

Captain Lester A. Niles ran along the Avenue De L'Aeroport. The machine-thunder of helicopters beat from the runway landing zones. Two hundred meters ahead, cars and trucks lined the curb. A crowd stood at the fence-- rescuers, journalists, Lebanese police and civilians. Marine sentries crouched behind the fence and watched the onlookers and the highway. Lebanese in passing cars slowed to gawk at the blast-stripped trees and gray devastation where a bomb had destroyed the Battalion Landing Team building that morning, murdering hundreds of United States Marines as they slept.

Past the one-story concrete building housing the Support and Service Group, Niles cut along the traffic circle to a checkpoint. A barrier of sandbags, steel oil drums, and concertina wire channelled traffic to a narrow entry. Two sentries stood inside a sandbagged guard post, their M16 rifles in their hands. A LAAW rocket-- Light Anti-Armor Weapon, capable of penetrating 300mm of steel plate and destroying any car or truck-- lay on the sandbags, ready to snap out and fire.

A sentry stepped out to block Niles, the young man shouting a command. But rotor-throb overwhelmed his voice. A CH-46 helicopter rose from the runway a hundred meters to the west, carrying away wounded Marines to surgery on the Iwo Jima offshore.

Niles stopped. The Marine Battalion commander had issued shoot-to-kill instructions to all sentries. The two sentries at the gate eyed him, their rifles in their hands. He slung his rifle over his shoulder.

Dust swirled as a stake-bed truck low-gearred out of the compound. Niles

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anced in the back. A Marine sat on the tailgate, staring down at the asphalt. In the truck, a tarp covered the bodies of Marines. Dust-gray boots and gray hands stuck out from under the tarp. The driver eased around the traffic circle, going slow to the improvised morgue near the west runway-- he had no reason to speed.

Waiting for the rotor noise to fade, impatient, his jaw clenched with rage, Niles removed his helmet, then wiped gray dust from his face to show the sentries his craggy Anglo features. He wore blood-splashed Marine camouflage pants, a bloody flak vest, and web gear. Gray dust had obscured the green camouflage patterns. His bare arms-- deeply tanned and blood -stained-- stuck out of the flak vest. Blood had clotted on Niles' sleeves and he had cut the blood-stiff sleeves off at his shoulders.

Throughout the morning, he had helped take dead and wounded Marines out of the wreckage of the barracks. Then Lieutenant Shaffik Hijazi of the Lebanese Armed Forces came with an emergency message.

A thin, wirey man of sinew and hard muscle, Captain Niles looked older than his thirty-eight years. Born into the poverty of Harlan County, Kentucky, he grew up hard. He had started working for his family at eight years old, shooting rabbits and squirrels to feed his brothers and sisters. Later, when his growth gave him strength in his arms and back, he worked in his uncle's mine, gouging coal from the earth. Then another uncle offered him the job of driving untaxed liquor from the mountain distillery to the towns. He drove for two years before his arrest. The judge offered to dismiss the charges if Niles enlisted in the armed services that day. Like his father before him, Niles joined the Marines. On his eighteenth birthday, he volunteered and qualified for the training program of the Force Recon Company at Camp Pendleton, California. He then went for airborne training at Fort Benning, Georgia. After two tours of combat in

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the I Corps of Viet Nam-- running reconnaissance patrols along the Demilitarized Zone and the Laotian border, he applied for Officer Candidate School. He returned to Viet Nam as a very experienced 2nd Lieutenant and led Recon patrols-- wearing North Vietnamese or Khymer Rouge uniforms and carrying Soviet weapons-- into Laos and Cambodia. Since then, he had served in the United States, the Caribbean, Central America, advancing in rank as he continued his education. He had served as an instructor to the Lebanese Air Assault Battalion since Novemeber of 1982.

Standing there, waiting for the noise of the helicopter to fade, he thought back over the past twenty years-- ambushes when he had to leave the bodies of his friends, the long waits for medevacs with his hands over the gaping wounds of lung-shot eighteen year old boys, the faces of hundreds of dead Marines after firefights-- and he could not remember a day worse than this day, 23 October 1983.

Pain and rage. The State Department dreamers. Ignorant politicians and bureaucrats mouthing vainglorious rhetoric, then sending brave young men into a malestrom of war and atrocity fueled by religious hatred, class struggle, and ruthless dictatorial ambition-- sending Marines to stand with unloaded rifles against the Syrian Army and the fanatics of Lebanon and Iran. Rules of Engagement denying the Marines the right to fire in their own defense, requiring the death of Marines before a Marine could fire back. Now the bombing of the barracks.

And the Syrians and Iranians had not yet killed enough Americans. A Lebanese officer had given him warning of another attack. Niles had to get to a trans-Atlantic telephone.

The rotor-noise died away. "You see I'm a Marine?" His anger brought out his Appalachian accent. "I'm no Shia infiltrator. You need identification to pass

me?"

"The headquarters compound is now restricted to essential personnel only."

"I'm Captain Niles. Liaison to the Lebanese Armed Forces."

"Pardon me, sir."

"Sir, we saw you come in from over there--" The second sentry pointed his rifle toward the slums of the Burj Al Branjneh Palestinian camp, where the tenements overlooked the northern perimeter of the airport. "From where those shits are shooting--"

A bullet banged into a steel drum a step away. Reflexively, Niles dropped down to a crouch behind the checkpoint sandbags. Bullets tore past the checkpoint.

"Don't know how you made it here, sir. They're shooting at us non-stop."

Squinting against the afternoon glare, Niles peered over the barrels. The Marine Support and Services Group building shielded the Marine compound from one section of the slum. But blocks of tenements with hundreds of windows had an unobstructed view of the airport. Niles scanned the rooflines three hundred fifty meters away. The snipers could be firing from any of the windows or rooftops. Another bullet slapped into the sandbags at the back of the checkpoint.

"See them?" a sentry asked.

"If I saw them, I'd shoot them." Putting on his helmet, he sprinted through the open area, then veered through a gate and into the shelter of MSSG building.

Down an access road, Niles saw the dust-gray ruin of the Marine barracks. When the suicide driver had crashed the truck into the lobby and detonated the cargo of explosives, the blast had sheared the four-story complex off its founda-

tions. Nothing remained of the structure, only thousands of tons of broken concrete-- intermixed with furnishings, equipment, and Marines. A gray dust of pulverized concrete covered everything. Voices still screamed from the wreckage. American and Lebanese rescue teams worked with heavy equipment and bare hands to free trapped Marines. A slab of concrete edged with tangled strands of reinforcing steel hung from crane as rescuers dug through the debris. Journalists followed a team carrying away a corpse, flash units blinking as the photographers recorded images for the newspapers of the world.

Niles rushed to the Marine Amphibious Unit Headquarters. A sergeant stepped out of a sandbagged guard post:

"You with the command?"

"Captain Niles, Liaison to the Lebanese Air Assault--"

"Didn't recognize you, sir." Saluting, the sergeant motioned him through the doors. Niles ran up the stairs to the second floor. Hurrying down the corridor, he glanced into the cubicals of the Intelligence staff. Officers and clerks worked in pressed fatigues. Niles continued until he found an office with an unused desk and telephone. He closed the door and dialed zero.

"Operator, this is a priority call to Lieutenant Colonel Devlin, in Washington, D C, at the following number--" Niles recited the number from memory, then waited. He stared out the window to the adjoining airport maintenance building. Over the roof, he saw the ridges of the Shouf Mountains. The building blocked any sniper fire from the Shiite ghettos of Hay al Sollom. The phone finally rang in Washington. A woman answered.

"Mrs. Devlin? This Captain Lester Niles, calling from Lebanon. I apologize if I woke you up."

"No, Captain, you didn't." Mrs. Devlin spoke with the precise and measured diction of an eastern university graduate. "Are you calling from

Beirut?"

"Yes, 'mam. I'm calling from Marine Headquarters. I need to speak to the Colonel."

"Oh, you are the Captain Niles. Anthony has spoken of you."

"Surprised that I'm worth the mention. Is it possible I could speak with the Colonel?"

"He was called to a meeting very early today."

"Special Operations?"

"I don't believe so. His aide called with a number in case of an emergency."

"This is an emergency."

"I know. One moment, I have the number here"

Niles wrote the series of numbers on the blood-stained tan of his arm.

"Well, thank you. Hope I have the pleasure of meeting you some day."

"Captain, are you alright?"

"Yes, 'mam. I wasn't even here at the Airport last night."

"It is as bad as it looks on television? They say fifty Marines are dead."

"It's worse. There might be three hundred men dead."

"Oh, good Lord"

"Got to go, Mrs. Devlin, thank you very much." He broke the connection.

"Operator? Operator, the Colonel was not at that number. Try this number"
Again, Niles waited.

A neutral voice answered. "Code, please."

Niles read off the last four numbers.

The line switched. Another voice answered. "Council."

"I need to speak with Lieutenant Colonel Devlin."

"The advisor and his staff are in a meeting. Would you like to leave a

message?"

"This is an emergency. Can you put the call through to Colonel Devlin?"

"An emergency?"

"I'm calling from the Marine Amphibious Unit Headquarters in Beirut. I need to speak with Colonel Devlin."

"There are several offices represented in the meeting. Who is Colonel Devlin with?"

"Special Operations, Joint Chiefs of Staff."

"Just a moment, sir."

A helicopter passed overhead. Niles cupped his hands over the mouthpiece and waited, listening to the electronic hiss of the satellite relay.

Noise and voices came. "This is Colonel Devlin."

"Colonel, this Niles in Beirut."

"What is the situation there? We're getting conflicting statements."

"You have a television there?"

"It looks bad."

"It's worse. Colonel, they wiped it out. Every man in that building is dead or wounded. Three hundred or more."

"How did that truck get in the compound?"

"How'd that kamikaze get in? He drove in through the gate. But that's history, sir. I've got information that the militias are talking about hitting the airport in force."

"You gave this information to the commander?"

"No, sir. I'm not going to bother. Sir, a week ago I got that information about the Syrians and the Pasdaran-- the Iranian Revolutionary Guards-- planning a bombing. I passed that information to the intelligence staff. You know that's a fact because I forwarded a copy of it to you. And now we've got hundreds of

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dead Marines. The men working rescue are taking continuous sniper fire and I've got word that the Hizbullah-- that's the Party of God, the militia organized by the Iranians, led by Iranians and Syrians-- that they're talking about hitting us. Look, sir. You know I'm in a peculiar position here. I've been here a year and the unit commanders change every few months. I know what goes. I got the sources. I want to do something about this information. Can you get me Special Operations authorization to go out there?"

"Go where?"

"Hay al Sollom."

"You're willing to go into the militia controlled areas alone?"

"No, sir. Not alone. I'm not crazy. I'm not looking for martyrdom. I got men who'll go with me. American and Lebanese."

"As a Recon unit?"

"We'll look for the Hizbullah force that's forming up. Call down artillery or gunships if they're actually out there."

"We're in a meeting now with the National Security Advisor Reisinger. I'll discuss it with him."

"That man can most definitely make it happen. If you can get the okay, I'll go out at dark."

"I'll try. We're discussing who did this. If I can suggest your action as a recon for information, are you willing to do that?"

"Anything you say, sir. But let me save you the suspense. I know who did it. The Syrians and the Iranians."

"Not a militia gang?"

"Sir, the men here thought they got hit by a nuke. It was professional hit. Perfectly planned, perfectly made, and perfectly executed. No militia did this. Not the Hizbullah. Not the Phalange."

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"If I get the authorization, how will I contact you?"

"Send a cable-- yes or no. I'll be in the area of the Third Platoon of Charlie Company, near Checkpoint 76." "There may be a problem with--"

A lieutenant stepped into the office. He saw Niles-- dusty, blood-splotted-- sitting on his desk. "Who are you, soldier? Why are you in here? Don't call your family from my telephone."

Niles thought of the wife he divorced fifteen years before-- she wouldn't care if he lived or died. And his children? They did not face any danger today. The Marines came first. "Do what you can, sir. A lieutenant wants his phone back."

"Keep me informed."

Rushing out, Niles wove through the crowded corridor, then down the stairs and out of the building. A white flash startled him, reflexes throwing him to the side even as he caught himself-- it had not been the flash of another bomb. "You Marines are very jumpy!" A young Frenchwoman with a camera laughed.

Pushing the woman aside, Niles elbowed through news crews waiting at the door to the headquarters building. The young woman-- a slender blonde in designer jeans and a white sweatshirt stenciled with the warning 'Don't Shoot, Journalist' in three languages-- laughed with a cameraman holding a video camera. The woman raised her camera to take another photo of Niles.

Niles ran north. At an intersecting road, he caught a ride with a truck delivering ammunition to the perimeter outposts. They stopped first at Charlie Battery-- a unit with the responsibility of providing mortar and artillery support for the Marine compound. "You ready to put out some fire from those one fifty-fives?" Niles called out to a cannoneer.

"Quit the jokes." The Marine took a case of 5.56mm ammunition and

dodged away through incoming sniper fire.

The truck continued around the perimeter. In the back of the stake-side truck, Niles crouched down beside the wooden crates. He heard the hammering of a Marine's M-60 machine gun returning fire at the distant snipers.

Only a few rifles and machineguns against thousands of fanatics, Niles thought. He listened to the Marine counter-fire, thinking of the hundreds of men already dead and how many more would die if a militia force hit the Marine perimeter. Sorrow took him for a moment, his thoughts trapped in a cycle of numbers-- how many families woke up this Sunday morning to radio reports of their sons dying in Beirut? How many young widows stared at televisions, hoping they would not recognize a corpse? How many fatherless children? He forced the thoughts away, concentrating on the threat of an attack. He could not bring back the dead. But he could stop the fanatics from killing more young Americans.

Mid-point on the runway, he banged on the cab of the truck. The driver slowed and Niles leapt down to the perimeter road. He ran to the trail paralleling the dry streambed of the Nahr al Ghadir, a seasonal river winding down from the Shouf Mountains.

Bullets cut through the trees and brush. Marines at sandbag bunkers motioned him down but he continued. Rifles answered the sniper fire. He heard an M-60 firing short shot bursts. A few meters short of the bridge and the checkpoint there, Niles cut into the brush and went down the river embankment.

Hundreds of meters away, across open fields of dry grass and weeds, snipers fired from the tenements of Hay al Sollom, a Shiite ghetto once controlled by the Amal, but now dominated by the Hizbullah and Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Months before, when Amal held the district, before the State Department threw American support to the Christian rulers, the Marines

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had patrolled the streets to enforce the armed truce between Amal, the Israelis, and the Phalange. The Shiite people greeted the Marines as saviors and protectors. Now the fanatics of the Hizbullah, advised by Iranian and Syrian officers, fired on the Marine positions around the airport from the windows and rooftops.

Exposed to the snipers, Niles zigzagged to a bunker. Living branches of bushes bent and tied to the sandbag walls camouflaged the position. Ten meters farther, the embankment fell away to the sand and trash of the dry Nahr al Ghadir.

"Niles coming in," he announced. He ducked through a green plastic tarp covering the door. The muzzle blast of a machinegun slammed his ears. He pulled a pair of valved hearing-protectors from a pocket and screwed the protectors into his ears.

Sergeant Leon Vatssek sprawled behind a tripod-mounted M-60 machinegun, triggering accurate bursts of heavy 7.62mm NATO slugs at snipers hiding in the tenements. A dedicated body-builder, Vatssek weighed two hundred and forty pounds-- all hard muscle. His sharp, Slavic features-- sharp nose, brilliant blue eyes, a slash for a mouth-- gave him a malevolent look. A Recon Marine like Captain Niles, he served as an instructor to the Lebanese Air Assault Battalion. A black belt in karate and judo, he taught hand-to-hand combat to the recruits. And as an armorer, he taught the maintenance of weapons to the Lebanese technicians. Another Marine crouched at the side of the bunker. Sergeant Jesus Marical Alvarez, of the Battalion Recon Platoon, had escaped the bombing only by chance. At six in the morning, his squad had completed a pre-dawn security patrol of the airport. The other Recon men returned to the BLT barracks. Alvarez walked north to the Lebanese Army compound for a Sunday breakfast with Niles, Vatssek, and a group of Lebanese soldiers. At six twenty-two a.m., the truck-bomb destroyed the barracks.

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Alvarez lived. All the others in his unit died. Tearing through the debris of the Recon quarters with his bare hands, Alvarez found only corpses and broken concrete running with blood. Shock had left his dark features drawn and gaunt.

"Vatsek! Stop killing them. Just for a minute."

The sergeant ceased firing. But he kept his eyes on the distant tenements.

"Gentlemen, I just came from the Lebanese compound. I talked to this officer there, an officer of the Islamic confession, a Shia in fact. He had information that--"

A three-shot burst interrupted the captain. Vatsek laughed. "Got him"

Niles continued. "This officer told me the Hizbullah, a k a The Party of God, plans to hit the compound from Hay al Sollom."

"They're coming to get us?" Vatsek smiled, his white teeth and prominent Slavic cheekbones twisting into a death's-head grin. "Is that a promise? I'll requisition a starlite scope and ten thousand rounds of linked seven six two."

Niles talked over his sergeant's interruption. "This is of serious concern to me as a mass assault could wipe out whole sections of the line. Once they get through the line, it's hand to hand."

Vatsek raised an arm-- the sleeve tight over muscles, his wrist thicker than most men's arms, the striking edges of his hand calloused from striking canvas sacks filled with gravel-- and made a fist. "Ready. To. Go."

"Is it true?" Alvarez asked. "What he told you?"

"The man is reliable. And a friend. Whether the information is true, that's to be determined."

"What did intelligence say?" Alvarez looked out the gun slot at crowded slums of the Shiite district, only a few hundred meters away. "They have the

same story?"

"Didn't talk to them. I called Washington. Made a direct request to go out and confirm the information."

Alvarez snapped around. "Please repeat that, sir."

"I requested authorization for a recon out there. I asked them that can say yes."

"The colonel?" Vatsek asked, not joking now.

"The colonel will relay the request."

"I volunteer," Vatsek told the captain. "When does the word come?"

"Soon. But I don't think there'll be a role for you out there. Alvarez, you speak some Arabic and you can pass as Arabic from a distance. I'll take you if you volunteer."

"Me? Look like a local?"

"And some of the fellows from the Air Assault. They volunteered to do revenge hits. But this won't be that. The bombing is history. Payback can't change it."

"Then what exactly will I be volunteering for, sir?"

"To stop the fanatics from killing more of us. We'll go out, capture uniforms and weapons, then move around and watch. Maybe put down snipers. Dangerous, but not crazy. Exactly what you were trained to do."

"Sir, my courses didn't cover any urban recon."

"You'll learn."

"And out of uniform?"

"Standard procedure on extraordinary patrols is to wear the uniforms of the enemy. The colonel and I wore the uniforms of the People's Army of Viet Nam. Walked around in Cambodia and Laos. Tonight, if you volunteer, we'll try for Syrian uniforms. Syrians shave. Take us a month to pass as Revolutionary

Guards."

Alvarez laughed quietly. He stroked the stubble on his face. "A month? Okay, I volunteer. If you get the okay, sir, I'll go with you."

"Got no use for me?" Vatsek asked.

"You'll be our long distance back up. We have to break for it, we'll come straight back to you."

"I won't argue with you, sir. But if you need me, I'm ready to go. And my M-60 with a Starlite scope."

"I won't forget. Alvarez, you and me will go over to the Lebanese compound and recruit our assistants. For you, Sergeant, I'll requisition a few thousand rounds of linked."

Hours later, Captain Niles crouched near the trail along the Nahr al Ghardir. The white disc of the moon lit the fields and tenements of Hayy al Sollom. Concealed in shadows, Niles watched the Marine perimeter exchange fire with Hizbullah positions. The fighting had escalated to long distance fire-fights, the militia gangs continuously firing Kalashnikov rifles and machineguns, shooting rockets from the distant rooftops at the improvised Marine defenses. The exposed and outnumbered Marine outposts had requested artillery to silence the militia bunkers. But the 155mm howitzers of Charlie Battery did not fire. The Marines requested mortars, nothing came.

Niles had assembled his men and equipment. The Marines and Lebanese waited in the bunker. Three English-speaking Lebanese troopers had volunteered. He knew them all from training and trusted them. As Sunni Moslem nationalists, they opposed the radical Shiite factions that wanted to throw Lebanon into the Islamic Revolution. They had volunteered to join the

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patrol without demanding a complete briefing.

That afternoon, when Niles had explained that their role would be to impersonate Hizbullah, the Air Assault troopers took Niles to a storeroom where they grabbed Soviet weapons from shelves and pulled militia uniforms-- blood-stained but laundered-- from plastic bags. Intelligence squads of the Lebanese Army also employed the uniforms of their enemies for reconnaissance patrols.

The Lebanese Army storerooms had provided small, citizen's band radios. But the troopers had cautioned that the radios had been purchased in a local shop. The radical and Islamic militias had identical radios.

The Marines and Lebanese then returned to bunker on the embankment of the Nahr al Ghadir to wait.

But the authorization to proceed had not come. Niles thought of the political conflicts in Washington. Perhaps Colonel Devlin had not won the approval.

How many more Marines would die?

And at that moment, he decided to go without the authorization. He knew he risked his career-- and it did not matter. If he did nothing, if the Marines suffered more losses-- dead and maimed-- because he feared the loss of his pension, his career with the Marines had meant nothing.

Yet he had to also consider the other men. All of the soldiers-- American and Lebanese-- risked their lives. Vatssek and Alvarez also risked the end of their careers, if not prison terms for breaking discipline.

He would lie to Alvarez and Vatssek and take the responsibility for the unauthorized action. They might get a few months filling sandbags. He would accept the risk of prison. He would accept that risk so that Marines did not lose their lives-- for nothing-- in Beirut.

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Resolved, Niles silently walked the the thirty meters to the bunker. He slipped through the green plastic tarp blocking the faint light. Inside, the others prepared for the action.

Three Lebanese Air Assault soldiers helped Alvarez with a Hizbullah uniform. One soldier-- Lieutenant Shaffik Hijazi-- wore the olive-green fatigues of the Lebanese Army. Clean-shaven Hijazi, a young Lebanese officer studying to be an international attorney, had trained at Fort Benning, Georgia. He would remain behind with Vatsek. The other Lebanese-- Hussein and Gamal-- wore the mismatched uniforms and beards of militiamen. They would go to Hayy al Sollom. White headbands marked with blood-red Arabic script identified them as fighters for the Hizbullah. A photo of the Ayatollah Khomeini decorated the plywood stock of Hussein's Kalashnikov rifle.

Gamal carried two weapons-- a folding-stock Kalashnikov and the most common heavy weapon of the militias, an RPG-7 rocket launcher. He wore the special Soviet pack required for his RPG-7. He had loaded one safety-capped rocket in the launcher and carried six more in his pack. Gamal spoke Arabic with Alvarez, repeating words for the Chicano Marine, trying to teach him to speak simple phrases without an accent. Strong, with muscles rivaling the body-builder Vatsek, Gamal came from a war-ravaged village. He had lost family to all the foreign invaders of his country-- the Palestinians, the Syrians, and the Israelis. But he had become a good friend of the Chicano from the East Los Angeles barrios. Gamal feared that Alvarez might mispronounce a simple word and betray his nationality.

Niles unfolded a map and spread it out on the dirt. "Ready to go?"

"Un momento, por favor," Alvarez answered, switching from Arabic to Spanish. He adjusted the buckles of frayed Soviet web-gear. "I look cool, Captain?"

"What about your hair?" Niles indicated the sergeant's regulation Marine haircut. "The Party of God ever wear helmets or hats?"

"They wear caps sometimes," Hussein answered, passing black watch caps to Alvarez and Niles. He had learned English in a private school, then lived for years with an uncle in New York. His hope to be a men's fashion importer/exporter to the Arab nations had faded as the civil war continued. "I have one for him and you. But Captain, your face is wrong. You must not be seen."

Pulling the cap over his hair, Niles grinned, then pulled the cap down over his face.

Vatsek laughed. "Hiz Boo Lah, the Unknown."

Niles put on ragged militia fatigues. He wore his own boots. Old, mismatched web gear, a Kalashnikov rifle, and 7.62ComBloc magazines completed his Party of God costume. All his American gear and identification would remain with Vatsek.

"The checkpoint there--" Niles pointed to the far side of Hayy al Sollom district, where a bridge crossed the river. "We can walk the al Ghadir creek all the way there. Chances are, any movement of crazies in from Baalbek will come that way."

"And the streets from West Beirut?" Hussein asked. "There are many militias-- and the Palestinians-- who would join a fight against the Marines."

"If we could cover the other routes, we would. But we can't."

As the others studied a map of Hayy al Sollom, he rubbed brown camouflage grease stick over his face and neck and hands to darken his Anglo skin. The sergeants had not asked if the authorization had come. They assumed Niles would not move without clearance for the action. If the action led to a court-martial, he would state that he had lied to the men "You

understand what goes with the radio?" Alvarez asked Vatssek.

"Yeah, don't use it." The sergeant pressed the transmit button and heard the other radios click. "Toy"

"They don't have the range, but if we do call you--"

"Don't give you away. I'll talk trash. Make like we're screwing around on the line here. Mister America to the Green Gang, come in."

"Mister America?" Alvarez asked. "Who's that?"

"Me."

"You mean, Mr. Godzilla."

"Godzilla? Give me some credit, Zoot-suit! That lizard did all his damage with his gluts and tail. No upper body development at all."

"Okay, Se@or King Kong."

The two sergeants gave the radios a last check as they argued call-names. Niles inspected his Kalashnikov, stripping it and inspecting the components with the beam of a penlight. He returned the bolt to the receiver, snapped the receiver closed, and jammed in a magazine. He looked to the others.

Alvarez nodded. The Lebanese soldiers picked up their weapons. Niles gave Vatssek a left-handed salute, and without a word, led the others out of the bunker.

Moonlight gave the Marines vision but denied the concealment of darkness. Crouching in cover, Niles paused to allow the eyes of his squad to adjust. He scanned the Marine line and the distant buildings of Hayy al Sollom. Intermittent rifle fire continued along the Marine line. The hammering of automatic weapons came from the Lebanese Army position on the bridge over the river. Niles saw no sentries.

Rising, Niles zigzagged through masses of brush, exploiting the shadows and branches for concealment. The weapons-noise covered the faint cracking of

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the dry weeds as the four men crept down the embankment to the dry streambed.

The Nahr al Ghadir flowed only in the winter and spring months, runoff from the Shouf foothills coursing through a winding riverbed south-west of Hay al Sollom, dividing that district from Ashuefat to the south. The riverbed-- actually a deep gulley-- ended at the Beirut International Airport runways. There, storm drains carried the flow under the runways to the Mediterranean. The Marines had outposts on the south bank of the al Ghadir. The Lebanese Armed Forces maintained a checkpoint at the north end of a bridge leading from Hayy al Sollom to the Marine outposts in the south. Hundreds of meters of open fields separated the Shiite district from the checkpoint and outposts.

In the summer, the natural flow failed and the gully carried only a stream of sewage from Hayy al Sollom. The Marines called the Nahr al Ghadir, 'The Shit River'. Tonight, a light wind came from the east, carrying away the stink of the open sewer.

Niles led the line of men toward the bridge. Rifles continued firing from the L A F checkpoint. Marines fired from their position beside the road, their high velocity bullets shrieking overhead to hit somewhere in Shiite district. But the Marines guarding the road had no downward view into the streambed. Only the Lebanese on the bridge could see the streambed.

Years of trash made the streambed look like a landfill. Black filth-- glistening in the moonlight-- cut a deep channel through the litter. But winter flooding had banked sand at the sides of the gulley. Niles walked silently in the clean sand, staying at the extreme side of the streambed, where the squad's uniforms would not contrast against the moonlight-brilliant sand.

A rocket shrieked past the Lebanese bunker and exploded somewhere in the Marine line. A roar of rifle and machinegun fire answered from the Lebanese

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and Marine bunkers. Niles rushed under the bridge, blind for the seconds he blundered through the absolute darkness of the night-shadow of the bridge. He found his way with sweeps of his boot tips, using his toes like the antenna of an insect. Past the bridge, he motioned for the others to rush. The chaos of firing weapons covered the noise of their boots on trash and leaves.

If Niles had responsibility for this area, he would have sealed the approach to the Marine lines with walls of coiled concertina wire, then mined the streambed. But the State Department had vetoed all static defenses of lethal capability. Even minimal defenses conflicted with the Marine peacekeeping assignment.

But the lack of defenses now served his purpose. Leaving the fighting behind, the four men followed the riverbed to the north-east. Soon they passed under a footbridge that had linked Marine Combat Post 69 to a Lebanese Armed Forces position on the other side of the river. Combat Post 69 had been abandoned in September after months of escalating warfare between the Marines and the Shiite and Druze militias.

Niles knew the area. At one time, the Combat Post and the Lebanese Armed Forces position had guarded one side of Hay al Sollom from the Israelis. Fields and buildings had surrounded the C P. After the withdrawal of the Israelis, the Shiite militias attacked the LAF position, attempting to force the Army out of the district. The first attacks failed. Then the militias directed their weapons at the Marines. The Marines drove back the gunmen with rifle and machinegun fire. To prepare for a sustained assault, the militias used earthmoving equipment to gouge trenches into the open fields. They built bunkers. The Rules of Engagement did not allow the Marine platoons stationed at CP 69 to fire on the militia work crews. Only after the militias launched their attacks from the completed trenches and bunkers-- sniping, raking the CP with

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heavy machinegun fire, blasting the position with rockets-- did the Rules of Engagement allow the Marines to return the fire. Buildings had also overlooked CP 69. Shiite snipers fired down on the Marines. Without the authority to use sufficient firepower to destroy the bunkers sheltering the militias or the buildings concealing the snipers, the Marine commander knew that C P 69 would eventually be overrun. He ordered their withdrawal. Without the support of the Marines, the Lebanese Army position fell. The militias took the soldiers prisoner and looted the compound. The Shiites then tortured the LAF officer to death as an example to the soldiers.

A distance of approximately five hundred meters separated the abandoned LAF and Marine positions from the airport perimeter. Niles estimated they had only three hundred fifty meters more to walk. Continuing fifty meters past the footbridge, Niles signaled the others to halt and wait. He crept up the steep embankment, into a clean cool wind.

The area seemed as he remembered, the jagged rooflines of blasted buildings, the dead trees, the trench-scarred fields. The Shiite neighborhood around the ruins of CP 69 stood sihouetted against the glow of the airport, the buildings gray in the moonlight, the shadowed narrow streets black voids-- all the streetlights and neon shot out or shattered by shrapnel during ten years of fighting. A few residents remained-- cracks of yellow lantern light showed through sandbagged windows. Niles studied the rooflines of the highest apartments-- the natural positions for militia lookouts. Despite the moonlight, the distance and shadows defeated his vision. He looked to the other side of the al Ghadir.

There, he saw lighted windows. All the windows opened to the Shouf Mountains, away from the fighting around the airport. Scanning the rooftops, he saw movement, but as he watched, his eyes defined the shapes as laundry

flapping with the wind. The buildings blocked his view of the militias firing from Hay al Sollom.

To the north, he saw only the brush and trees lining the river. He eased down the slope to the waiting men. They continued north along the side of the sewer, moving more slowly, placing their feet carefully in the littered sand. They passed places where children had played with tires and scrap plywood-- which indicated an absence of mines or booby-traps. After counting a hundred steps, Niles stopped and listened. He heard Alvarez moving behind him. Niles signaled the sergeant with a hiss. Crouching down, his Kalashnikov pointing into the darkness, Niles listened. He heard the distant sound of weapons and the wind rustling branches. He turned his head slowly, trying to turn his ears toward any slight sound. Except for the weapons and wind, he heard only the creaking of the ligaments in his neck and his own breathing.

They moved again, advancing a few steps before he heard the voice. Niles stopped in mid-stride and dropped to a crouch. The voice came and went with the wind. Turning, he motioned Alvarez forward. He touched his ear and pointed in the direction of the sound.

Alvarez nodded. They crouched side-by-side for minutes, listening. The voice continued, pausing rhythmically, continuing, but too distant to be understood. Gamal left his position at the end of the line.

"Prayers," he whispered.

The Americans realized they had listened to the amplified voice of a mullah. Somewhere in the distance, loudspeakers blared out evening prayers. Niles continued on.

The streambed narrowed, forcing them to finally walk in the stream of sewage. Niles stayed at the edge of the wide stream, feeling the filth seep into his boots, every slow step bringing a wave of stink as his boots broke the scum.

Branches overhanging the stream provided cover from observation. But the leaves scraped over their hands and webbing as they brushed the branches aside, dry sticks clicking across their weapons. Niles concentrated on making every step in the scum silent, making the motions of his hands through the leaves slow and soundless. He almost fell over the corpse.

His boot sank into the rotting flesh of the corpse and the vile stench hit him, his whole body shuddering with nausea. Knowing what lay below him in the black filth, he clamped down on his throat and stepped over the corpse. He forced himself to take several more silent steps before breathing.

Simultaneously, he heard the voices on the bridge. He advanced until he rounded a curve in the embankment and saw lantern light. Retreating, he heard Alvarez and the Lebanese gasping in the overwhelming stink of sewage and decomposition. He warned them with the hissed words, "Bridge. Checkpoint."

Niles went slowly up the side of the embankment, angling through the dry weeds. His hand found plastic and slick chrome. Tracing the outline with his hand, he felt a handle and shattered locks-- a briefcase, shot open and looted. A kidnapping and murder? A robbery? A militia execution? It did not matter to the corpses dumped here. Niles edged forward until he saw the road.

Lanterns illuminated a checkpoint, posters of the Ayatollah Khomeini identifying the militia manning the position as the Hizbullah. Headlights approached. Three militiamen left the concrete block and sandbag bunker. A car snaked through curving rows of oil drums set in the road and stopped. A militiaman went to the driver's window with a flashlight. Voices came to him but he could not understand the Arabic. The militia man checked the driver's identification, then shined the flashlight inside the car. Niles saw bearded faces and fatigues.

The militiamen motioned the car to continue. The three gunmen returned

to the bunker. Niles watched shadows and light shift in the firing slots set in the bunker walls. Music came on, the sensual rhythms and insinuating words of Donna Summer blaring into the night.

Faint crackling announced Alvarez. The sergeant seemed to flow up the slope, his hands smoothing the weeds aside, his body rising to pass over trash, then going flat again, his boots silently pushing him ahead. He whispered, "Disco?"

"Three Party of God. Wait here."

Continuing to the top of the embankment, Niles stayed below the scraggly weeds and scanned the area. A wide, tire-rutted lot lay between him and the road. Dark buildings adjoined both sides of the Nahr al Ghadir. Plywood covered the windows of the ground level shops. Trash had drifted against the doors. No lights showed in the windows of the second and third floor apartments. The area seemed deserted except for the Hizbullah militiamen.

For the minutes that Niles watched and listened, no other cars came. He finally eased down the slope to Alvarez.

"Move Hussein and Gamal within listening distance of that checkpoint. We'll listen, we'll wait. Then we'll take it."