

RECON

09

Vatsek led the platoon of Lebanese recruits through physical training. After warm-ups, he progressed to strength exercises -- flutter-kicks, sit-ups, slow isometric punches. Then he went to push-ups, dropping down prone in the sand on his fists. The recruits did the push-ups with their palms down. Vatsek called out to the English-speaking platoon leader, "On their fists!"

The platoon struggled to keep up with Vatsek's count, their wrists buckling, sand and stones digging into their knuckles. The two hundred forty pound sergeant beat out push-ups like a machine, every line of his muscles defined through the o.d. green t-shirt he wore. The platoon tired and struggled, some of the teenagers flopping down into the sand.

On the last push-up, Vatsek punched hard against the earth and jumped to his feet in karate sparring stance. He punched and kicked in a fluid two-count technique, returning to sparring stance after the kick. At twenty-five, he switched to the left side and started again. The recruits groaned. Some stopped. Vatsek moved along the front line of recruits, targetting a punch and kick at anyone not following the count. A punch to the chest sent one teenager flying back. A kick dropped another recruit. Vatsek shouted out, "Kick or get kicked!" He drove a kick into the stomach of a recruit gasping for breath.

Niles and Lieutenant Shaffik Hijazi watched from the side of the sandbag-walled training field. The head-high walls protected the recruits and their Marine trainers from snipers or car bombs driven into the compound.

"What an animal," Hijazi commented. He grinned to Niles, "After this, they will want to fight the militias. Anything to escape the sergeant."

RECON

"King Kong cuts no slack," Niles laughed.

"Line up!" Vatsek told the platoon. "Karate test. One line. Every man attacks. Line up and attack!"

Vatsek stood in the center of the sandpit in Shotokan karate sparring stance, his right foot a natural distance behind his left, his arms held low to cover his ribs. The Lebanese recruits crowded into a line and watched as the first soldier rushed their American instructor. His arm going back to swing, the soldier screamed out a battle cry. Vatsek waited as the distance closed, then snapped an easy front kick into the recruit's stomach. Breath exploded from the young man's body and he fell backwards, doubled up and gasping. He crawled away.

The second soldier hesitated. The man behind him shoved him out. This soldier tried to employ karate techniques, front kicking twice in the empty air as he advanced. As the soldier drove a third kick at Vatsek's torso, Vatsek stepped aside and shoved his shoulder, throwing the soldier sideways into the sand. A third soldier shuffled forward in a cautious sparring stance, keeping his arms in front of his body, his eyes locked on Vatsek. The line of soldiers cheered the young man. Niles recognized him. "Hey, sergeant. Watch out! He's a black belt."

"Oh, yeah?"

Lunging, the soldier jabbed at Vatsek's face. Vatsek slapped the punch aside, then blocked a punch at his gut. The soldier took a half-step back and threw a round-house kick at Vatsek's head. A quick slap stopped the kick. Vatsek took a step back. "Yeah, he's okay. He can punch and kick--"

As the soldier lunged forward again, Vatsek spun and shot a back kick into the young man's solar plexus, throwing him backwards through the air. He crashed into the line of recruits.

"But he can't fight. This is too fucking much. Weeks I've been standing out here drilling them and they think--"

RECON

Behind the sergeant, the recruits whispered, urging on the next soldier in line. As the sergeant talked, the soldier attacked his back.

"-- that this is a French lesson, all yes, sir and no, sir. Polite and all that shit." Turning and taking a step, Vatsek threw a classic reverse punch. He looked like an illustration in a textbook, the geometry of his stance perfect, his back straight, his massive shoulders locking as his fist smashed into the center of the soldier's stomach. The soldier fell backwards and groaned. The platoon of soldiers laughed-- except for the next in line. Vatsek held the formal stance for an instant, then turned back to Niles. "Captain, what can I do with these jerks? Weeks of training and they don't have the first idea of what's going on."

"They're teenagers. They haven't had ten years of karate."

"They're not going to live ten more years if they don't learn something."

Niles turned to Hijazi. "Show them something, lieutenant. You're not a black belt but you can knock him around."

"God willing" Like Vatsek, Hijazi followed a weight -training discipline. He stood less than six feet tall but weighed two hundred pounds. He had received hand-to-hand combat training at Fort Benning. And Vatsek had personally tutored the lieutenant in combat karate. "Sergeant! I challenge you!"

The recruits cheered their officer. The stocky Hijazi went to the center of the area and faced Vatsek. Standing straight, heels together, his hands at his sides, Vatsek formally bowed to the lieutenant before taking a sparring stance. Hijazi circled Vatsek, forcing Vatsek to turn to follow him.

Rushing, Hijazi threw a powerful kick at Vatsek's groin. Instead of down-blocking the kick, Vatsek pivoted to the side and scooped upward with his forearm as he simultaneously deflected a punch. One hand gripping the lieutenant's shirtfront, the other his belt buckle, Vatsek heaved him into the air and held him. Hijazi thrashed.

RECON

A camera flashed. Niles whipped around to see a thin blonde woman photographing Vatsek and Hijazi. He shouted out, "No photos of the trainers!" She ignored Niles and continued flashing photos as Vatsek spun the Lebanese lieutenant around. Hijazi screamed. Niles rushed at the woman and grabbed her camera out of her hands. The strap around her neck jerked taut and she slapped at his face with one hand, clawing at his hands with the other. She cursed him in French. He understood every word but he didn't bother to respond. He only repeated:

"No photos of the American trainers." Seconds later, Lieutenant Hijazi and Vatsek joined him. Speaking calmly in French, the lieutenant slipped the strap from the woman, allowing Niles to take the camera. The woman screamed as Niles popped open the back and pulled out a long loop of film. Without closing the camera, Niles handed it back to her.

"Sorry, but you knew the rules. You can look, you can interview, but you can't take the names or photos of Americans. You knew that."

The woman switched to English. "I thought he was French. The Legionaires allow us to photograph."

"Uh huh," Niles nodded, grinning, watching her take the ruined film from the camera. He remembered her from the day of the bombing, weeks before. A very pretty woman, she wore no make-up on her slight features and white skin-- only a touch of lipstick, like an afterthought. She wore her white-blonde hair pulled back and bound with a rubber band, accenting her thin neck. A loose dark blue sweater contrasted with her white skin. Small breasted, lithe, she had the body of a teenager. But the tight denim over her hips and thighs revealed a woman's figure. She wore no jewelry-- no earrings or bracelets, no wedding ring.

Closing her camera, she looked up to him smiling. "You said interviews. Will you talk with a reporter?"

"Who you with, miss?"

RECON

"I am independent. But I sell to Le Monde and Match. Sometimes the American newspapers and magazines."

"You must be a brave young woman to work Lebanon."

"And you, too, American. Many Marines died here."

"Marines are cheap. Ask the State Department."

"I want to ask you--"

"Don't quote what I just said."

"But you'll talk with me?"

"Sure," Niles smiled to her. "Cost you a few beers."

"In West Beirut? That may be difficult. There is a prohibition against alcohol."

"Not everywhere. But let's make it easy. We'll talk here in the compound. Cost you nothing."

Niles led her along a walkway walled with sandbags. Since the bombings, the Lebanese compound had become a sandbag fortress. Shovel and bag details worked every day to shield sentries and personnel. Soldiers walked from the sentry posts to the offices to the training field without exposure to the snipers firing from the nearby districts. Niles and the young woman passed a group of soldiers placing wooden beams over the walls-- soon the walkway would be a tunnel through sandbags, secure from snipers, mortars, shrapnel. Only a direct hit from an artillery shell or heavy rocket would threaten the soldiers.

"You are an officer?" she asked him.

"That I am. Disappointing?"

"No, but I did not think an officer would speak with a journalist."

"Well, this officer wants to talk."

"You are critical of your country's Lebanese policy?"

"You can't quote what I say. But it's not like this Marine doesn't know what's going on."

RECON

They came to the vehicle yard. Above the parked trucks and cars, banks of black clouds loomed on the eastern horizon. A cold wind blew brought the stink of garbage and tenements from the ghettos. "Ask your questions here. Don't want the Lebanese officers wondering what I'm talking about."

"What will be the American response to the bombing?"

"You read the newspapers. It's history."

"There will be no response?"

"Against who?"

"Your President said the Syrians and Iranians were responsible."

"Maybe he knows something I don't. Miss, I can't really--"

"Angelique Chardon."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Chardon. Call me Lester. I can't help you with those questions. I thought you wanted to talk to me about my work here with the Lebanese."

"Have you overcome the hatred of the Moslems for the Christians?"

"I don't know if the word is hatred. All the soldiers are volunteers. They volunteered to serve in the armed forces. If they hated Christians, they'd be in the militias. We stress loyalty to the government, not the faith."

"But the government is controlled by the Maronites."

"Now we're talking politics. I can't comment on politics. But I am aware of the problems."

"Without changing the regime, the civil war will continue--"

"There it is."

"Do you believe your government will--"

"I can't talk politics. Not here."

Across the vehicle lot, a jeep stopped at the sentry post. Niles saw Marines inside-- and he recognized Colonel Devlin.

RECON

Chardon did not take his refusal as final. "You are the only officer I met who will talk. And I want to hear your thoughts on Lebanon and the civil war. If we meet somewhere else, can we talk?"

"Where?"

"On the other side of the city."

"Okay. But not now. I've got to go back to my duties." He saw one sentry check the identification of the driver. Another sentry walked around the jeep with an underview mirror-- a rectangular mirror on rollers. A long handle allowed the sentry to wheel the mirror around the jeep and examine the frame and undercarriage. Only after the check for hidden explosives did the sentries wave through the jeep.

She gave him a card. "There is the phone number of my hotel. And the number of a message service. If one does not work, try the other one."

Freelance reporters moved from faction to faction. Did she want to develop Niles as a source of information? "Thanks. See you later. Maybe I'll call if I want to talk at you. Sorry about spoiling your film, but you broke the rules."

"I hope we talk again." Chardon told him as she walked away through the trucks.

Niles watched the jeep stop. A Marine left the jeep with the colonel. Niles did not recognize the tall, wide-shouldered black man. Two gold bars identified the Marine as a lieutenant. He wore a pistol belt and carried an poster-sized folder but no rifle. Glancing toward the sentry post, Niles did not see Chardon among the parked cars and trucks.

"Captain," Devlin called out. "Allow me to introduce you to Second Lieutenant Richard Stark."

"Pleased to meet you, sir."

"Lieutenant Stark is the son of a friend. When his father told me that the lieutenant had completed his Recon training only a few weeks ago, I offered him the

RECON

opportunity to volunteer for your new unit."

"New unit, Colonel?"

"You are no longer a trainer." Devlin looked behind Niles and saw no one within hearing. "You now head a special operations squad directed by National Security Advisor Reisinger."

"And what's the special operation?"

"The capture for interrogation of the commander of the Revolutionary Guards in Baalbek."

Across the vehicle yard, Chardon braced her camera on the door of a truck and focused the zoom lens on Colonel Anthony Devlin of the Pentagon's Special Operations Division.

Why had he come from the United States to speak with the officer called Lester? How much would Rajai pay for this information?

In the Lebanese barracks, the three Marines talked in Niles' room, a white-washed concrete cubical filled by a steel cot, a shipping crate for a closet, and RPG crates for bookshelves. Anthropology texts, stacks of paperback books, a reading lamp, and a clock radio filled the improvised shelves. The radio blared Arabic music to cover their voices. A folding card table served for the briefing.

"Here are transcriptions of Farsi-language communications," Lieutenant Stark laid down a thick notebook. "Names, code names, times, locations-- all indexed. Here is a series of satellite photos of the town." Stark spread out several sixteen by twenty inch black and white prints on the small table. The large format prints showed streets and the rooftops of buildings of Baalbek. In the fields around the town, the resolution showed footprints over the broken earth. Tire ruts and trash circled a checkpoint on a road outside of the town. Stark pointed to the grid codes along the edges of the

RECON

prints. "If you give the laboratory the numbers, you can get sections enlarged and enhanced."

"How much time?"

"Same day, but that does not include transport time. You can expect no better than second day. Here are the montages prepared by Colonel Devlin's staff in Washington."

"My ex-staff," the colonel corrected. "For secrecy, Reisinger dissolved the contingency group. I will have access to the same people in their usual offices, but I will be responsible for coordinating and assembling the work. There will be no one group of specialists and translators and technicians to assemble your pre-mission intelligence."

"What about the Agency?" Niles asked.

"There is nothing they can do. They lost most of their sources when the Israelis expelled the PLO last year. They lost their entire Middle East staff in the April bombing. Their Washington officers promised whatever is possible, but--"

"I don't want it. I don't want those spooks involved."

"A certain amount of involvement will be unavoidable."

"Whatever, colonel. But I'm prejudiced. You remember how it used to be in Viet Nam. A spook white shirt comes in with a list of names or a black box or a series of map co-ordinates-- did not mean shit to them how many Marines died. I don't want to be involved in an Agency operation."

"This will not be an Agency operation."

"Your word's good enough for me. Lieutenant, what are those pictures?"

Stark laid down the assembled strips of prints photographed from video tapes. Niles studied the panoramas. He referred to the co-ordinates, then located the views on the satellite photo. "Can I mark on this big print?"

"Here, sir." Stark passed him a grease-pencil. "That can be removed with a

RECON

cloth."

"The lieutenant's organized." Niles printed the number of one panorama on the satellite photo, then indicated the arc of view. "This is great. Almost as good as reconning it. Did you prepare these, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir. Not this material. But I took classes in computer enhanced photography."

"He knows the work," Devlin told Niles. "In the future, he can assemble any required photo intelligence."

"What languages do you speak, Stark?"

"French, sir. Some Spanish."

"No Arabic? No Farsi?"

"No, sir."

"You start studying Arabic today," Niles turned to the colonel. "We need a Farsi speaking Marine."

"The Agency has Iranian nationals on contract. Expatriates. Do you want interview--"

Niles shook his head, no. "Who knows who an Agency man will actually be working for? I want a Marine. Born in Iran. Farsi his first language. Speaks English. Hates the Ayatollah. Thousands of Iranians escaped to the United States, there has to be some who joined the Corps."

"That will be difficult," the colonel answered.

"That's why I'm giving the job to the lieutenant. All these photos and intercepted communications are great, but we need to get into the Beeka. I don't know how it can be done without an Iranian. We can't just walk in like-- did you brief Stark?"

Devlin nodded, yes.

"And you still volunteered to work with me?" Niles asked the young lieutenant.

RECON

"Yes, sir. This will be an extraordinary unit. I am very fortunate Colonel Devlin--"

"Fortunate!" Niles laughed. "Maybe. We'll be a squad going into Baalbek. I think we can do it. I'm betting my life. But rationally, the idea of a squad getting in, grabbing the chief of the Pasdaran and getting out, is not very likely. You might want to reconsider--"

"Sir! I reviewed the Agency information on Baalbek. I know what we face. I also reviewed your file and the files of Sergeants Alvarez and Vatssek. I cannot match your experience but I can offer my skills. Despite my inexperience in the field, I believe I can be instrumental in developing a unit which can undertake very unusual assignments and survive."

Niles nodded to the colonel. "You brought me a good man. He knows what we're doing. Problem is, I don't. Lieutenant, go back to Washington and assemble all the background material we need. Find a Farsi-speaking Marine. These photos are great but we'll need names, photos, thousands of little details."

The lieutenant took notes. "The Agency is already assembling agent reports--"

"Can't get away from the spooks, can we? Put the technical work on the agency. I want you to get me that Farsi-speaking Marine. And one other piece of research-- A woman reporter talked to me today. Her name's Angelique Chardon. She's French. She's a freelancer working Beirut. I want copies of the articles she's written. Can you do that?"

"Yes, sir. Does she write in English?"

"Probably French."

"Then you'll need translations."

"I can read some French. I can understand it. I want to know why she wants to talk to me."

"She interviewed you?" Devlin asked. "Why is that suspect?"

RECON

"Hundreds of reporters working here in Lebanon. And a pretty young one wants to talk to me? Invites me to get together with her off the compound and listen to my views on Lebanon? Me? Something ain't right." ***

Snow paled the fields of the Beeka Valley. The storm darkened the mid-day sky, bringing snow and freezing rain, concealing the eastern foothills in banks of churning gray and black clouds. Angelique Chardon drove slowly on the slick highway, the borrowed Fiat lurching and shuddering on the broken asphalt. Truck drivers ignored the weather and road, hurtling past her, water splashing over her small car like waves.

She passed battered billboards. Once the signs had advertised hotels and restaurants serving the tourists visiting the pagan and Roman ruins outside of Baalbek. Even during the worst years of the civil war, tourists had braved the militias to enjoy the resorts. Now, no tourists came to the Beeka. Scrawls of Arabic graffiti across the advertisements declared loyalty to the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution. Weathered posters of the scowling Khomeini looked down on the highway. On one sign, splashes of paint covered figures around a pool-- the decadent illustration of tourists sunbathing on the deck of a hotel pool had offended the morals of a militiaman.

For this drive to Baalbek, Chardon had not worn European clothes. She did not want to risk humiliation by the fanatics manning checkpoints. Though she could not hide her foreign skin and features, she had dressed in clothing appropriate to a Shiite woman. She wore gray trousers, a gray formless dress, a black overcoat, and a black head scarf. Only her supple-- and water resistant-- knee high boots came from France.

Clusters of whitewashed houses appeared alongside the road. Rutted dirt lanes led off to villages and farms. She recognized the scattered concrete and rusting sheet metal that had been an industrial development-- the Syrians had tried to hide radar

RECON

vans and anti-aircraft guns among the trucks and equipment. A month before, an Israeli air-strike had devastated the complex as part of an attack on the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Party of God militiamen quartered in Baalbek. Her coverage of the destruction had included photos of dead workers entangled in wrecked factory.

The Paris and London newspapers had paid extra for a follow-up article on the grief of the workers' families. There had been no mention of the Syrian radar and guns. The Syrians thanked her for the propaganda with an unrestricted press pass.

At the division in the highway, the trucks veered west. She took the east road to Baalbek. Lines of cars and trucks waited at a Syrian checkpoint. Trucks went to the right lane, cars to the left. Every driver and passenger left the vehicles as Syrian soldiers searched. The squads worked methodically, soldiers patting down the men while other soldiers looked under the hoods and in the trunks of the cars. One soldier peered under the cars and trucks with a long-handled, wheeled mirror. Resigned to long waits, truck drivers sat on their bumpers as soldiers searched through their cargos.

After a fifteen minute wait, a soldier motioned her out. He stared at her white face a moment before demanding her identification and Syrian Army pass. He called out to his officer. The soldiers searching the car joked to one another about becoming Shiites if they could meet women like this one. They found nothing but her camera and notebook.

The officer asked, "Why do you go to Baalbek?"

"To interview victims of the Israeli war."

"Yes, many victims of the--"

Shouts interrupted his comment. Soldiers stepped into the road to block an old truck veering around the line of cars. They raised their rifles. The officer shoved her identification into her hands and rushed in front of the truck.

Though the truck had the markings of a construction company, a Syrian soldier

RECON

drove. He shouted out to the soldiers. The other soldier in the cab remained quiet, looking down without interest at the Syrian officer demanding that the truck stop. Then the foreigner's eyes locked on Chardon and the wide-faced, blue-eyed Russian in the uniform of the Soviet Army smiled at the lovely Frenchwoman. Brakes screeching, metal rattling, the truck slowed to a stop on the opposite side of the highway.

And in the back of the truck, peering over the plank sides, the Revolutionary Guards stared at her as she stared at them.

The Syrian driver, the Soviet officer, the ragged Iranians: an image worth hundreds of dollars to an international news service, if she could photograph the truck and its occupants at an angle showing the Syrian, the Soviet advisor, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards crowding the back of the troop truck.

Her pulse raced as she returned her identification to her purse and calmly got in her car. She rolled down her window. The checkpoint soldiers had their backs to her. By luck, she had a 1 : 1.8 50mm lens on her camera and not a zoom. She leaned over her camera, popped off the lens cap, and guessed at an f-stop of 11-- which allowed a depth-of-field from three meters almost to infinity. She switched on the motor drive and clicked off one frame to test the batteries.

Starting the Fiat, she put it in gear and eased forward as she picked up the camera and braced it on door with only the lens element showing. The sleeve of her black coat covered the camera body and shielded the lens from the rain. She glanced down to check the lens, then steered wide around the truck.

Soldiers motioned her past. Pointing the camera without looking, she swerved in a semi-circle-- as if avoiding the soldiers standing in the highway-- around the construction truck as she shot the roll of film. She did not risk pointing the camera back as she drove away.

The road curved through a shanty-town of abandoned workshops, warehouses, and shacks. She stopped the car and unloaded the camera as boys in ragged clothing

RECON

peered through the windows. Feeling under the dashboard, she found a space between a cardboard duct and the shell of the glove compartment. She jammed the film canister there. Hands tapped at the windows. The boys wanted money.

She accelerated away. The boys ran after the car, throwing rocks. A rock banged off the trunk and she left the shanty town behind as she drove past shops and walled family compounds enclosing trees and homes. Hundreds of posters of Khomeini declared the area to be the territory of the Islamic Amal.

The freezing rain had stopped work in the fields and the streets. Men squatted under sheets of plastic, waiting for the rain to pass. Outside of cafes, tools and wheelbarrows cluttered the sidewalks. Women in soaked black chaadors stood in doorways, waiting hand-in-hand with small boys dressed in brilliantly colored polyester jackets. She saw only two militiamen with rifles. They took shelter from the rain under the sheet metal roof of a service station.

Then she passed a line of Syrian vehicles. A Soviet ZSU-- a tank with the cannon replaced by four radar-directed 23mm machineguns-- parked with three heavy transport trucks. Each truck towed twin-barrelled anti-aircraft machineguns. Syrians manned the tank and trucks.

Unlike the soldiers of the checkpoint, who had worn the helmets of the regular army, the Syrians in the trucks wore the red berets of the Special Forces, a division of elite soldiers usually stationed in Damascus to defend the regime of Hafez al-Assad from internal enemies and commando assaults.

In October, apparently in anticipation of counter-strikes by the United States, France, and Israel in response to the attacks of 23 October in Beirut and 4 November in Tyre, Syrian Army positioned its anti-aircraft weapons and crews around the town, in the fields where buildings would not interfere with the radar tracking and the line-of-fire of the machineguns.

But when Israeli jets attacked Baalbek on 4 November, after the truck bombing
Vatsek/Niles/Chardon/Devlin/Stark/Beeka

RECON

of their military headquarters in Tyre, the gun crews did not down a single jet.

Now the Syrians placed the weapons in the town itself. And assigned highly-trained gunners of President Assad's elite Special Forces to man the positions. What did the Syrians anticipate? Another counter-strike by the Israelis? Is this why Rajai had instructed her to ask the Marines about counter-strikes against Syrian and Iran?

Chardon cruised slowly along the highway, looking into the narrow roads cutting through the blocks of walled houses. But she saw no other Syrian troops or vehicles until the old construction truck appeared behind her. Sounding the horn, the Syrian driver raced to her rear bumper and flashed his lights. She swerved to the side of the road, letting the truck pass. A hundred meters ahead, Revolutionary Guards in rain slickers stood at the steel barrels and sandbags of another checkpoint. Chardon followed the truck and stopped. The Iranians in the back of the truck turned to stare at her.

The Revolutionary Guard drew recruits from the villages and the slums of the cities, where the miracle of the Shah's oil-financed rush into the twentieth century-- secular education, the education of girls, civil government instead of the dictates of the village mullahs-- had not only failed but generated a reaction of of holy rage that overwhelmed the secret police, the army, and all the other revolutionary factions.

Chardon feared the Revolutionary Guards. She had known educated Iranians in Paris. The young men in the truck had no education other than the madness of the Ayatollah. She saw them staring at her hands and face. In the remote villages, men considered the sight of a woman's face provocative. Switching off the Fiat's windshield wipers, she hid behind the rain spattering on the windshield. Finally the truck clanked away.

Easing the car forward to the militiamen, Chardon rolled down the window and showed her passes-- one issued by the Syrian Army, the other by the director of the

RECON

Ayatollah Khomeini Hospital in the center of Baalbek. Militiamen leered through the windows but their leader motioned her to continue.

She did not drive to the hospital-- the hospital director had issued the pass only to allow her meetings with Rajai. Speeding a few blocks, she turned onto a street overarched by olive and carob trees. Sodden bougainvillae spread across walls topped by ironwork spikes. Before the civil war, this had been a street of wealthy landlords and merchants. Now, Syrian army staff officers enjoyed the homes. Fahkr Rajai used one villa for his offices and quarters.

Revolutionary Guards recognized Chardon and pushed open the wrought iron gates. She drove through to the courtyard. The early storm had stripped the trees, carpeting the courtyard stones with yellow leaves. Guards called out as she hurried through the cold rain to the house.

Hasani stopped her at the door. He worked in the office as a clerk. A short, anemic man, he wore a holstered Russian pistol at all times. Like Rajai, he had learned French as an exile. "Why are you here?"

"I must see Rajai."

"Why did you not call?"

"The telephone is out. I have something important. I must show it to--"

"He is not here. He will call when--"

"What? When will he return? I'll wait if I must, but I must show him--"

"He will not return for days."

"But--" Chardon saw Akbar, the scar-faced war veteran who served as the personal bodyguard of Rajai. He stood a few steps away, watching as they argued in French. Akbar accompanied his commander everywhere in Lebanon. "Did he leave money for me?"

"Money? For you?" Hasani turned to Akbar and spoke in Farsi. Chardon understood that the clerk speculated on her relationship with their commander.

RECON

Hating herself, pretending she had not understood the Farsi obscenities, she explained:

"He told me to wait in Beirut for another action against the Marines. There was no action. He told me to interview Marines. To take photos of them. To gather information. And now I have important information."

"What information? I will tell him when he returns."

"I must show you."

Hasani joked again with Akbar. Chardon ignored the obscenity. Following him into the office, she turned and slammed the door in Akbar's face. Hasani returned to his desk. A glaring fluorescent light made his pale, sickly face glisten. He leaned back in his chair and watched her, waiting for her to explain.

Crouching down, she reached under her long dress and unzipped her boot. She took out the photos. Flexing the prints to straighten the curl, she laid the prints on the papers covering the desk and pointed to the close-up of Devlin:

"This American-- who looks like a movie star-- he is a general or a colonel in the Pentagon. He has been in magazines and newspapers. On television. He is a hard-liner. An expert on covert war. His department is called Special Operations. I will send one of these photos to a Le Monde. They will search their files and confirm that."

"Special Operations is the C I A?"

"They work with the C I A. This Marine," she pointed to Niles. "The Special Operations officer came to talk to him. He is an officer. He trains the Lebanese. He has many friends in the Lebanese Armed Forces. This is what I want to show Rajai."

"He is C I A?" Hasani pointed to Niles.

"How can I know? I only know that he is a Marine."

"And this other one?"

"The negro? An aide. He carries the papers for the officer. Perhaps they are all

RECON

C I A. I don't know. But I will know about that one--" She pointed to Niles. "He will talk with me. With time, I may learn why he talked with that officer. But I need money. I have money in my bank in Paris but there is a problem and it is difficult to draw on my account here. If I do not get money, I must return to Paris."

"He left no money here."

"When will he return?"

"It is uncertain."

"Then send the money to me in Beirut. I am at the same hotel. I can stay only a few more days. If you want this information, I must get money."

She gathered the photos of the Marines but Hasani grabbed them from her hands. "I will keep the pictures for him." "No! Pay first--" Chardon fought for the photos.

Hasani shoved her back and called out to Akbar, telling him to take the woman out of his office. "Now go."

Rushing past the scarred bodyguard, Chardon ran out to her borrowed Fiat. She sped from the iron gates of the villa cursing the Iranians. Desperate, she mentally totalled her travellers checks and the few Lebanese pounds in her Beirut account-- only enough for another week. If she did not have a return ticket to Paris, she would be trapped in Lebanon.

If she returned to Paris, she could write a few color articles about the war in Lebanon. Or interview Middle Eastern expatriates. Or interview the friends and families of the bombed legionnaires. But she had no assignments. And a thousand other journalists could write color articles and interviews. Without pay for articles or an advance, she had no money for a ticket back to Lebanon.

Her editors wanted her on-the-scene articles from Lebanon. But she did not have the money to stay.

Driving through the narrow streets, she tried to think of a solution. Perhaps she

RECON

could sell the photos of the Revolutionary Guards with the Soviet-- with a story identifying the Soviet as an advisor. With that money she could stay in Baalbek until the attack the Syrians expected. Her writing and photos would be the first from the scene-- if the attack came.

Then, over the shopfronts of a narrow avenue, she saw the Syrians working in the fire-gutted shell of an abandoned hotel. A group of Revolutionary Guards had occupied the hotel the year before and used it as a barracks. Israeli jets had rocketted the hotel during the 4 November raid. The explosions had blown holes through the walls but had not collapsed the floors or roof.

Syrians used pulleys and ropes to lift equipment to the third floor. Buildings blocked her view. Chardon continued another two blocks on the street before she saw the Syrians again. Now she identified the equipment hanging by the ropes:

A twin-barrelled anti-aircraft gun.

Swerving to the curb, she parked and watched the Syrians raising the weapon. This confirmed her guess-- the Syrians expected an attack. But why place the anti-aircraft weapon in the hotel rather than on the roof? The hotel overlooked the old center of Baalbek. Hidden inside the hotel, the guns could not be photographed by air reconnaissance planes or satellites. But the gunners could not track an incoming jet.

Helicopters. The Syrians prepared for an attack by airborne commandos-- the Israelis? the Americans? The heavy 14.5mm anti -aircraft guns could rake any helicopter assault descending on Baalbek. Chardon reached for her camera.

A voice called out in Arabic. Startling, she looked to the sidewalk to see a Syrian soldier motioning her away. He told her not to park there. A Revolutionary Guardsman walked with the soldier. Chardon laid her notebook over the camera.

Accelerating away, she searched for another view of the hotel. She saw a sidestreet and slowed. Syrian soldiers blocked the street. Seeing Chardon's foreign face, an officer stepped out to stop her but she continued past to the next street.

RECON

Soldiers stood there also. At the next corner, she turned in the opposite direction, winding through a narrow lane of vendor stalls, empty in the cold rain. She maneuvered past the poles supporting plastic sheets tenting the stalls, then eased around the next corner. She went back three streets, then turned again.

Two Syrian soldiers stood in the doorway of a shop. They watched the Fiat speed past. She saw the hotel ahead. The anti-aircraft gun hung from ropes, the barrels silhouetted against the clouds. She slowed and scanned the shopfronts. Merchants stood in doorways talking. A young man with one leg stood on his crutches and rearranged goods on display.

Looking down at the camera for an instant, she confirmed the f11 setting, then pushed the focus ring to infinity. She switched on the motor drive, then thumbed the motor drive setting from single to continuous.

As she made a slow right hand turn, she waited for the correct moment, then pushed down the motor button with her thumb, the motor power-winding the roll past the shutter in two seconds. Fear made her breathing difficult as she continued past the Syrian officer for the second time.

Leaving the town, she followed a potholed road to the groves and small farms in the hills. No one worked in the rain. She stopped on a dirt lane and scanned the area around her. Despite the sound of the rain on the Fiat, she heard her heart hammering in her ears.

If they stopped and searched her, the first roll of film identified her as an unwanted journalist. She risked only interrogation and deportation. The second roll, the photos of the anti-aircraft gun hidden in the abandoned hotel marked her as a foreign agent-- Israeli, American, French, whatever nation the Syrian interrogators demanded she confess.

The second roll of film meant prison-- perhaps disappearance into the torture cells of Damascus.

RECON

She hid both rolls of film in her underwear. Though the photos of the weapon placement risked expulsion from Lebanon, the photos also offered the freedom of United States dollars.

Returning to Beirut, she went directly to the Lebanese Armed Forces compound.