

BEN BOVA

REMEMBER, CAESAR ...

We have never renounced the use of terror.

-- Vladimir Ilyich Lenin

She was alone and she was scared.

Apara Jaheen held her breath as the two plainclothes security guards walked past her. They both held ugly, deadly black machine pistols casually in their hands as they made their rounds along the corridor.

They can't see you, Apara told herself. You're invisible.

Still, she held her breath.

She knew that her stealth suit shimmered ever so slightly in the glareless light from the fluorescents that lined the ceiling of the corridor. You had to be looking for that delicate little ripple in the air, actively seeking it, to detect it at all. And even then you would think it was merely a trick your eyes played on you, a flicker that was gone before it even registered consciously in your mind.

And yet Apara froze, motionless, not daring to breathe, until the two men -- smelling of cigarettes and after-shave lotion -- passed her and were well down the corridor. They were talking about the war, betting that it would be launched before the week was out.

Her stealth suit's surface was honeycombed with microscopic fiber optic vidcams and pixels that were only a couple of molecules thick. The suit hugged Apara's lithe body like a famished lover. Directed by the computer built into her helmet, the vidcams scanned her surroundings and projected the imagery onto the pixels.

It was the closest thing to true invisibility that the Cabal's technology had been able to come up with. So close that, except for the slight unavoidable glitter when the sequin-like pixels caught some stray light, Apara literally disappeared into the background.

Covering her from head to toe, the suit's thermal absorption layer kept her infrared profile vanishingly low and its insulation subskin held back the minuscule electromagnetic fields it generated. The only way they could detect her would be if she stepped into a scanning beam, but the wide-spectrum goggles she wore should reveal them to her in plenty of time to avoid them.

She hoped.

Getting into the president's mansion had been ridiculously easy. As instructed, she had waited until dark before leaving the Cabal's safe house in the miserable slums of the city. Her teammates drove her as close to the presidential mansion as they dared in a dilapidated, nondescript faded blue sedan that would draw no attention. They wished her success as she slipped out of the car, invisible in her stealth suit.

"For the Cause," Ahmed said, almost fiercely, to the empty air where he thought she was.

"For the Cause," Apara repeated, knowing that she might never see him again.

Tingling with apprehension, Apara hurried across the park that fronted the mansion, unseen by the evening strollers and beggars, then climbed onto the trunk of one of the endless stream of limousines that entered the grounds. She passed the perimeter guard posts unnoticed.

She rode on the limo all the way to the mansion's main entrance. While a pair of bemedaled generals got out of the limousine and walked crisply past the saluting uniformed guards, Apara melted back into the shadows, away from the lights of the entrance, and took stock of the situation.

The guards at the big, open double doors wore splendid uniforms and shouldered assault rifles. And were accompanied by dogs: two big German shepherds who sat on their haunches, tongues lolling, ears laid back.

Will they smell me if I try to go through the doors? Apara asked herself. Muldoon and his technicians claimed that the insulated stealth suit protected her even from giving off a scent. They were telling the truth, as they knew it, of course. But were they right?

If she were caught, she knew her life would be over. She would simply disappear, a prisoner of their security apparatus. They would use drugs to drain her of every scrap of information she possessed. They would not have to kill her afterward; her mind would be gone by then. Standing in the shadows, invisible yet frightened, she tongued the cyanide capsule lodged between her upper right wisdom tooth and cheek. This is a volunteer mission, Muldoon had told her. You've got to be willing to give your life for the Cause.

Apara was willing, yet the fear still rose in her throat, hot and burning.

Born in the slums of Beirut to a mother who abandoned her and a father she never knew, she had understood from childhood that her life was worthless. Even the name they had given her, Apara, meant literally "born to die."

It was during her teen years, when she had traded her body for life itself, for food and protection against the marauding street gangs who raped and murdered for the thrill of it, that she began to realize that life was pointless, existence was pain, the sooner death took her the sooner she would be safe from

all fear.

Then Ahmed entered her life and showed her that there was more to living than waiting for death. Strike back! he told her. If you must give up your life, give it for something worthwhile. Even we who are lost and miserable can accomplish something with our lives. We can change the world!

Ahmed introduced her to the Cabal, and the Cabal became her family, her teacher, her purpose for breathing.

For the first time in her short life, Apará felt worthwhile. The Cabal flew her across the ocean, to the United States of America, where she met the pink-faced Irishman who called himself Muldoon and was entrusted with her mission to the White House. And decked in the stealth suit, a cloak of invisibility, just like the magic of old Baghdad in the time of Scheherazade and the Thousand and One Nights.

You can do it, she told herself as she clung to the shadows outside the White House's main entrance. They are all counting on you: Muldoon and his technicians and Ahmed, with his soulful eyes and tender dear hands.

When the next limousine disgorged its passengers, a trio of admirals, Apará sucked in a deep breath and walked in with them, past the guards and the dogs. One of the animals perked up its ears and whined softly as she marched in step behind the admirals, but other than that heart-stopping instant she had no trouble getting inside the White House. The guard shushed the animal, gruffly.

She followed the trio of admirals out to the west wing, and down the stairs to the basement level and a long, narrow corridor. At its end, Apará could see, was a security checkpoint with a metal detector like the kind used at airports, staffed by two women in uniform. Both of them were African-Americans.

She stopped and faded back against the wall as the admirals stepped through the metal detector, one by one. The guards were lax, expecting no trouble. After all, only the president's highest and most trusted advisors were allowed here.

Then the two plainclothes guards walked past her, openly displaying their machine pistols and talking about the impending war.

"You think they're really gonna do it?"

"Don't see why not. Hit 'em before they start some real trouble. Don't wait for the mess to get worse."

"Yeah, I guess so."

They walked down the corridor as far as the checkpoint, chatted briefly with the female guards, then came back, passing Apará again, still talking about the possibility of war.

Apara knew that she could not get through the metal detector without setting off its alarm. The archway-like device was sensitive not only to metals, but sniffed for explosives and x-rayed each person stepping through it. She was invisible to human eyes but the x-ray camera would see her clearly.

She waited, hardly breathing, until the next clutch of visitors arrived. Civilians, this time. Steeling herself, Apara followed them up to the checkpoint and waited as they stopped at the detector and handed their wristwatches, coins, and belts to the women on duty, then stepped through the detector, single-file.

Timing was important. As the last of the civilians started through, holding his briefcase in front of his chest, as instructed, Apara dropped flat on her stomach and slithered across the archway like a snake speeding after its prey. Carefully avoiding the man's feet, she got through the detector just before he did.

The x-rays did not reach the floor, she had been told. She hoped it was true.

The alarm buzzer sounded. Apara, on the far side of the detector now, sprang to her feet.

"Hold it, sir," said one of the uniformed guards. "The metal detector went off."

He looked annoyed. "I gave you everything. Don't tell me the damned machine picked up the hinges on my briefcase."

The woman shrugged. "Would you mind stepping through again, sir, please?"

With a huff, the man ducked back through the doorway, still clutching his briefcase, and then stepped through once more. No alarm.

"Satisfied?" he sneered.

"Yes, sir. Thank you," the guard said tonelessly.

"Happens now and then," said her partner as she handed the man back his watch, belt and change. "Beeps for no reason."

"Machines aren't perfect," the man muttered.

"I guess," said the guard.

"Too much iron in your blood, Marty," joked one of the other men.

Apara followed them down the corridor, feeling immensely relieved. As far as her information went, there were no further security checkpoints. Unless she bumped into someone, or her suit somehow failed, she was safe.

Until she tried to get out of the White House. But that wouldn't happen until she had fulfilled her mission. If they caught her then, she would simply bite on

the cyanide capsule, knowing that she had struck her blow for the Cause.

She followed the civilians into a spacious conference room dominated by a long, polished mahogany table. Most of the high-backed leather chairs were already occupied, mainly by men in military uniforms. There were more stars around the table than in a desert sky, Apará thought. One bomb in here and the U.S. military establishment would be decapitated, along with most of the cabinet heads.

She pressed her back against the bare wall next to the door as the latest arrivals went around the table, shaking hands.

They chatted idly for several minutes, a dozen different conversations buzzing around the long table. Then the president entered from the far door and they all snapped to their feet.

"Sit down, gentlemen," said the president. "And ladies," she added, smiling at the three female cabinet members who sat together at one side of the table.

The president looked older in person than she did on television, Apará thought. She was not wearing so much makeup, of course. Still, the president looked vigorous and determined, her famous green eyes sweeping the table as she took her chair at its head. For an instant those eyes looked directly at Apará, and her heart stopped. But the moment passed. The president could not see Apará any more than the others could.

The president's famous smile was absent as she sat down. Looking directly at the chairman of the joint chiefs, she asked the general, "Well, are we ready?"

"In twenty-four hours," he replied crisply. "Troop deployment is complete, the naval task force is on station and our full complement of planes is on site, ready to go."

"Then why do we need twenty-four hours?" the president demanded.

The general's silver eyebrows rose a centimeter. "Logistics, ma'am. Getting ammunition and fuel to the front-line units, setting our communications codes. Strictly routine, but very important if we want the attack to come off without a hitch."

The president was not pleased. "Every hour we delay means more pressure from the U.N."

"And from the Europeans," said one of the civilians. Apará recognized him as the secretary of defense.

"The French are complaining again?"

"They've never stopped complaining, madam president. Now they've got the Russians joining the chores. They've asked for an emergency meeting of NATO."

"Not the general assembly?"

The secretary of defense almost smiled. "No, ma'am. Even the French realize that the U.N. can't stop us."

A murmur of suppressed laughter rippled along the table. Apara felt anger. These people used the United Nations when it suited them, and ignored the U.N. otherwise.

The secretary of state, sitting at her right hand, was a thickset older man with a heavy thatch of gray hair that flopped stubbornly over his forehead. He held up a blunt-fingered hand and the table fell silent.

"I must repeat, madam president," he said in a grave, dolorous voice, "that we have not yet exhausted all our diplomatic and economic options. Military force should be our last choice, after all other possibilities have been foreclosed, not our first choice."

"We don't have time for that," snapped the secretary of defense. "And those people don't respect anything but force, anyway."

"I disagree," said state. "Our U.N. ambassador tells me that they are willing to allow the United Nations to arbitrate our differences."

"The United Nations," the president muttered.

"As an honest broker--"

"Yeah, and we'll be the honest brokee," one of the admirals wisecracked. Everyone around the table laughed.

Then the president said, "Our U.N. ambassador is a well-known weak sister. Why do you think I put him there in New York, Carlos, instead of giving him your portfolio?"

The secretary of state was not deterred. "Invading a sovereign nation is a serious decision. American soldiers and aircrew will be killed."

The president glared at him. "All right, Carlos, you've made your point. Now let's get on with it."

One of the admirals said, "We're ready with the nuclear option, if and when it's needed."

"Good," snapped the president.

And on it went, for more than an hour. The fundamentalist regime of Iran was going to be toppled by American military power. Its infiltration of other Moslem nations would end, its support of international terrorism would be wiped out.

Terrorism, Apará growled silently. They speak of using nuclear weapons and they call the Iranians terrorists.

And what am I? she asked herself. What is the Cabal and the Cause we fight for? What other weapons do we have except terror? How can we straggle for a just world, a world free of domination, unless we use terror? We have no armies, no fleets of ships or planes. Despite the lies their media publish, we have no nuclear weapons and we would not use them if we did.

Apará felt sure of that. The guiding precept of the Cause was to strike at the leaders of oppression and aggression. Why kill harmless women and children? Why strike the innocent? Or even the soldiers who merely carry out the orders of their leaders?

Strike the leaders! Put terror in their hearts. That was the strategy of the Cabal, the goal of the Cause.

Brave talk, Apará thought. Tonight we will see if it works. Apará glided along the wall until she was standing behind the president. She looked down at the woman's auburn hair, so perfectly curled and tinted. The president's fingernails were perfect, too: shaped and colored beautifully. She's never chipped a nail by doing hard work, Apará thought.

I could kill her now and it would look to them as if she had been struck down by god.

But her orders were otherwise. Apará waited.

The meeting broke up at last with the president firmly deciding to launch the attack within twenty-four hours.

"Tell me the instant everything's ready to go," she said to the chairman of the joint chiefs.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "We'll need your positive order at that point."

"You'll get it."

She rose from her chair and they all got to their feet. Like a ghost, Apará followed the president through the door into a little sitting room, where two more uniformed security guards snapped to attention.

They accompanied her down the corridor to the main section of the mansion and left her at the elevator that went up to the living quarters on the top floor. Apará climbed the stairs; the elevator was too small. She feared the president would sense her presence in its cramped confines.

Unseen, unsensed, Apará tiptoed through the broad upstairs hallway with its golden carpet and spacious windows at either end. There were surveillance

cameras discreetly placed up by the ceiling, but otherwise no obvious security up at this level -- except the electronic sensors on the windows, of course.

The president lived alone here, except for her personal servants. Her husband had died years earlier, during her election campaign, in an airplane crash that won her a huge sympathy vote.

Apara loitered in the hallway, not daring to rest on one of the plush couches lining the walls, until a servant bearing a tray with a silver carafe and bottles of pills entered the president's bedroom. Apara slipped in behind her.

The black woman turned her head, frowning slightly, as if she heard a movement behind her or felt a breath on the back of her neck. Apara froze for a moment, then edged away as the woman reached for the door and closed it.

The president was showering, judging by the sounds coming from the bathroom. Legs aching from being on her feet for so many hours, Apara went to the far window and glanced out at the darkened garden, then turned back to watch the servant deposit the tray on the president's night table and leave the room, silent and almost as unnoticed as Apara herself.

There was one wooden chair in the bedroom and Apara sat on it gratefully, knowing that she would leave no telltale indentation on its hard surface. She felt very tired, sleepy. The adrenalin had drained out of her during the long meeting downstairs. She hoped the president would finish her shower and get into bed and go to sleep quickly.

It was not to be. The president came out of the bathroom soon enough, but she sat up in bed and read for almost another hour before finally putting down the paperback novel and reaching for the pills on the night table. One, two, three different pills she took, with sips of water or whatever was in the carafe the servant had left.

At last the president sank back on her pillows, snapped her fingers to turn off the lights, and closed her eyes. Apara waited the better part of another hour before stirring off the chair. She had to be certain that the president was truly, deeply asleep.

Slowly she walked to the side of the bed. She stared at the woman lying there, straining to hear the rhythm of her breathing through the insulated helmet.

Deep, slow breaths. She's really sleeping, Apara decided. If the thought of invading another country and killing thousands of people bothered her, she gave no indication of it. Maybe the pills she took helped her to sleep. She must have some qualms about what she was going to do.

Apara realized she was the one with the qualms. I can leave her here and get out of the mansion undetected, she told herself.

And the Cause, the purpose of her life, would evaporate like dew in the hot



desert sun. Muldoon would be despairing, Ahmed so furious that he would never speak to her again. They would know she was unreliable, a risk to their own safety.

Strike! she told herself. They are all counting on you. Everything depends on you.

She struck.

By seven-fifteen the next morning the White House was surrounded by an armed cordon of U.S. Marines. No one was allowed onto the grounds, no one was allowed to leave the mansion.

Apara had already left; she simply walked out with the cleaning crew, a few minutes after five A.M.

The president summoned her secretary of state to the oval office at eight sharp. It was early for him, and he had to pass through the gauntlet of Marines as well as the regular guards and secret service agents. He stared in wonder as more Marines, in their colorful full-dress uniforms, stood in place of the usual servants.

"What's going on?" he asked the president when he was finally ushered into the oval office.

She looked ghastly: her face was gray, her eyes darting nervously. She clutched a thin scrap of paper in one hand.

"Never mind," the president said curtly. "Sit down."

The secretary of state sat in front of her desk. He himself felt blearyeyed and ruffled, this early in the morning.

Without preamble, the president asked, "Carlos, do you seriously think we can settle this crisis without a military strike?"

The secretary of state looked surprised, but he quickly regained his wits. "I've been trying to tell you that for the past six weeks, Alicia."

"You think diplomacy can get us what we want."

"Diplomacy and economic pressures, yes. We can even get the United Nations on our side, if we call off this military strike. It's not too late, you know."

The president leaned back in her chair, fiddling with that scrap of paper, trying to keep her hands from trembling. Unwilling to allow her secretary of state to see how upset she was, she swiveled around to look out the long windows at the springtime morning. Birds chirped happily among the flowers.

"All right," she said, her mind made up. "Tell Muldoon to ask for an emergency

session of the Security Council. That's what he's been after all along."

A boyish grin broke across the secretary of state's normally dour face. "I'll phone him right now. He's still in New York."

"Do that," said the president. Then she added, "From your own office."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The secretary of state trotted off happily, leaving the president alone at her desk in the oval office. With the note still clutched in her shaking hand.

I'll put the entire White House staff through the wringer, she said to herself. Every damned one of them. Interrogate them until their brains are fried. I'll find out who's responsible for this...this...

She shuddered involuntarily.

They got into my bedroom. My own bedroom! Who did it? How many people in this house are plotting against me?

They could have killed me!

I'll turn the note over to the secret service. No, they screwed up. If they were doing their job right this would never have happened. The attorney general. Give it to the F.B.I. They'll find the culprit.

Her hands were shaking so badly she could hardly read the note.

Remember Caesar, thou art dust.

That's all the note said. Yet it struck terror into her heart. They could have killed me. This was just a warning. They could have killed me just as easily as leaving this warning on my pillow.

For the first time in her life, she felt afraid.

She looked around the oval office, at the familiar trappings of power, and felt afraid. It's like being haunted, she said to herself.

In his apartment in New York, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations nodded as he spoke to the president's security advisor.

"That's good news, Carlos!" said Herbert Muldoon, with a hint of Irish lilt in his voice. "Excellent news. I'm sure the president's made the right choice."

He cut the connection with Washington and immediately punched up the number of the U.N.'s secretary general, thinking as his fingers tapped on the keyboard:

It worked! Apará did the job. Now we'll have to send her to Tehran. And others,

too, of course. The mullahs may be perfectly willing to send young assassins to their deaths, but I wonder how they'll react when they know they're the ones being targeted.

We'll find out soon.