

Hearing his Revolutionary Guards muttering curses, Fahkr Rajai looked up from the 24 October edition of the New York Times to see yet another highway checkpoint. The headlights of his Mercedes illuminated a barricade of oil drums manned by bearded militiamen with Kalashnikov rifles. They wore photos of Imam Moussa Sadr on their fatigue jackets, the spiritual leader of Harakat Amal, the Movement of the Deprived. The driver slowed the sedan to a stop as the bodyguards lowered the muzzles of their rifles from the open windows. Through the tinted glass of his window, Rajai saw the forms of men surround the luxury sedan. One man leaned down and peered through an open window at the passengers inside.

Voices demanded identification. Rajai held up the newspaper to the dome light and resumed reading of the strike against the United States Marines. A courier had brought air express copies of American and French newspapers from Damascus to the Iranian Embassy for all the diplomats to enjoy. Other copies had been forwarded to Tehran for the commander and his staff of explosives technicians.

Though he did not read English as easily as Farsi or Arabic, he understood the words of the headline celebrated the victory —

BEIRUT DEATH TOLL AT 146 AMERICANS;
FRENCH CASUALTIES RISE IN BOMBINGS;

REAGAN INSISTS MARINES WILL REMAIN

Only one hundred forty six? A lie meant for the American people. The Mercedes bumped over sandbag speed barriers, then accelerated away from the Rajai/Recon hit/Rajai/Recon escape

RECON

Amal militiamen. Rajai continued reading the Times. He knew that the bomb had killed or maimed every Marine in the building. All four hundred. The explosion of the TNT and hexogene instantly killed every American in the basements and first two floors. Perhaps a few on the third floor survived to be maimed by the falling slabs of concrete. Only the sentries on the roof had any chance of survival.

Nothing less than annihilation justified the months of surveillance and planning. Agents masquerading as street vendors had detailed the Marine routine. European journalists took thousands of photos of the interior of the buildings. Then the search through Baalbek militias for the religious psychopaths to drive the trucks. Rajai had been the only Iranian working with the militias and their Syrian advisors from the beginning. His other countrymen-- officers and technicians of the Revolutionary Guard, others from the SAVAMA-- had come three weeks ago with the explosives. Under the supervision of Syrian and Palestinian technicians, they assembled the explosives. Yesterday the officers and technicians had returned to Damascus and Tehran to accept the glory:

U. S. Says Terrorists Tied
To Iran May Have Set
Off the Lethal Blast

Even the United States acknowledged Iran as the victor. Rajai laughed again at the last line of the headline-- REAGAN INSISTS. The words brought the mental image of the the retired movie star at a television press conference. In his imagination, he saw the aging matinee idol -- his hair slicked, his face tanned with cosmetics -- attempting to play the role of a world leader by mouthing rehearsed statements and posing for the video cameras. The elected movie actor could not speak without a script. Any unexpected question brought nonsense from his mouth that forced his press secretary issue immediate clarifications and explanations.

RECON

How would the actor-president and his staff of hacks explain this annihilation?

One of the column headings brought more laughter—

'DON'T LEAVE US,'
TRAPPED MEN CRY

Leaning to Akbar, the bodyguard who shared the backseat with him, Rajai pointed out the heading and translated the English words. "They are weeping, pleading to be saved--" He acted out a scene of a Marine clawing for air and screaming.

Akbar did not laugh. A grim veteran of five years of war, he had fought for the Revolution from the first days, seizing a rifle in the street riots against the Shah, then becoming one of the Guards of the Revolution. He proved himself utterly loyal to the Ayatollah Khomeini, obeying without question the orders to arrest and execute Mujahedeen allies during the purges, then volunteering for the trench warfare of the Iraqi Front. Rajai had checked through his file personally before accepting the man as his bodyguard. His scarred face an expressionless mask, Akbar watched Rajai mimicing the struggles of a dying Marine, then looked back to the street.

At that moment, Rajai decided to liquidate him. The soldier had protected Rajai throughout the past months, every hour of the day and night, riding in his Mercedes, standing guard outside the meetings, sleeping in the courtyard of his villa in Baalbek. Akbar knew by sight, if not by name, the Syrian officers, the Palestinian technicians, and the Lebanese militia leaders who had worked with Rajai. His capture or defection-- or any talk in the future to someone who worked for the Western intelligence agencies-- would compromise the mystery of the Islamic Jihad. What a reward for Akbars' courage and absolute loyalty-- the

RECON

execution wall. A joke. The driver slowed again, weaving through the curves of a series of barriers. The stink of sewage hit Rajai. Hizbullah militiamen manned this checkpoint on a bridge over the Nahr al Ghadir. Scowling portraits of Khomeini marked the end of Amal power. Past this checkpoint, fighters trained and armed by Iran had the authority to act in the name of the Islamic Revolution.

No one walked on the streets. Despite the early hour of the evening, no shops remained open. Only a few lights shone in the hundreds of windows overlooking the empty boulevard. Rajai heard firing, the far off sounds of rifles and machineguns.

Again, the demand for a pass. The bearded faces of militiamen with headbands proclaiming themselves as warriors of Allah stared at Rajai in his suit and tie, his barbered hair and razor-sculpted beard. One grabbed for the New York Times in his hands.

"He is a foreigner! He is reading the foreign pornography of Satan!"

The stupid creature called for assistance. A group of Hizbullah converged around the Mercedes. Kalashnikov rifles banged and scratched on the door. Hands reached inside to take the newspaper but Rajai folded it and placed it in his briefcase. His bodyguards talked quickly in their awkward Arabic, attempting to explain the privileges of an officer in the the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Finally their leader appeared. He recognized the Iranians from other visits to Hayy al Sollom and shoved the crowd of ragged militiamen away.

"Do not bother our comrades! They come as allies in our Revolution and you greet them with this trouble? My brothers, how can I help you?"

"We are expected at the prayers for the martyrs," the driver told him.

"Oh, yes. At the cinema. My men will take you there."

"My driver does not need a guide. We were there last night."

RECON

"But there is fighting with the Americans at the airport. And last night the Phalangists attacked us. Three of my men died here. I would be failing in my responsibilities if I did not provide an escort."

Several militiamen crowded into an open Land Rover. Posters of Khomeini glared from the doors and tailgate. Rajai could not understand the blind devotion of these of the Lebanese proletariat to the mullahs. His knowledge of Iran's culture and history rationalized his country's surrender to the mullahs, but these Lebanese did not share that tortured history even if they shared the same Shiite faith. Amal idolized Imam Moussa Sadr. The Islamic Amal and the Hizbullah worshiped the Ayatollah Khomeini. Sadr had already disappeared into the execution cells of Libya and Khomeini had retreated into madness. Neither mullah, nor any of the thousands of mullahs controlling the villages and towns and cities of the Shiite domain, offered the Persian and Arab societies a future: only a descent into the medieval past. Yet the devoted came by the millions, offering their lives to the madness of the Shiite myths, giving hundreds of thousands of their sons to the vast yawning grave of the Iraqi Front, condemning their daughters to life-long isolation within the woven prison walls of the black chador.

Of course, if Rajai ever expressed his thoughts out loud he would be immediately imprisoned, if not executed on the spot. He knew the terrible penalties for free thought and speech in his country-- both Imperial pre-revolutionary Iran and the Iran of the Ayatollah.

His father, a devout Shiite, had served in the Shah's Imperial Army as a Captain in command of an armored unit. The rapid modernization-- and the corruption, the captain believed-- of Iran offended his traditional values. He spoke too freely of his concerns. A cousin in the Shah's secret police, the SAVAK, warned him to leave. Captain Rajai fled with his family to Iraq, where they lived in exile with the Ayatollah Khomeini in Najaf, one of the Shiite shrine-cities.

RECON

Without a salary, without a command, Captain Rajai promoted himself to colonel and took work where he found it, training the forces of the warring Arab states, sometimes the irregular forces of the Palestinians. His young son Fahkr often travelled with him. Fahkr already spoke the the French of the international elite and the Arabic of Iraq. His travels taught him the dialects and politics of other nations-- Arab and European.

A decade later, the Shah pressured Saddam Hussein to expell Iranian troublemakers from Najaf. The family went to Paris. This second exile enhanced Colonel Rajai's international contacts. The colonel continued working in the Arab nations but also expanded his list of clients to include the French-speaking nations of Africa. With his knowledge of American, Soviet, and European armored vehicles Colonel Rajai trained elite units of tribal armies to use super-power military aid. International arms dealers occasionally contracted Colonel Rajai to demonstrate weapons in South America. Fahkr attended French colleges when he did not travel with his father. Sometimes he acted as a courier between his father and other devout exiles from Iran. Again, Fahkr learned-- the politics, the organizations, the personalties of exiled leaders. But he ceased to only observe and learn. In the years of the Ayatollah's residence in France, Fahkr Rajai exploited his father's reputation to ingratiate himself with the future leader of Iran. After the triumph of the mullahs, the Rajai family returned to Tehran. The middle-aged Colonel Rajai advised the new force of street fighters and assassins, the Revolutionary Guard, in the art of military organization. The young, polylingual Fahkr Rajai led platoons of Revolutionary Guards in search of royalists and liberals.

Then the mullahs turned on their fellow revolutionaries, the Mujahedeen. The Mujahedeen believed in a socialist Islamic society ruled by laws and elected secular leaders. Thousands of the Islamic socialists had died by torture or the

RECON

firing squad in the prisons of the Shah's secret police, the SAVAK. The Mujahedeen had fought side-by-side with other Iranians to depose the Shah, then paraded in the streets to celebrate the return of Khomeini. In the years of the purge, Rajai went name by name, address by address down the official membership lists of the National Liberation Movement. Thousands died by torture or the bullet or the noose in the prisons of the Ayatollah's secret police, the SAVAMA.

His performance in the pursuit of the heretics won the trust of SAVAMA. After shattering the Mujahedeen organization in Tehran, the SAVAMA sent Rajai to France to infiltrate the exile organizations there. The SAVAMA intended to dispatch Revolutionary Guard kill-squads to eliminate the leaders of the expatriate factions in opposition to Khomeini. Rajai warned his commander in Tehran of the efficiency of the French security forces. But SAVAMA sent the killers.

Within days, the French police captured the assassins with their weapons-- Rajai had anonymously informed on his comrades. His forewarning of the arrests gained the respect of his commander. Rajai continued his work with the Mujahedeen exile organization. His months of patience earned a position on the staff. He learned which leader ran the surviving networks in Iran, then requested a second Revolutionary Guard team-- but this time with a French mercenary pilot and a plane to wait at a provincial airfield. The team kidnapped the network leader and flew him to Tehran for interrogation.

In the chaos of the disappearance, Rajai worked with the staff of the missing leader to salvage and reorganize the Mujahedeen networks in Iran. He never saw or heard a name, but he saw the safe where the staff put their lists. Booking a flight on the next Paris to Tehran flight, he burglarized the office and stole the lists.

Rajai returned to Tehran and supervised the liquidation of several Mujahedeem cells. His next assignment sent him to Baalbek, as an advisor to the

RECON

Revolutionary Guard units working with the Syrians to combat the Israeli occupation forces. When the American president sent Marines to protect the Palestinians and Shiites from the Christians and Israelis, he co-ordinated the training of the Hizbullah militias and armed them for their assaults on the Marines. Then came the assignment to prepare for the bombing of the Marine headquarters.

Now with that victory on his record, he continued in his long-term liaison with the Syrians and plotted more attacks. As long as the Americans maintained a presence in Lebanon, Rajai would send fanatics to strike-- at their soldiers, at the embassy diplomats, at the professors of the American University of Beirut, at their journalists, then at their citizens.

Tonight, the Hizbullah threw themselves on the Marine lines. Rajai expected a slaughter-- of the Hizbullah militiamen and Marines. Shiite casualties did not concern him. He wanted more headlines, more photos of American dead and wounded on the front pages of international newspapers.

The Land Rover led his Mercedes through the narrow, war-ruined streets of Hayy al Sollom. Over the noise of automatic rifles firing, he heard the chanting of the militiamen, the ritual prayer and flagellation echoing in the streets as the militiamen vowed to embrace martyrdom.

Rajai thought of the New York Times column linking the bombing of the Marines to Iran. Let the Americans accuse Iran. Let them threaten Iran and plead with their European allies for a united response to terror. Let them isolate Iran and starve the people. Let the United States attack Iran.

The terror would not stop. The fanatics of Iran wanted to die, they sought death in their holy war. No American threat or counter-attack would defeat the mass psychosis of his tortured people. And when the holy war against the American invaders left his nation ruined, then the Soviets would play their role and

RECON

drive out the Americans.

Rajai wanted to lead his people into the twenty-first century. The creation of a new Iran required the destruction of the old Iran. As Josef Stalin had used the gulag and the Nazis to create a modern Soviet Union, FakhR Rajai would use the madness of the revolution and a war with America to create a modern Iran-- with FakhR Rajai as the nation's leader.

Niles memorized the features and clothing of the young man who left the black Mercedes. Two bodyguards accompanied him. Like the Iranians who had arrived earlier, these men wore slacks and coats. But the one with the briefcase looked different than the others.

First, the briefcase. Who carried a briefcase in a war? The other men carried folding-stock Kalashnikovs. And his suit. As the young man walked through spots of light from the windows, Niles saw the lines of the trousers, the tailored fit of the coat across his shoulders, the conservative blue of the fabric-- the young man dressed like a diplomat. He wore his hair styled and his beard neatly-trimmed. Then he went into the theater.

"That one wasn't a militiaman," Niles whispered to Hussein.

"The soldiers with him, they look like the Iranians."

"Yeah, that they do."

Smoke drifted over the rooftop. A block away, the stockpiled munitions had burned out. Only a streak of acrid, greasy smoke rose from the tenement. The pops of single shots and short bursts of sniping continued. In the street, two militiamen carried a wooden crate of ammunition toward the bunker. Other militiamen stood on the corners of the block.

The chant stopped. In the seconds of silence that followed, Niles heard a Rajai/Recon hit/Rajai/Recon escape

RECON

militia leader shouting to his men to unload the rockets. Teams of Hizbullah worked in the backs of the trucks, passing crates of munitions to men in the street. Niles leaned out and looked straight down. Boxes and weapons lined the sidewalks, ready for distribution.

An amplified voice boomed in the theater. Hussein gave Niles a running translation. "They will attack, they will be the vanguard of the revolution, they will be the sword of God's revolution, they will drive the Marines into the sea--"

"This is serious," Niles left the facade and ran to the back of the building where Alvarez waited with a radio. "Did he get the authorization?"

"No call back yet."

"Sergeant, you willing to do something that is seriously dangerous?"

"I'm here. What could be more--"

"I want to hit them."

Alvarez laughed softly. "Oh, yeah ... that would be seriously dangerous. But with what, sir? Rifles against a crazy convention? They've got it all-- numbers, firepower, rockets."

"More widows if we don't. They'll overrun the line and run straight into the headquarters."

"If we do it, can we get out?"

A faint buzz came from their C B radios. They listened on their hand-radios as Vatsek reported: "This Victor. Strike denied authorization. Even Mr. Marvel can't get no satisfaction. I put out the word to the line."

"Yeah?" Niles spoke into his radio. "This actual. Put this word out to the line. Stand by for hot foot. Be advised, hot foot."

"What? Request repeat."

"Hotel Oscar Tango. Uniform Sierra Mike Charlie. Over." Niles turned to Alvarez. "This will be wild--" He went to the stairs and hissed to Gamal. He

RECON

explained to Alvarez and Gamal what he needed. "This kid is going to walk out on that street and pick up a crate of rockets and a launcher."

"I have six," Gamal pointed to the sack on his back.

"We need more. Bring in the crate and one or two launchers. Then you and Alvarez bring them up to me and Hussein on the roof. Now. Move fast and we can do this."

Niles ran back to the front. The amplified voice continued. "We're going to hit them."

Hussein stared at the American. "How? There are hundreds!"

"Won't be hundreds when we're done."

Below, Niles saw Gamal leave the street entry of the building. Gamal walked directly to the stacks of equipment and crates. He took a rocket launcher and a crate of rockets. Staggering with the weight, he started back. A militiaman stopped him. Gamal swayed with the weight of the crate as the militiaman approached him. Niles saw the two men talk for a moment, then the militiaman took one end of the crate. Together, they carried the rockets into the building. The steel stairs at the street end of the courtyard rang with boots.

The militiaman appeared first, then Gamal. Niles smashed the Hizbullah's skull with a fist-sized block of concrete. Alvarez ran up the steps.

"His rifle and ammunition and web gear to Gamal. I get the grenades." Niles told Alvarez. Then he pulled his combat knife and levered off the lid of the crate. He told Hussein. "All these rockets, pull them out of the tubes, get them ready." Then he motioned Gamal over to him. Niles pointed out the targets on the street.

"Your first rocket goes into that last truck, next rocket into that first car. Then all the other rockets, you point at the entrance to the cinema or at the roof and shoot. I want rockets through the roof and inside. We'll reload for you."

RECON

"Yes-- yes--" Gamal stuttered as he stripped off his pack of rockets.

"Don't panic and keep putting out rockets. And keep the tailpipe pointed up in the air."

Alvarez brought a Kalashnikov and a vest with several magazines of ammunition. He gave the vest to Gamal. The militiaman had also carried Soviet fragmentation grenades. Niles laid out the grenades, then his remaining US-issue grenades. He kept two of the M67 grenades for their retreat.

A line of rockets stood ready for Gamal. Niles pointed to the Syrians and Iranian on the roof, telling Alvarez, "Hit them with the first burst, then the sentries. They're the only ones who can hit us." He looked to Gamal. "Ready? When we shoot, you hit them."

Gamal shouldered his launcher and nodded. Alvarez set extra magazines near his rifle and sighted on the opposite roof.

Taking a long breath, then exhaling, Alvarez snapped three quick shots into the standing Syrians and Iranian. Niles wasted ammunition, firing his Kalashnikov on full-automatic to kill the Hizbullah sentries on the roof. Gamal's rocket shrieked away, tearing through the last troop truck. Niles took the second launcher and fired the rocket into a truck parked in front of the theater entrance. The warhead punched into the diesel tanks and sprayed flaming fuel. Niles passed the launcher back to Hussein to reload.

Flames lit the street. As Gamal fired the third rocket, Niles pulled the wire pins from the Soviet serrated iron grenades as threw them as quickly as he could pull and throw. He threw two far down the street, then two in front of the theater.

Thirty seconds passed before the first return fire. Bullets chipped at the concrete, the deformed slugs humming into the sky. The high angle of their position denied the militiamen on the street any target. Following Niles' instructions, Gamal did not risk aiming after the first three rockets. Hussein

RECON

passed him reloaded launchers, then Gamal pointed at the curving auditorium roof of the theater and fired the rockets, the warheads shrieking into the tar and asbestos and exploding inside the auditorium. Other times, he only held the launcher out at arm's length and fired the rocket down at panicked militiamen rushing from the entrance.

The Marines could not lean out to fire on the street. Niles shouted out to Alvarez. "Get down to the back stairs. Don't let them get through the street door."

A rocket shrieked past, a miss, the warhead continuing hundreds of meters into the night and self-destructing. Niles chanced a glance down into the street-- seeing flames, wrecked trucks, corpses, running men-- and bullets punched into the concrete wall, fragments slashing the side of his head, spinning away his Syrian beret. He fell back and touched blood in his hair. Hussein came to his aid and Niles pushed him away. "Reload those rockets!"

Niles pulled the pin from an M67, counted off two seconds, and dropped it down to the building entrance. Without risking his life again to look, he threw the next fragmentation grenade approximately twenty meters away, between the entrance and the theater. He saw that Gamal only had four more rockets to fire. Niles dropped another grenade in front of the entrance, then took a rocket launcher.

Aiming at the stairwell on the roof of the theater, he waited. He saw a form moving on the doorway and fired, the rocket hitting a step short of the doorway. Forms dived from the stairs at that instant but the flash tore through the concrete, shattering the stairs and housing, sending broken concrete across the domed roof.

As Gamal fired the last rockets, Niles emptied his Kalashnikov at the remains of the stair shaft. He snapped another magazine into the rifle and motioned Gamal and Hussein back.

Rifle and machinegun slugs tore at the facade, impacts coming continuously,

RECON

bits of concrete flying. A rocket hit low on the building, blast and flame roaring upward. Niles and the Lebanese troopers ran for the back stairs. Rifles fired in the courtyard. Behind them, they heard another rocket explode at their abandoned position.

The Lebanese went down the stairs first. At the top, Niles watched the front entry. Flames from the street backlit a form. He fired, and below him, Alvarez fired, the two slugs dropping a militiaman among the other bodies in the courtyard. When Gamal and Hussein cleared the stairs, Niles rushed down.

Only Alvarez waited. "They're already out of here."

Hizbullah militiamen rushed through the front entry. Niles leveled his Kalashnikov and swept the entry with full-auto 7.62ComBloc while Alvarez fired single shots into two forms sprinting through the darkness.

The courtyard went quiet. At the far end, they saw a rectangle of flame. "Get back, Alvarez. Move it--"

"Rockets are next--"

"Move it!"

Alvarez backed out of the building. Niles went prone, his Kalashnikov resting on the walkway. He took an M67 from his bag. Pulling the pin, he turned to the heavy plank door.

At the street, a militiaman appeared, a rocket launcher on his shoulder.

"Move!" Alvarez shouted out.

Niles spun and Alvarez fired once, the slug knocking the militiaman back. But the rocket flashed away. Niles fell, his hands closed around the grenade.

The passageway exploded, concrete and tiles showering Niles. But the rocket had gone high, hitting the wall above the rear exit passageway. Dust filled the passageway. Crawling, Niles put the armed grenade under a slab of concrete, then scrambled out the exit. Alvarez grabbed his arm and dragged him to the side

RECON

as several automatic rifles hammered in the courtyard, bullets splitting the door, ricocheting from the walls.

"Cut across," Niles pointed toward the gully of the Nahr River. "Back the way we came." Alvarez tried to lift Niles to his feet. Niles twisted away. "Move it, sergeant."

"With you, sir."

Niles did not answer. He found a can in the trash piles around him. Pulling the pin out of the last US-issue grenade, he put the grenade in the can and set it on the path from the exit. He fired a burst back into the building. "Now we go--"

Flames roared in the street. Rockets pinwheeled from the burning trucks, the warheads slamming against walls and careening off in spirals. Rajai stood in the lobby of the theater, his briefcase clutched in his hands. A mass of torn bodies blocked the theater door. Men screamed, clawing at the dead sprawled across them, twisting to free themselves from the carnage. Across the street, the firing continued as the Hizbullah fighters assaulted the gunmen who had attacked the gathering.

Akbar crouched at the side of the entry, watching the assault. No more bullets or rockets came at the theater, no more anti-personnel grenades exploded in the street. Rajai joined Akbar.

Bodies lay in the street. Rajai saw that his Mercedes burned. Wounded men crawled away from the flames. Groups of Hizbullah stood at both sides of a tenement entrance. One fighter with a rocket launcher leapt into the center with a rocket ready, but as his rocket shrieked away he lurched back and fell. The blast sent dust and smoke clouding from the entry. The man with the rocket launcher lay in the street, not moving as other fighters rushed into the building, their Soviet

RECON

rifles firing on automatic.

A militiaman emerged from the entry and motioned the groups of waiting men to follow.

"Who were they?" Rajai asked his bodyguard.

"They have not been seen."

Rajai saw fighters crowding through the entry. He started across the street and Akbar called him back. "My leader Rajai. It is not safe. You should not--"

"Then come with me."

Akbar shouted back to the theater. Three surviving Revolutionary Guards hurried out with rifles. Staying one step ahead of Rajai, Akbar preceded his officer into the building. Men shouted, rifles fired from the far end of the interior courtyard.

The tiny explosion lit the rear passage for an instant, the yellow flash silhouetting militiamen holding rifles, their forms twisting in the narrow passage. Rajai stumbled over a wounded man, the man screaming out. Akbar caught Rajai and led him to the side.

More screams came. A man staggered from the billowing dust, his body lurching oddly with every step. Rajai saw that the Hizbullah fighter had only one foot. Other men screamed and pleaded from a tangle of bodies and broken concrete. Militiamen dragged the dead and wounded out of the passage. Other militiamen stepped over the men on the pavement and fired.

Rajai hurried to the passage but this time Akbar stood in front of him and would not move. "It is not safe."

A voice shouted out. "They are running toward the Marines. They are Marines."

Hizbullah crowded through the narrow passage. Another explosion stopped their pursuit. Akbar pushed Rajai back to the shelter of a corner as more wounded

RECON

staggered back. An officer shouted into the passageway. "Come back. This is a trap."

Bullets slammed into the men, throwing the walking wounded down, making the dead jerk. Small 5.56mm bullets from the rifles of the Marines hundreds of meters away pinged from the concrete. The heavier 7.62NATO slugs from the machineguns hit like hammers.

Retreating men fell over the others--

A flash swept the passage of life, one of the small American rockets exploding in the confined space, the blast throwing concrete and fragments of men everywhere in the courtyard. Legless, the Hizbullah officer screamed as blood gushed from his stumps.

Rajai signaled his bodyguards to follow him. Still holding his briefcase, he led them from the slaughterhouse of the courtyard to the street. "Find the officers. If they are to attack, it must be now."

One of the Iranians ran to the theater, another to a group of Hizbullah tended to their wounded. Another explosion tore through the tenement as a second American rocket hit. Militiamen dragged wounded from the entry. A crowd of Hizbullah gathered there and took the wounded, rushing their bleeding and maimed comrades away from the flaming line of trucks and cars. Lines of wounded lay in the street. Attendants struggled to cram wounded into a single white Pinto station wagon.

A wounded man with tourniquets on both legs screamed and thrashed in the hands of four militiamen. The wounded man pointed at Rajai and raved: "You Syrian dogs did this. I saw your soldiers. Why did you attack us? Why?"

Rajai went to the raving militiaman. "You saw who attacked us?"

"Syrians! I saw Syrians! Syrian soldiers did this" Convulsing, the man coughed blood. The other militiamen carried him away.

RECON

"Who saw the soldiers?" Rajai asked the crowd of Hizbullah. "Is there someone who saw who attacked?"

"Ask the dead," one militiaman shouted back.

Akbar returned with a Hizbullah officer. Blood covered the officer's hands. The officer stared around at the flaming trucks and the lines of wounded men. He did not look at Rajai until the Revolution Guard took his arm and turned him to Rajai.

"When will you attack?" Rajai asked.

"What?" The officer only stared.

"When will you attack the Marines?"

The Hizbullah officer walked away. Blood glistened his short cut hair and streamed down the back of his uniform. Akbar started after the man but Rajai motioned his bodyguard to stop. "Did you see others?"

"No."

"And the mullah?"

"He is injured. He fell off the stage."

"Syrians?"

"They are dead."

Rajai looked at the flaming trucks, the bodies in the blood-splashed street, the militiamen helping their wounded. Only a few minutes before, this mass of Hizbullah would have assaulted and overwhelmed the few Marines guarding the airport runways. Now they only cursed the unknown enemies who had struck and escaped. Curses meant nothing to the newspapers and televisions of the world. The terror war against the Americans required American dead. And this incident offered only more anonymous Lebanese corpses. In a civil war that had already killed a hundred thousand, fifty or hundred more corpses meant nothing.

No victory tonight. Rajai accepted that. But then, he had not lost. No

RECON

cameras had recorded the attack. The killers of these Hizbullah did not even gain a fifteen-second video clip on the evening news. There would be no images of a successful counter-strike by Marines or American allies to diminish the Iranian victory of 23 October.

"Find a car," he told Akbar. "We return to Baalbek."

To plan the next strike against the Marines.

At the al Ghadir, Niles turned and watched the fields as the others slid down to the streambed. He saw no militiamen pursuing his squad. Rifles and machineguns continued firing from the tenements of Hayy al Sollom but the Marine outposts remained silent. A few bursts of return fire came from the black form of the Lebanese Army bunker on the bridge. Niles watched the L A F bunker for sentries-- he wanted no lethal errors.

Sliding down the embankment, Niles went west. Brush and weeds concealed the four men from the Lebanese bunker. They passed under the bridge, slowing to maintain their silence as they walked through the darkness. Niles placed his boots by touch, feeling for trash or brush before stepping forward. Above him, he heard music and the voices of the Lebanese soldiers. The music stopped. Voices faded away. In the total darkness under the bridge, Niles did not risk stopping-- Gamal or Hussein might blunder into him. He continued through to the moonlight and crouched down against the side of the gully.

Auto-fire exploded from the bunker above him. Gamal and Hussein rushed from under the bridge. They took cover in the brush. Past the bridge, Niles saw dust clouding from the embankment. The Lebanese soldiers put out hundreds of rounds in wild full-automatic. Tracers ricocheted, spinning away. Niles could not see Alvarez. A grenade popped. The rifle fire quit as the soldiers emptied their

RECON

weapons. A belt-fed machinegun continued cutting the night with long bursts.

Alvarez rushed out. Niles broke from his cover and followed him.

"What are they shooting at?"

"Not me," Alvarez shouted back.

Behind them, the rifles fired again. Gamal and Hussein splashed through the filth and raced up the embankment. They shouted out their names.

"Lookouts coming in," Vatsek bellowed out. "Hold your fire!"

Alvarez followed them, then Niles went up the embankment. A muzzle flashed point-blank. Niles threw himself to the side, rolling away through the weeds, then scrambling into the cover of a low bush. He looked up to see Vatsek firing an M60 from the hip, sweeping the heavy machinegun from side to side to saturate the streambed.

White light seared the scene. The tiny point of a pop-up flare floated overhead, revealing a bloody Hizbullah militiaman sprawled in the sand. Vatsek fired another long burst into the corpse, spraying blood and flesh.

Without leaving his concealment, Niles called out. "I think he's dead."

Vatsek waved across the Nahr to the Lebanese soldiers at the bunker. "Nah. He lives on. Sunbathing forever at the Motel Allah. Just lay cool, sir. Don't want to have to explain you. Wait til that light goes out"

The flare burned out and Niles rushed to the top of the embankment. He heard Colonel Devlin congratulating him, but he did not stop moving until he pushed through the plastic black out curtain screening the Marine bunker. Colonel Devlin followed him inside.

Alone in the bunker, they sat in the darkness as Captain Niles described the improvised strike on the Hizbullah. Colonel Devlin listened. He did not debrief Niles, did not interrupt him with questions-- later he would question all four men as a group. The colonel let Niles speak until he ended his story.

RECON

"Remarkable. A platoon could not have done it but four men did."

"Luck, colonel. I used up all the luck I had."

"I don't believe in luck. Luck is discipline. Luck is preparation for an eventual opportunity. You prepared, you moved, you encountered a target of opportunity--"

"And we escaped. That gang of fanatics back there is not professional. If we'd been up against Pa- Vin, we would have been dead."

"But you did encounter a professional."

"Yeah, the Iranian. The executive with the briefcase. Maybe he was Rajai. But I don't believe it was his show. He had Pasdaran-- Revolutionary Guards-- with him, but they were his bodyguards. The same with the Syrians. They were professionals, but they were there to watch the crazies. Those Hizbullah-- one of them may have driven the truck, but they didn't make the bomb. They didn't plan the bombing. That was professional work."

"The Iranian. You think you could recognize him? If we show you photos?"

"I memorized him."

"And if I could win the authorization, would you go after him?"

"Most definitely. I'm going to be thinking about hundreds of dead Marines for the rest of my life. And I want to be able to think that I got them justice. Most definitely I would chase that Iranian and anyone else who was in on that bombing. I would buy my own boots."

"That will not be necessary. And how did those two Lebanese soldiers do?"

"They did good."

"Would you foresee any problems with loyalty in a future action against other Islamics?"

"Sir, religion is not their motivation. They are Lebanese nationalists. They like living in the twentieth century. They went out against the Hizbullah because

RECON

those crazies would give the country to Iran. I don't know if I'd want to involve them in what we're talking about. Rather have someone who speaks Farsi."

"Farsi. That may be difficult."

"There's got to be a Farsi-speaking Marine somewhere in the world."

"Tomorrow, I return to Washington. National Security Advisor Reisinger took me out of the Special Operations Division. I'll be with an office in the Council."

"Congratulations, Colonel. You're there."

"Temporarily. Only for this project. I'll brief my superiors on your observations and attempt to describe your success tonight without ending your career-- If anyone, in the Corps or out, asks you what happened tonight, do not answer them. Only in my presence and with my authorization. Do you understand me?"

Niles laughed. "What happened tonight? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Exactly. I'll give the same instructions to the other men. However, I will say nothing of the future action. That is between you and I. It may be weeks before we can begin organizing a counter-action, so please be patient. There are many who will refuse to contemplate this. But I will not stop until we bring the murderers of those Marines to justice. I promise you that."

"Ready to go. Send the word."