"Ah, now I know who it is," said Antonio de la Maza. He opened the car door, still holding the sawed-off rifle in his hand, and climbed out onto the highway. None of his companions—Tony, Estrella Sadhalá, and Amadito—followed him; from inside the vehicle they watched his robust silhouette, outlined against shadows the faint moonlight barely illuminated, as he moved toward the small Volkswagen that had parked near them, its headlights turned off.

"Don't tell me the Chief changed his mind," Antonio exclaimed by way of greeting as he put his head in the window and brought his face up close to the driver and only occupant, a man in a suit and tie, gasping for breath and so fat it didn't seem possible he could have gotten into the car, where he seemed trapped.

"Not at all, Antonio," Miguel Ángel Báez Díaz reassured him, his hands clutching the wheel. "He's going to San Cristóbal no matter what. He's been delayed because after his walk on the Malecón he took Pupo Román to San Isidro Air Base. I came to put your mind at ease, I could imagine how impatient you were. He'll show up any minute now. Be ready."

"We won't fail, Miguel Ángel, I hope you people won't either."

They talked for a moment, their faces very close together, the fat man holding the wheel and De la Maza constantly looking toward the road from Ciudad Trujillo, afraid the automobile would suddenly materialize and he wouldn't have time to get back to his car.

"Goodbye, good luck with everything," said Miguel Ángel Báez Díaz.

He drove away, heading back to Ciudad Trujillo, his headlights still turned off. Standing on the road, feeling the cool air and listening to the waves breaking a few meters away—he felt drops on his face and scalp, where his hair was beginning to thin—Antonio watched the car disappear in the distance, blending into the night where the lights of the city and its restaurants, filled with people, were twinkling. Miguel Ángel seemed confident. There was no doubt, then: he would come, and on this Tuesday, May 30, 1961, Antonio would at last fulfill the vow he had sworn on the family ranch in Moca, before his father, his brothers and sisters, his brothers- and sisters-in-law, four years and four months ago, on January 7, 1957, the day they buried Tavito.

He thought about how close the Pony was, and how good it would be to have a glass of rum with lots of ice, sitting on one of the rush-bottomed stools at the little bar, as he had so often in recent days, and feel the alcohol going to his head, distracting him, distancing him from Tavito and the bitterness, the frustration, the fever that had been his life since the cowardly murder of his younger brother, the one closest to him, the one he loved best. "Especially after the terrible lies they made up about him, to kill him a second time," he thought. He returned slowly to the Chevrolet. It was a brand-new car that Antonio had imported from the United States and souped up and refined, explaining at the garage that as a landowner, and the manager of a sawmill in Restauración, on the Haitian border, he spent a good part of the year traveling and needed a faster, more reliable car. The time had come to test out this late-model Chevrolet, capable, thanks to adjustments to the cylinders and engine, of reaching two hundred kilometers an hour in a few moments, something the Generalissimo's automobile was in no condition to do. He sat down again next to Antonio Imbert.

"Who was it?" said Amadito from the back seat.

"Those are things you don't ask," muttered Tony Imbert without turning around to look at Lieutenant García Guerrero.

"It's no secret now," said Antonio de la Maza. "It was Miguel Ángel Báez. You were right, Amadito. He's definitely going to San Cristóbal tonight. He was delayed, but he won't leave us hanging."

"Miguel Ángel Báez Díaz?" Salvador Estrella Sadhalá whistled. "He's involved too? You couldn't ask for more. He's the ultimate Trujillista. Wasn't he vice president of the Dominican Party? He's one of the men who walk every day with the Goat along the Malecón, kissing his ass, and go with him every Sunday to the Hipódromo."

"He walked with him today too." De la Maza nodded. "That's why he knows he's coming."

There was a long silence.

"I know we have to be practical, that we need them," Turk said with a sigh. "But I swear it makes me sick that somebody like Miguel Ángel is our ally now."

"Now the saint, the puritan, the little angel with clean hands has been heard from." Imbert made an effort to joke. "You see now, Amadito, why it's better not to ask, better not to know who else is in this?"

"You talk as if all of us hadn't been Trujillistas too, Salvador," Antonio de la Maza growled. "Wasn't Tony governor of Puerto Plata? Isn't Amadito a military adjutant? Haven't I managed the Goat's sawmills in Restauración for the past twenty years? And the construction company where you work, doesn't it belong to Trujillo too?"

"I take it back." Salvador patted De la Maza's arm. "I talk too much and say stupid things. You're right. Anybody could say about us what I just said about Miguel Ángel. I didn't say anything and you didn't hear anything."

But he had said it, because despite his serene, reasonable air that everyone liked so much, Salvador Estrella Sadhalá was capable of saying the cruelest things, driven by a spirit of justice that would suddenly take possession of him. He had said them to Antonio, his lifelong friend, in an argument when De la Maza could have shot him. "I wouldn't sell my brother for a

couple of bucks." Those words, which kept them apart, not seeing or talking to each other for more than six months, came back to Antonio from time to time like a recurring nightmare. Then he had to have a lot of rum, one drink after the other. Though with inebriation came those blind rages that made him belligerent and drove him to provoke a fight, punching and kicking anybody near him.

He had turned forty-seven a few days earlier and was one of the oldest in the group of seven men stationed on the highway to San Cristóbal, waiting for Trujillo. In addition to the four in the Chevrolet, Pedro Livio Cedeño and Huáscar Tejeda Pimentel sat two kilometers further on, in a car lent by Estrella Sadhalá, and a kilometer past them, alone in his own vehicle, was Roberto Pastoriza Neret. Their plan was to cut Trujillo off, and in a barrage of fire from the front and the rear, leave him no escape. Pedro Livio and Huáscar must be as edgy as the four of them. And Roberto even worse, with no one to talk to and keep up his spirits. Would he come? Yes, he would come. And the long calvary that Antonio's life had been since the murder of Tavito would end.

The moon, round as a coin and accompanied by a blanket of stars, gleamed and turned the crests of the nearby coconut palms silver; Antonio watched them sway to the rhythm of the breeze. In spite of everything this was a beautiful country, damn it. It would be even more beautiful after they had killed the devil who in thirty-one years had violated and poisoned it more than anything else it had suffered in its history of Haitian occupation, Spanish and American invasions, civil wars, battles among factions and caudillos, and in all the catastrophes—earthquakes, hurricanes—that had assailed Dominicans from the sky, the sea, or the center of the earth. More than anything else, what he could not forgive was that just as he had corrupted and brutalized this country, the Goat had also corrupted and brutalized Antonio de la Maza.

He hid his turmoil from his companions by lighting another cigarette. Without removing the cigarette from his lips,

he exhaled smoke from his mouth and nose, caressing the sawed-off rifle, thinking about the steel-reinforced bullets prepared especially for tonight's business by his Spanish friend Bissié, whom he had met through another conspirator, Manuel de Ovín Filpo, and who was a weapons expert and a magnificent shot. Almost as good as Antonio de la Maza, who, since childhood, on the family land at Moca, had always amazed parents, brothers and sisters, relatives, and friends with his shooting. That was why he occupied the privileged seat, to the right of Imbert: so he could shoot first. The group, who argued so much about everything, agreed immediately on that: Antonio de la Maza and Lieutenant García Guerrero, the best marksmen, should carry the rifles supplied to the conspirators by the CIA and sit on the right so they could hit the target with their first shot.

One of the things that made Moca and his family proud was that from the very beginning—1930—the De la Mazas had been anti-Trujillista. Naturally. In Moca everyone, from the most privileged landowner to the poorest peon, was Horacista, because President Horacio Vázquez came from Moca and was the brother of Antonio's mother. Starting on the first day, the De la Mazas viewed with suspicion and antipathy the intrigues employed by the brigadier general at the head of the National Police—created by the Americans during the occupation, it became the Dominican Army when they left—Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, to bring down Don Horacio Vázquez and, in 1930, in the first crooked elections in his long history of electoral fraud, have himself elected President of the Republic. When this occurred, the De la Mazas did what patrician families and regional caudillos traditionally did when they didn't like the government: they took to the mountains with men armed and financed out of their own pockets.

For almost three years, with short-lived intervals of peace, from the time he was seventeen until he was twenty, Antonio de la Maza—an athlete, a tireless horseman, a passionate hunter, high-spirited, bold, and in love with life—along with

his father, uncles, and brothers, fought Trujillo's forces with guns, though without much effect. Gradually Trujillo's men dissolved the armed bands, inflicting some defeats but above all buying off their lieutenants and supporters until, weary and almost ruined, the De la Mazas finally accepted the government's peace offers and returned to Moca to work their semi-abandoned land. Except for the indomitable, pigheaded Antonio. He smiled, remembering his stubbornness at the end of 1932 and the beginning of 1933 when, with fewer than twenty men, among them his brothers Ernesto and Tavito, who was still a boy, he attacked police stations and ambushed government patrols. The times were so unusual that despite the military activity, the three brothers could almost always sleep at their family home in Moca several days a month. Until the ambush on the outskirts of Tamboril, when the soldiers killed two of his men and wounded Ernesto, and Antonio himself.

From the Military Hospital in Santiago he wrote to his father, Don Vicente, saying that he regretted nothing and asking that the family please not humble itself by asking Trujillo for clemency. Two days after giving the letter to the head nurse, along with a generous tip to make sure it reached Moca, an Army van came to take him, handcuffed and with a guard, to Santo Domingo. (The Congress of the Republic would not change the name of the ancient city until three years later.) To the surprise of young Antonio de la Maza, the military vehicle, instead of depositing him in prison, took him to Government House, which in those days was near the old cathedral. They removed his handcuffs and led him to a carpeted room, where he found General Trujillo, in uniform, and impeccably shaved and combed.

It was the first time he had seen him.

"You need balls to write a letter like this." The Head of State made it dance in his hand. "You've shown that you have them, making war on me for almost three years. That's why I wanted to see your face. Is it true what they say about your

marksmanship? We ought to compete some time and see if it's better than mine."

Twenty-eight years later, Antonio recalled that high-pitched, cutting voice, that unexpected cordiality diluted by a touch of irony. And those penetrating eyes whose gaze he—with all his pride—could not endure.

"The war is over. I've put an end to the power of the regional caudillos, including the De la Mazas. Enough shooting. We have to rebuild the country, which is falling to pieces. I need the best men beside me. You're impulsive and you know how to fight, don't you? Good. Come and work with me. You'll have a chance to do some shooting. I'm offering you a position of trust in the military adjutants assigned to guard me. That way, if I disappoint you one day, you can put a bullet in me."

"But I'm not a soldier," stammered the young De la Maza.

"From this moment on you are," said Trujillo. "Lieutenant Antonio de la Maza."

It was his first concession, his first defeat at the hands of that master manipulator of innocents, fools, and imbeciles, that astute exploiter of men's vanity, greed, and stupidity. For how many years did he have Trujillo less than a meter away? Just like Amadito these past two years. You would have spared the country, and the De la Maza family, so much tragedy if you had done then what you're going to do now. Tavito would certainly still be alive.

Behind him he could hear Amadito and Turk talking; from time to time, Imbert became involved in the conversation. It probably didn't surprise them that Antonio remained silent; he never had much to say, although his taciturnity had deepened into muteness since the death of Tavito, a cataclysm that affected him in a way he knew was irreversible, turning him into a man with a single fixed idea: killing the Goat.

"Juan Tomás's nerves must be in worse shape than ours," he heard Turk say. "Nothing's more horrible than waiting. But is he coming or not?"

"Any minute now," Lieutenant García Guerrero pleaded. "Trust me, damn it."

Yes, at this moment General Juan Tomás Díaz must have been in his house in Gazcue biting his nails, asking himself if it had finally happened, the thing that Antonio and he had dreamed about, stroked, plotted, kept alive and secret for precisely four years and four months. That is, since the day when, following that damn interview with Trujillo, and with Tavito's body recently buried, Antonio jumped in his car and at a hundred twenty kilometers an hour drove to see Juan Tomás on his ranch in La Vega.

"For the sake of twenty years of friendship, help me, Juan Tomás. I have to kill him! I have to avenge Tavito!"

The general put his hand over his friend's mouth. He looked around, indicating with a gesture that the servants could hear them. He took him behind the stables, where they usually did target practice.

"We'll do it together, Antonio. To avenge Tavito and so many other Dominicans for the shame we carry inside us."

Antonio and Juan Tomás had been close friends since the time De la Maza had been one of the Benefactor's military adjutants. The only good thing he could remember of the two years when as a lieutenant, then as a captain, he shared the Generalissimo's life, accompanying him on his trips into the interior, on his departures from Government House to go to the Congress, the Hipódromo, receptions and performances, political meetings and amorous trysts, visits and appointments with associates, allies, and cronies, public, private, and ultrasecret meetings. Without ever becoming a staunch Trujillista, as Juan Tomás was back then, and though secretly harboring some of the rancor every Horacista felt toward the person who had ended the political career of President Horacio Vázquez, Antonio could not resist the magnetism that radiated from the tireless man who could work for twenty hours and then, after two or three hours of sleep, begin at dawn the next day as fresh as an adolescent. The man who, according to popular legend,

did not sweat, did not sleep, never had a wrinkle on his uniform, his tuxedo, or his street clothes, and who, during the years Antonio was part of his iron guard, had, in effect, transformed this country. Not only because of the highways, bridges, and industries he built, but also because in every sphere—political, military, institutional, social, economic—he was amassing such extraordinary power that all the dictators the Dominican Republic had endured in its entire history as a republic—including Ulises Heureaux (Lilís), who had once seemed so merciless—were pygmies compared to him.

In Antonio's case, respect and fascination never turned into admiration, never became the abject, servile love other Trujillistas professed for their leader. Including Juan Tomás, who, since 1957, had explored with him all the possible ways they could rid the Dominican Republic of the figure who was crushing it and sucking it dry, but in the 1940s was a fanatical follower of the Benefactor, capable of committing any crime for the man whom he considered the nation's savior, the statesman who had returned to Dominican control the customs service formerly administered by the Yankees, resolved the problem of foreign debt to the United States and earned the title, granted to him by the Congress, of Restorer of Financial Independence, and created a modern, professional Armed Forces, the best-equipped in the Caribbean. During those years, Antonio would not have dared to speak ill of Trujillo to Juan Tomás Díaz, who scaled the ranks of the Army until he became a three-star general and obtained command of the Military Region of La Vega, where he was caught off guard by the invasion of July 14, 1959, which was the beginning of his fall into disgrace. After that happened, Juan Tomás no longer had any illusions about the regime. When they were alone, when he was sure nobody could hear him, when they were hunting in the hills of Moca or La Vega, during family dinners on Sundays, he confessed to Antonio that everything mortified him—the assassinations, the disappearances, the tortures, the precariousness of life, the corruption, the surrender of body,

soul, and conscience by millions of Dominicans to a single man.

Antonio de la Maza had never been a heartfelt Trujillista. Not as a military adjutant, and not later, when after asking for the Chief's permission to leave the military, he worked for him in civilian life, managing the Trujillo family's sawmills in Restauración. He clenched his teeth in disgust: he had never been able to stop working for him. As a soldier or as a civilian, for more than twenty years he had contributed to the fortune and power of the Benefactor and Father of the New Nation. It was the great failure in his life. He never knew how to free himself from the snares Trujillo set for him. Hating him with all his might, he had continued to serve him, even after Tavito's death. That was the reason for Turk's insult: "I wouldn't sell my brother for a couple of bucks." He hadn't sold Tavito. He had dissembled and swallowed his rancor. What else could he do? Let himself be killed by Johnny Abbes's *caliés* so he could die with a clear conscience? It wasn't a clear conscience that Antonio wanted. He wanted revenge for himself and for Tavito. And to get it he had swallowed all the shit in the world during these past four years, even having to hear one of his closest friends say what a good many people, he was sure, repeated behind his back.

He hadn't sold Tavito. His younger brother had been a dear friend. Unlike Antonio, the ingenuous, boyishly innocent Tavito had been a convinced Trujillista, one of those who thought of the Chief as a superior being. They often argued about it, because it irritated Antonio when his younger brother repeated, like a refrain, that Trujillo was heaven's gift to the Republic. Well, it was true, the Generalissimo had done favors for Tavito. Thanks to his orders Tavito had been accepted into the Air Force and learned to fly—his dream since childhood—and then was hired as a pilot for Dominican Airlines, which allowed him to make frequent trips to Miami, something his younger brother loved because he could fuck blondes there. Before that, Tavito had been in London, as military attaché,

and in a drunken argument had shot and killed Luis Bernardino, the Dominican consul. Trujillo saved him from prison by claiming he had diplomatic immunity and ordered the court in Ciudad Trujillo, where he was tried, to absolve him. Yes, Tavito had his reasons for feeling grateful to Trujillo and, as he told Antonio, for being "ready to give my life for the Chief and do anything he orders me to." A prophetic statement, damn it.

"Yes, you gave your life for him," Antonio thought as he smoked his cigarette. The affair in which Tavito became embroiled in 1956 had smelled bad to him from the start. His brother came to tell him about it, because Tavito told him everything. Even this, which had the air of one of those murky operations that had filled Dominican history since Trujillo's rise to power. But Tavito, the dumb shit, instead of feeling uneasy, covering his ears, being alarmed at the mission he had been entrusted with—picking up a drugged and masked individual in Montecristi, who was taken off a plane that had come from the United States, and flying him in a small, unregistered Cessna to the Fundación Ranch in San Cristóbal—was delighted, taking it as a sign that the Generalissimo trusted him. Not even when the press in the United States expressed outrage, and the White House began to pressure the Dominican government to facilitate the investigation into the abduction, in New York, of Professor Jesús de Galíndez, a Spanish Basque, did Tavito show the slightest concern.

"This Galíndez business looks very serious," Antonio warned him. "That's the guy you took from Montecristi to Trujillo's ranch, who else could it be. They kidnapped him in New York and brought him here. Keep your mouth shut. Forget all about it. You're risking your life, Tavito."

Now Antonio de la Maza had a good idea of what happened to Jesús de Galíndez, one of the Spanish Republicans to whom Trujillo, in the kind of contradictory political operation that was his specialty, gave asylum in the Dominican Republic at the end of the Civil War. Antonio hadn't met this professor,

but many of his friends had, and from them he learned that he had worked for the government in the State Department of Labor and at the School of Diplomacy, attached to Foreign Relations. In 1946 he left Ciudad Trujillo and settled in New York, where he began to help Dominican exiles and write against the Trujillo regime, which he knew from the inside.

In March 1956, Jesús de Galíndez, who had become an American citizen, disappeared after being seen, for the last time, coming out of a subway station on Broadway, in the heart of Manhattan. A few weeks earlier, publication had been announced of his book on Trujillo; he had submitted it as his doctoral dissertation at Columbia University, where he was already teaching. The disappearance of an obscure Spanish exile, in a city and a country where so many people disappeared, would have passed unnoticed, and no one would have paid attention to the outcry from Dominican exiles, if Galíndez had not been an American citizen and, above all, if he had not worked for the CIA, a fact that was revealed when the scandal broke. The powerful machinery that Trujillo had in the United States—journalists, congressmen, lobbyists, lawyers, and promoters—could not contain the explosion of indignation in the press, beginning with *The New York Times*, and among many representatives in Congress, at the possibility that a tinhorn Caribbean dictator would dare to abduct and murder an American citizen on American soil.

In the weeks and months that followed the disappearance of Galíndez, whose body was never found, the investigation by the press and the FBI unequivocally proved the regime's complete responsibility. A short while before it happened, General Espaillat, Razor, had been named Dominican consul in New York. The FBI identified compromising inquiries regarding Galíndez by Minerva Bernardino, the Dominican ambassador to the UN and a woman close to Trujillo. Even more serious was the FBI's identification of a small plane with a false registration, flown by a pilot without a proper license, that took off illegally on the night of the kidnapping from a small airport on

Long Island, heading for Florida. The pilot was named Murphy, and from that time on he lived in the Dominican Republic, working for Dominican Airlines. Murphy and Tavito flew together and had become good friends.

Antonio learned all this in bits and pieces (censorship did not allow the Dominican press and radio to mention the subject) in broadcasts from Puerto Rico, Venezuela, or the Voice of America, which could be picked up on shortwave, or in copies of the *Miami Herald* or *The New York Times* that filtered into the country in the bags and uniforms of pilots and airline attendants.

Seven months after the disappearance of Galíndez, Murphy's name suddenly appeared in the international press as the pilot of the plane that had taken an anesthetized Galíndez out of the United States and brought him to the Dominican Republic, and Antonio, who had met Murphy through Tavito—the three of them had shared a paella washed down with wine from La Rioja in the Casa de España on Calle de Padre Billini—jumped into his van in Tirolí, near the Haitian border, and with the accelerator down to the floor and his brain about to burst with grim conjectures, drove to Ciudad Trujillo. He found Tavito in his house, calmly playing bridge with his wife, Altagracia. In order not to worry his sister-in-law, Antonio took him to a noisy club, Típico Najayo, where the music of the Ramón Gallardo Combo and its singer Rafael Martínez allowed for conversation that could not be overheard by the wrong ears. After ordering kid stew and two bottles of Presidente beer, and with no further preamble, Antonio advised Tavito to request asylum at an embassy. His younger brother burst into laughter: what bullshit. He didn't even know that Murphy's name was in every American newspaper. He wasn't worried. His confidence in Trujillo was as prodigious as his naiveté.

"I'll have to tell that gringo all about it," a horrified Antonio heard him say. "He's selling his things, he's decided to go back to the States to get married. He's engaged to a girl in Oregon. If

he goes there now it would be like putting his head in the lion's mouth. Nothing will happen to him here. The Chief rules here, Antonio."

Antonio did not allow him to joke. Without raising his voice or attracting the attention of nearby tables, with muted fury at so much innocence, he tried to make him understand:

"Don't you get it, asshole? This is serious. The Galíndez kidnapping has put Trujillo in a very delicate situation with the Yankees. Everybody involved in the kidnapping is at risk. Murphy and you are very dangerous witnesses. And you maybe more than Murphy. Because you're the one who took Galíndez to the Fundación Ranch, to Trujillo's own house. Where's your head?"

"I didn't take Galíndez," his brother insisted, and he clinked his glass against Antonio's. "I took some guy I didn't know, and he was dead drunk. I don't know anything. Why don't you trust the Chief? Didn't he trust me with a really important mission?"

When they said goodbye that night, at the door of Tavito's house, he had finally, on the insistence of his older brother, said okay, he would think over his suggestion. And not to worry: he'd keep his mouth shut.

It was the last time Antonio saw him alive. Three days after their conversation, Murphy disappeared. When Antonio came back to Ciudad Trujillo, Tavito had been arrested. He was being held incommunicado in La Victoria. Antonio went in person to request an audience with the Generalissimo, but the Chief would not receive him. He tried to speak to Colonel Cobián Parra, head of the SIM, but he had become invisible, and shortly afterward, on Trujillo's orders, a soldier killed him in his office. In the next forty-eight hours, Antonio called or visited all the leaders and high officials in the regime whom he knew, from the President of the Senate, Agustín Cabral, to the president of the Dominican Party, Álvarez Pina. All of them had the same uneasy expression, all of them said that the best thing he could do, for his own security and theirs, was to stop

calling and seeing people who could not help him and whom he was also putting in danger. "It was like banging your head against the wall," Antonio later told General Juan Tomás Díaz. If Trujillo had received him, he would have begged, he would have gone down on his knees, anything to save Tavito.

Not long after this, at dawn, a SIM car carrying armed *caliés* in civilian clothes stopped at the door of Tavito de la Maza's house. They took his body out of the vehicle and carelessly threw it into the heartsease in the little garden at the entrance. And as they were driving away they yelled at Altagracia, who had come to the door in her nightgown and was looking at the corpse in horror:

"Your husband hung himself in jail. We brought him back so you could give him a decent burial."

"But not even that was the worst thing," thought Antonio. No, seeing Tavito's corpse, the rope of his alleged suicide still around his neck, his body tossed out like a dog's at the entrance to his house by the thuggish killers who were the *caliés* of the SIM, that wasn't the worst. Antonio had repeated this to himself dozens, hundreds of times over these four and a half years, as he devoted his days and nights, and the remnants of lucidity and intelligence he still possessed, to planning the revenge that—God willing—would become a reality tonight. The worst had been Tavito's second death just days after the first one, when, making use of its entire informational and publicity apparatus—*El Caribe* and *La Nación*, the Dominican Voice television and radio stations, the radio stations of the Voice of the Tropics and Caribbean Radio, and a dozen small regional newspapers and radio stations—the regime, in one of its cruelest masquerades, published a letter allegedly written by Octavio de la Maza explaining his suicide. His remorse for having killed with his own hands his friend and colleague at Dominican Airlines, the pilot Murphy! Not satisfied with ordering his murder, the Goat, to wipe out all clues in the Galíndez story, added the macabre refinement of turning Tavito into a killer. In this way he got rid of two troublesome

witnesses. To make everything even viler, Tavito's handwritten letter explained why he killed Murphy: the American was a homosexual. Murphy had so pursued Antonio's younger brother, with whom he had fallen in love, that Tavito, reacting with all the energy of a real man, erased the stain to his honor by killing the degenerate and hid his crime by pretending it was an accident.

He had to bend over where he sat in the Chevrolet, pressing the sawed-off rifle against his stomach, to hide the spasm he had just felt. His wife kept telling him to go to the doctor, the pains might be an ulcer or something even more serious, but he refused. He didn't need doctors to tell him that his body had deteriorated in recent years, reflecting the bitterness in his spirit. After what happened to Tavito, he had lost all hope, all enthusiasm, all love for this life or the next. Only the idea of revenge kept him active; he lived only to keep the vow he had sworn aloud, terrifying the neighbors in Moca who had come to sit with the De la Mazas—parents, brothers and sisters, brothers- and sisters-in-law, nieces and nephews, sons and daughters, grandchildren, aunts and uncles—during the wake.

"I swear to God I'll kill the son of a bitch who did this with my own hands!"

Everybody knew he was referring to the Benefactor, to the Father of the New Nation, to Generalissimo Dr. Rafael L. Trujillo Molina, whose funeral wreath of fresh, fragrant flowers was the most elaborate in the viewing room at the mortuary. The De la Maza family did not dare to refuse it or remove it from the room; it was so visible that everyone who came to cross themselves and say a prayer next to the coffin knew that the Chief had sent his condolences for the tragic death of this aviator, "one of the most faithful, loyal, and brave of my followers," according to the sympathy card.

On the day following his burial, two military adjutants from the Palace got out of a Cadillac with an official license plate in front of the De la Maza house in Moca. They had come for Antonio.

"Am I under arrest?"

"Not at all," First Lieutenant Roberto Figueroa Carrión quickly explained. "His Excellency wishes to see you."

Antonio didn't bother to put a pistol in his pocket. He assumed that before he went into the National Palace, if they really were taking him there and not to La Victoria or La Cuarenta, or if they didn't have orders to throw him over some cliff along the road, they would disarm him. He didn't care. He knew how strong he was, and he also knew that his strength, doubled by his hatred, would be enough to kill the tyrant, as he had sworn to do the night before. He pondered that decision, resolved to carry it out, knowing they would kill him before he could escape. He would pay that price if he could put an end to the despot who had ruined his life and the life of his family.

When he got out of the official car, the adjutants escorted him to the Benefactor's office without anyone searching him. The officers must have had precise instructions: as soon as the unmistakable high-pitched voice said, "Come in," First Lieutenant Roberto Figueroa Carrión and his companion left, allowing him to go in alone. The office was in semidarkness because of the partially closed shutters on the window facing the garden. The Generalissimo, sitting at his desk, wore a uniform that Antonio did not recognize: a long white tunic, with tails and gold buttons and large epaulets with gold-colored fringe on his chest, where a multicolored fan of medals and decorations was hanging. He wore light blue flannel trousers with a white stripe down the sides. He must have been getting ready to attend some military ceremony. The light from the desk lamp illuminated the broad, carefully shaved face, meticulously arranged gray hair, and the small brush mustache that copied Hitler's (whom, Antonio had heard the Chief say once, he admired, "not for his ideas but for the way he wore a uniform and presided over parades"). That fixed, direct gaze bored into Antonio as soon as he came through the door. Trujillo spoke after observing him for a long time:

"I know you think I had Octavio killed and that his suicide was a farce set up by the Intelligence Service. I had you come to tell you personally that you're wrong. Octavio was a man of the regime. He was always a loyal Trujillista. I've just appointed a commission, under the leadership of the Attorney General of the Republic, Francisco Elpidio Beras. With broad powers to question everyone, military and civilian. If the story of his suicide is a lie, the guilty parties will pay."

He spoke without animosity and without inflection, looking into Antonio's eyes in the direct, peremptory manner with which he always spoke to subordinates, both friends and enemies. Antonio remained motionless, more determined than ever to attack the hypocrite and wring his neck without giving him time to call for help. As if to make the job easier for him, Trujillo stood and walked toward him with slow, solemn steps. His black shoes shone even brighter than the waxed wood in his office.

"I also authorized the FBI to come here and investigate the death of this Murphy," he added in the same sharp tone. "It's a violation of our sovereignty, of course. Would the gringos allow our police to go and investigate the murder of a Dominican in New York, or Washington, or Miami? Let them come. Let the world know we have nothing to hide."

He was a meter away. Antonio could not endure Trujillo's unmoving gaze, and he blinked incessantly.

"My hand does not tremble when I have to kill," he added, after a pause. "Governing sometimes demands that you become stained with blood. I've often had to do that for this country. But I am a man of honor. I do justice to those who are loyal, I don't have them killed. Octavio was loyal, a man of the regime, a proven Trujillista. That's why I took a risk and kept him out of prison when he went too far in London and killed Luis Bernardino. Octavio's death will be investigated. You and your family can participate in the commission's deliberations."

He turned and, in the same unhurried way, went back to

his desk. Why didn't he attack when he had him so close? He was still asking himself the question four and a half years later. Not because he believed a word of what he was saying. That was part of the melodrama that Trujillo was so fond of and that the dictatorship superimposed on its crimes, like a sarcastic supplement to the tragic deeds it was built on. Why, then? It wasn't fear of dying, because fear of dying was never one of the many defects he acknowledged in himself. Since the time he was an insurgent and fought the dictator with a small band of Horacistas, he had risked his life many times. It was something more subtle and indefinable than fear: it was the paralysis, the numbing of determination, reason, and free will, which this man, groomed and adorned to the point of absurdity, with his thin high-pitched voice and hypnotist's eyes, imposed on Dominicans, poor or rich, educated or ignorant, friends or enemies, and it was what held Antonio there, mute, passive, listening to those lies, the lone observer of the hoax, incapable of acting on his desire to attack him and put an end to the witches' Sabbath that the history of the country had become.

"Furthermore, as proof that the regime considers the De la Mazas a loyal family, this morning you have been granted the concession for highway construction between Santiago and Puerto Plata."

He paused again, wet his lips with the tip of his tongue, and concluded with a phrase that also said the interview had ended:

"In this way you'll be able to help Octavio's widow. Poor Altagracia must be having a difficult time. Give her my best, and your parents too."

Antonio left the National Palace more stupefied than if he had been drinking all night. Had that been him? Had he heard with his own ears what that son of a bitch said? Had he accepted explanations from Trujillo, even a business deal, a mess of pottage that would allow him to pocket thousands of pesos, so that he would swallow his bitterness and become an accomplice—yes, an accomplice—to Tavito's murder? Why hadn't he

dared even to accuse him, to say he knew very well that the body thrown at his sister-in-law's door had been murdered on his orders, like Murphy before him, and that he had also created, with his melodramatic mind, the masquerade of the gringo pilot's homosexuality and Tavito's remorse for having killed him.

Instead of returning to Moca that morning, Antonio, without really knowing how, found himself in a cheap cabaret, El Bombillo Rojo, at the corner of Vicente Noble and Barahona, whose owner, Loco Frías, organized dance contests. He consumed vast quantities of rum, lost in thought, hearing as if from a distance merengues with a Cibao flavor ("San Antonio," "Con el Alma," "Juanita Morel," "Jarro Pichao," among others), and at a certain moment, without any explanation, he tried to hit the maracas player in the band. His drunkenness blurred the target, he punched the air, fell to the floor, and could not get up again.

When he reached Moca a day later, pale, exhausted, and with his clothes in ruins, his father, Don Vicente, his brother, Ernesto, his mother, and his wife, Aída, were in the family house, waiting for him, horrified. It was his wife who spoke in a trembling voice:

"Everybody's saying that Trujillo shut you up with the highway from Santiago to Puerto Plata. I don't know how many people have called."

Antonio remembered his surprise when he heard Aída rebuke him in front of his parents and Ernesto. She was the model Dominican wife, quiet, obliging, long-suffering, who put up with his drunkenness, his affairs with women, his fighting, the nights he spent away from home, and always welcomed him with a smile, raising his spirits, willing to believe his excuses when he bothered to give her any, and finding comfort in Mass every Sunday, in novenas, confessions, and prayers, for the troubles that filled her life.

"I couldn't let myself be killed just for the sake of a gesture," he said, dropping into the old rocking chair where Don

Vicente nodded off at siesta time. "I pretended I believed his explanations, that I let myself be bought off."

He spoke, feeling the weariness of centuries, the eyes of his wife, of Ernesto and his parents, burning into his brain.

"What else could I do? Don't think badly of me, Papa. I swore I'd avenge Tavito. I'll do it, Mama. You'll never have to be ashamed of me again, Aída. I swear it. I swear it again, to all of you."

Any moment now he would keep his oath. In ten minutes, or one, the Chevrolet would appear, the one the old fox used every week to go to Mahogany House in San Cristóbal, and, according to their carefully drawn plan, the murderer of Galíndez, of Murphy, Tavito, and the Mirabal sisters, of thousands of Dominicans, would fall, cut to ribbons by the bullets of another of his victims, Antonio de la Maza, whom Trujillo had also killed with a method that was slower and more perverse than when he had his prey shot, beaten to death, or fed to the sharks. He had killed him in stages, taking away his decency, his honor, his self-respect, his joy in living, his hopes and desires, turning him into a sack of bones tormented by the guilty conscience that had been destroying him gradually for so many years.

"I'm going to stretch my legs," he heard Salvador Estrella Sadhalá say. "They're cramped from sitting so long."

He saw Turk get out of the car and take a few steps along the edge of the highway. Was Salvador feeling as much anguish as he? No doubt about it. And Tony Imbert and Amadito as well. And, up ahead, Roberto Pastoriza, Huáscar Tejeda, and Pedro Livio Cedeño. Gnawed by the fear that something or someone would prevent the Goat from keeping this appointment. But it was with him that Trujillo had old accounts that needed to be settled. He had not harmed any of his six companions, any of the dozens of others who, like Juan Tomás Díaz, were involved in the conspiracy, as much as he had harmed Antonio. He looked through the window: Turk was shaking each leg energetically. He could see that Salvador

held his revolver in his hand. He watched him return to the car and take his place in the back seat, next to Amadito.

"Well, if he doesn't come we'll go to the Pony and have a cold beer," he heard him say morosely.

After their fight, he and Salvador did not see each other for months. They would both be at the same social gathering and not say hello. Their break heightened the torment in which he lived. When the conspiracy was fairly well developed, Antonio had the courage to show up at 21 Mahatma Gandhi and go directly to the living room where Salvador was sitting.

"It's useless for us to scatter our efforts," he said by way of greeting. "Your plans to kill the Goat are childish. You and Imbert should join us. Our plan is worked out and can't fail."

Salvador looked into his eyes and said nothing. He made no hostile gesture and did not throw him out of his house.

"I have the support of the gringos," Antonio explained, lowering his voice. "I've spent two months discussing the details at the embassy. Juan Tomás Díaz has also been talking to Consul Dearborn's people. They'll give us weapons and explosives. We have high-ranking officers involved. You and Tony should join us."

"There are three of us," Turk said finally. "Amadito García Guerrero became part of it a few days ago."

Their reconciliation was only relative. They had not had another serious argument during the months when the plan to kill Trujillo was made, unmade, remade, with a different form and a different date every month, every week, every day, because of the vacillations of the Yankees. The planeload of weapons originally promised by the embassy was reduced, in the end, to three rifles that were given to him not long ago by his friend Lorenzo D. Berry, the owner of Wimpy's Supermarket, who, to his astonishment, turned out to be the CIA's man in Ciudad Trujillo. In spite of these cordial meetings, when the only topic was the plan in perpetual transformation, the old, fraternal communication was not reestablished between them—the jokes and confidences, the interweaving of shared

intimacies that existed, Antonio knew, among Turk, Imbert, and Amadito, and from which he had been excluded ever since the argument. Another piece of misery to hold the Goat responsible for: he had lost his friend forever.

His three companions in the car, and the other three waiting up ahead, may have been the people who knew least about the conspiracy. It was possible they suspected certain other accomplices, but if something went wrong and they fell into Johnny Abbes García's hands, and the *caliés* took them to La Cuarenta and subjected them to their usual tortures, then Turk, Imbert, Amadito, Huáscar, Pastoriza, and Pedro Livio would not be able to implicate too many people. General Juan Tomás Díaz, Luis Amiama Tió, two or three others. They knew almost nothing about the rest, who included the most important figures in the government, Pupo Román, for example—head of the Armed Forces, the regime's number-two man—and myriad ministers, senators, civilian officials, and high-ranking military officers who were informed about their plans, had participated in their preparation or knew about them indirectly, and had let it be known or understood or guessed through intermediaries (as in the case of Balaguer himself, the theoretical President of the Republic) that once the Goat was eliminated, they would be prepared to cooperate in the political rebuilding, the eradication of the last dregs of Trujillism, the opening, the civilian-military junta that, with the support of the United States, would guarantee order, block the Communists, call for elections. Would the Dominican Republic finally be a normal country, with an elected government, a free press, a system of justice worthy of the name? Antonio sighed. He had worked so hard for that and still he couldn't bring himself to believe it. In fact, he was the only one who knew like the back of his hand the entire web of names and complicities. Often, as one infuriating secret conversation followed another, and everything they had done collapsed and they had to start building again out of nothing, he had felt exactly like a spider at the center of a labyrinth of threads that he

himself had spun, trapping a crowd of individuals who did not know each other. He was the only one who knew them all. Only he knew each person's degree of involvement. And there were so many! Not even he could remember how many now. It was a miracle that with this country being what it was, and the Dominicans being how they were, there had been no betrayal to wreck the entire scheme. Perhaps God was on their side, as Salvador believed. The precautions had worked, all the others knowing very little except their final objective, not knowing the means, the circumstances, the moment. No more than three or four people knew that the seven of them were here tonight, knew whose hands would execute the Goat.

Sometimes he was overwhelmed at the thought that if Johnny Abbes arrested him, he would have the only one who could identify everyone involved. He was determined not to be captured alive, to save the last bullet for himself. And he had also taken the precaution of concealing in the hollow heel of his shoe a strychnine-based poison pill prepared for him by a pharmacist in Moca, who thought it was for killing a wild dog that had been wreaking havoc in the henhouses on the ranch. They wouldn't get him alive, he wouldn't give Johnny Abbes the pleasure of watching him writhe in the electric chair. When Trujillo was dead, it would be a real pleasure to finish off the head of the SIM. There would be more than enough volunteers. Most likely, when he found out about the Chief's death, Abbes would disappear. He must have made plans; he had to know how much he was hated, how many people wanted revenge. Not only the opposition; ministers, senators, members of the military said so openly.

Antonio lit another cigarette and smoked, biting down on the tip to relieve his tension. Traffic had stopped altogether; for some time not a truck or a car had passed in either direction.

The truth was, he said to himself, exhaling smoke from his mouth and nose, he didn't give a shit what happened later. The crucial thing was what happened now. Seeing him dead so he would know that his life had not been useless, that he hadn't

passed through this world like a worthless creature.

"That bastard is never coming, damn it," a furious Tony Imbert exclaimed beside him.