

For an hour after leaving his hotel, Rajai zigzagged through the center of Paris, riding the Metro from station to station and dodging through the after-work crowds before reboarding the metro for another station. He left the metro for a final time at the Champs-Elysees and boarded a commuter train leaving the metropolitan centre of the city. Finally, three minutes before the meeting time, he left a train depot and walked out to the street. The van appeared exactly on the minute. As he stepped inside, the door locked shut behind him, then the van sped away, swerving through turns to disorient him and to lose any surveillance.

A masked Colombian gunman watched Rajai. Only the gunman's eyes showed through holes cut in a pillowcase, his eyes and dark skin contrasting against the bleached-white, starched cloth. His hands held an Israeli Uzi submachinegun.

A twelve-volt bulb cast a weak yellow light on the stained and battered interior of the van. The van smelled of chemicals. The gunman sat on the floor, leaning back against the door to the cab. Rajai stood at the other side of the van, holding onto a strapping loop.

Several times, he felt the van slow and stop, then continue. He rode for thirty minutes before he heard the driver jerk the parking brake. The back door opened.

Flashlight glare blinded him. Hands helped him down, then guided him a few steps. Rajai glimpsed an alley. A form stood in front of him and passed a metal-detector over his suit, a sensor squeeling at his cufflinks and coins. Someone took his briefcase and searched through the papers and bundles of American hundred dollar bills. Another electronic device appeared. No sensor sounded. The searchers returned his briefcase.

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Hands pushed him into a smaller van. The second van smelled of flour and sweets. Immediately, the delivery van accelerated away. Rajai waited as the driver sped through another twenty minutes of evasion.

Finally the second van parked. Metal wheels screeched, chains clanked. After the machinery went silent, the van's sidedoor slid open. Rajai saw that the van had parked in an apartment's underground garage.

Two men in slacks and leather jackets watched him step out of the van. They wore sacks over their heads-- the sacks made of red and black cloth, the melodramatic colors of Revolution. Only their eyes peered out through round holes. A third revolutionary stood to one side holding an Uzi, her size and curves identifying her as a woman. Like the men, she wore slacks, a leather jacket, and the red and black headsack. The revolutionaries wasted no words. The shorter man demanded to know:

"What is the action?"

"Your group will have a role in an action. Another force will make the attack."

"What is the action?" The short man repeated.

"I don't know."

"You're only a messenger?"

"My commander cannot risk travelling. I have my role. And my role does not permit me to know every detail of the action."

"We are not mercenaries. We are not for hire. We fight only for Colombian liberation."

"Any strike against the Yankees--" Rajai used the idiom of the Sandinistas. "Is a blow for all the struggling peoples of the world."

The taller man asked, "But you will not trust us to know why we risk our lives?"

"The details will be revealed as the planning continues. I assure you that your role will be vital. You will take your place in the vanguard of the international. This action will rewrite the future and go down in history as a--"

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"History books don't stop tanks," the woman spat out. "In Cacalombia, the army has American tanks, they have American helicopters and we have only old rifles. What will we get for fighting for you Arabs?"

"Your group will not be fighting. However, you will share fully in the glory and the rewards. Please allow me to brief you on your responsibilities, if you accept, and the rewards of--"

"We want anti-tank rockets," the woman stated. "And anti -aircraft missiles. Don't even talk about your holy shit action if you won't pay in rockets and missiles."

"Your comrades searched this valise." Rajai held up his American briefcase. "Perhaps they informed you that I brought, as promised, the first payment for your group's assistance."

"We have all the hundreds we can carry," the short one answered. "Rockets and Sam-seven missiles. That will be the price. Nothing else."

"Weapons instead of money? Is that the only disagreement? If so, it is solved. You will receive what you desire."

The revolutionaries looked to one another. The woman nodded to the short leader. He turned back to Rajai. "Tell us what you know about the hit."

In the color-coordinated decor of a room in the Holiday Inn in downtown Washington, District of Colombia, Lieutenant Stark dropped a photocopy of a Marine's career file. He rushed to the television and fine-tuned the picture as a commentator announced the names and numbers of a French soccer team playing in Buenos Aires. Tape replays showed the players in action.

The telephone rang. Stark watched a slow motion scene of the French forward players closing on the goal, passing the ball around the defenders. A Frenchman drove the ball past the Brazilian goalee. Only then did Stark answer the ringing tele-

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phone. "Room Three Zero Nine."

Through electronic hissing, he heard an operator speaking very awkward English, asking his name. "Yes, I'm Richard Stark."

The line switched. "How's it going, Stark? This is Niles."

"Yes, sir. Good evening, sir."

"It's morning here. Let's keep this informal. I'm calling from a public phone."

Stark guessed that Captain Niles meant an insecure telephone line. "Informal. Yes, sir, I understand." "I'm calling to thank you for those articles. Very interesting reading."

"No problem with the French?"

"Nah, I struggled through it. I'm sending Devlin some very interesting photos. Maybe it isn't my job, but I promised that photographer some money. You think you could get Devlin to wire some more money to me? I tried to call him tonight but he's at a conference somewhere. The pictures tell the story."

"Photos coming ... request for funding" Stark outlined the message on a pad by the telephone. "How much more, sir?"

"Ten thousand this week."

"Ten thousand dollars? Did I hear you correctly?"

"Affirmative. Ten thousand dollars. And how's the search for the new employee going? The new man."

"Yes, sir. It's ongoing." Stark looked around at the several enlistment and specialty forms laid out on the room's extra bed. "I'm reviewing ... their resumes."

"Get him. We'll need him. Immediately."

Hands in the pockets of his heavy coat, the collar up to cover his face, Niles walked quickly on the wide Corniche Pierre Geymayel, passing department stores,

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shops, and the steel-grated entries of private apartments. Early morning traffic sped past on the divided boulevard. An old man walking a dog saw Niles and stared at him-- looking at his scuffed leather boots, his black slacks, and the gray wool overcoat. The old man's eyes fixed on Niles's face. Niles had cut his hair to the style of a militiaman, an even one-length stubble. He wore the beginning of a beard. With his sun-darkened face and prison hair cut, he no longer looked like a Marine. The old man watched Niles. Niles rushed past and went right, leaving the Corniche and hurrying along a sidestreet of offices and apartments. He checked the addresses. The buildings overlooked a park of bare trees and frozen grass.

A hundred meters up the block, he saw the hotel. Plywood had replaced the street-level windows of the hotel. A section of the street had been repaved where a rocket or shell had hit. Shrapnel had pitted the fronts of the buildings and punched through the steel of roll-up shutters. Across the street, the shrapnel had scarred the trees.

Niles eased the front door open and stepped from the brilliant early morning glare of the street to the semi-darkness of the lobby. He smelled coffee. Though a radio played in the office, no one manned the desk. He silently crossed the torn carpets of the lobby to the stairway.

On the fourth floor, he found the room of Angelique Chardon. He listened for a moment, but heard only the distant traffic sounds of the corniche. Reaching under his coat to his shoulder -holstered Colt Government Model, he unsnapped the hammer strap. He carried the pistol with a hollowpoint in the chamber, the hammer cocked and the safety set. The leather thumb strap held the pistol in the holster. He slipped the auto-pistol free of the holster, then pushed it back: ready.

Only then did he knock. He did not trust Chardon. The articles from the magazines and newspapers detailed her meetings with all the factions and powers in the crazed Lebanese civil war. But Niles needed information on Baalbek-- the photos

proved that Chardon moved through the Syrian and Iranian sectors of the Beeka. A minute passed. Knocking again, he heard bedsprings squeak. The door opened a hand's width. Chardon stared at him a moment, her eyes flicking from his face to his clothing.

"Why did you come here?"

"The photos."

"Why did you not call?"

"I did. You're always out. I've got the money you want."

"Wait." She peered out at the hallway. "Is there--"

"I came alone."

"Did anyone see you come here?"

"No one downstairs."

"Wait." She closed the door.

The bolt locked. Niles heard furniture clatter and a balcony door slide open. Water ran. Niles walked back to the stairway and waited. Minutes later, the door opened again. Now she wore jeans and a pullover sweater. A dark scarf covered her hair. Water beaded the fine blonde hair around her face.

"I did not recognize you."

Early morning glare came through the open balcony door. The light made the white room glow. Niles glanced at the bed, the closets, and behind the door. He crossed the room and looked into the bathroom. Nylons and underwear hung on the shower curtain hoop. He stepped out onto the balcony. Concrete partitions extended an arm's reach past the railing, providing privacy and security. Smooth, angled concrete formed the overhang. No one could surprise him from the adjoining balconies.

"Perhaps you quit the Marines?"

Grinning, Niles rubbed the stubble covering his head and face. "Does it look

bad?"

"Shia chic." She laughed, pointing to a chair. "Your officers want the photos?"

Niles moved the chair so that he sat with his back to the wall. He took an envelope from his coat pocket. Spilling out the black and white prints, he found the two best of the rolls.

"This one," he showed her the print of the truck driven by the Syrian, with the Soviet in the front seat, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the back of the truck.

"Went to a friend who thinks the Russians are the devil. This picture'll get him all fired up. Evil Soviet Empire and all that--"

"But what will you pay?"

"For the picture of the Soviet? Nothing. Isn't anything I don't know about. Try the wire services. They'll pay you more."

"Where are the negatives?"

"Here. Now this one--" He held up the print showing the Syrians placing the anti-aircraft gun in the shell of the hotel. "This one's of more interest."

"How much interest? What will you pay?"

He took out a handful of ten dollar bills. "Five hundred."

"What?" Chardon looked at the stack of bills. "The Syrians, they would kill me for those photos. The Israelis, they would pay thousands of American dollars. What is the price of a helicopter? What is the price of all the commandos in a helicopter attack? Millions of dollars! You offer me only five hundred?"

He waited until she went silent. "I didn't ask you to take the pictures."

"I want all the photos returned. Where are the negatives?"

"There in the envelope. Take them back. No problem."

"Of course you made copies."

"Oh, yeah. But I don't have any helicopter. And I'm no Israeli."

"But you are a Marine of the United States."

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"Miss Chardon, when you brought me those rolls of film, you said you needed money. I called the government offices and asked about you. You are an accredited journalist. You write articles and you work with television crews. Pardon me for saying this, I'm not being forward, but you're as pretty as an movie star. You could go back to France and do okay. Why are you taking these pictures of Syrians and Soviet soldiers and gun positions?"

"It is my work. Do you question all journalists? Or only pretty women?"

"Anti-aircraft gun emplacements are not your business."

"Mr. Marine, I will explain. My business is news in the middle east. I speak and I write Arabic. I know the countries and the peoples. When I write here, I can sell my writing. That is why I work here."

"But pictures of anti-aircraft guns are not your business."

"Interest in the middle east, it comes and it goes. After the bombings, I sold many articles. Now, no."

"So you thought you could make some money selling photos to us Americans. Why do you think we want the photos?"

"The Americans will launch a strike on Baalbek."

"There won't be any bombing of Baalbek."

"Then why will you pay five hundred dollars?"

Niles smiled. "Because I want information."

"Five hundred dollars is nothing. The C I A pays millions."

"I'm not with the Agency. But I'm willing to pay for information about Baalbek."

"For who?"

"Why do you care? I'll pay."

"How much?"

"Five thousand dollars."

"For what? Photos? Names? What?"

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"You'll take me out there. Help me look around. Then bring me back."

Chardon laughed. Niles watched her, marvelling at her white skin, her perfect features, the rose color of her lips-- why didn't this woman get a job reading the evening news into a television camera? She pulled off the scarf over her hair and wiped her eyes. Tangled from sleep, the white-blond mass of her hair framed her face, accentuating her features, shadowing her eyes. She leaned forward, looking him straight in the face as she said, "American, they will kill you. I know. I go there. Every car is searched many times. By the Syrians. The Iranians. If you are lucky, the Syrians will take you. If you are very unlucky, the Iranians will take you. And when they take you, they will kill me also."

"Why did you risk those photos?"

"For money."

"Then risk this. I'll be a photographer. I--"

"You have equipment?"

"I can get it. I won't look like a Marine."

"That's why you look different. You want to be a spy."

"And I'll have false identification."

"What nationality?"

"French."

"Vous parlez Francais?"

"Assez de duper un Syrien, je crois."

She stared for a moment. "You can."

"Marines ain't stupid."

"And that day you took my film, you understood everything I said."

"I didn't take it personally."

Chardon studied his short hair, the black and gray stubble on his face, his scarred features. She glanced down to the five stacks of bills on the table. Then she

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added, "A cameraman can't have a gun. No pistol, no Kalashnikov. Not even a knife."

"I know."

"And what of the story? The story of a U S Marine spying on the Iranians in Baalbek? When can I write it?"

"No story."

"But when there is the attack, there will be a story."

"There won't be an attack."

"Assassination? Kidnapping?"

"If and when it happens, we'll both know what's going on."

"When must you go?"

"Now."

"Perhaps in a few days. When do I get the five thousand?"

"When I get back."

"If you return. If we return."

"There it is, Miss." Niles gathered up the five hundred dollars on the table.

"That money is mine."

"I thought you refused."

She pushed the prints and negatives of the anti-aircraft position to him. "Take the photos. I cannot sell that to a newspaper-- and you have already made copies."

Standing, Niles pocketed the envelope. "Until tomorrow or the next day."

"Do not come here again. Do I call you at the Lebanese barracks?"

"Call me at this number." Niles took a tissue from her night table and printed a telephone number. "Call me when you're ready to go."

Idling along a quiet street in the Beirut suburb of Hazmiye, the taxi driver pointed a spotlight at the fences and walls of the homes. Trees swayed as cold wind

swept down from the Shouf Mountains. Few lights showed from windows. The driver swept the spotlight across locked gates and concrete block walls. Iron spikes lined the tops of the walls. Vines grew over rusted barbed wire. The light paused on name plaques and numbers.

"There." The driver turned to Stark and Vatssek in the back seat of the taxi.

"That is the house?"

"This is the street. That is the address." Stark counted out Lebanese bills. The driver startled as a rifle action clacked. Vatssek set the safety on a folding stock Kalashnikov. He grinned to the driver. The driver returned the grin, showing his gold molars. He took the money from Stark and shoved the wad of bills in his shirt pocket without counting it. "Very good, sir. Thank you, good evening."

"And thank you, driver." Stark answered as he stepped out with his attache case. "I don't believe you need to--"

The taxi accelerated away, Stark staggering off balance as the door tore out of his hand.

Vatssek gripped the Kalashnikov in his right hand and carried a cardboard suitcase in his left. "Don't think he liked us."

"Very few taxi drivers appreciate someone cocking a rifle behind them."

"Hey, Lieutenant. This is Beirut, not Washington. I'm not coming out in the dark without a weapon in my hands."

A voice spoke from the darkness. "Next time, wear hats." "Only hat I've got is a steel helmet," Vatssek answered.

"Then get out of the street." Niles told him. The hinges of a gate squealed. A silhouette in a long coat motioned for them to enter. "I don't want the neighbors to know I got Marines coming here. Could waste the property values. You requisition the camera equipment, Stark?"

"Right here, captain." Vatssek held up the suitcase.

"And that little tourist camera?"

"Yes, sir," Stark answered. "But I caution you. I tested it and the photo quality is not excellent."

"I'll see, I'll be using it tomorrow." By the light from a second floor window, they followed the driveway toward the house. Brush and trees thrashed in the cold wind, leaves swirling around their feet. They came to battered white Ford.

"My car. Looks bad, but it's got a new engine."

"A Falcon, sir?" Vatssek asked. "A Marine Corps captain driving a Falcon, sir? Even that Turkish faggot who peddles disco tapes to the recruits works out of Mercedes."

"A stolen Mercedes, sergeant. He tried to sell it to me. Without papers. I decided to get a car-- with papers-- that no self-respecting militia Napoleon would want to steal."

Debris covered the driveway. Glass flashed in the light from the second-floor window. Niles led them along a zigzagging path through broken concrete. Waving a flashlight across the interior of the house, he showed them the gutted first floor. Only trash remained of the interior walls and the furnishings.

"Landlord would not tell me what happened here."

"Looks like an accident with an incoming one fifty-five," Vatssek commented.

"Or Marine non-coms."

"Why is it necessary for you live away from the barracks?" Stark asked. Niles pointed the flashlight at his own face. The sight of Niles' beard and hair answered Stark. "Sir, I wouldn't have recognized you."

"Neither do the Lebanese sentries," Niles laughed. "They won't let me through the gate."

They went up a flight of concrete steps to the second floor entry. Boxes furnished the apartment. The stark light of bare bulbs showed walls cracked by the

blast on the first floor. Plaster had fallen from the ceiling. The floors had been swept clean to reveal interlocking patterns of hardwood. The french windows overlooking the garden and the lights of Beirut had been patched with clear plastic sheets. The plastic flexed as the wind shifted.

"Don't take off your coats, there's no heat. Only been here a few days. Take a seat, anywhere." Niles went to an alcove and took out a six-pack of beer. "Don't have anything else to offer you. What's the news from Washington?"

Sitting on the floor, Stark set his attache case on a box. "Sir, I have the money you requested. A few miscellaneous items-- radios and electronic surveillance devices. And some more information on that journalist."

"Question number one," Niles started. He popped the caps off beers and handed them to Stark and Vatssek. "Why is she here in Beirut? You see any pictures of her? She's beautiful. She could be on a Paris television show."

"Yes, sir. She is attractive. I called several French newspapers. She is very new to journalism--"

"She says she's a freelancer." Niles opened the cardboard suitcase. First, he examined a cheap plastic-bodied 35mm camera. He flipped open the lens cover to power the camera, then pressed the shutter button quickly, listening as the built-in motor whirred. As Stark continued his briefing, Niles sorted through the cameras and accessories, fitting lenses to camera bodies, checking the function of the delicate equipment.

"Another description would be, 'very infrequently employed'. Her work in journalism is all very recent. Up until two years ago, she was a student and a part-time actress. She began writing about Middle Eastern exiles in France. Then she came to Lebanon. Her editors praised her unusual contacts among the Arabs and Iranians here. Also, she exploits her contacts to learn of events before the fact-- she called Paris with the first reports of the 23 October attacks, one of her editors told--"

"What?" Vatssek interrupted. "Did she know about the bombing? Was this woman in on it?"

"I considered that. I read all her dispatches on the attacks and the aftermath. I don't believe she knew anything about the means or targets of the attacks. But I do believe someone told her to be awake and ready to move at six that morning. That would explain her immediate report. Allow me to continue. She has no training in journalism and this creates difficulties for the editors. But they buy her articles because of her contacts and her on-the-scene reporting."

"Then why is she desperate for money?" Niles asked. He pushed the button of a power-winder. "Taking those pictures of the Syrian anti-aircraft guns was desperate. She knows what the Syrians would do to her." "Two newspapers buy from her only infrequently. In times of crisis in Lebanon, they buy her work. No crisis, no sale."

"Did you get any idea of how much she made? What is a standard price?"

"A few hundred dollars for an excellent story with photos."

"Does she have an apartment in Paris?"

"Exactly my thought, sir. She has expenses here and in France. But she has another problem. I spoke with a managing editor who will not buy from her again. They had contracted with her to write day to day reports from Lebanon. It seems she took her reports from Arabic newspapers. She translated articles from newspapers in Lebanon and Syria, then sold the articles to the French paper. The editor I spoke with stated that this has created legal problems."

"So she's in trouble." Niles put the cameras and spare lenses into a padded backpack. "What about those interviews you sent me? Those didn't come out of Arabic papers."

"No, sir. Those are examples of her exploiting her contacts with radicals. Her association with radicals and exiles took the attention of the Agency-- but the April bombing of the Embassy disrupted Agency operations in Lebanon. The Agency

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personnel who may have evaluated the value of Miss Chardon as a source are dead. The bomb also destroyed their files."

"Then I'm on my own."

"On your own? I don't understand, sir."

Niles raised the black plastic tourist camera and snapped the shutter. "I'm her photographer tomorrow. We'll be taking a drive. Taking some pictures."

"Where, sir?"

"Baalbek."

Leaving the line of passengers walking from the airliner, Rajai hurried across the asphalt to a waiting Mercedes. Azghar stood at the door, his scarred face scowling, his light sportscoat flapping in the freezing wind off the mountains. Hasani-- the overweight clerk-- waited inside the car. Another bodyguard stepped out to take his suitcase. A shout came from the landing area:

"Sir, you must go through customs and immigration! It is the law."

Saying nothing, Azghar pointed his Kalashnikov. No other shouts came. Rajai sat in the Mercedes. Azghar and other bodyguard took their places and the driver put the car in motion, easing the Mercedes through the technicians and vehicles of the service area.

"The Palestinian Kalaq waits for you on the road," Azghar told him.

"Good." Rajai turned to Hasani. "What is it that I must see?"

"These." Hasani opened a folder to show the prints of Colonel Devlin and Captain Niles. "The woman brought these. She said this one--" He pointed to Devlin. "Is a colonel in the United States Pentagon. A commander of secret operations. I could not confirm it. This one is a Marine officer in Beirut. He was an advisor of the Lebanese Air Assault Battalion."

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"You have their names?"

"Not the colonel. But the captain is Niles. I paid for information on him. There are rumors, only rumors, that he fought against the militias. No other information."

"Who did he fight? And when?"

"I could learn nothing else. Now he has left the training school. There is no information about his present assignment."

At the Avenue De L'Aeroport, Rajai saw the scattered lights of the Marine base. Walls of sandbags protected every American position, as if their enemies would make the mistake of attacking alert and prepared soldiers.

"Put the photos away," Rajai told Hasani. The Land Rovers of Kalaq and his squad waited ahead. "Tonight, I will talk with the Palestinian, then with Chardon."

Kalaq rushed up to the door as the Mercedes slowed. He called out. "So, my clerk! How went the business with the guerrillas?" Rajai left the Mercedes. Turning away from the stench of alcohol, Rajai endured an embrace. He whispered, "Say nothing more. My men are to know nothing."

"Of course! Secrecy!" Kalaq closed the door behind Rajai. "Now they cannot hear. What of the Latins? Is it arranged?"

"Yes. They will make the arrangements in their country. Are your men ready?"

"They wait. The fedayeen and the bomb technicians. When will the word come?"

"Soon. You have two trucks. I must talk with the woman, Chardon. Is it possible we can talk as we go there?"

"To that French whore?" Kalaq lit a cigarette. He spat out a fleck of tobacco. "Do not ask me to accompany you. Did you read what she wrote of me?"

"No," Rajai lied.

"Friends have told me what she wrote. She heard nothing of my passion, nothing of my vision. She wrote only the propaganda of the Zionists, the lies they broadcast of our movement. And me? I am a rabid dog, murdering innocent boys."

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"Only I will speak with her. Take me there. We will talk. Then I will speak with her."

"Done." Rushing to a Land Rover, he told the driver and a gunman to go to the other truck. Kalaq took the steering wheel.

As they sped through the slums, Rajai detailed the limited role accepted by the Latins. "They will only secure the staging point. They will watch the surrounding area for unusual activity. If there is any contact with the national authorities, the Latins will react. Your men will remain unseen. Your role will not be known unless it is a victory."

"And what if the impossible happens?"

"The Latins will delay the police while your men evacuate. Then they will disperse. There will be no attempt at defense or negotiations."

"What of the bomb? We will leave it to the gendarmes?"

"No. It will be destroyed."

"My friend, there is no courage in this action. If we do nothing, we win. If we fight, it is only to run. How can this enflame the imagination of the masses?"

"My duty is victory. I will leave the enflaming of the masses to you."

"What mockery is that?" Kalaq demanded. "Do you sneer at the struggle of my people? Do you think that the rage of Palestinian masses will not someday enflame the world?"

A checkpoint silenced him. Screeching to a stop, Kalaq presented his UNESCO identification. Rajai looked back and saw his Mercedes. The second Land Rover had disappeared. He spoke carefully, watching the Lebanese Army soldiers around the truck.

"You need not continue past here, Iziz." Rajai spoke to sooth the Palestinian's anger. "I have told you what you need to know of the business. I can to the woman in the other car."

"You have told me!" Kalaq accelerated away from the soldiers. "You have told me. I tell you this, the next time I will command the action. And it will not be one of your Iranian schemes. There will be blood and fire and the screaming of the dying enemies of my people. Victory or defeat? What is the difference if the world watches? That they see suffering and learn of the suffering of my people, that is victory."

"And I hope I can serve you when you command," Rajai answered quietly. "This time, as with the other action, we can only do as we are told. In the future, when you command, it will be different."

Rajai talked of the future for several minutes. He flattered and lied to calm Kalaq's drunken rage. The promises of bloody victory and international glory satisfied the Palestinian's demands. Kalaq drove straight, his eyes fixed on the distance, as if he dreamed of fame. He allowed Rajai to direct him to the hotel of the Frenchwoman.

"So what is this appointment with her?" Kalaq asked. "Are you arranging for the publicity of your action?"

"No." Headlights filled the interior of the Land Rover. Rajai looked back to see the Mercedes parking at the curb.

"Then what? Is she your lover?"

"No!"

"Then what?"

Rajai considered the possible lies. But why not the truth? To learn more of the Americans-- to follow them, to question Lebanese informers-- he needed men who operated in Beirut. His men could not watch the Americans. He needed Kalaq and his gang. "She has identified two Americans who may be working against us."

"What Americans?"

"I know almost nothing. I must question her."

"I will wait."

Signaling his bodyguards to stay in the Mercedes, Rajai entered the hotel and

hurried up the stairs. The sounds of televisions and radios and arguments reverberated in the old hotel. Cooking odors came from the hallways. At Chardon's room, he heard a radio tuned to a Damascus station.

She answered the door with a knife in her hand. Food smeared the blade.

"Finally. Did you bring the money?"

Pushing the door open, he saw bread and a can of imported sardines on the table with an open bottle of wine. Then he saw that Chardon wore no dress or pants, only a long shirt. The side-cut of the shirttail revealed her long, white legs, shaved smooth, naked to her waist, the front of her shirt covering only her crotch. He stared until her laugh startled him.

"Have you no shame? Clothe yourself."

"I did not invite you into this room." She sat at the table, the tabletop concealing her nakedness. "Did you bring my money?"

"The check was deposited in your Paris bank, in accordance to our agreement."

"I need more." She spread sardines on a slice of black bread. "Did Hasani tell you of the Americans?"

"How did you learn of the colonel in Beirut?"

"I did as you told me. I talked to the Marines. I watched them. Then I saw Colonel Devlin. I recognized him from the television and took the photos."

"What did you learn from the Marines?"

"They tell me nothing. It is not like before. Your bombing changed it all. Now they will not allow me inside their offices. They will not talk. They do not allow photos."

"I had no involvement in the bombing." Rajai took a banknote from his wallet. "Here is one hundred dollars for the photos of the Marines. The photos are nothing, but I will alert our intelligence services."

"One hundred dollars? I have worked only for you for weeks and you give me

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one hundred dollars? How can you expect me to live in this city? To rent a car costs hundreds of dollars. Restaurants. Hotels. Look, I am already living like a refugee."

"It was not our agreement that I employ you, only that--"

"Was not all of November and December employment? Interviewing the Marines, watching them. If I could leave Beirut, I would write of the war in Tripoli. But no, Rajai wants me in Beirut."

"Here is five hundred more. But it was not our agreement that I support you."

"I need more. What of the Americans? What are they worth?" "I cannot pay you more for the photos."

"What if you take the Marines prisoner? What is it worth?"

"The Marines?"

"I want twenty five thousand dollars for the captain. One hundred thousand dollars for the Pentagon colonel."

"Impossible."

"It is not impossible. Your country is paying millions for weapons. I am offering you the enemies of your country. How much will you pay?"

"I do not have the authority to--"

"Then call your commander. If I can arrange for you to capture the Marines who are plotting against you, how much will you pay? You must have paid millions for the bombing."

"The bombing? I know nothing of that incident."

"You knew enough to tell me to be ready. How much for the Americans?"

"I will consult with my superior. Continue watching them. Perhaps we can make an arrangement. I can say no more."

"This money will be enough for another week."

Chardon started from her chair. Rajai turned away, opening the door quickly and hurrying out of the room.

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"Afraid of the sight of a woman," she laughed.

Returning to the street, he saw Kalaq waiting in the Land Rover, a cigarette in his hand. He went to the window.

"The woman is working for the Americans."

"How do you know?"

"She is questioning me on the October bombings. Always questioning. She is a threat to our next action. If I want her taken and interrogated, will you do it?"

"Will she then be released?"

"No. She has no more value to me."

"Then she does not survive the interrogation?"

"No."

"May I invite my men to participate in this interrogation?"

"Wait. I must inform my superior. If they agree with my decision, then you may do as you want with that whore."

As snow swirled against the windows of his office, Abas Zargar sipped imported Colombian coffee and reread his notes. His clerk typed in the outer office, the keys and line-end chimes loud in the silence of the Foreign Ministry offices. All the other employees had left their desks and offices at the end of the workday. Only Zargar and his clerk stayed into the night.

Early the next morning, Zargar met with the mullahs and the Pasdaran commanders. They would question every detail of the explosives shipments, the vehicle and aircraft transfers, and the various groups of fighters. His future with the Ministry, and perhaps his life, depended on answering the questions.

Zargar carefully arranged the order of the copies in the stacks on his desk.

Telex codes detailed the movement of the American-made dynamite from

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California, to Mexico, across the Pacific to Sri Lanka, then the transfer to the freighter bound for Colombia. A note from the Palestinians hired to accompany the container confirmed the liquidation of the Englishman.

Other telexes confirmed the shipment of American C-4 plastic explosive from Libya to Cyprus to Colombia.

A folder of bank documents and mechanical checklists sent from Panama to Switzerland, forwarded to Paris, then hand-carried to Iran recorded the purchase and renovation of a DC-4 airliner. The long distance airliner waited on an airfield outside of Panama City, lacking only pilots.

Reports from the fanatic Maranaki-- the school-teacher who became a torturer for the Revolution-- told of the training and indoctrination of the three pilots. The volunteer pilot remained determined to join his sons in Paradise. The two prisoners had accepted their fate and believed the promises of their torturer to spare their families if they flew to their martyrdom.

And finally, the reports from Fahkr Rajai in Lebanon. Marvelous, Zargar thought as reviewed each summary. The young man had accepted an awkward task in the preparations-- the recruitment and organization of the Palestinian fedayeen and the Latin revolutionaries-- and he had succeeded. With his summaries of his contacts with the groups, he included organizational charts of the squads and brief histories of the leaders. He had determined the responsibilities of each squad and negotiated payments-- American dollars for the fedayeen, Soviet rockets and anti-aircraft missiles for the Colombians.

Zargar closed the folders, confident of his presentation. None of the mullahs or Pasdaran could find fault with his work. Though they did not trust him to know the actual target and the date of the attack, he had guided the preparations as if he had conceived the project. The glory of this strike against the Americans would assure his position in the regime-- not as one of the fanatics but as a competent and reliable

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technocrat, a man of value to whoever replaced Khomeini. No purge would claim him.

The clerk brought sheets of typed numbers and dates-- the record of payments in dollars and gold to code-numbered squads. Zargar dismissed the clerk for the night. He read through the retyped accounts, checking the codes against the actual names of the squads. Then he assembled all the reports, telexes, and documents and locked the presentation in his office safe.

Gulping the last of his coffee, he slipped on his heavy wool coat and left the office. He could do no more on the presentation. The individual reports documented every movement of vehicles, fighters, explosives, and money. And the marvelous reports from Rajai even sketched the personalities of the hired fighters. Zargar would, of course, present all the work as his own, but in time, he would make known his appreciation to Rajai. Perhaps he could post Rajai in Paris. He knew the debonair young man would value the transfer more than money.

The parking lot guards had retreated to the warmth of the corridor. With their old G-3 rifles leaning against the wall, the gray-haired militiamen stood in front of a kerosene heater, drying their ragged cloth coats and soaked boots. Zargar passed them without a word and stepped into the blowing snow.

Freezing wind came from the north. Snow reduced the few lights on the street to gray glows. Only his Mercedes-- property of the Foreign Ministry-- remained in the parking lot. He turned his fur-lined collar up and stepped carefully through the snow crusting the pavement.

His mind continued checking every detail of the next morning's presentation even as he put the key in the ignition of the Mercedes-- then his thoughts came to an instantaneous end as the solenoid cable shot voltage into two electrically-fuzed 81 mm mortar shells placed by a Mujahedeen assassin. The simultaneous blasts lifted the Mercedes from the pavement, tearing through the floor of the car, sending the doors spinning away, and throwing pieces of the interior for fifty meters.

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As the guards crowded around the flaming wreck of the Mercedes, snow fell on sprayed blood and flesh, concealing the remains of Abas Zargar under crystalline white.

An early morning commuter flight took Colonel Devlin from Washington National Airport to Los Angeles International. Thirty minutes later, he stepped out of a taxi on Wilshire Boulevard and went through the security checks to enter the Federal Building. Clerks and administrators crowded the lobby, rushing out to lunch at the restaurants and cafes two blocks away in Westwood.

Noon had cleared the Customs Department offices. One young woman worked at the reception desk, eating a lunch of carrots and fruit while she typed. He introduced himself as Mr. Devlin.

"Just a second." The typist studied the names and numbers on an intercom, then keyed a button. "Mr. Gelb, Mr. Devlin is here."

Thin and balding, Larry Gelb stooped from years of desk work. He welcomed the square-shouldered visitor from the capitol with a handshake and ushered him into his small office. "How exactly did you learn of this investigation of the dynamite shipment?"

"Through the Joint Chiefs. I reviewed the briefing papers you prepared. Your link between the dynamite and a terrorist group may be unfounded, but it is a legitimate concern. I'm also interested in why you believe Mason deliberately purchased dynamite which can be identified as of American manufacture."

"Finally!" Gelb raised his hands in thanks to the acoustical tile of the ceiling. "Finally someone sees the obvious." "I believe the phrase in your report read, 'Mason has the knowledge and experience with explosives to know, first, that dynamite has very little military value, and second, can be traced to the company of

manufacture'. I did quote that correctly?"

"My associate Mrs. Sula prepared the briefing. She is sharp. I thought that Mason creep had made a stupid mistake. But he knows chemistry and manufacturing. Informers reported that he can analyze the explosive compounds of munitions to confirm the specifications. International scham artists have burned the Iranians for hundreds of millions but they never got a load of trash past Mason. He had to know about U S regulations requiring the micro-coding of commercial explosives. And that's why I sent the report to the Pentagon. And when no one answered, that's why I sent Sula back there. And now, a month later, here you are. Like I said, finally."

"The dynamite left the country for Mexico, then shipment to the Port of Colombo in Asia. Is that correct?"

"The container is now in Cartagena, Colombia."

"Colombia?"

"Closer to home, isn't it? Mason did a fancy ship shuffle in Colombo and sent the container of dynamite to Colombia."

"Do you have agents watching the dynamite in Cartagena?"

"In the port. A friend in the D E A said they'd try to keep an eye on it if it leaves the port. But it sounds like I have to go to the Colombians for help on it."

Devlin put a business card on the desk. "This is my office number. A switchboard can put calls through to my home. Ask your friend in the D E A to assign whatever number of men he thinks necessary to follow that dynamite to its destination. If there is a departmental problem, call me. After you have exhausted your resources and the resources of the D E A in Colombia, then I can take action."

"So it's Colonel Devlin," Gelb commented, reading the card. "And-- didn't I see you on the news a few times? You were in uniform. Talking for the Joint Chiefs of Staff in front of a committee? About the Russians paying for terrorism? So you're with the Joint Chiefs?"

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"No." Devlin shook hands with Gelb again. At the door, he said, "Call me. I'll resolve the problem."