

Angelique Chardon packed her suitcase. In two hours, she would take the afternoon ferry to Cyprus, then fly on to Paris. She rushed through her updated reports on the bombing of the United States Marines. Reading that morning's Arabic language newspapers, she marked sections of the columns with her red pen. She marked a number beside each section. In a newspaper published the day before in Damascus, she found a quote of the Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Talas. Then, translating as she typed, she went number by number through the sections, writing her French dispatch first draft from the Lebanese and Syrian newspapers.

She worked near the sliding glass balcony door of her rented room, the newspapers spread over the desk and the bed. Pausing in her translation of a paragraph of rhetorical Arabic to the straight-forward French required by her Paris editor, Chardon stared out at the trees of the park below her hotel. The balcony overlooked one of the parks along the Corniche Pierre Geymayel. Over the tops of highrise apartments, she had a view of the Shouf Mountains. The flowery Arabic phrases reminded her of the revolutionary nonsense Kalaq pronounced. Laughing at her one-night lover, she returned to her work. She completed translating and editing the articles of the other journalists very quickly-- their writing would appear in Paris tomorrow under her name.

Glancing at her watch-- only another hour, she cleared her desk, slipping her typed copy into her briefcase, throwing the newspapers in the corner. She set her Sony by the typewriter and plugged in the headphones. As the tape played back

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the resonant voice of Kalaq raving, she translated and typed. The Palestinian's statements did not require a studied translation-- she had heard it all many times, in Arabic, French, and English. Kalaq only repeated the propaganda of his faction.

She included the personal questions he had asked her-- let the magazine readers in France read of her childhood in the Gulf States, let the readers imagine the scene of the Palestinian gunman eyeing a Frenchwoman as they rode through the war. But she cut his request for a tape of her laughter and the saccharine hand-kissing. Instead, the shooting ended the interview.

The photo of the dead boy, the sequence of Kalaq firing his rifle-- the interview and photos would take no more than two magazine pages. On the plane to Paris, she would scribble out a romantic description of the dark-haired Aziz Kalaq, the poet and freedom fighter, charming and ruthless-- she would not mention his tobacco-foul breath and premature ejaculation. She finished typing the interview only seconds before the telephone rang.

"Your car is here," the deskman told her.

Throwing the interview into the folder of copy-sheets, she locked her briefcase and her portable typewriter. A horn sounded from the street. She searched through her rented room to confirm she had forgotten nothing. Rushing out, she struggled down the stairs.

Plywood had replaced the glass in the hotel's door and street windows. Running through the shadowy lobby, Chardon pushed the door open with her suitcase and hurried into the mid-day glare-- and stopped. Two bearded men, their hair cropped prison-short, the forms of pistols at their waists visible through their polyester jackets, waited at a white Mercedes. Chardon saw no taxi. The two gunmen stepped toward her and she spun, trying to return to the hotel. Hands grabbed her.

A man spoke to her in Persian. She hit him with her typewriter case and simultaneously dropped her suitcase on the feet of the other man.

"Angelique!"

Recognizing the voice, she turned to see Fahkr Rajai. Elegant as always, Rajai took her arm and escorted her back to the Mercedes. His guards brought her suitcase and typewriter. "Why did you run?"

"Your men. I thought they would kidnap me. How could I know it would be you? I did not expect to see you here."

He pushed her into the back seat and sat beside her. "And I did not know you would leave without informing me."

"It doesn't matter. I will be back soon. I must go to Jounieh for the launch to Cyprus."

"We will take you there. Tell me of your evening with Kalaq. Or was it the night?"

Chardon snapped open her briefcase and gave Rajai the typed interview. "This is what I wrote of the evening. Do you want me to tell you of the night?"

"How can your sordid affairs interest me?"

As the driver guided the Mercedes through traffic, Rajai read the French article. Chardon watched him, waiting for a reaction. But his face showed nothing. She had met this strange man a year before, when he worked with the exiled Mujahedeen. Unlike the other Iranian men she knew in Paris, Rajai had not pursued her. This elegant schemer had never invited her to his chateau, hotel, rented room, or back seat. In fact, she had never seen him with a woman. Yet he watched her the times they talked, his eyes fixing on her breasts, the lines of her thighs under her skirt. Did she mistake those stares? Had he been one of the political prisoners emasculated by the Shah? Did he have no interest in women?

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It did not matter. She did not want to risk their business relationship to discover the sexual identity of this Iranian who looked like an Italian mannequin. He paid too well and provided too many introductions to other strange creatures of Middle Eastern politics and war-- like Kalaq.

"Is this all?" Rajai asked, returning the interview to her.

"What did you expect? A detailed strategic and political plan on the recapture of Palestine? An existentialist interpretation of the Palestinian experience? Another chapter for the Koran? Kalaq is no thinker. He only talks."

"And what of his time in Hayy al Sollom?" Rajai asked, turning, watching her. "He followed me. How did you pass the Hizbullah?"

"The Amals stopped us on the highway, but the others--"

"There was a checkpoint on the bridge."

"Nothing. They did not stop us."

"Did he or any of his men speak with them?"

"No."

"And in the district? Who did he contact? Names, streets, places, times."

Chardon shook her head, no. "We only taped the shooting. We asked a militiaman to fire at the Marines but he refused. So the cameramen had Kalaq's Palestinians shoot. Then a patrol came and told us to leave. He met no one. No one talked with him. It was all--" She remembered the thrill when Kalaq shot the boy, then the noise of Kalaq's rifle slamming her senses. If he had only proved as much a lover as a killer "A waste of time and video tape."

"Why do you return?"

"It is my editor's decision--"

"Tell him that events forced you to stay. The attacks against the Americans will continue."

"How do you know this?"

"I am only telling you of a rumor."

"And the French?"

Rajai shrugged. "I have heard nothing of that."

"But the Americans?"

"That, I have heard. Perhaps tonight."

"He has already told me to return."

"Were not the other rumors correct? And now you have excellent coverage of the victories."

"My editor would not allow me to call the attack on the French legionaires a victory. The word will be terrorism."

"Words. We will take you back to your hotel."

"But I must call my editor."

"You are a modern woman. Make your own decision."

Chardon surrendered. "Take me back."

The taxi stopped in front of her hotel. "You are there."

Rajai pushed her from the car. The bodyguards dumped her cases on the sidewalk. Chardon struggled back to the hotel entry, spitting out curses in three languages. But she would never curse Rajai to his face. She could not break contact with him-- she needed the money and names the arrogant little mannikin supplied. Without his Swiss checks financing her travel and expenses, without his calls alerting her to terrorist actions before the event, she had no hope of maintaining her flow of copy to newspapers and magazines. Her earnings from her articles and interviews did not meet her expenses. Somehow, she must end her dependency on the Iranian-- find a staff position on a magazine, marry a banker-- anything to escape from Rajai.

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Lines of tracers arced across the moonlit fields. Colonel Anthony Devlin crouched in the darkness, his eyes searching the shadows and tangles of brush for the bunker. Fifty meters away, he saw the Marine CP 69 and the Lebanese Army bunkers on the bridge across the Nahr al Ghadir.

Ahead, Devlin heard a distinct single shot from a 7.62NATO weapon, followed by a three-shot burst-- an M-60 machinegun. He rushed toward the hidden machinegunner and called out:

"Niles!"

A voice answered from the weeds. "Who's there?"

"I want to speak with Captain Niles."

"Don't know who you're talking about."

Devlin left the shadows. He wore a gray business suit and the gray cloth seemed to glow in the moonlight. Crouching, he held his black briefcase in front of him. He moved forward several steps, then crouched again, his eyes searched for the voice. Grass and low brush sloped down into the darkness of the streambed. He scanned the embankment but saw no one.

A rocket shot out from a tenement three hundred meters away. Devlin dropped down flat. Flame sprayed from the fields across the al Ghadir, the sound of the explosion coming an instant later. A shadow moved beside him. A pale face with high Slavic cheekbones spoke to him:

"Are you Colonel Devlin?"

"Correct."

"I'm Sergeant Vatsek--"

The colonel remembered the Sergeant Vatsek from fact-finding visits in

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August and early September. The son of Bolseviks driven from Russia by Stalin's purges, the sergeant had an unusual understanding of the Soviet threat to the Free World. The Force Reconnaissance non-com somehow moved silently in the dry weeds.

"-- just a second, Colonel. Shaffik, put it to them," Vatssek called out. "I got to talk with this man."

Steps away, a point of electronic green appeared, then went dark again. An M-60 fired a three-shot burst of 7.62NATO.

"Over here, Colonel," Vatssek led him through the brush. The sergeant's shoulders looked almost a meter wide. "Get some shelter. That's my apprentice Shaffik back there. First Lebanese Air Assault Battalion. I mounted a starlite scope on a righteous M-sixty and we're trying to kill us some E-rannies. But the fact is, we need artillery."

They came to a camouflaged bunker. "Captain? Colonel's here "

Devlin crouched behind a low wall of sandbags and waited. He heard low voices in the bunker speaking Arabic and English. A plastic black-out curtain parted as the sergeant went in. Weak light spilled out as silhouettes shifted in the doorway. The curtain fell back. A hand gripped his shoulder.

"Well, it's Colonel Marvel."

Friends for fifteen years, they shook hands. Devlin laughed at the old nickname of 'Marvel'. As an ambitious young intelligence lieutenant in Vietnam, his code name had been 'Captain Marvel' or 'Mr. Marvel'.

"As always," Niles continued in his harsh Appalachian accent. "You came through. Still in your D of C uniform. Look at that. Gray flannel camouflage for the war of the bureaucracies."

"I flew all night. I thought your offer required immediate action."

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"Imagine you shake them up, talking tough and actually trying to do it, too."

Colonel Devlin cut short the jokes. "What's the situation?"

"The situation? We got two hundred men dead and fifty more missing and the sentries are now permitted to load their rifles. Yes, sir. It is official."

"What about the assault on the airport?"

"Nothing much from my sources. But you can see what's going on. Those gangs over there are trying to kill more Marines. The men on the perimeter request artillery and zero-- it is inconsistent with our peacekeeping presence."

"All that is changing. There'll be a new man in command tomorrow."

"The Secretary of State resigned? Finally!"

"No. They replaced the commander here. The new headquarters unit is already on the ground."

"It wasn't the Marine commander who made the rules. But he'll take the blame for following State Department instructions. Nothing will change until the State Department understands that this isn't a peacekeeping operation anymore. That's why I called you to make the offer. There's no point in talking to our commander. You did get the authorization, right?"

"I did. And I took that authorization and flew out before they could reconsider. But there are conditions."

"Don't tell me, I'll guess. No loaded weapons."

"No U S weapons, equipment, or uniforms."

"Just like old times. We got all that."

"And a secondary mission. They want you to observe and report on the Iranians and Syrians in the area."

"They want prisoners?"

"No. Only your observations."

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"What if I take prisoners?"

"Question them over there. And don't bring them back."

"The Iranians and Syrians came into Hayy al Sollom in September. You saw it, you brief the Council."

"I don't qualify. Can you organize a unit and send them out there by tomorrow night?"

"Sir," Niles hesitated for a moment. "You and I go back a long time. I Corps, the incursions."

"Since I was a lieutenant."

"Right, we go back a long time. And look at us now. You a Colonel in the Pentagon, and me--" A penlight flared. "And me, a Captain in the Syrian Army"

Niles waved the weak beam over his uniform. He wore the rust and green Soviet-style uniform of the Syrian Army. "Ready to go now. We went last night."

"Without authorization."

"The authorization didn't come. Had to do it. And we're ready to go out again."

"That was an unwise-- that was an absolutely crazy thing to do. You would face courtmartial."

"Yeah, I know. I'm just out-and-out loco. But someone had to do it."

"What did you see?"

"Syrians and Iranians. Didn't see any concentrations of Party of God militia. But I got some documents. And I got a name. An Iranian named Rajai of the Revolutionary Guard who works as liaison between the Hizbullah and the Syrians."

"How did you do this?"

Niles described the observation and capture of the checkpoint, then the interrogation of the wounded Syrian.

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"What will you do tonight?"

"Take a walk through a different part of town. Look for a few hundred Party of God fanatics. Suppress some snipers. Why don't you come in and meet the other fellows?"

They pushed through the blackout tarp. In the bunker, Devlin saw four M-16 rifles propped against the wall. Two sets of U S M C field gear-- flack vests, folded camouflage fatigues, web gear, boots, and dogtags-- lay in neat stacks. Two other stacks contained similar uniforms but with the different web gear of the Lebanese Armed Forces.

A group of five men gathered around a map. Only Sergeant Vatssek wore Marine fatigues. Captain Niles and a dark featured Chicano wore the uniforms of the Syrian Army. Two Lebanese wore the mismatched uniforms and beards of militiamen. White headbands marked with blood-red Arabic script identified the two men as fighters for the Hizbullah. All four men had Soviet Kalashnikov rifles. One of the Lebanese also carried rockets and a launcher.

Folding the map, Captain Niles introduced the others. "You know Sergeant Vatssek. This is Sergeant Alvarez--"

"The captain thinks I look like a Syrian."

"More than I do. And you most definitely look more like a Syrian than Sergeant Vatssek."

"I could wear a chador," the sergeant joked, meaning the black head-to-foot gown of traditional Shiite women. The Americans and Hussein laughed. Hussein explained the joke to Gamal and the group laughed again at the idea of the hulking, two hundred forty pound weightlifter hidden under a black chaador.

"You'll go with us when we recon Russia." Niles took grease-stick camouflage from his pocket. He smoothed the brown paste over his tanned Anglo face as he

continued the introductions. "And my Lebanese friends are Hussein and Gamal of the Air Assault Battalion. Graduates of my courses."

"What do the headbands say?" Devlin asked.

"Oh, this?" Hussein pointed to the arabic script. "It is a vow to become a martyr. Which I hope is not my fate."

"Came true for the shee-it that wore it," Vatsek told Devlin.

"Hussein and Gamal happen to be gentlemen of traditional Islam," Niles explained to Devlin. "Of what is called Sunni. They do not agree with the teachings of the Shias--"

"Do not agree!" Hussein protested against the captain's mild phrasing. "They will persecute my people. If we don't fight them, Lebanon will be like Iran. Or they will destroy the country and then we will be part of Syria."

"Enemies of all the world," Gamal added, pronouncing the words slowly. He talked in Arabic with Hussein. They argued. Alvarez joined in the argument in halting Arabic.

"How will you maintain contact with the perimeter?" Devlin asked Niles. "You have radios?"

"We have radios but we can't risk calling back here." Niles slipped his walkie-talkies from one of his magazine pouches. "They're only citizen's band. Alvarez played with the frequency but he told me we can't trust it."

"The militias have got ones just like ours," Alvarez turned away from the Arabic argument to explain the radio problem. "Probably bought them at the same shop on Hamra. Rinky-dink things probably don't have the range to make it back there. Through all the buildings and all that. A very serious chance we'd just announce ourselves to the militias. We'll mostly be using ours for Morse code."

Niles looked to his men. "Ready to go?"

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They nodded. One by one, they pushed through the plastic tarp.

"What do you estimate your return time to be?" Devlin asked Niles.

"From where?"

The colonel looked across the moonlit fields to Hayy al Sollom.

"Me, go there?" Niles asked, incredulous. He rubbed the dark grease-paint onto his face. "We're not going there. I deny any suggestion that we would violate the Rules of Engagement. But you can expect us back from where we're not going sometime before dawn."