm. Senor Vargas threw his hands to his head and collapsed," the distant image of a small body clinging to the floor was the background for d'Orange's comments.

"Perhaps an aneurysm?" he asked hopefully.

D'Orange shook his head violently back and forth. "No, chance," he replied emphatically. "His head...well, it just came apart. If you'll caution the viewers and give me a couple of seconds to get this set up, we can give you the run of the footage we were shooting when this all happened," the picture of d'Orange darkened on the screen, faded and was replaced by the freshly-scrubbed picture of the anchorman.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he flashed a somewhat uncertain smile at the camera. "In a moment, we will be showing you some tape shot only minutes before in Havana. The network hasn't had time to edit the raw footage and the scenes may be graphic. Proud of being a family channel, we would caution you to remove the children from the room if any are present and yourselves, for the next few minutes, if you find violence on television upsetting."

"Okay, we're ready now," d'Orange's voice came over the satellite clearly.

"We're ready now to return to Pat d'Orange in Havana," he reported.

"What you see here is the line of mourners filing past the coffin of the late leader of Cuba," the disembodied voice of NTN's representative in Latin America said solemnly. "Can we slow the video now? Pause? That's Rodolfo Vargas surrounded by his security team. You may

notice the look on the man's face," and Americans squinted their eyes to see the tear rolling down the cheek of the Cuban.

"Okay, continue at normal speed." Obviously d'Orange was calling the shots from Havana. "You can see that the entourage is moving past the line waiting to exit the room and . . . now, slow down . . . now, you can see Vargas begin to reach for his head."

*My God!* America took a collective breath as it watched the Cuban's head explode in a shower of blood and fragments on national television. Panning his camera, the technician followed the corpse to the floor and optically closed the distance as the body twitched its last involuntary spasms. The camera operator increased the view that revealed the security agents already had their firearms out and ready, but collectively they could not identify a single target.

Time returned to the present in the world of television, focusing on d'Orange. "As you can see, Rodolfo Vargas is dead; the result of an assassination," he pronounced.

"Fidel and Raúl Castro were such a powerful figures in Cuban politics - they **WERE** Cuban politics for fifty years, most Americans don't really understand the role Senor Vargas had in his nation's affairs," the anchorman, John Berridge, said. "Could you tell us what his importance is - was - to Cuba and how that may affect that nation's relationship with the United States?"

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Raúl Castro had reluctantly assumed the duties as President of the Council of State when his older brother Fidel fell ill and was hospitalized for the final time. When "El Comandante" went to meet his maker – whom many in the Cuban communities of Florida believed was Satan - Raúl Castro Ruz, First Vice President of the Council of Ministers, Second Secretary of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), and Maximum

General of the Armed Forces (Army, Navy, and Air Force), second only to Fidel, assumed the powers as President of Cuba, although his immediate entourage had to wait until they felt he was sober enough to so inform him. Whispered in comparison to his older brother, the word “dull” was most often used as a descriptor. His major contributions to the previous administration had been to introduce Fidel to Ernesto "Ché" Guevara, for whom Fidel felt genuine affection and the summary execution of hundreds if not thousands of soldiers who had served the defunct Batista regime. During Fidel’s rule, Raúl was responsible for, or more accurately listening to the advice of Rodolfo Vargas, making some agricultural and other free market reforms; however, under pressure from General Julio Vasco he embraced the Peoples’ Republic of China for a political and economic model. Unlike the PRC, poor Cuba had no Hong-Kong to prop up its socialist economy, and despite the Herculean efforts of Vargas, Cuba’s economy continued to stagger.

Fidel’s pale shadow, just as repressive as “El Comandante” without the charisma to give it a politically-acceptable spin, was the exact opposite of what Cuba needed; but then again, a gracious God had never seen fit to grant Cuba the leadership it needed. The nation held its collective breath . . . and empty bellies . . . as Raúl bumbled his way through one misadventure after another, until he finally did the one thing of which the entire country approved: Raúl Castro Ruz died from chronic alcoholism.

Raúl’s body lay in state. Mourners lined the streets as the procession made its way from the Russian-built hospital. Some even shed real tears, but they were the rarity. All but these few among the mourners had long since stopped believing in the *Revolution*. The prosperity promised by the dictator never materialized and the people were tired of propaganda and promises and poverty. But they weren't so tired as to voice their mutual relief and hopefulness because of his passing.

Among Castro's immediate entourage there was greater concern than among the peasants. The proletariat, after almost fifty years of being led, was going to follow the path of least resistance, the least risk. They were so accustomed to following a strongman government, the people would follow another - if he could gain control of the governmental apparatus quickly enough.

Or so Jesus Munzo thought.

Until the dictator's death, he had been the chief of his personal security. Fortunately, Raúl had died of natural causes - old age - otherwise Jesus would not have been around to attend the burial; he would be in some stinking hole in the ground, deemed an enemy of the Revolution and not worthy of so much as a marker to note his passing.

His official vehicle, a refurbished East German auto distributed in Cuba when there was such a thing as the Peoples' Democratic Government of Germany, turned into the national rotunda. It was not a place of worship, but certainly one that deified the late Fidel Castro. It contained the legislative body of Cuba, *Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular*, which did nothing more important since its construction than applaud speeches made by various dictators.

Jesus impatiently leapt from the car before it came to a complete stop much to the annoyance of his own security team. The protective screen could not encircle Munzo in a shield of human bodies before the Chief of Security ran up the impressive, by revolutionary-Cuban standards, stairs that led to the massive double door intended to inspire the populace and bar the uninvited. Two revolutionary soldiers snapped to attention from their previous position of leaning against the wall when they identified Colonel Munzo and threw him as crisp a salute as they could muster. He nodded his head in recognition gratifying the soldiers that they had done their job to his satisfaction.

It took the Security Chief a moment to adjust his eyes to the relative darkness of the building's interior, but less time for his aide to race up to his side.

"Give it to me fast, Luis," the Colonel ordered without passing pleasantries.

"Senior Vargas had just passed by the coffin and was leaving by the exit when it happened," the Captain answered in a voice filled with urgency, but clouded with a sense of shame.

"Television?" It was the obvious question for Munzo to ask and Luis surprised himself that he hadn't included mention of it in the first sentence to his superior.

"Oh, hell yes," he answered in disgust. "Yes, of course. The French Kayenta, Russia's VGTRK, our own Prensa Latina, and the American News Television Network . . . Si, mi colonel, all of them had live satellite links at the time," he answered as fully as he could. "None of them, except NTN, focused their lens on those departing the rotunda, but they share the images anyway, so that doesn't really matter."

The Captain shook his head in disbelief. In a well-ordered society, the government controlled such things as TV, the press, radio - all of it. If the government allowed them to report anything they wished without the guiding hand of the government, then God - if there were such a thing - alone knew what kind of chaos would reign. Castro himself had on many occasions been explicit on this issue. Luis could not comprehend why the temporary governors of the Revolution, indeed Senor Vargas personally, had allowed the foreign journalists, many he had no doubt were spies, access to the solemn ceremony of Raúl 's earthly interment.

Colonel Munzo sighed and the Captain immediately took it as a sign of displeasure. Sensing that his subordinate had concerns because of his own uneasiness, Jesus placed a gentle

hand on his shoulder. "Don't concern yourself with this, Luis. There was nothing you could have done. Senor Vargas was always a bit reckless."

"But brave," added the Captain.

"Si, but brave," acknowledged the Colonel, allowing himself to be guided to the site of the incident.

The foyer was large, built to the specifications of the Batista regime during a time when money flowed into the island because of the legalized gambling and government sponsored corruption ninety miles from the American coast. Colonel Munzo could see that the security officers of the nation had come up with a reasonable plan that would allow the maximum number of people to view the body of Castro. The mourners flowed in one door in single file, passed before the coffin, and continued out another double door. When the incident happened, it stopped the easy flow out of the building; yet, simultaneously people had continued to enter until just minutes before Munzo's arrival. Much like a balloon filling with water, the room was about to burst at its seams in spite of its spaciousness. From the coffin, which Munzo did not so much as glance at, to the exit, the room became so congested with humanity that the two security officers were forced to shoulder their way through the milling crowd.

"Here, mi Colonel," beckoned Luis pushing two policemen away from the scene.

On the polished floor, laying half in and half out of the door, was the body of the late Rodolfo Vargas, the man who three days earlier was voted by the Revolutionary Council to replace Raúl Castro as ruler of Cuba. After almost fifty years of Fidel rule and the next several of Raúl's, they too had tired of the oppressive poverty and isolation since the virtual collapse of Communism around the world. Vargas' vigorous economic approach would lead a new Cuba into a new century and prosperity. To achieve that, he confessed to his confidantes, it would be

necessary to acquiesce to American demands and reestablish trade with the Yankees. A few, Munzo among them, had opposed the idea. Not for political reasons, such simplistic ideology had died a quick death in the 60's, but for the purposes of retaining power. Learning their lessons from the fall of European Communism, Jesus decided that offering a little freedom was as impossible as making a woman a little pregnant - neither wholly possible.

"Have the area sealed as quickly as possible," he ordered unnecessarily.

"Already done, mi Colonel," he had anticipated the order and responded appropriately.

"That's the reason all these people are still here," he nodded at the throng in the main room.

"Excellent, Luis," he smiled briefly. "I want each interrogated by a team of two men, three times each. Have them housed in the army barracks. Allow them to send a message to their families, but I want those letters carefully monitored and copied. Treat them well, but move the room assignments around daily until everyone's interviewed. Separate the families before they get on the bus, but leave any children under twelve with their mothers - with their fathers if they have no mother in attendance."

"Si, mi Colonel," Luis acknowledged immediately. "Mi Colonel?" he asked in response to Munzo's furrowing brow.

"Now, tell me what happened?"

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"What's the significance of this?" the President of the United States asked rocking back in his chair in the Oval Office. He rubbed his chest unconsciously as he often did when under stress. The war wound was healed, but the memory still fresh.

George Clauson spoke first, the President's Chief of Staff, Harold Hemmingsford, would handle the political ramifications of the question and after the national security issues were resolved, as if the two were ever really far apart.

"Rodolfo Vargas, fifty-seven-years old, third son of a peasant family," he read off the biographical data that his agency had collected on the subject. Of course, they maintained files on all such individuals, friends and enemies alike. "Too young for the original revolution, his father had some connection with Castro and other revolutionaries, but what exactly, we don't know," he made his minor concession for the day regarding the Agency's fallibility. "His father is alive; mother deceased - when he was in his preteens. Educated in one of the local schools where he apparently showed a great deal of promise. He was shipped to Kiev for post-secondary education and Beijing, Tokyo, and London in that order for graduate schools."

"Western educated," noted Tindel, the Attorney General. "That's unusual."

"Not as much as you would think during that time," remarked Clauson. "Most of the schools were fairly radical back then, or at least their faculties were. The Communist nations could send their best and brightest to Western schools without much fear of them being contaminated by anything more politically counter-revolutionary than a Big Mac."

The others nodded their heads in understanding. All of them were of an age that they could clearly remember the political bent of their university instructors. While they represented the epitome of capitalism in the Western World, they too had their heads filled at one time with Marx and Lenin and Mao and Ho and Love and Peace and Pot and Revolution.

"At any rate, he received his training under the tutelage of Che' Guevara before Castro's lieutenant was killed in Bolivia in 1967."

"How did he manage to escape that?" probed the Attorney General. It wasn't much of a secret that Green Beret forces had tracked the ruthless revolutionary down and killed him with about as much mercy as he had shown those who had a different political point of view. The agency quipped that Guevara must have been a Yankee fan to have so often killed his victims with a baseball bat.

"Apparently he had been recalled to Havana earlier in the year," replied the Director. "The Soviets were helping to reorganize their intelligence apparatus to make it more effective. As a promising and rising star, Vargas had been selected with a handful of other Cubans to attend the Suzhba Vneshnogo Razvedky's, then the KGB's training school outside Moscow. He was a good pupil, but his strong suit wasn't really on the intelligence side of things. Vargas' real contribution to Castro was as a political economist."

Hemmingsford snorted at that pronouncement. "Brother, he made a great contribution to their economy," he chuckled. The Cuban economy continually slid downhill since the Communists took over in 1959 and almost totally evaporated when the Soviet Union withdrew financial support to the Communist nation when they stopped being one itself.

"That's a pretty easy thing for us to say," commented Tindel, "from a warm office in the wealthiest nation of the world."

"Zack's right, Harold," the Director added. "Cuba never did have much industry besides tourism and sugar. Zero in terms of heavy industry. When America embargoed the nation - well, my economic people tell me that it's nothing short of a miracle they didn't collapse within a couple of years. That they survived this long can only be attributed to the intelligence and ingenuity of a single man, Rodolfo Vargas."

The President watched the exchange between his top advisors, interested, but only partially so. He had selected them, except Hemmingsford who had already been with him, a few months earlier while still his party's nominee for the Office of President of the United States of America. And thus far, he had no reason to regret his appointees.

A few months before, he had been an obscure third-year congressman from a Western state of little importance hoping to either gain a nod from his party to obtain one of the cabinet seats that would become available if the party's front-runner went all the way or win a fourth term in his own district. Both senators and the governor of his state were so firmly entrenched that he had no possibility at all of unseating any of the three.

The front-runner had sewn the party nomination up early in the primary season owing to his natural charm, the many favors owed him, and that the other four candidates simply had no appeal outside their home states except Windel Oliver and his support from the Christians for Moral Government. CMG, its television audience - "The Partners in Christ," and Oliver were strong enough to give the most popular candidate a run for his money early in the race, but Americans tend to be brutally disinterested in single issue candidates (or single-issue parties for that matter, they usually have their best ideas adopted by one or the other major parties) and by Super Tuesday it was obvious who would be representing the party in November; the convention to be nothing but another media event. All the other candidates resigned themselves to the facts and publicly offered the victor their support in their home districts, except Oliver who informed him through the media at the press conference announcing his withdrawal that the teachings of the *Bible* would never allow him to support an enemy of Christianity.

*And then things - well, happened.* Six weeks before the convention, the man considered by all of the insiders and most of the press as most likely to be tapped for the supporting role on

the ticket was suddenly dropped from consideration after an undenied report by the *Post* that he was HIV positive. Worse, the malady was the result of frequent visits to an Atlanta brothel where he consumed vast quantities of the house specialty, both male and female.

Damage control signals were sent out to all the party's political advisors in the United States and that handful of elected politicians that really mattered met for an emergency meeting in D. C. Suffering from a severe migraine brought on by the event, the party's nominee made it known he didn't care whom the party picked for him as long as they found someone clean, acceptable to the public, and who could carry his fair share of states in the election. *Oh, yeah*, he added. *I'd like to see someone who'd served in uniform.* The fact that he had not was beginning to be a real drawback and provided ready ammunition to the opposition.

The current occupant in the White House had not been invited; Harold Hemmingsford had. Others had recognized Hemmingsford in his trade as one of the few who plied his political craft with such skill that by consensus the powerful members of the power bloc decided he should be consulted. His comments would be noted and heeded by others in the room.

Playing his cards for the right hand, Hemmingsford had allowed others to be brought before the assemblage one at a time. Each of the men's names, excepting Windel Oliver, who had opposed the nominee-presumed were mentioned, but decided against for the very same reasons they had been unable to obtain a majority of votes in any of the primary states. One pundit from Kentucky had actually recommended that they resurrect the party's last vice president for the job, but such insanity is merely born during the hours of frantic decision-making and had no real weight.

At the right moment, when fatigue had set in and men's minds began to wander and a sense of urgency to reach a decision is at its height, Hemmingsford offered the name. The others

were initially outraged that he would propose his own principal and said as much, some rather harshly and with words they would later regret particularly after the election. Calmly, rationally, stubbornly Harold listed his reasons. The aspirant had done well in his own district, a member of the Armed Forces committee, a party faithful, willing to do and be what he was told to do and be where he was told to be, a good public speaker if he had a good writer, **AND** a veteran. He had gained some small portion of national prominence for his work on behalf of veteran benefits and was a member of the VFW in his home town.

"I'll be happy to withdraw his name, IF we can come up with a more solid replacement," Hemmingsford played the last card in the deck. There was no better replacement and all of them who had been around the table for the last eighteen hours knew so. If there had been, they would already be back at their hotels lying in lumpy beds and trying to get some sleep before they called the party's choice in the morning with their decision.

Harold had to wait until the tenth ring before the telephone was answered at the two-story brick home in suburban Atwood.

"Do you know what time it is?" the occupant asked, "Four fuckin' o'clock in the morning!" he answered his own question. "When the hell are you coming home? Things are heating up here and the polls show me four points behind as of this afternoon," he gave a sleep-induced whine over the phone.

"Get your bags packed," Hemmingsford ordered. "You're going on vacation."

"This is no time for a vacation!" the congressman shouted loud enough to stir his sleeping wife next to him. "This is no time for a vacation," he repeated in a whisper as if his advisor couldn't hear him before.

"Yes, it is," replied Harold. "Tuesday you'll be in Baltimore and Pittsburgh, but tomorrow - today - you will be here in D. C."

"D. C.? Baltimore? Pittsburgh? Hemmingsford, are you drunk?" he demanded. "What the hell will I be doing there?"

"Trying to help the guy who looks like he will win the party's nomination become president," answered Hemmingsford.

"That's nice, but who the hell's gonna help me get reelected?" demanded his student.

"Not your problem," Hemmingsford replied. "Vice presidential candidates don't usually concern themselves with congressional elections."

"Harold! Harold? Am I hearing you right?" he asked already having the answer.

"Your hearing's just fine," replied Hemmingsford. "Get your ass on the first plane to D. C. Bring your wife. Your children, too, if you can swing it fast enough."

"Alright. Yeah, sure," he held the dead phone in his hand, the receiver already replaced in a D. C. hotel room.

"Everything all right, dear," Marcie slid across the bed and wrapped her slender arms around her husband's naked waist.

"Yeah, sure," he said standing erect and pulling out of her arms.

"Was that Harold, honey?" she asked getting up behind him, unwilling to allow him to pull away from her warmth and affection.

"Yeah."

"Are he and Tricia having problems again?" she asked. Hemmingsford had recently begun to "discover" himself or was suffering from mid-life crisis or *God only knows what*, and his relationship was beginning to deteriorate with his wife, Marcie's best friend.

"No. Nothing like that," he replied coming fully to his senses now.

"What is it then?" she used the moonlight to look into his face with the concern of a devoted wife.

"Harold's got me the party's endorsement to become the vice presidential running mate this year," he said, not believing it himself.

"I'll put the coffee on while you shower," she swung into action. "When do you have to be there?"

"First plane I can get," he answered dropping his pajama bottoms to the floor before walking into the bathroom.

The team had been incredibly successful, and the winner of the party's primaries and the political leadership had been overwhelmingly surprised at the results. They crisscrossed the nation telling the likely voters what they wanted to hear, but presented it a palatable enough package for them to lap up from the grimy floor of politics.

*And then things - well, happened, again.* The presidential candidate who bragged of doing nothing more physical than *schtupping* his secretary, the man most likely to carry his party to victory in November, suffered a stroke while campaigning in Los Angeles, the last day of a ten-day, nonstop crusade that covered the entire West Coast and had locked those states solidly into the fold. The *Movers and Shakers* of the party rushed back to Washington for another round of discussions and decision-making. A slender minority of them wanted to continue on the same course and with the same nominee, hoping to garner the sympathy vote of the nation. The stroke was moderate and his attending physicians assured them that he could be up making limited engagements in a month or so. Fortunately, nothing approaching a majority wanted to maintain the status quo and take the risk.

Yet another faction decided that they should throw the process open to the convention and allow the delegates to make the choice. This suggestion caused the senior New York Senator's advisor to fall out of his chair struggling for breath from his laughing fit. "Democracy, as a concept," he pointed out, "is something for public consumption; not something to be practiced when it really matters!"

That brought them back to Hemmingsford's candidate. He had surpassed even the most optimistic expectations of the party. And while he hadn't been known to America prior to five weeks earlier, they had poured a lot of money into building a public image for him. It would be a shame for them to have to start from the beginning in what most of the decision-makers considered a futile attempt to sell another impression to the American public at this late date.

The decision was made. Harold's man would be the party's candidate. The announcement caused an immediate 10 percent drop in the polls, wiping out a 3 percent lead they had enjoyed previously.

The convention was not thrilled with the contrived agenda of the leadership, but was mollified by the subsequent nomination (this one actually from the floor of all things) of William McClusky as his vice presidential nominee. Oddly enough, McClusky, from the West Coast became immediately acceptable to the hard-line members of the party, including Windel Oliver. The nominee was pro-life, pro-death penalty, pro-school prayer, but most important to the hard-liner, saw the party's ticket as being himself and *the other guy*. Senator McClusky had little or nothing to do with the Congressman in his official federal duties and nothing at all with him socially.

Although he belonged to the same party, they could have not been further apart in ideologies. The presidential nominee was pro-choice, anti-death penalty, and thought school

prayer shouldn't even be allowed in parochial schools. In fact, the single item they could discuss without screaming at each other was the Department of Homeland Security and, even more oddly for the same reason. Both the presidential and vice-presidential candidates believed that the Department was nothing less than pseudo-fascism and undermined the basic principles of democracy. Both vowed to gut the Department and send its director packing. Privately, they also both understood something would need to take its place. The world had become too dangerous not to have an agency that could do the dirty work and stay out of the limelight.

Despite the rejuvenation of the campaign following the convention that gave them a 2-point lead the next week, when the other party held their convention they obtained with it a steadily growing resurgence in the polls that held constant at 7 percent seventeen days before the general election.

*Fact far more unpredictable than fiction - well, happened, yet one more time. The proverbial third time was the charm.* "Christ! This wouldn't even make a third-rate novel plot," he laughed, a twinkle in his eye, and rubbing his hands together as if a child at Christmas.

A rumored paternity suit followed by three separate indictments for corruption while he was governor was slapped on the other party's candidate within a week and a half. The graft indictments he could have put off until after the election and, if he were successful, postponed until after his term in the White House after which he could expect executive clemency, but the dumb shit had immediately submitted to DNA testing to put to rest the affidavit filed by the seventeen-year-old mother. The expert for the prosecution had said that theoretically the match could have been only with the candidate and *perhaps* one other person in the world. Unless the young woman had carnal knowledge and found connubial bliss with someone from Outer Mongolia, the candidate was the father of a seven-week-old male and the lover of a teenager.

Harold's pupil literally walked into the White House unopposed, the other side not receiving less than 40 percent of the electoral votes. It would have been a time for elation and celebration had the circumstances been different. But as it was, the nation was stuck with a President who had not had his mettle tested in the forge of an actual campaign, but in fortunes of fate. The nation felt cheated and the media seemed delighted to report this fact on a daily basis.

"Who does that leave in charge?" asked the President. He wondered whom fate would pick this time for the beleaguered Caribbean country.

"This man," Clauson pulled a photograph out of the package and handed it across the desk to the President. "Jesus Lionardo Ricardo Munzo."

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"Senor Munzo, how good of you to come," the old man said in a *pro forma* manner. "My house is your house," he said with Old-World charm. Jesus was not fooled by the allure of the offer. The disguise was common to the elderly of the island and often was the only forewarning an adversary received before an attack on his person.

"Senor Vargas," he shook the hand of the dead man's father, entering the modest home of his rival's parent. "I came as soon as I concluded pressing matters of State and tended to your son."

"I thank you for that," Ricardo Vargas allowed. "When will the funeral be, may I ask?"

"Not for several days, I'm afraid," responded the former security chief. "We are investigating the matter most diligently and hope to bring the conspirators to justice as swiftly as possible. In order to do that, we must retain the - your son - for a while longer to determine the exact path of the bullet. Right now, we believe that Omega 7 was the perpetrator in this criminal act and we are focusing our attention and interrogations in that direction," he answered.

"I see," replied Senor Vargas unconvinced of the man's sincerity. Indeed, he was unconvinced of many things that occurred in Cuba...had occurred in Cuba over the last half century.

Ricardo Vargas had been one of those few still alive who had been with Castro before one could be with **CASTRO**, the bearded one. Back in 1948, he had traveled with his friend, Fidel, to Columbia in order to fight for the people's rights following the murder of Jorge Eliecer Fajtan, the popular proletarian leader of the nation. Their's and others' actions had led to *La Violencia*, the decade of unrest and terror that caused the destabilization of much of Latin and South America and ultimately caused the downfall of the *status quo*. Satisfied with the start they had made on the mainland, the men who had become as close as brothers came back to Cuba. Ricardo had returned to his occupation as a law clerk; Fidel to his occupation as a revolutionary. Both hoped for change, but used entirely different instruments to bring it about.

When the dictator had first come to power in the late 1950's he had called upon his friend to help draft the document that would guide his nation. Calling upon his legal ability, his understanding of what Marx had hoped to achieve and, yet, what had resulted in the Soviet Union, Vargas had drafted a beautiful document that called upon the poetry and logic of the American *Constitution*, the 1832 Belgium constitution and Denmark's written in 1848 to design what he and Fidel had so often spoke of in the hills of Colombia. Influenced by his inner circle, however, Castro rejected the effort and ordered Ricardo to rewrite the document relying more on classic Soviet collectivism. Vargas refused, stormed from the room, and waited out the night with his weeping wife for Castro's minions to arrive at his door.

They never came. Vargas' wife passed away and Fidel's henchman, Guevara, paid the President's respects to the household. His only son, Rodolfo, was given privileges other sons of

other men could only hope for, but he neither saw nor spoke to Castro. He had a brief argument with his son just before he left for South America with Che. "There is more than enough work for you here," and again just before he had left for Moscow, "You need to settle down and raise a family," but they were momentary interruptions in the normal love between father and son; thus, reunions were always happy events. Slowly he had watched over the years as his son's career had taken him from one important position to another until he was not a member of the inner circle, he was the inner circle and others reported to him. And in all that time, he had seen Fidel only once. He had accompanied his son to the private clinic outside Havana that accommodated the not-yet-deceased remains of his teenage friend. He wept that night as he had not since his wife's death and once again when the President died and yet once more this morning when he was informed of his son's death.

"You will please keep me informed of the disposition of this matter?" inquired Ricardo. "I would like to have him interned in the family plot."

"It would be better for the revolution for him to be buried in the national cemetery," advised Colonel Munzo.

"I would not object to a ceremony held at the national cemetery if the body would be released for burial later," Vargas said.

Fool! Munzo wanted to shout, but smiled a white-lipped smirk at the old man. It would not serve his purposes for the old man to die so soon after his son. "Very well. But you will attend the services at the national cemetery?" it was both a question and an order.

"It would be an honor. For me as well as all of Cuba to pay homage to a man who meant so much to our nation," he said graciously.

"My adjutant will inform you of the date and time," Munzo said curtly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have pressing matters of State to attend."

"Yes, of course," replied Ricardo politely, but he could not bring himself to take the hand of the man who had used the appendage to cause the death of his own son.

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"Our reaction?" the President was not yet familiar with all of the options he had at his command. "What should our official policy be?"

"If it were Vargas who remained in power, that would be simple," Clauson thought aloud. "He'd been moving Cuba toward a position of normalization for years. Raúl's death would have simply accelerated those things he had already placed in motion. But now . . .?"

"Now, George," ordered the President. "We can't afford to play 'What if?' I need to know if we should show this Munzo character a hand extended in friendship or a fist clenched in warning."

"Your Secretary of State would be better to advise you on those matters," Clauson reported faithfully. Like any true bureaucrat, he tried his best to avoid committing himself to a single course.

"I have a meeting scheduled with him in an hour and a half," he said looking at the watch on his wrist. "And I'm certain he will try his best to sidestep the issue as well." One of the things that galled the President the most was the level of political insulation cloaking Washington. No one was ever responsible for anything. What had once been the Federal government's position of "The Buck stops here," had now become "The buck pauses here long enough for us to tax it; but if you're expecting change, forget it."

"With the concurrence of the Secretary of Defense, sir," George responded knowing that the President would not allow him to squirm his way out this time, "I'd recommend you beef up Gitmo for the time being. We have some ground assets in Havana and should have a feel for the direction this Munzo character is leaning in a couple of days. Before today, Munzo **WAS** somewhere left of Trotsky." He used the analogy of Stalin's rival for power in the 1920's who claimed that continuous international revolution was the only course to follow if one was to maintain faith with the Marxist-Lenin doctrine. It was peculiar that the Soviet leader, forced to flee Russia after Stalin was able to consolidate his power, was assassinated in this hemisphere, Mexico City to be exact, "but it wouldn't be the first time that one of these tin-horn wannabe's reversed their position after they got control of their government."

"So a steel fist in a velvet glove?" he asked.

"That's my recommendation based on what information we have at the moment," he covered himself as best he could.

"Harold?"

The President's Chief of Staff steepled his fingers under his chin as he formulated an answer and, amazingly, all other occupants in the Oval Office awaited his message as if he were the political Mullah of America, which was closer to the truth than anyone cared to admit.

"Harold Hemmingsford's brains, determination, and political acumen," the party's Chairman had once remarked, "in the President's body would have made a super-political figure of dimensions not yet seen on earth." Instead, Hemmingsford's intellect was trapped inside the body of a gnome, pockmarked by acne and childhood chicken pox. The grim irony of fate was smiled upon by Harold himself with a grin that told those around him he had great need of an orthodontist's care.

"Until proven differently, Mr. President, I think the position of the United States should be one that situates itself to welcome Cuba back into the community of nations now that the last Great Transgressor has gone to explain himself to his Maker," Hemmingsford smiled crookedly at his own sardonic humor. "This comment alone should have two effects: first, it may well provide the leverage necessary to prompt Senor Munzo in a friendly direction more in line with the Organization of American States; secondly, it should satisfy those radicals in *Omega 7* whose hatred was directed more towards the Castros personally than the ideology they espoused."

"Sounds like a good move," he approved of the centrist philosophy. "What about George's suggestion regarding Gitmo?"

"Precautionary measures are always important during times of crisis," he pronounced solemnly the same words that he would ensure the President's speech writer opened his address to the nation with.

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Munzo had yet one more meeting before he could return to his own ruling council and at this one he could not be chaperoned by his adjutant. He thought it strange that as titular head of State he should be driving twenty miles into a remote region away from Havana alone and in the evening. But then, he wouldn't be the titular head of State had it not been for a similar meeting the same week Raúl had been placed in the hospital for an alcohol induced coma. The man he was meeting was extraordinarily cautious and had he not been, Munzo would have had nothing to do with him.

He had left the main road four miles back and had been in first gear for the last two, clawing his way over a rutted, muddy path that only a mule should have risked and then only in daylight. At exactly five point six miles he stopped the car and killed the engine leaving the

headlights on and the windows rolled down. He waited in the stillness that surrounded him for fifteen minutes. At one point, he thought he felt the oppression of the jungle grow more intense, but that could have been nothing more than a twinge of conscience and he quickly dismissed it.

Then the interior light had come on for one brief moment illuminating a single figure that could well have been an apparition, so quickly did he fade into the shadows as soon as the door closed and the light was extinguished. The shadow reached a ridged index finger upright and stabbed it into the fixture rendering the light inoperable.

"You took your time getting here," scolded Munzo. Only two men had kept him waiting in years and both of them were dead, one by nature's hand and the other one by this man's.

"I thought you had an appreciation for caution," retorted the man.

"Caution, yes. Melodrama, no," rejoined the Colonel.

"I'll keep that in mind," he replied without remorse. "You wished to see me?" he asked. The contract had been paid in full and there was no reason for him to have stayed in Cuba a moment longer than was necessary to pull the trigger and escape the country, not a difficult task considering the chaos that usually accompanied these things. The opportunity for even the best law enforcement agency in the world to catch a perpetrator diminished in direct relation to the time that passed after the crime. But the Colonel had reestablished contact with him by coded message and asked for an additional meeting.

The assassin had at first considered it possible that Munzo wanted him to disappear, permanently. But on further consideration, he found that unlikely. The Colonel had come to him for his services and not the other way around. He was a well-trained disciple of the former KGB-instructed Cuban Intelligence apparatus and would surely understand that he had left certain sureties around the world in the event something sinister occurred. *No, more likely he*

*has other powerful figures he wished to dispose of while I'm here.* An extension of his contract by his primary employers was not unknown.

"Yes," the Colonel, who would be confirmed with the title of President before the evening was over, answered. "I have decided you are a very efficient man. A good man to have around and to help me achieve my goals."

"I'm sorry if I have misled you in any way, Senor Munzo," he said with genuine sorrow. "But I don't undertake long-term contracts for services, only single operations. It is a matter of personal security, you see."

Jesus nodded his head appreciatively. *The man is no fool*, he considered again. It was the very reason he had not attempted to prevent him from leaving the island. Such men were in great demand and discovering his name, actually just the means of contacting him, had been an exhausting effort that cost him many favors to those in the SVR whom he had known when the KGB was the KGB. It would have been futile to attempt to stop him from leaving the island and may well have caused him to react violently if he had failed.

"I completely understand," Munzo replied. "But you would be available to mount an additional operation or two in this hemisphere?"

"Yes, of course," he shrugged. "It's what I do for a living."

"Good. Allow me to give you the concept then." He talked for another fifteen minutes.

While motivated by his own greed, it seldom failed to amaze Pegasus to what levels world leaders were willing to go in order to fulfill their own appetites in the name of the people.

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The man stood just inside the tree line and watched carefully as Munzo backed his auto down the trail to a place where it became wide enough for him to turn around on his fifth

attempt. For a moment he thought it would be necessary for him to reappear to help push the car out, but the Colonel was as skilled as he was prompt in payment and that proved unnecessary. He waited for an additional fifteen minutes to ensure that there were no unsuspected surprises brought to the site by Munzo before making his way to a parallel jungle road where he had left his motorbike. He didn't think the Colonel would be stupid enough to try something like that, but one did not get old in this business by becoming careless. After all, carelessness had caused many of his former associates to die for foolish reasons.

He had cut his terrorist teeth, so to speak, during what his father called his apprenticeship with the Baader-Meinhof Gang in the early seventies. But the grandmother of new European terrorism, Ulrike Meinhof, had grown careless and allowed herself to be captured. With *pro forma* regrets, the Western German government reported in May of 76 that she had hung herself from the bars of her cell window at Stammheim. A year and a half later, Andreas Baader and two others of the Red Army Faction had also committed "suicide" at Stammheim after the Mogadishu hijacking orchestrated by him failed to earn their release. In less than two years, the government at Bonn had put the terrorists out of business permanently.

But not *Pegasus*, for that was what he was called whenever those in his cell wished to call him by name. He was the fourth in his line to earn and maintain the reputation of the name, a woman and two men, including his father, had protected it for more than a century, built upon it, and sold it - not unlike stocks were sold in the exchange - to the highest bidder.

His father had been the first to see the trend toward terrorism-for-hire by private individuals and smaller nations in the early 70's while America was still deeply involved in Viet Nam and while the fourth Pegasus was just finishing graduate school in economics in Edinburgh. His firm opinion was based on a trend the third Pegasus had observed first in October of 1971.

Terrorist leaders from more than a dozen nations had met in Florence, Italy to discuss problems of mutual interest and to determine what the future of terrorism, ideology aside, would be in the world. Not only were there representatives from cells around the world, but also agents of various governments who supported and employed terrorists. He found that, whereas they lacked the might to confront the larger nations of the world, they maintained the will. And not only the determination, but the resolve to do something and put their countries' newly-developed money where their mouths were. Similar congresses were held throughout the 1970's in Lisbon, Belgrade, Beirut, Tripoli and even under the British nose in Dublin. But none of these subsequent meetings had the importance of the first for the family.

The West was not without its own weapons and rhetoric to combat the problems of terrorism. The Organization of American States sanctioned the "Convention to Prevent and Punish Acts of Terrorism Taking the Form of Crimes against Persons and Related Extortions That Are of International Significance." The document with the rather lengthy title was the vehicle by which countries of the Western Hemisphere could act collaterally to destroy radicals that had been a growing problem for all of the signatories.

The highly competitive and feuding factions that directly opposed Castro met in 1976 in the Dominican Republic at the behest of the American CIA. Putting aside differences and focusing their attention on their antagonist, they left the island after forming CORU - the Cuban version of the PLO and resolved to bring down the bearded one. After that, Cuban diplomatic offices, airlines, and consuls came under attack.

In Western Europe, with the notable exception of the success against the Baader-Meinhoff Gang, it took somewhat longer for the governments to organize themselves effectively against terrorists. When they finally did so, they were the most effective of any counterinsurgent

organizations in the world - except the Communists who simply imprisoned or killed those suspected of not fully supporting the government. In the summer of 1978 seven Western nations, America among them, met in Bonn to reach an agreement that would allow them to fight terrorism on more than an individual level. The nations agreed publicly to take two actions: stop airline flights to nations that gave refuge to terrorists and impose ill-defined sanctions. Privately, they agreed to share intelligence deemed vital so that Germany could employ its GSG9, Italy its Leatherheads, Israel its General Intelligence and Reconnaissance Unit, France their Gigenes, and America its newly formed and untested Blue Light Force that would not have an opportunity to prove its mettle until the ill-fated 1980 Iranian hostage failure.

But the Terrorist nations were not idle either. Not to be outdone, the terrorist organizations of Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, and Uruguay formed the "Junta for Revolutionary Coordination" in April 1974.

Uruguayan terrorists were represented by the Movimiento Liberacion Nacional (MLN) who called themselves the Tupamaros for the Inca chieftain who, captured by the Spanish in the 18th century, was quartered by horse carts in Lima. MLN was formed in 1963 under the leadership of Raúl Sendic, a law student. They had intended to fan the interest in opposing their government among the peasants, but had quickly learned that farmers wanted to be left alone to tend their fields, grow their crops, raise their children, and fool around with their wives when they weren't so dead tired from their day's toil that it was physically impossible. Instead of being a "peoples' revolution" the Tupamaros quickly found their numbers filled by students, teachers and other professionals. Sendic had become so hunted that he had to have extensive plastic surgery to change his appearance. Even so, he had been captured and held briefly until he led a breakout from the detention facility of one hundred six members of the organization.

By the end of 1975 the “Junta” had been joined by Paraguay, Panama, Venezuela, Columbia, and the Dominican Republic. Carlos Teledo Plata, the founder, leader, and ideologist of M-19 in Columbia represented that nation, although the organization had only the year before announced its existence by raiding Simon Bolivar Museum outside of Bogota and liberating the sword, spurs, and epaulets of the figure revered south of the American border as the "Liberator" of their world. The *Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP), the armed force of the Revolutionary Workers' Party and the *Montoneros*, the left-wing supporters of Peron, were represented by the legendary Roberto Satucho and helped to further bolster the interested members.

Among the new members of the South and Latin American terrorist organizations, the recently-organized Panamanian Socialists of Darien represented the smallest in terms of geographic and population resources. The organization, including less than thirty members upon inception, had taken its name from the site where Balboa had launched his expedition from the Atlantic to the Pacific in 1513. Later the Scottish colony of Darien was established under the direction of William Patterson on Caledonia Bay. But it had vanished into the jungle that consumed all things foreign to the nation. The populist leader Prisciliano Hidalgo had been waging legal, courtroom war with the United States and its own government for the return of the canal to direct Panamanian ownership and administration. In 1976, it seemed the presidential election in the United States would determine the ultimate status of the country's prized possession. Yet, Prisciliano was uncertain that they would act in concert with his organization's desires. If the Republicans were elected, they would almost certainly not return the Canal to his nation. But that party was in deep trouble with its own electorate and might well lose the presidency along with control of Congress. If that were to happen, the Democrats may well be

favorably disposed to grant their desire. To ensure that it would be placed high on the agenda of whatever Democrat may gain the seat in the White House, the Dariens had contributed heavily to the Democratic National Committee through intermediaries. If the nation to the north went back on their word having once given it - not an unknown thing for modern nations to do, Prisciliano would have need of the resources of this antithesis of OAS. So he continued to meet with them, sent them some small amount of funds, a little more in terms of manpower, and a virtual cornucopia of intelligence, a desperately needed commodity in the terrorist community, something Hidalgo seemed able to effortlessly accumulate.

Prisciliano Hidalgo had been one of those few visionaries who understood the very nature of terrorism. "Terrorism," he was often quoted as saying, "was fundamentally different from either guerrilla warfare or open rebellion. Instead of mounting organized field operations against the established government, we must garner our support from the populace, for without it the individual organizations are finished before they begin." He would pause to re-light his Panamanian cigar. "Modern terrorism has two objectives. Primarily, it must become ruthless enough to require the established government, or in the case of Panama, an invading army, to react in such a manner that they become oppressive to the common citizen who has, up until that time, been unaffected by the policies of his nation. Second, it must receive the acknowledgement - not the consensus, but the acknowledgement - from the news media that they alone represent the will of the people, or at least a sizable fraction thereof. "In his widely-read book, *The Nature of Revolution*, he further developed the hypothesis that fighting in the jungles with isolated troops was not the most effective way of changing the government. He advanced the theory that one went where the political, military, and economic power of the nation laid - the cities. If they were to get the international exposure that all groups sought, thrived on, and

ultimately required to remain operational, then they would have to create scenarios that would be attractive to the media and sting the government in power. "A good revolution is a staged event," he wrote. "Like any drama, people love to watch it unfold. Give the people what they want and they will continue to patronize this art form."

Pegasus' father had been able to take advantage of this rich revolutionary atmosphere to further his own ideology - personal wealth, by helping various revolutionary leaders obtain their goals. After the current Pegasus returned from training in North Korea, apprenticed in Europe, and polished his skills, he flew to Mexico City to help his father plan operations in the Western Hemisphere. The duo wasn't anxious to directly abet the terrorist organizations considering them far too amateurish and infiltrated to risk. But they were willing to plan their operations and operate independently during the second half of the 70's and the first half of the 80's.

By the mid-80's, things had taken a decided turn for the worse in Latin and South America. In most of the countries of this hemisphere, the revolutionaries had gotten exactly what they wanted: an oppressive government. Instead of the populace rising up against the oppression, the governments had become so effective dealing with internal threats that their tyranny had reached a level where no amount of insurrection could exist let alone thrive.

In a few cases, such as Panama, the revolutionaries actually achieved their goals, although not by direct effort. In the Isthmus' case, the late 70's had brought with it an American presidential promise that the nation would become whole again and be able to practice self-determination. With all of their goals achieved by a signature on a rewritten treaty, the Dariens became more of a politically active social club than a revolutionary cell, although there was a resurgence of interest when the Americans once again violated their nation in 1989 to arrest the lawfully elected leader of Panama. Many in the nation applauded the Yankees' intervention this

one time, purging the nation of such a vile man, but others - represented by the Dariens - became increasingly suspicious of America's real interest in the region. That suspicion grew when less than six months before the current President of the United States had mouthed the fatal statement: "I believe that we have given away too much of our territory abroad," in response to his opponent's vacillating position on America's weakened ability to project power internationally during a presidential debate. Hidalgo used that passage, out of context, to convince many in his nations that the dreaded Yankees would attempt to regain control of their tiny nation. The numbers that flocked to the Darien banner had exceeded their most delirious concept of membership.

The New Dariens demanded the Yankee's of the North repeal the American Senate modification to the treaty of June 1978 that allowed the United States to guarantee that "the Panama Canal shall remain open, neutral, secure, and accessible." Such vague wording, the Dariens contended, gave the hated Yankees a right to intervene once again in Panamanian affairs under that pretext. The party leadership would have been astounded to know the current American President agreed with them.

That idiot Peres' had actually invited the American military to return back to Howard Air Force Base, dislocating the residents of the former military installation, to provide a forward base of operation for America's war on terrorism in the wake of an Al-Qaeda attack on that nation. That, after the Yankees had willingly given up the same location in 1999 as part of the initial treaty agreement. The dependent housing area had even been returned to the government of the United States, so that the service men and women would not be subjected to a hardship, being separated from their spouses and families.

Pegasus gunned the engine of the ancient BSA to life with a single kick and turned the headlights on, convinced that Munzo wasn't trying a double cross. *At least not this time.* If he were to do what Munzo wanted, he had to ensure that there were no records of his existence in the Interpol files. He had to return to Europe before carrying out the Colonel's next contract.