

From the leather-upholstered comfort of the UNESCO limousine, Fahkr Rajai and Iziz Kalaq viewed their victory. Their chauffeur allowed the long Mercedes to idle past the ruins of the Marine barracks. Fifteen hours after the bombing, under glaring flood lights, American and Lebanese rescue workers continued to search for Marines in the gray wasteland of shattered concrete and debris. Jackhammers beat relentlessly. A crane pulled a slab up as a team of men in dust-grayed uniforms cut at steel reinforcing rods with power saws, sparks spraying from the discs. Men with flashlights risked their lives to look under the suspended mass of concrete for trapped men.

A rescuer pointed at a form in the wreckage and medics rushed under the hanging slab. A Lebanese ran with a stretcher. But then a medic stood and motioned the others back. They had found only another dead man. Photographers pointed their cameras at the twisted gray corpse and their strobe-units flashed. The two young men in the limousine-- Rajai the Iranian and Kalaq the Syrian-born Palestinian-- laughed.

Horns sounded behind the limousine as other cruising onlookers demanded a view of the spectacle. The chauffeur touched the accelerator and the Mercedes eased forward, passing the rescue vehicles, ambulances, video trucks, and taxis lining the scene. A bullet-proof and sound-proof glass barrier separated the driver from the rear passenger compartment. Distracted, Kalaq shouted into the microphone.

"What now?"

"Shall I circle again?"

"Of course!"

"It is perhaps not wise," Rajai cautioned in his formal Arabic. "For us to be seen as too interested in the bombing. They cannot but notice this car, and therefore, the two foreigners within. Why not have him return us to my car and my guards? We will go immediately to the where the militias will fight."

"Uh huh." Kalaq found a Marlboro and lit it with a silver lighter. He pressed the intercom button again. "Do not go back there. Take us back to the cafe."

"And tomorrow," Rajai continued. "And for weeks, there will be thousands of photos published. We cannot risk touring our victory. But many photographers will have recorded images of our revenge for our pleasure and memory."

Kalaq laughed smoke. "You are right! Thousands of photos. I will cover the walls of my office with dead Marines. A theater of their defeat."

They laughed again, Rajai in his polite and reserved way, Kalaq almost barking. The project to bomb the Marines had brought together two very different young men.

Rajai wore his expensive French suit with ease and conservative elegance, every detail of his tailoring and grooming correct. A French expatriate barber styled his hair and beard. Exile from the Shah's Iran had made Rajai an international traveller. He spoke several languages and knew the cultures of the Middle East and Europe.

Kalaq dressed in a discounted polyester suit that he wore like military fatigues, unconsciously pushing the sleeves above his elbows, the slacks spotted by weapon lubricating oil. He had the habit of jerking at the knot of his tie to ease the constraint at his throat. His curly hair hung over his collar. His mustache blended with his heavy beard stubble. Born in Syria, he spoke only Arabic and

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basic Russian-- learned during his training in Yemen.

"Those Marines!" Kalaq laughed. He took quick drags on his cigarette, his hand slashing the air, clouding the compartment with smoke. With his other hand, he swept back his curly hair. Then he jabbed at the release of a walnut veneered compartment. A table folded out. "A drink to our victory. Do you drink?"

"Alcohol? No."

"Iranians. Some are very strict. Others steal my vodka." Kalaq splashed the clear liquor into a glass. He gulped down the vodka and filled the glass again. "The Marines are amateurs. They come here. They think they know war. A delusion. They read too many comic books. They are amateurs in this business of politics and killing. All their money and weapons and ships. For months they kill no one-- how did they think they could earn respect? Now they are defeated and they know they are nothing. Maybe they will run back to Europe. Or the U S A. It was a good sport to kill them-- not like fighting the Zionists. That is fighting. But I think the game is over, they will go. The next action will be more difficult."

"Perhaps." Rajai commented. He touched the switch to drop the power window. Cold night air thinned the smoke and the smell of alcohol. The limousine left the airport highway, going east through the crowded Burj al Brajneh district. This route would take them away from areas controlled by the Lebanese Armed Forces. Rajai watched the ravaged shops and apartments flash past. The wars had jammed this Moslem district with refugees from other areas of Lebanon-- Shias from the south, Palestinians from the coast, Sunnis from East Beirut. The residents and refugees had crowded into the existing apartment buildings, then occupied the fields, building shacks and haphazard tenements. The doubled and redoubled population had overtaxed the utilities, leaving residents without water, electricity, or sewers. War had destroyed other conveniences-- cutting off telephone service,

blacking out the streetlights. Many tenements occupied by refugees had only kerosene lanterns for light.

"And if they stay, we will kill them. What does it matter? They can do nothing. We are too strong."

"I am in agreement with you," Rajai gave his full attention to the raving Palestinian. Kalaq had killed without reason. Drunk with the mass murder of the Marines and the Russian alcohol, the Palestinian became very dangerous. Any wrong word might offend him. Rajai chose his words carefully. "But the response of the Americans will remain unknown until they attack-- or do not attack. They are powerful. But without the will to act. There is no leader with the will to strike back in revenge-- only that clown President. And his committees of fools and hacks."

Kalaq laughed. He lit another Marlboro from the butt of the one he smoked. "It was good to see. I am glad that I did not fly back to Damascus with all the others."

"They feared the revenge of the Americans. They feared without reason."

"It is the Americans who must fear. The wrath of the oppressed of the world shall not be satisfied by a few American dead. This was a defeat for the Americans. But it was not an annihilation of their imperial forces. It is a shame that they will go and deny our fighters easy targets. It will be very difficult to follow them to Europe or America."

"More difficult, but not impossible. Others have."

"Are you involved in another action?"

"Actions here in Beirut. You will see. We go there."

"In Europe? The U S A?"

"No. I must be content with my assignment here."

"With the Party of God?"

"The faithful of the Party of God are not as experienced in war as your Palestinian warriors, but they fight. If they are encouraged and supported, they may be victorious. You will see."

"I do not trust them. They fought against the Palestinians. They welcomed the Zionists."

"They are not politically sophisticated. But they are devoted. They accept the teachings of the Ayatollah. Soon, they will take Lebanon from the Christians. When Lebanon joins the Islamic Revolution, they will be our allies in the struggle against the Zionists and the Americans. And your allies."

The young Palestinian turned to him. He stabbed the air with his glowing cigarette to emphasize his statement. "Fahkr, you may be my friend. But Palestinians have no allies. Even the Syrians exploit us. We are alone in the world--without a nation, without allies."

"I can only hope to prove you wrong."

"Events prove my words true."

The limousine slowed. Rajai looked ahead and saw the taillights of stopped cars. Militiamen stood at the side of the boulevard, shining lights at the passengers. As the driver braked to a stop in the line of waiting cars and trucks, Kalaq took out his identification. "You must conceal the alcohol." Rajai pointed to the bar compartment.

"Of course. This is not Syria. We will take this limousine on your tour, yes?" Kalaq asked him. "Why change cars? Your guards can follow."

"I would prefer that we did not," Rajai responded. He did not want to argue with this killer. He phrased his objections very carefully. "We can have no confidence in the discretion of the driver. He cannot hear us, but he can

remember where--"

"The driver is one of us. I trust him."

"My friend Iziz, you may trust the driver but I know my instructions. No one outside of the group is to be trusted."

Kalaq laughed. "Suspicious like a banker. A banker who thinks of everything, every detail. That is what the others said of you. You know every name. You know every detail. The bank clerk, they called you. I am surprised you were not with the command group. Why did you not return with them?"

"I have my assignment here. Who am I to question my role in the struggle?"

A flashlight illuminated the interior. Kalaq put his UNESCO identification against the glass of the window. Though he also carried papers issued by Syria and The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, he presented his UNESCO identification at most checkpoints. Posing as a functionary of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization assured safe passage through the maze of Lebanese politics and religious conflicts. Even the Christian Phalangists passed Kalaq through their checkpoints. Rajai wondered if Kalaq would dare to present his UNESCO identification at an Israeli road block.

The militiamen signaled the limousine to continue. The driver steered through the rows of concrete obstacles, then continued east through the ghettos.

"Maybe I will have an operation for you." Kalaq began.

"An operation?" Rajai asked. "Against Israel?"

"Or Europe. When I have the command, I will need all my friends."

"Oh, when you have your command. You are very ambitious. I believe that will come soon." Rajai masked his distain with flattery. The alcohol-drinking, chain-smoking Kalaq would never command more than a few squads of teenagers. Though the P L F commanders in Damascus valued his recklessness in combat,

Kalaq lacked the education and discipline to plan an attack. The Syrian commander of the Marine bombing had used Kalaq to enforce security-- by street murder or capture and execution. But Rajai could not dismiss Kalaq as only a vicious gunman. The handsome young Palestinian had the charisma to lead other young men-- until the Americans or the Israelis killed him.

"I demanded a group. They told me I will have a command when opportunity comes. A man of action must not hesitate to seize his destiny."

"Of course, I know nothing of that. I am only ... as you say, like a clerk, seeing to endless details."

The limousine slowed at a brightly lit cafe. Kalaq saw a group of foreigners. "She is here! There, you see her? Ah, my little French starlette, you are mine this night."

Two foreign men sat with the blonde woman. The woman wore white jeans and a dust-soiled white sweatshirt. She toyed with a camera, peering through the viewfinder to look at the other patrons of the cafe. The men had aluminum equipment cases at their feet. Palestinian guards sat near the foreigners, Kalashnikov rifles in their hands.

"Journalists! Why are they here?" Rajai demanded.

"To interview me. And to accompany me on the visit to the militias attacking the Marines."

"No. They cannot see me. They cannot photograph me. They cannot know I--"

"They are friends, they--"

"No." Rajai threw open the door. Jerking his briefcase free of the Palestinian's legs, he rushed across the street. He kept his face turned from the cafe. Kalaq shouted out:

"I will see you in Hayy al Sollom, my sly friend Fahkr!"

Across the street, his old Mercedes waited. Rajai kept his face turned from the foreigners until he sat in his Mercedes, one of his guards blocking the cameras of the foreigners. Only as his Mercedes accelerated away did Rajai risk a glance back.

The group stood on the sidewalk. Surrounded by the other foreigners and the Palestinian gunmen, the blonde Frenchwoman embraced Kalaq.

That whore, Rajai thought. Any shame for an interview. And Kalaq. How could he pretend to be a leader when he did not have the strength to resist the sins of the west?

Rajai knew his judgement of Kalaq to be correct-- a fighter, a leader of other fighters, but unworthy of command. Yet fighters had value. Tomorrow or next day, Rajai would receive a report on his night with the foreign woman. Details to add to his files. Kalaq had offered Rajai a role in his future action. More likely, Rajai would offer Kalaq a role.

If he sent Kalaq against the Americans, Americans would die. And perhaps Kalaq. But what did it matter? Money and weapons created armies of martyrs.

Alone with Angelique Chardon in his limousine, Kalaq watched her lips form the words of her questions, the movements of her hands as she gestured. She sat far from him, her back against the opposite door, her cassette recorder in her hand. Passing cars illuminated her features and hands like a woman seen in a dream. The scent of her perfume and the smoke of his cigarettes brought memories of the casinos of pre-war Lebanon, when he had served as a teenage bodyguard for P L O chieftans. As the cars passed, she returned to a silhouette

against the lights and scenes of moonlit streets.

The Palestinian guards preceded the limousine in their Land Rover, the French cameramen followed in their van. Chardon interviewed Kalaq in the bullet-proof luxury of the limousine as the line of cars wound through the south Beirut slums.

"The Americans are denouncing the attacks on the Marines and French forces as terrorism. What is your response to that?"

"This is a war of liberation. We fight as we must."

"You say, 'we'. Did your group participate in the attacks?"

"It is so unusual for a Frenchwoman to speak Arabic. And you do not speak as if you learned in a university. How did you come to speak my language?"

"My father worked in the oilfields. We did not want to live in the British enclaves, so we learned to speak Arabic."

"And where was this?"

"Kuwait. Saudi Arabia. My experience there has helped my career. But please--" She laughed. "I am interviewing you. My life is of no interest to the people of France."

"But to me, you are very interesting. You know the Islamic traditions, yet you dress-- as if you were in Paris."

"I am a modern woman. Does that offend you? Are you a Shia?"

"No! I am a socialist."

"What of the Islamic Revolution?"

"There are many roads to freedom."

"Do you fight in alliance with the Party of God?"

"Am I allied? No."

"You are taking me to their fighting lines. You must have some alliance--"

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"No. We fight the same enemies-- the Zionists and the Americans. But we do not co-ordinate our struggle. My people fight only to liberate Palestine-- through revolution and armed struggle."

"Struggle against Israel--"

"The hated Zionist entity."

"And the United States."

"The imperialists who arm and pay the Zionists."

"And revolution?"

"The overthrow of the corrupt Arab regimes that permit the Zionists to exist. The few thousand freedom fighters in Syria and Lebanon cannot defeat the Zionist-American war machine. Only when all the Arab peoples unite in a single nation and launch a united attack can we reclaim our ancestral homes and the holy shrines now held by the Jews."

"There are rumors that Syria and Iran and the Popular Front participated in the attack on the Marines--"

"Who told you that?"

"Many people."

"And I thought you sought the truth. Instead you record the lies of the enemies of the revolutionary states."

"What is the truth?"

"Did not some Islamic group make a claim? The Holy War? I heard of it on the radio."

"Yes, there was a call to a radio station--"

"There! They admit it."

Chardon laughed, leaning back. "You are a comedian. You have a reputation--"

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"And you are beautiful." Moving across the seat, Kalaq grasped her hand and held her recorder up to her lips. "I want a tape of your laughter. I will play it as a song in my times of isolation and hardship."

She did not take her hand from his. "You have a reputation of brutality. What is your comment on that?"

By the lights of a car, he saw her watching him, her face leaping from the darkness, her blue eyes fixed on his eyes, her hair suddenly glowing, then dark as the lights streaked past.

"My comment?" He kissed her hand.

Laughing again, she pulled her hand from his grip and pushed him back. She spoke an English word. "Valentino."

"What does that mean?"

"Val- en- ti- no. An American movie star who played Arabs in the silent movies. Dark and handsome. Very romantic."

"I am no play actor--"

The limousine slowed. Flamelight lit the interior of the limousine as the driver stopped behind the Land Rover. Kalaq glanced out at the street. He saw blast-shattered buildings on one side, shanties of scrap lumber and sheet metal on the other. Ahead, flames leapt from oil barrels set in a line across the street. Forms moved against the fires.

A voice came from a walkie-talkie on the seat: "They will not allow us to pass."

"Who are they?"

"Shiites. Of the Amal."

"How many?"

"Only four boys."

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"Offer them some money." Kalaq turned to Chardon. "You see? We are not allies of the Shiites. We fight the same enemies. But they believe we are enemies, also."

The limousine intercom chimed. "Mr. Kalaq. I think there is a disturbance."

"What?" As Kalaq lifted the radio to speak, a silhouette came to the limousine. He spoke quickly into his walkie-talkie, "Be ready." A hand knocked at the window. Kalaq powered down the window.

A Kalashnikov barrel came through the open window. Chardon shrieked and pressed herself against the far side. The face of a teenage militiaman looked inside. Kalaq spoke smoothly, without fear. He kept the transmit lever of the walkie-talkie depressed.

"What is wrong? Why do you threaten workers of the United Nations?"

"What do you want in our district?"

"Nothing. We are only driving to the highway. Please do not point your rifle at us. This reporter is terrified."

"You are Palestinians. You come with soldiers and weapons. What do you want here?"

"Those men are my bodyguards. We are going to a troubled area. Please lower your rifle. Thank you, we are no threat to you. May I show you my United Nations identification? Will that end this problem? Here is my identification--"

In one motion, Kalaq brought a 9mm pistol from under his jacket and shot the teenager in the face. Simultaneously, rifles fired long bursts of full-auto. Kalaq threw open the limousine door and fired a second bullet through the head of the dying militiaman. He took the teenager's Kalashnikov.

Rushing from a doorway, a middle-aged man shouldered a rifle. Kalaq triggered a three-round burst through the man's chest, staggering him back.

Shots from the Palestinians in the Land Rover hit the dying man again.

Kalaq scanned the street. An old man shuffled for the safety of doorway. Kalaq snapped a single shot through the man's back, spinning him to the sidewalk. Beyond the fires in the barrels, two shadowy forms ran for the tenements. Firing a long full-auto burst, Kalaq dropped the running forms-- and a woman screamed in agony. No one else moved on that side of the street.

Glancing behind him, Kalaq saw the Frenchmen in the mini-van videotaping the scene. He flashed a V-for-victory handsign. A silhouette moved in the open window of wood and sheet metal shack. Kalaq fired a burst through the wall, an arm flailing, children screaming.

Ahead, his men leaned out the shattered windows of the Land Rover to fire long bursts of 7.62ComBloc slugs into the bodies of other teenage militiamen.

"They are all dead?" Kalaq shouted out.

"All."

"Continue on!"

Chardon crouched in the street, flashing photos of the dead teenager. Kalaq grabbed the collar of her sweatshirt and jerked her back. The acceleration of the limousine slammed the door closed. Kalaq put the muzzle of the Kalashnikov out the window and sprayed unaimed automatic fire at the shops and apartments around the checkpoint. Cartridge casings bounced off the glass partition and fell on the seat.

Pointing the camera up at Kalaq, Chardon flashed photos of him shooting. The Kalashnikov's bolt slammed closed on the empty chamber. Kalaq glanced back to confirm that the mini-van followed, then looked down at Chardon on the seat.

"I am not a play actor." He pushed his lips against hers and felt her mouth open, her mouth soft and fluid, her tongue fluttering against his lips. Her arms

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closed around him as they rode through the streets of Beirut.

Hidden in the trash and weeds of the stinking al Ghadir, they watched the Hizbullah bridge checkpoint for hours. Hussein and Gamal hid within listening distance of the bunker, Gamal crouching on the steep embankment below the bunker, Hussein a few steps away, flat in the weeds where he overheard the voices of the drivers in the cars and trucks. Alvarez watched the bridge and road from a few meters away. Niles lay twenty five meters away. From his position on the embankment, he viewed the area around the checkpoint-- the bunker, both sides of the bridge, his concealed squad, and the nearby buildings.

Niles saw only three civilians on foot in the first two hours-- a man and teenager escorting an old woman out of Hayy al Sollom. They had hurried from doorway to doorway, looking around with fear, the men carrying suitcases and bundles. The gunmen at the bridge jeered at them and fired bursts of automatic fire over their heads. After the pointless shooting, Niles watched the rooflines and windows overlooking the checkpoints. He saw no sentries. The residents did not dare look out their windows.

Other civilians passed in vehicles-- outbound, their cars and trucks loaded with children and possessions. Niles saw the drivers passing money to the checkpoint gunmen-- payoffs to escape the district. He wondered where in the Koran the Hizbullah militiamen found inspiration for extortion.

Cars and trucks carrying militiamen passed in both directions. The men held rifles and RPG launchers. Posters of the Ayatollah Khomeini had been taped to doors. A Land Rover with a pedestal-mounted Soviet 12.7mm Degtyarev heavy machinegun paused at the checkpoint, the militiamen talking for a few minutes

before continuing. Niles saw the same cars enter and exit, carrying the same number of men each time. Perhaps the groups patrolled the roads leading to the district or carried a few boxes of ammunition to the snipers firing on the Marine perimeter. But no trucks with masses of militiamen went through the bridge checkpoint.

Niles waited. Though the Hizbullah-- and their Syrian and Iranian sponsors-- might be using other routes to other assembly points, Niles reasoned that any attack on the Marine perimeter would come from Hayy al Sollom, where the fanatics of the Party of God controlled the streets and the Syrians controlled the highways from the Iranian-occupied town of Baalbek. An attack from the north of the airport involved negotiations with the several Palestinian and Shiite militias of Burj al Brajneh. The Lebanese Armed Forces maintained salaried informers in all those militias. No information had come of an attack from the north-- only the second hand report of an attack from Hayy al Sollom.

The approach of the Mercedes took Niles' attention. He saw no weapons, no posters of the scowling Khomeini. The old four -door sedan slowed through the snaking curve of obstacles and stopped at the checkpoint. A militiaman waved his flashlight over the interior. The sight of the bearded men in the white shirts and suitcoats put Niles into motion.

Slipping backwards through the trash, he eased down the embankment, and dropped into the stagnant sewage. He moved quickly through the stench until he passed Alvarez. Hand-signing for the sergeant to follow, Niles continued to the bridge, then went up the slope to Gamal. The radio in the bunker played Arabic-language songs, the voices and orchestra covering the noises of Niles' rush up the embankment.

"Who is in the car?"

"The music," Gamal answered in bad English. "I not hear."

Niles whispered in Arabic, telling Gamal to be ready to capture the checkpoint and the militiamen in the Mercedes. Then he continued up the embankment.

Loud voices came from the road. The men argued over identification. Niles understood that they disagreed over the validity of a pass issued by the Syrian Army. One man said the pass had no value in Beirut. The other said that their Party officers recognized the Syrians as allies and therefore they must accept the identification. Niles slowly raised his head above the concrete of the bridge.

Wind-blown papers and trash had drifted against the steel mesh of the guardrail. Niles shifted until one eye found a hole. He saw the polished black sedan continue into Hayy al Sollom. The boots and the voices of the militiamen passed as they returned to the bunker. Niles moved again, easing up beside Hussein. The music and pop lyrics of Abba covered his whispered questioning of Hussein:

"Who was in that car?"

"Foreigners. They did not speak very good Arabic."

"But who were they?"

"There was nothing said. Only questions about their documents. They came from the Beeka with Syrian papers."

"In thirty minutes, we're taking the checkpoint. You and Gamal will walk up there and shoot them. Understand?"

"Just walk to them? And shoot?"

"They'll think you are one of them. Tell them you are looking for the Pasdaran. Try to get the name of that one in the Mercedes. Any information you can. The sergeant and I will cover you from here. Then you will man the

checkpoint until that Mercedes comes out. I want whoever was in that Mercedes."

"They were not Syrians."

"That's why I want them."

Niles slowly worked his way down the embankment. He stopped and gave Gamal whispered instructions in both English and Arabic. He wanted no misunderstandings. Then he continued down to the stream of sewage where Alvarez waited.

"We're taking the checkpoint in thirty minutes. I want to try to capture whoever was in that Mercedes."

"Who were they?"

"Hussein said they weren't Syrian. They looked Persian to me. Iranian. They came in from the Beeka. I want them."

"We'll take the checkpoint and wait? Check papers and all that?"

"Affirmative."

"Respectfully, sir, you are one vato loco."

"You don't want to do this?"

"Ready when you are, sir."

They went up the embankment. Niles handsignaled to Gamal to join Hussein. Gamal nodded and shifted positions. The two Marines continued up until they could peer through the litter and garbage against the bridge railings. From Niles' point-of-view, he looked into the bunker where the three Hizbullah militiamen shared a kettle of tea and shouted over the loud music. He saw only one man. He saw the hands of another when the militiaman gestured and the boots of the third under the table.

Glancing at their watches, the Marines and Lebanese waited. Hussein and Gamal tied their white, Arabic-lettered headbands around their foreheads. Niles

straightened the cotter-pin on a US-issue M-67 fragmentation grenade.

A car of civilians passed through the checkpoint. The shouted threats of the militiamen confirmed Niles' observation-- when the escaping family pleaded that they had no money, the gunmen threatened to burn the car. Children wailed. A woman prayed out loud for the mercy of Allah and the gunmen told her to be quiet. The woman shrieked and the militiamen laughed and told the family to continue. From his point-of-view, Alvarez had watched what happened and whispered to Niles:

"The puto grabbed her gold teeth. Right out of her mouth."

The militiamen returned to their bunker. Niles saw them pour tea over gold bridgework, then hold the stolen gold up to the light. For the last minutes of their lives, the Party of God holy warriors laughed and joked about the gold.

Niles screwed his valved hearing-protectors into his ears, then handsignaled Hussein and Gamal. Silently, they left their concealment. They walked directly to the bunker, their hands casually gripping their Kalashnikov rifles.

A militiaman in the bunker heard their boots kicking through the sidewalk litter and looked out. Seeing their ragged fatigues and white headbands, he put down his rifle. Hussein leaned in the doorway, left hand on the sandbags, right hand loose on the pistolgrip of his Kalashnikov. Niles, only two steps away, listened as Hussein asked if the militiamen had seen a group of Iranian Revolutionary Guards in a truck.

A truck? No truck. But some Pasdaran came through in a Mercedes.

Why do you ask that? another militiaman demanded. What unit are you from? We do not know--

Hussein fired, sweeping the bucking assault rifle from side to side in the narrow bunker, emptying the thirty-round magazine point-blank into the three

Hizbullah.

Silence returned. Niles bent down the safety pin on the grenade and returned it to his thigh pocket. Alvarez left the embankment and casually walked to the bunker. Niles watched the rooftops overlooking the road. He saw no response to the noise of the riflefire.

"Captain!" Alvarez hissed.

"On my way." Niles scrambled up to the road. He pulled his black watch cap down on his head to cover his forehead and short-cut hair. He continued to the bunker, his eyes scanning the buildings beyond the bridge.

In the bunker, Hussein searched through the pockets of the dead men, taking out papers, money, and identification. Gamal and Alvarez heaved the dead militiaman into the stream of sewage below. Mock-solemn, Alvarez crossed himself and muttered a quick prayer:

"Ashes to ashes, shit to shit."

Niles watched the moonlit rooftops. "Hussein. Gamal. Get out on the road. We'll deal with this."

The Marines threw the blood-splattered table and chairs, the shattered cassette player, and stacks of Khomeini posters and newspapers over the railing. Dirt from the torn sandbags ran onto the concrete, covering the blood. The confined interior of the bunker stank of cordite and blood.

"Now we wait." Niles looked out a gunport viewing the road from Hayy al Sollom. "The Party of God punks said that Mercedes was carrying Revolutionary Guards. When they come back, we take them."

"Alive or dead?"

"That's their decision."

"Car coming!"

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Niles shifted to where he could watch the checkpoint. Headlights approached from the east. A battered Peugeot sedan stopped. Hussein went to the driver's window. Gamal stood a few steps from the passenger side. The driver wore the rust and green camouflage uniform and beret of an elite Syrian unit.

Hussein demanded identification. An officer spoke from the back, questioning Hussein. Niles could not make out the Arabic of the dialog between Hussein and the officer.

A soldier in the front seat jerked up his rifle. Gamal fired through the windshield, killing the soldier. Hussein fired into the faces of the Syrian officers as Gamal fired again, the full-auto bursts of high-velocity slugs raking the car, shattering the windows and hammering the metal of the car. The engine raced as the dead driver's foot held down the accelerator.

"Damn," Niles sighed. "Alvarez. Back that car off the road, put it over there--" He pointed to the vacant lot on the east bank of the al Ghadir.

Gamal and Hussein leaned through the shattered windows of the Peugeot and took weapons. One Syrian groaned and struck at their hands. Alvarez ran to the car and shoved the dead driver aside. He shifted into reverse and backed the Peugeot through the obstacles, then parked in the vacant lot.

Niles left the bunker, keeping his face down. In less than ten minutes, they had fired almost a hundred shots-- the quiet action had gone dangerously loud. Hussein ran to Niles and told him:

"They asked about an Iranian. They asked if he had come through here in a black Mercedes with Pasdaran bodyguards."

"What else?"

"Then they saw blood on my hands."

"You did alright. You did what you had to. A few more minutes and we'll get

out of here. If the Mercedes comes, try to separate the leader from the others. If they fight, shoot them. But I want the leader alive."

Continuing to the Peugeot, he glanced inside. Three Syrians-- two soldiers in the front seat and an officer in the back-- had died instantly of chest and head wounds. But the fourth Syrian still lived. Alvarez eased the officer out of the back seat and inspected his wounds. He pressed his hands over a froth of blood. "He's got two sucking chest wounds," Alvarez told Niles. "A through-and-through with a compound fracture to the left arm. A gut wound. A near-miss along the side of his head."

Laboring to breathe, the officer choked and coughed blood, then said in British-accented English: "Americans"

Niles had seen men wounded like this. The Syrian had only minutes to live. In Arabic, Niles told the Syrian to not move, a medic would come soon.

"Americans who speak Arabic. Don't lie to me about a doctor. You killed us, but you are defeated."

"You are not dead yet," Niles told him. "Answer my questions and we will try to keep you alive."

"I tell you nothing--"

Niles put his knee on the Syrian's bullet-shattered arm. Shrieking, his mouth spraying blood, the Syrian thrashed against the agony. Niles repeated, "Answer my questions and we will try to save your life. Who is the Iranian?"

"Rajai!"

Taking his knee from the Syrian's arm, Niles asked, "What is his full name?"

The Syrian struggled to breathe. Blood streamed from his mouth. "Rajai," he gasped out. "I only know Rajai."

"And what does he do?"

"He is with the Pasdaran"

"Where will the Hizbullah assemble for the attack?"

No answers came. Choking, struggling to breathe, the Syrian convulsed as he drowned in his own blood. Alvarez rolled the man onto his side to try to clear his air passages, then gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The breath bubbled out of the bullet wounds in his lungs. The Syrian stopped moving. Alvarez searched for a pulse.

"Dead."

"Go work the checkpoint. No more shoot-outs. Don't stop anyone. Just wave cars through, unless the Mercedes comes. A few more minutes, then we're out of here."

"Even if we don't get the Iranian?"

"Can't risk it. This has gone wrong."

Working alone, Niles searched the dead Syrians for identification and documents. He found only identification cards and photos of their families. Going through the Peugeot, he found carbon copies of lists, typed in Russian and Arabic. The numbers and Soviet names indicated weapons and munitions. He stripped the corpses of their uniforms and equipment. In the truck of the Peugeot, he found a ten liter gas can, cans of oil, tools, ropes, and a plastic tarp. With the rope and tarp, Niles bundled up the uniforms and equipment.

Headlights interrupted him. Niles went flat on the rutted dirt and watched. A line of vehicles-- a Land Rover, a gleaming midnight blue limousine, and a Japanese passenger van-- slowed at the rows of oil drums in the road. Gunmen rode in the Land Rover, the muzzles of their Kalashnikov rifles out the windows. Niles watched the gunmen, noting their polyester sportscoats, their shaved faces, their barbered hair. No Arabic scrawls on the Land Rover identified their religious

or political faction. They looked like hired soldiers, probably bodyguards for the official in the limousine.

Hussein motioned the Land Rover past. The driver of the limousine braked and held out documents, but Hussein told him to continue. Hussein shined a flashlight through the limousine's dark windows and stared at what he saw. The mini-van followed a moment later, a video camera recording the checkpoint scene.

Niles waited until the sounds of the vehicles faded before moving. He shoved the stripped bodies of the Syrians back into the old Peugeot. Finally, he spilled the gasoline from the ten liter can over the bodies and the interior, soaking the foam upholstery with the gasoline, then poured a line of gasoline to the embankment. Done, he shouldered the bundle of captured uniforms and equipment and started down the embankment. He signaled the others with a low whistle.

Running from the bunker, Alvarez crossed the lot to Niles. But Hussein and Gamal did not leave the road. "We should've stopped that United Nations limo for a search, sir."

"It was a U N limo?"

"Unesco. That Arab had a blonde and bar. The high life."

Niles pointed to the Lebanese troopers. "Get them over here. We're on our way out."

"Sir, they told me they're willing to risk it and stay. That Mercedes could come through any minute."

"I'm not willing to risk it. Taking this checkpoint was a gamble. And it's not going right. I want us out of here before we lose."

"Yes, sir. On my way."

Crouching, Niles waited. Alvarez ran back to the bridge. Hussein and Gamal

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rushed down the embankment and into the filth of the al Ghadir. Alvarez followed, crawling backwards down the slope, using a rag to erase their bootprints. He rearranged trash to cover any signs of their infiltration. Niles watched the road, his rifle ready.

This incursion had failed. Niles had not risked his life and the lives of his men to kill a few militiamen and Syrians.

Though his squad had monitored the traffic on this road, they had not seen any activity within the district. He knew only that no transports had passed through the checkpoint for three hours. If the Hizbullah had already massed their forces in the empty tenements of Hayy al Sollom, the Marine line would receive no warning until the assault. Or the assembly of militiamen and weapons might begin in an hour or a day.

The observation of the Iranians and Syrians operating with the militias confirmed information from Lebanese intelligence. For months, sources had reported the presence of the foreign liaison officers. The reports had not detailed their activities.

Niles had hoped to take and interrogate the Iranian. He could not risk the wait. He had only the identification of the dead Syrians and their list of weapons and munitions.

But he now knew the name of an Iranian who worked with both the Hizbullah and the Syrians: Rajai.

Niles saw Alvarez and the Lebanese moving silently through the black stream below him. He motioned them to continue, then put the muzzle of his Kalashnikov to the trash in front of him. He fired once, gasoline flashing into flame and the line of fire racing to the Peugeot.

By the orange light of the burning car, Niles obscured his trail with a stick,

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scratching out his bootprints and scattering trash. He wanted nothing to remain to identify the killers of the militiamen and Syrians as Marines.

"Won't know what hit them, sir," Alvarez commented when Niles joined the others.

"Or what will hit them again."