

Success of a Mission

by Dennis Lynds, 1924-2005

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The minister of defense stood with his back to the room. He faced a large map on the wall of his office.

„They will attack,” the minister said. „If we do not know the locations of their ammunition dumps, supply depots and fuel stores, we cannot stop them.”

The minister turned. He was a small man with a round face that would have been kindly except for the hard gray surface of his eyes. These hard gray eyes studied the faces of the other two people in the room the way a scientist would study a specimen on a microscope slide.

„That data would only be at army headquarters in their capital, Minister,” the tall infantry captain said.

The minister nodded. „Yes. Our man at their headquarters knows that much, has already located exactly where they are in the building.”

„He cannot get the data for us, Minister?” the woman asked.

„No. He cannot get into the building. It would be quite impossible in his disguise, and in any case we need him to remain in his present position. His

contacts are too low level, and we have no other reliable agents with the necessary experience at their headquarters for a job of this degree of difficulty, sensitivity and importance. There is no time to place an undercover man in the headquarters now. It will have to be a single swift operation from outside army headquarters. Get in, get the data, bring it back without them being aware that we have it."

The woman paled under her olive complexion. There and gone, the quick fear, but it had been there. She was little more than a girl, despite her officer's uniform. Her face was oval, with a small nose, wide and full lips and soft brown eyes. She had been in the army three years, and had killed four men with a knife in the dead of night, but she paled as the minister described what would have to be done at the headquarters of the enemy's army in the heart of enemy country.

The tall man only nodded. "When do we leave?"

His voice, when he said this, was low, and had a faint trace of an accent different from that of the woman and the minister. There was a long scar on his lean, tanned face. The middle finger of his left hand was missing. His almost-black eyes showed no expression.

"In ten minutes, Captain. All your papers are ready," the minister said. "You, Captain Hareet, will be an American automobile salesman on a long-planned combined vacation and business trip that could not be canceled despite the crisis. We have picked you for this job because of your experience, your colloquial American English and your command of Arabic. With some darkening of the skin, your features will also pass as Arab, if that becomes necessary. You know their army and their city."

Captain Hareet nodded. "Yes, sir. I know both only too well to lose a war to them."

The minister faced the girl. "Lieutenant Frank, you will be his wife. Your home is in Santa Barbara, California. You have lived there, and no special regional accent is required for an educated Californian. Standard American will do. Your Arabic will pass in an emergency, but we hope there will be no need. It is hard for a woman to infiltrate in Arab countries."

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Frank said. The shiver in her voice was so faint no one but a man as trained as the minister, or Captain Hareet, would have caught it, and it disappeared as quickly as it had come. The two men looked at each other, nodded, and then smiled at the woman.

"You are lovers?" the minister asked.

The captain was silent. Lieutenant Frank hesitated for a moment. Then she nodded. "Yes, sir. Paul and I have lived together for over a year. We were lovers before that. We planned to marry soon, but that will have to wait now until after the crisis has passed."

"I am sorry for that, Lieutenant, but it is good that my information is correct."

"Is such information necessary?" Captain Hareet asked.

"All information is necessary," the minister said. "In this case, it might be vital. You will be posing as man and wife under the most careful scrutiny of every foreign national who arrives in their country at this moment. They will expect us to send spies, try to learn what their plans are. Women who are not married tend to act like coy maidens at the wrong moment. They forget. To act like she sleeps

regularly with a man, a woman must be sleeping regularly with the man. Men who are not married don't know how to act with a wife at all."

"Yes, sir," Hareet said, and smiled again at the young woman.

"I think Greta and I will be able to act the part well enough to pass any inspection."

"Do we parachute?" Greta asked.

"The sky is too clear. They will be alert. You will fly to Rome, and there you will board a normal commercial carrier. You will be Mr. and Mrs. Rogers of Santa Barbara. Harry and Susan, but he calls her Susy. Your papers are in order. The real Mr. and Mrs. Rogers are in Europe on such a trip with a different order of itinerary caused by a sudden change in plans we managed to arrange, and are being watched by our agents. You look enough like them to pass a cursory inspection."

The minister turned again to the large map on the wall. "I wish we could allow you some time to prepare. We can't. You are the only suitable team we have that can act the part on such short notice. I cannot even tell you how to proceed. Only that we must have the data within three days."

The minister turned once more to look at Hareet and Greta with his hard gray eyes. "In three days, they will attack us."

Mr. and Mrs. Harry Rogers of Santa Barbara, California, U.S.A., passed through Rome customs and immigration without any trouble. The Italian officials were most polite, and more than a little appreciative of Mrs. Rogers's dark beauty. She received all the customary whistles and smiles, and one definite pinch. In the taxi that took them to their hotel, they peered out the windows and exclaimed over everything, as American tourists would.

They checked into the hotel they had booked months ago from the States, showered off the grime of their trip, made love in the ornate Italian bed and went out to see the sights of the Eternal City. They ate in one of the best restaurants in Rome, ordered two bottles of good local white wine, went dancing, threw some coins in the proper fountain and visited the others, and generally had a fine tourist evening in the Italian capital.

The next morning they did not rise early, took the time to have their usual big, leisurely breakfast, then caught a taxi back to the airport for the next leg of their journey. On the jet out of Rome, they had seats just behind the wing. Harry Rogers held a guide-book and pointed out the sights below they had missed on the ground the night before.

"Look, dear," Captain Hareet said to Greta, the perfect eager American automobile salesman on his first trip to Europe.

"There's St. Peter's, and the Colosseum, and the Via Veneto. We were standing right down there just last night, honey."

"Did you remember to send the postcards to the Phelps and the Temples, Harry?" Greta said, her mind clearly at home with her social obligations where a good wife's mind should be.

"Ouch, I forgot," Mr. Harry Rogers said, the self-centered American husband. "We'll send some from Athens when we get there, okay?"

When they arrived at the airport of their next stop, the capital of the enemy country, there was the loud confusion normal to Arab countries. The present political crisis and impending possibility of war only heightened the clamor and chaos. They were inspected thoroughly at customs. With the mighty United States Seventh Fleet cruising pointedly at this end of the Mediterranean, Americans were not in the best standing in Arab countries at the moment.

„You will do well to remain safely within the city,” a customs official told them coldly. „And I suggest you do not enter the less visited and policed areas.”

„We sure won't, buddy,” Hareet said, his voice clearly nervous.

The official smiled at the intimidated American. Another man who stood off to the right and watched everyone who passed through customs did not smile. The dark shadows of his Levantine eyes stared at Captain Hareet's left hand. He showed nothing on his face, no particular expression, but his steady gaze followed them as they left.

„He's interested in your missing finger, Paul,” Greta said through a wifely smile. „They might have a file on you.”

„Possible,” Hareet agreed, smiling down at her. „We must go to the hotel, however. The risk can't be avoided, our contact will be made there.”

Greta walked ahead of her husband in the American fashion.

They took a taxi to their hotel, where she walked in first, left Hareet to pay the cabdriver and run after her.

In their suite of rooms, Hareet remembered to overtip the robed and surly bellman, and Greta remembered to prepare at once for a shower. They were well-taken precautions. Two maids soon arrived to perform some barely necessary tasks.

„We're being watched, Paul,” Greta said.

Hareet agreed. „The question is, are we being watched as their normally trigger-happy suspicion against all tourists at a time like this, or have we been spotted as something special and possibly dangerous?”

„I would say something special.” Greta thought carefully. „But not yet certain. They are checking on us.”

„So we have some time. A few hours at least. Unless they do have a file on me and have connected it to Harry Rogers.”

„How many will come?” Greta asked.

„If they are sure, a squad of soldiers and a vehicle. If they are still only suspicious, two men.”

„We can't stay here in the rooms. We wouldn't look much like American tourists.”

„No. Are you ready?”

They went out and down to the crowded streets that smelled of the masses of humanity and poor sewage disposal.

Streets now crowded more than usual with the local inhabitants, the fellahin and the middle class and even the elite upper classes in their Cadillacs and Mercedes. They were all more excited than normal. There was a high tension in the city, a fever of hate and violence building almost by the minute. In the

markets, the merchants hawked and sold frantically. In the shops, shutters were being readied for possible mass demonstrations.

The two Americans were watched with barely concealed antagonism.

Hareet took pictures until it was dark. They went to clubs that throbbed with excited patriotism. The belly dancers appeared overcome with ecstasy, danced specifically for the soldiers in uniform who seemed to throng everywhere. Four Americans sat near Hareet and Greta in one popular tourist club.

„I don't like it," one American said to them. „Time we got out of here."

„The sooner the better," another said.

„It doesn't look so good," Hareet acknowledged, his voice nervous again.

„Dave Spatz," the first American introduced himself. „Where you folks from?"

„Santa Barbara," Hareet said. „Harry and Susy Rogers."

„I was in Santa Barbara once for Fiesta. That's one helluva great town to live in. We're from Chicago."

„August is our best month," Greta said.

The police watched them, listened to them. But the police were watching everyone. They sat through two drinks and three belly dancers, then left and returned to their hotel. The desk clerk was friendly.

„Terrible times," the clerk said. „Even our thieves are too excited to work."

„Thieves?" Hareet said.

The clerk smiled and held out Greta's wedding ring. „Madame forgot her ring after her shower. The maid found it after you had gone out."

„Oh, my, how careless of me," Greta exclaimed, and smiled at the clerk.

She reached for the ring with her left hand. The clerk bowed over her hand to put the ring on. When he straightened up, his eyes had subtly changed, clouded, but he continued to smile as if nothing had happened.

Greta and Paul went up to their suite.

„They searched our rooms," Hareet said. „That's when they found your wedding ring."

„It won't matter," Greta said. „I made a bad mistake, Paul. Did you see the clerk's eyes? He saw it."

„A mistake?"

Greta took off her wedding ring and held up her hand. The ring was a broad gold band. The third finger of her left hand was smooth and unmarked, one single color.

„I'm suntanned, Paul," Greta said. „There should be a pale ring mark on my finger. The clerk knows I haven't worn the ring more than a few days."

„You have a dark complexion."

„Not that dark. Look under my wristwatch. My sunglasses have left a pale patch on my nose. He saw all that, too, Paul."

Hareet looked at his watch. „We'll wait half an hour for the contact."

The knock came in fifteen minutes.

Hareet opened the door. Behind him, the shower was running in the bathroom, the noise coming from under the bathroom door.

The two dark-eyed men who came into the suite wore Western clothes. They both glanced toward the sound of the shower, then back at Hareet.

„My wife can't stand this heat of yours, too muggy,” Hareet said with an apologetic smile. „Back home, our heat isn't so humid. Dry and not all that hot except when the Santa Anas blow down the canyons, you know?”

„In Santa Barbara, sir?” one man said. „The sundowner winds, yes?”

The other man walked through the rooms, his hand in his pocket. All the rooms except the bathroom. He returned, shook his head to the first man, and stood near the hall door they had left open.

„That's right,” Hareet said to the first man. „You've been to Santa Barbara?”

„If you will ask your wife—” the first man began.

Greta appeared silently in the open door from the hall. The man at the door heard her soft step, turned. She stabbed him twice in the heart before he could move or even open his mouth.

Hareet's knife appeared in his hand. The first man only managed to half draw his pistol. Hareet killed him with a single thrust.

Greta closed the door. They dragged the bodies into the bedroom and pushed them into a closet, moved the furniture just enough to cover the bloodstains on the carpeting. They changed into Arab clothes and left the room. They took nothing with them but their weapons and their second set of papers. They took the back stairs down.

Before they left, Hareet broke the mirror of the dressing table in the bedroom.

In the noisy streets, they mingled with the crowd. As they walked through the packed throngs of the enemy capital, Greta held Hareet's hand once. Her veil hid her face. Then they separated and she walked behind him until they reached the dark and deserted streets in the slums of the city where the fellahin wallowed in filth and misery.

On a particularly dark and silent street they went down four steps into a dank cellar where water ran in a deep trough at one side of the room. Slime floated on the water and rats swam in the slime. Hareet haggled with a one-eyed Arab in ragged Western clothes and a stained fez. Money changed hands. Hareet and Greta found a deserted corner of the cellar. They lay down to sleep as much as they could.

„How long do we have?” Greta said.

„As long as we've always had, Greta. Two more days.”

They spoke softly in stilted Arabic. Water spouted in ragged streams from pipes in the walls, human waste reeked through the darkness. The people lay in stuporous sleep, or sat against the walls and stared at the poverty and need and squalor of their lives. No one cared about Greta and Hareet in the darkness and silence of the cellar, no one was suspicious. Patriotism does not run deep among the ragged and starving and diseased of any country, not even here where patriotism was often all they had to make them feel human.

„They have no way to trace us,” Hareet said. „The Rogerses are gone for good. They know that two spies are in the city, but they expected there would be spies anyway. Our problem is still the same—to get the data. The only change is that it will be a little harder to get it back and in time.”

„There's another change, Paul,” Greta said. „We don't have a bed for tonight.”

„No,” Hareet said. „I'm sorry, liebchen.”

Greta smiled at the endearment that was far from his stilted Arabic. „I’m sorrier,” she said, and lay close against him in the dimness. „Where will we live when we retire, when this is over?”

Hareet stroked her arm softly. “There’s a hill in the north. It looks out over orange trees and an olive grove. You can see the border. I own it, and when I can look at that border and know that no danger will ever come across it again, then we will build a stone house and live in it.”

They slept for a time, took turns on watch. Greta was awake when the ragged peddler sidled up to them like an apparition from the slimy water of the cellar itself. She touched Hareet, who opened his eyes but did not move.

„The mirror could be mended,” the peddler whispered in English.

Hareet took his hand from the pistol under his ragged robes.

Greta slipped her knife back up her voluminous sleeve.

„We had to kill two,” Hareet said.

„They were found. Fortunately, I had seen the mirror five minutes before. What is your assignment?”

„The ammunition dumps, supply depots, fuel centers.”

„Impossible. The maps and information are in General Staff Headquarters,” the peddler said.

„I can get in,” Hareet said.

„But not out, Captain. No way you can get out. Not with the data in usable form.”

„Why?” Greta asked.

The filthy peddler sat against the wet stone walls, seemed to close his eyes and go to sleep. “Because our Arab friends have become modern, Lieutenant. At least at General Staff Headquarters. The documents will have been chemically treated so that no one can touch them undetected, or film them undetected. A sophisticated touch supplied by their friends in the bigger nations. Also, to get out you must pass two ranks of guards and locked gates, and a bank of detectors that detect film or the documents themselves.”

„So if we steal them, they would know at once and change the locations.”

„If you got them out, the present locations would be changed as fast as they could do it. Perhaps a short delay in their plans, and no help to us.”

„And we could only make the attempt once,” Greta said.

„No matter how many attempts we made, the data is useful to us only as long as they do not know we have it,” Hareet said.

„It must be taken and sent to our forces undetected.”

„And that can’t be done, Captain,” the peddler said. „We’ll have to beat them head to head, no matter how bad that looks.”

„Everything can be done in some way,” Hareet said, and sat for a time in the raw stench of the cellar filled only with the sound of running and dripping water. „Our man inside General Staff Headquarters is still there at his job?”

„Yes.” The peddler nodded. „But there is no way—”

„The main building with the information we need is inside a courtyard?”

„Yes. And there is a locked gate in the outer wall of the courtyard.”

„Where are the detectors?”

„At the door of the building.”

„How is the security inside the building in the day and the night?”

„In the day, fairly tight. At night, poor. They rely on the wall and outer gates and perimeter guards. The guards inside make rounds but don't go into the offices. The staff officers don't trust the soldiers with keys to the offices. That's their weakness.”

„And we'll use it,” Hareet said.

„Can we go in together, Paul?” Greta said.

„Of course not,” Hareet said simply. Then he smiled at her.

„But perhaps we can find some private place later tonight. A place for us to sleep.”

She smiled in return. „Tonight, then.”

Hareet and the peddler lay down on the stone. Greta sat up, watching. Hareet and the peddler talked for a long time. It was well past midnight when the peddler left alone. Hareet and Greta pretended to sleep for another hour, then slipped out of the dank cellar together.

„Our peddler gave me another address,” Hareet said. „Somewhere we can be alone. It's not far.”

They both knew the danger of such a move, every moment on the streets brought the possibility of being stopped, observed, making a mistake. Every new place exposed them to more contacts, more unexpected events. But they both also knew the risks of tomorrow.

The place turned out to be a small room on the second floor above a dark bookshop owned by an old Coptic Christian widow with patriotic slogans in her window. The peddler himself let them in, had a room of his own on the first floor where he had lived for over a year.

„It's as safe as anything can be here,” the peddler said, and left them alone in the tiny room with its one bed and some chairs and a cabinet they could barely see. There was no light.

They didn't need a light. After they had made love once more, Hareet held her close against him for the rest of the night as if to build a wall of protection that would keep her safe. He was not a demonstrative man; Greta knew he was afraid for what could happen to her, to them, when the night ended.

The guards paced at the gates in the outer wall of Army General Staff Headquarters far out on the edge of the city. They looked up as they walked their posts to watch their jets fly high above in beautiful formation. The ragged people on the streets cheered the jets and the guards as they shuffled past the front gates.

Among the throngs of people that passed the gates was a tall, dark-skinned man with a pointed beard, thick glasses and a fez.

He walked purposefully, with an arrogant bearing. With the tasseled fez he wore a dark Western suit and immaculate pale kid gloves. The crowds of fellahin gave him respectful room as he strode around and through them.

Hareet, in the dark makeup and wearing the gloves to conceal his missing finger, turned into a side street at the corner of the wall and proceeded on his

inspection of the headquarters building. The side wall was broken by only another high wooden gate, locked on the inside and outside. In the rear, the wall stretched without a break, and on the fourth side there was only a narrow, barred gate, also locked on the inside and outside and patrolled by a guard.

The building inside the high stone wall was from the last century and only two stories high. The roof had a steep pitch, and the windows of the upper floor were barred and shuttered. Two armored cars slowly patrolled the street all around the building, moving in opposite directions.

Hareet, his study completed, walked to a house a few blocks from the headquarters, and there changed into the flowing and ragged burnoose of an Arab country. He removed the fez and glasses, replaced the fez with a keffiyeh, and rearranged his false beard. He strapped his left arm to his side, and assumed a limp in his left leg.

A crippled fellahin was too common a sight in the streets of the city for anyone to look at twice. The fellahin limped his way to a filthy alley that paralleled the street in front of staff headquarters, and entered the rear of a building. He climbed to the second floor and slipped into an empty room at the front. He locked the door behind him, crossed quickly and without a limp to the front window with its clear view of the guarded gate into the headquarters.

Hareet sat in a chair some three feet inside the window so that no sun would glint on the powerful binoculars he took from beneath his burnoose. He sat on the chair for six hours without moving, except to rest his eyes now and then, and to light a cigarette.

He scrutinized the building, and the officers who went in and out.

Late in the afternoon, a slight scratching came at the door of the room. Hareet listened from his chair. The scratching was repeated in a definite pattern. He opened the door. The peddler came in.

„Have you found your man, Captain?”

„A colonel of artillery,” Hareet said. „He looks enough like me to pass. He’s in there right now. He is arrogant, the soldiers do not seem to like him, and he drives himself. His vehicle indicates that he is a field commander, not a staff officer. He is unusually tall, has slightly Sudanese features, wears a monocle and strides much as I do. He also wears gloves. He carries a swagger stick and is annoyed at having to present credentials every time he goes in or out of the front gate. When does the guard change?”

„In an hour.”

„Where are all the supply, fuel and ammunition depot documents we need?”

„In a small vault. It’s an old key-locked type left by the British. With all other precautions supplied by their more modern friends, they don’t feel a need to spend what a new vault would cost. It won’t be hard to open, and it’s located in a file room connected to the office of the chief of supply. They may work around the clock tonight.”

„No, not an Arab army. They will be in conferences or with their mistresses. Come.”

Hareet and the peddler left the room, and went down to the alley.

Greta stood in the shadows of the alley dressed as a street boy.

Hareet described the colonel of artillery. „Watch for him. If he comes out, don't lose him.”

Hareet and the peddler returned to the building a few blocks away where Hareet had changed from the gentleman in the fez to the crippled fellahin. There the peddler opened a large dossier, and Hareet found the picture and official history and designations of the artillery colonel he had seen go in and out the main gate of General Staff Headquarters.

The peddler read the details. „Colonel Aziz Ramdi. Forty-two years old. Unmarried. Sudanese mother. No foreign posts or training, no staff time, but many commendations for bravery in the last war with us. Commander of the Hundred and Twelfth Field Artillery. They're part of the city defense. Only recently transferred to the city from service on the southern border. He hasn't had the plum positions, doesn't sound like he's made any good connections. Probably because of that Sudanese mother. Hard to say how well-known he could be at staff headquarters.”

„I won't need long,” Hareet said. „It's reasonable to assume that a line officer who's been out in the field and far from the capital won't be all that familiar to the staff here. He's my best chance, we don't have a lot more time.”

The peddler nodded, and with the picture of the artillery colonel in front of him, Hareet worked on his face until he looked as much like Colonel Aziz Ramdi of the Hundred and Twelfth Field Artillery as he could.

„The film could be shot over the wall from a top window,” the peddler said. „I have the equipment.”

„They would know,” Hareet said.

„You could copy and not photograph, then the light would not sensitize the chemicals on the documents.”

„There would not be time. I would have to touch the papers. The data must be secured without their knowing that we have it,” Hareet emphasized.

Hareet completed his disguise. With the peddler shuffling far enough ahead of him that they could not be considered in any way together, he walked back to the alley and the room across from the headquarters. It had grown dark in the city, and large floodlights illuminated the headquarters wall and building.

„He is still inside,” Greta said from the shadows of the alley.

An hour later, the colonel of artillery came out, got into his Jeep and impatiently presented his credentials at the front gate.

He drove off to the left and made a right turn onto a narrow street that was the direct route to his unit.

A fellahin woman dashed out of the shadows directly into the path of his Jeep. A ragged peddler pursued her. The peddler caught the woman in the street in front of the colonel's Jeep, struggled with her amid a torrent of loud screams and curses.

Ramdi jammed on his brakes, and added his own curses to the loud Arabic.

The colonel barely felt his Jeep sway as someone jumped into it behind him. His pistol was still under its flap when the thin cord tightened around his throat.

Colonel Aziz Ramdi glared angrily at the officer of the guard at the gate into headquarters. The officer of the guard was nervous as he inspected the colonel's credentials. Only fifteen minutes ago he had checked the colonel out, and he felt ridiculous going through the entire routine again, but he knew he would have been even more nervous if he hadn't. In an Arab army, independent thought and decisions are not encouraged. Another weakness Hareet had exploited before.

The colonel made no explanation for his sudden return, sat in stony silence through the entire careful process. But his arrogant eyes bored through the junior officer with the clear implication that the colonel would remember this insult. The status of recognition is also part of an army too rigid with class and privilege.

„A thousand pardons, Colonel,” the officer of the guard said, and returned the credentials with a smart salute.

Hareet drove on into the courtyard without even returning the salute. The junior officer swore under his breath at the back of the arrogant colonel.

Hareet parked his Jeep as close to the main entrance of the headquarters building as he could—a senior officer does not walk far. He jumped out as if impatient to get to some important task, strode rapidly to the entrance. Two majors reached the entrance a hair before he did—which he had arranged by slowing his pace.

The majors both stopped and deferred to him. He waved them ahead with an impatient gesture of his swagger stick: asserting his rank, showing democratic largesse and distracting the guard at the front door.

The two majors hurried on into the building so as to not keep the colonel waiting. Not much more than an inch behind them, Hareet merely flashed his credentials to the guard. The guard, hurried by three credentials almost together, and the need to give three fast salutes, barely glanced at the tall colonel's identification.

Hareet was inside the building.

The long corridors were dim, cool and high-vaulted. Hareet strode loudly along the corridors until he located the office of the chief of supply. There was light under the door and the low sound of steady activity inside. As the peddler had predicted, the office of the chief of supply was working long and late this night.

Hareet walked into a lounge for officers only. He entered, went into the lavatory, and then into a booth. Inside the booth, he removed all his makeup. He changed his rank to major. He changed his insignia to that of an artillery unit stationed far to the south.

He tore all the credentials of Colonel Aziz Ramdi into small pieces and flushed them down the toilet, removed the credentials for a major of a tank unit in the south from a thin pouch under his clothes. He flushed the pieces of the pouch. He remained in the lounge for an hour, absorbed in reading some important report.

Each hour, he walked back to check the office of the chief of supply. Twice, he went into the officers' dayroom and read a magazine. He drank the thick Turkish coffee the orderly served.

In his normal appearance, there would be no one who could know him, as far as the peddler knew there were no officers from the distant artillery unit in the capital at this time, all field units being on twenty-four-hour alert.

At midnight, the office of the chief of supply was as dark and silent as all the other offices. As Hareet had been sure they would, all the officers from the chief of staff on down had gone to rest or party. Tomorrow would be a great day, tonight the building was quiet. Only the guards moved in the corridors of the headquarters.

Hareet waited until a guard had made his rounds of the corridor outside the office of the chief of supply. The corridor silent and empty, Hareet opened the door of the office with a picklock, slipped inside, his knife ready on the remote chance someone had been left behind, perhaps asleep.

No one had.

The door into the windowless file room was open. Hareet fitted a small light to his head and crouched to inspect the vault.

It was a simple key-locked vault from British days such as the peddler had reported. Hareet picked the lock with no trouble, swung the door open.

The documents he needed were neatly filed in their proper places. The folders were sealed with a wire-and-plastic seal that had to be broken to open the folder. Hareet broke the seal and removed the documents. They felt faintly slippery to his touch.

Tomorrow, ultraviolet light would reveal Hareet's prints, but that would not matter.

He photographed the documents with the miniature camera that had been hidden in the built-up heel of his boot. There were ten lists with maps and dated overlays. The overlays were all new and dated that day. Hareet photographed each document. They became faintly darker under the heat of his intense light. He unloaded the roll of microfilm and placed it in its container in his breast pocket.

He took a second roll of film from his other heel, reloaded the camera and took a second set of photographs.

He returned the documents to their files, resealed the folders as best he could, replaced the folders in the vault and relocked the vault.

He left the file room.

Behind the door of the dark office he sat at the general's desk, smoked a slow cigarette, looked around this high-level office of the enemy and waited for the guard to make his next round. It took a second and a third cigarette. He smoked deeply, enjoying the relaxation.

When the guard had passed, he slipped out of the office of the chief of supply, relocked the office door and walked openly again to the lounge for officers. Inside a booth once more, he sat and went to sleep with his head against the wall.

Dawn arrived soon after five o'clock that morning.

The building came slowly to life. Vehicles drove up and parked outside. Orders were shouted all through the courtyard and at the gates. The corridors echoed with the smart clicking of heels, and the morning greetings of the elite officers. Heavy-booted footsteps rang all through the building. Office doors opened and closed like the ragged sound of small artillery.

Hareet waited until just after six o'clock when the initial chaos had slowed to a steady sound of routine.

Inside the booth he took a large piece of wrapped halvah from his pocket, unwrapped it, and embedded the second roll of microfilm inside until it was completely covered with the soft confection.

He left the booth, went out into the lounge that was still empty at the early hour and returned to the corridor.

Hareet walked calmly toward the front door. Visiting officers were being checked in by the sleepy night-shift guards. Excitement and confusion were high at the door—the fever of impending war in any army. The day-shift guards were forming in the courtyard. The ragged fellahin servants were sweeping the courtyard, watering it down in preparation for the heat of the day to come.

Already the sun was up. It was going to be a dazzling day. Far across the courtyard at the front gate, Hareet could see the night-shift guards stretching the weariness from their bones, waiting for their relief. Vehicles coughed and sputtered in the morning air. The officers continued to pour in. No one was going out.

Hareet waited until the day-shift guards forming outside began to march to the posts to make the official transfer with the night-shift guards. He placed his pistol in his pocket, checked the film in his breast pocket, and when a large group of officers came across the courtyard and approached the front entrance, strode out and walked straight up to the door.

The officers thronged in the entrance.

A guard turned around to check Hareet's credentials.

There was a faint click somewhere in the wall, and an alarm began to sound, echoing through the building and out across the courtyard. The guard at the door stared at Hareet.

Hareet stabbed him in the heart, held the man's body close against him, and walked out into the courtyard through the confused group of incoming officers.

For a long moment, as the alarm continued to sound through the headquarters and over the courtyard in the bright morning, the officers and guards milled around and shouted and no one noticed Hareet walking across the courtyard away from both the building and the front gate still carrying the dead guard upright against him as if they were hurrying together toward some important official duty.

Then the officer of the guard saw them out there all alone and going in the odd direction, saw that one man was holding up the other. He ran after them, shouting, „You out there! You, Major! Stop where you are! Stop—”

Hareet dropped the dead guard, drew his pistol and shot the running officer of the guard. Then he turned and ran on across the courtyard toward the small barred side gate where he knew there was only one guard.

Pandemonium flowed through the building and the courtyard as the guards and officers all grabbed for their weapons. Quickly the day-shift and night-shift guards all spotted Hareet and began to converge on him. The guard at the side gate fired and missed.

Hareet shot the guard down.

He leaped for the wall. A bullet hit him in the leg, buckled it.

He collapsed, rolled, and struggled up again. He grasped the bars of the gate and hauled himself up toward the top of the wall.

Outside the wall, the two armored cars on patrol both careened into the street. Hareet reached the top of the wall.

A burst of fire struck him in the back. The machine guns on the armored cars cut him in two. Two rifle bullets exploded in his head. His body, at the very top of the wall, fell back to the stones of the courtyard.

The night-shift and day-shift guards stood all around Captain Hareet's body, uncertain what to do, perhaps awed by the daring escape that had failed.

A colonel of military police pushed through the guards and shot Hareet in the head again.

The colonel bent down, searched, and found the microfilm in Hareet's breast pocket. The colonel laughed and kicked the dead body. Some soldiers laughed now, spat on Hareet's lifeless eyes.

„Cut his head off,” the colonel of military police ordered.

„Hang it on the gate with a sign: Pig of a Spy!”

A general of the staff walked slowly up, and the soldiers and other officers gave way. The general looked down at Hareet's body. The colonel of military police handed the general the roll of microfilm.

„Take his body and identify it, Colonel, before you cut off any heads,” the general said. „A very stupid attempt, but well done. He very nearly escaped.”

„A desperate attempt,” the colonel sneered. „A hopeless attempt. They are afraid of us, General.”

„Of course they are afraid of us, as we are afraid of them,” the general said almost wearily. „Find out what it was they wanted, Colonel, what he has on that microfilm. Not that it matters now, but they might try again.”

„They will always fail,” the colonel insisted. He did not like to be told he was afraid of the enemy. That was weak, defeatist talk. He would watch the general. But now he looked down again at the dead body. „The fool never knew it would have done him no good to succeed. We would locate what he took even if he had escaped, and instantly change our plans.”

The colonel laughed. Hareet's body was taken away. The chief of supply quickly identified the enormity of the theft and posted a twenty-four-hour guard at his door. Even though, he explained to the army commander, there was no way anyone could get that data without the chief of supply knowing it instantly and changing it.

In any event, the chief of supply assured the army commander, the data was still secret and safe, there was no need to change the vital plans with so little time left. The army commander was relieved, such a change could have delayed them for days.

Captain Hareet was soon identified, and his head cut off and hung on the gates for the fellahin to jeer at.

The headquarters returned to its routine. Officers came and went in a steady stream. The fellahin servants cleaned the courtyard while the officers prepared for war. The hardworking, important and excited officers ignored the ragged peasants. One of the fellahin swept up a large piece of discarded halvah. He dropped the

halvah into his trash sack. Eventually he took the sack to a trash box near the small barred gate in the side wall where Hareet had died.

Soon, a truck picked up the trash boxes and drove them to the city waste dump. Out at the dump, a ragged peddler scraped among the boxes. Later, the same peddler hawked wares in front of a hotel near the eastern edge of the city.

A pretty Italian tourist woman bought a small urn from the peddler.

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That evening, the pretty Italian tourist checked out of her small hotel and drove from the city to a deserted beach. On the beach, she stripped down and swam out to sea.

Thirty-six hours later, the attack was launched. Ten hours after that, the war was essentially over. All the supply depots, ammunition dumps and fuel centers of the attacking army were destroyed within ten hours of the initial attack.

Some weeks later, Lieutenant Greta Frank sat alone on a hill in the north of her country and looked out toward the border beyond the orange trees and olive groves. The border was quiet.

It was not yet safe, but it was becoming safer.

Greta cried.

The minister came up the hill and squatted down in the dry dust. His hard gray eyes looked out toward the border.

„There was no other way,” the minister said. „They had to be convinced that he had tried and failed. They had to catch him—and not alive. He knew it was the only plan that would work.”

„And you knew,” Greta said.

„I knew.”

„You knew before we went.”

The minister drew patterns in the dust with his walking stick.

„Why didn't you go there and do it yourself?” Greta asked. „The great minister who won the war.”

„I could not have done it.”

„No, you could not have done it, and I could not have done it, and the peddler, whoever he really is, could not have done it. Only Paul could have done it,” Greta said. She studied the patterns drawn in the dust by the minister. Ancient patterns like the sun and moon of cavemen, hieroglyphics. „He knew he was the only way.”

Below, among the orange trees, two young boys ran and shouted, played soldier.

