

Syrian soldiers blocked the road. In the freezing morning air, exhaust and steam clouded from the lines of idling cars and trucks. Ahead, a driver raised his hands as the hooded and gloved soldiers searched him for weapons. Other soldiers searched the car. An officer supervised the document check and search from several steps away. Across the road, an armored personnel carrier parked in the snow, a blanket-wrapped soldier behind a 12.7mm machinegun watching the vehicles.

In his old Ford, Niles studied the routine of the soldiers. The Syrians worked quickly, passing the cars through the checkpoint at a rate of one every other minute. At the right-hand shoulder of the road, other soldiers slowly and carefully searched the cargos of trucks. Niles looked over to Chardon and saw her watching him. "Here goes."

"Do not be concerned when the soldier calls over the officer," Chardon told him again. "I think it is only the officer who can pass foreigners. If he speaks French he will not speak very well. Tell him I have the pass to the hospital. If he only speaks Arabic, I will talk for us."

"Got it. Got it memorized."

"Nervous?"

"Why?"

Chardon laughed. Niles heard the shrill, forced sound of her laugh-- the sound of fear. Only two cars ahead, the soldiers searched a driver. Niles spoke quietly to reassure Chardon. "Nothing strange about this not making me nervous. They know you. You got the papers. And most journalists I see work in groups. Say, why is that? You work alone. Why don't all journalists work alone? Wouldn't they see more like

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that?"

"It is simple to understand. They do not know the language, they do not know the people-- and they have no interest. So to go to a place, they must hire a guide. If it is a dangerous place, the guide wants very much money, so the journalists hire the guide together. Less money and the same article and photos."

"But you go out alone, don't you? You're like an anthropologist. On my field work, I go out alone to do research. Got to. If I go out with a whole gang of people, it disturbs the folk."

"Is that what you study? Anthropology? How interesting. You are a strange one."

"No more talking. This is it. We're next."

A soldier returned keys and documents to the driver of a Fiat. Exhaust clouding, the driver gunned the engine and sped away. Then the soldier motioned Niles forward. Niles eased the old Ford up to the soldier and stepped out into the cold.

Speaking Arabic, the Syrian demanded identification. Niles said nothing. He passed the forged French passport to the soldier. The passport carried the name of an imaginary Jean Monory. Seeing the cover and design, the soldier called over the officer. Chardon spoke in Arabic, explaining their assignment at the Ayatollah Khomeini Hospital in Baalbek. Niles pretended to understand nothing. Other soldiers gathered around the car.

The officer spoke to Niles in Arabic, asking his business in Baalbek. Niles answered in French that he did not understand. Chardon repeated her explanation of the assignment at the hospital. The officer took Niles' passport and glanced at the photo and immigration stamps. With handsigns, the officer asked for the car keys and Niles took the keys out of the ignition. Soldiers searched through the interior and trunk of the Ford.

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The officer went to the other side of the car and talked with Chardon, looking at her Syrian Army pass and the letter from the director of the hospital. A teenage soldier casually watched Niles, his hands folded over a Kalashnikov, the rifle barrel pointed at Niles' gut. The soldier grinned and arched his eyebrows, glancing in the direction of Chardon. Niles smiled back and pulled his coat tight around his throat, listening to the soldiers searching the car complain about foreigners making trouble in Lebanon.

A soldier returned the keys to Niles. Chardon translated the officer's instructions to Niles as they got into the car-- no photographs of the buildings bombed by the Israelis, no photos of militia positions. Niles nodded to the soldiers and waved, then accelerated away from the checkpoint.

"Was not

"There is no problem with the Syrians, but the Iranians--"

"Are next. What was that about no shots of what the Israelis hit?"

"He advised us not to take out our cameras until the hospital. The Hizbullah watch all the streets."

Niles let the Ford coast along the highway. He scanned the sprawl of shops, work lots, and shacks outside of Baalbek, comparing what he saw from the road to the high-altitude photos he had memorized. Going slower, he looked into the muddy streets and the narrow trash-strewn lanes between the lines of shanties.

A three-story warehouse rose above the squalor. Niles rolled down his window. He took the black plastic tourist camera from his coat pocket and flicked open the lens cover.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking pictures."

"No! The Iranians will see and--"

"No, they won't. They're hundreds of meters up there." Without looking through the viewfinder, Niles pointed the plastic camera at the warehouse and pushed the button once. A motor automatically advanced the film. Waiting until the

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perspective changed, he took another photo. As the car passed the front of the building, he clicked off a series of photos-- the cargo doors opening to the highway, the barbed-wire parking area where men in coveralls worked on the company trucks, then a flat snow-covered field marked by two improvised soccer goals. Niles steered with one hand while he pointed the camera back and snapped two more photos of the field, trucks, and warehouse from the opposite side.

"Patrol!"

"Yeah, I see them." Niles returned the camera to his pocket. Ahead, a line of Syrian soldiers carried black sacks of charcoal from a walled lot to a truck. "But they're no patrol. Keep cool."

"Yes, very cool! Close your window."

"No can do, miss. Think of the money."

Maintaining an even speed, Niles studied the approach to Baalbek. He noted the walled homes, the blocks of shops and apartments, the few streetlights and electric signs. Posters of Khomeini and the Lebanese Shiite Ayatollah Sadr covered walls. At an intersection, he saw an enclosure of sandbags roofed by sheet metal. No militiamen manned the post, but the ashes of fires indicated that militiamen watched the street and highway at night. Merchants rolled up their shutters for their first customers of the day. Clerks swept shops and sidewalks as women in chaadors passed. Running across the highway, a group of teenage girls in chaadors and head-to-foot coats and shawls forced Niles to stop-- he guessed their age by their slim legs and laughter as they ran across the highway.

Niles memorized the clothing of the men. Shopkeepers wore cheap dark suits. Laborers wore polyester work clothes and heavy coats. Some men carried their tools, others drove Japanese pick-up trucks loaded with equipment. He saw a crowd of militiamen lounging in the doorway of a teashop, rifles in their hands. They wore civilian boots, Syrian winter uniforms, and Soviet webgear. The gunmen confirmed

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what he guessed-- the Islamic fundamentalists dominated this district of Baalbek.

"All the town like this? Controlled by the Shia gangs?"

"Perhaps. I do not know. I have only visited the hospital. No farther. But I do not think all the people are radical. The Syrians support the Iranians and the militias, the militias control the people. Terrorize the people. Some people tell me they hate the militias. But they can do nothing."

"Who?"

"The people?"

"That hate the militias."

"Forget that thought, Marine. You will find no collaborators here. There, that is from the bombings last week."

Only blackened trash and ashes remained of a gas station. Water stood in craters. High-explosive had flattened the sheet metal buildings, throwing the twisted panels everywhere. The hulks of burned-out trucks stood in a line along the side of the lot. An aluminum Land Rover had melted in the fire. The riveted-steel light poles on the highway showed hundreds of nicks and gouges from shrapnel. Though the adjoining buildings showed no bomb damage, the fire had spread the length of the block, gutting shops and the second floor apartments.

Niles saw the white oil drums and sandbag bunkers of the next checkpoint.

"Here it is"

Militiamen checked the cargo of a flatbed farm truck, looking under tarps at an engine block and boxes heaped with grease-black parts. One boy unscrewed the filler cap of an oil drum and poked inside with a stick. The driver stood at the cab, showing the milita leader a clipboard of papers. In the back of the truck, a teenager with a Kalashnikov slung over his back noticed the passengers of the old Ford and called out to the others. The search of the truck ended, the leader motioning the driver to continue.

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As the truck pulled away, Niles eased forward. A militiaman shouted out and rushed in front of the Ford, pointing his Kalashnikov at the windshield. Another militiaman banged the butt of his rifle down on the hood. Chardon saw a muzzle pointed at her face. Crying out, she startled back, pushing herself backwards across the seat, trying to retreat from the rifle.

Militiamen pointed rifles at Niles. Easing the gear shift into neutral, he turned off the motor and pulled out the keys. He put both hands out the window and asked in French if they wanted to search the car.

The leader jerked the door open. Another man pulled Niles out and threw him against the car. As Niles raised his hands, a Kalashnikov stock slammed him in the back, the flat side of plywood stock hitting him. His shirts and heavy coat absorbed the blow. He faked a gasp and bent sideways.

Chardon talked fast in Arabic, too fast for Niles to comprehend every word. But he understood most of what she said as she explained she had a pass from the Syrians and the Revolutionary Guard, that she had come to Baalbek to interview those who suffered the wounds of the Zionist crime, that she could take the story of the crime to all the people of the world. The militiamen interrupted her with shouts and curses, demanding she be silent.

Hands spun Niles. Rifle muzzles jammed into his gut. He relaxed his abdominal muscles and pretended to fold over the rifles. The militiamen crowded around him, demanding in Arabic to know why he had tried to run the checkpoint. Niles repeated in French that he did not understand.

Finally, the leader called out to a militiaman in Farsi. That militiaman asked in halting French for his passport. Niles straightened. He twisted his face into a nervous smile and made his raised hands shake slightly, as if he verged on panic. The militiamen glared at him, their eyes fierce in the masks of their full beards and shaggy, short-cut hair.

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Adreneline coursed through his body. He focused on the simple act of reaching into his pocket and taking out the passport, then handing it to the militiaman who spoke French. Asserting his authority, the leader grabbed the passport and tried to read the pages. The French -speaking militiaman pointed to lines, translating the statements into Farsi, then Arabic for the others.

Behind him, Niles heard Chardon speaking in slow, calm Arabic. She read the pass prepared by the director of the hospital, telling the militiamen of coming to the Beeka after an Israeli attack and taking photos of the destruction and the victims. After the publication in the European newspapers, the Syrian Army had recognized her as friend of the people of Baalbek and granted her the privilege of documents--

Quiet! The leader shouted out. Throwing the passport back at Niles, the leader rushed around the car. He demanded to see the documents issued by the Syrians.

Niles looked down at the passport laying in the mud and ice of the road, then at the faces and the rifles of the men around him. He did not chance stooping down. Instead, he turned to the French-speaking militiaman and asked, Why the interrogation? Miss Chardon comes often to Baalbek. She said there would be no problem.

Spies, the militiaman answered. Israelis came to bomb our positions. Only spies could have located our positions. We must stop all the spies.

But we are not Israelis.

You think the Jew spies wear uniforms?

The leader shouted out for silence and the militiaman turned away. He directed the others to search the Ford. Two other cars stopped at the checkpoint. Militiamen demanded identification from the drivers. When only one man with a rifle remained, Niles picked up his passport. You can go, the leader told Chardon. But not alone. He motioned for Niles to get inside the car. Chardon slid to the center of the front seat, allowing the French-speaking militiaman to take the

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passenger side. She edged away from the militiaman, pressing her side against Niles.

Driving past the barriers, Niles felt Chardon shaking. He glanced to her and grinned. In French, he asked her if the Revolutionary Guard always interrogated her.

No, usually they were polite--

We are not Revolutionary Guard, the militiaman interrupted. We are the Hizbullah, the Party of God, the faithful of Lebanon.

Chardon directed Niles through the narrow avenues. In the main square, they came to a bomb-shattered and flame-gutted building. Niles slowed to look at the damage and the militiaman grabbed his Kalashnikov, banging the magazine and stock against the dash as he tried to point the rifle at Niles:

No look!

Offices of the Revolutionary Guard, Chardon told Niles.

No lies! Twisting in the seat, the gunman pointed the rifle at her. School!

Niles felt her hand grab his thigh. But Chardon said nothing more, ignoring the militiaman and pointing out turns until they came to a two-story concrete building.

The stark utilitarian design of the hospital contrasted with the old European colonial style of the nearby shops and apartments. White banners marked with red crescents draped the walls, identifying the facility as a hospital. But the militias had fortified the grounds and the building. Sandbags blocked the windows. Walls of sandbags protected the entry. Militiamen in a sandbag bunker checked the identification of the few people entering the hospital. And on the roofs of the shops and apartments across the avenue, twin-barrelled anti-aircraft guns pointed up at the sky.

As they turned into the driveway, militiamen stopped the car. The gunman in the front seat called out in Farsi, then told Niles to continue. Niles eased past the men and parked. The French-speaking gunman left the Ford and talked with the other militiamen, pacing and gesturing toward the foreigners-- while he spoke in Farsi.

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Chardon whispered in French: They are all Iranians.

Niles nodded. He looked down. Her hand still clutched his thigh. He gave her hand a squeeze, then opened the door and stepped out.

No! Wait-- she tried to pull him back.

Stepping up to the group of startled militiamen, Niles asked in French-- What is the problem?

They stared. Finally, the French-speaking militiaman told Niles and the woman to take their equipment and follow him.

Carrying the cameras and a tape recorder, Niles followed Chardon into the hospital. Adults with gifts sat in the waiting room, staring into space. Framed posters of Khomeini looked down from the walls. One woman sobbed as a nurse talked with her. A doctor greeted Chardon, then called over an administrator. They talked with the militiamen. Niles watched the activity of the hospital offices and corridors. Looking back to the parking lot, he saw the militiamen watching him through the windows. He smiled and pantomimed taking a photo. They pantomimed shooting him.

A stairwell led up to the second floor. Niles saw four Iranians come down the stairs. Two men wore suits and carried folders of papers. The other two-- in fatigues, boots, and stained parkas-- carried folding-stock Kalashnikov rifles. Niles turned away. He crossed the waiting room and pretended to look through the window of the reception office at the clerks working inside.

In the reflection of the window, he watched the stairs to the second floor. Niles waited for minutes as Chardon talked with the administrator and the doctor. He saw none of the hospital staff enter or exit the stairwell. Doctors and nurses and clerks hurried through the corridor and waiting room, going from office to office, but no one of the staff went to the second floor. Only a militiaman with a rifle went up the stairs.

Calling to Niles, Chardon introduced him to Mr. Raed and Dr. Nourbash. Raed

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spoke Arabic, the doctor some French. Niles only nodded and shook hands, then followed them along the corridor to the door of a ward. There, the nurse directed Chardon and Niles to strip off their coats and cover their clothing with hospital gowns. As they washed their hands and faces, wiped off their recorder and cameras with alcohol, the nurse opened the door and Niles smelled burned flesh.

Children lay in rows of beds, segregated into boys and girls, the areas divided by folding screens. Niles followed Chardon from bed to bed, photographing burned and maimed children as she questioned the children and their parents about the two attacks in the first week of January-- the first flight of Israeli jets striking at dawn, the second the next day in the afternoon.

The nurses pointed out the victims of the dawn attack. After the jets hit the gas station, exploding gasoline had trapped sleeping families in their apartments. Chardon collected stories of panic and family courage from the fathers and mothers sitting at the beds of their children. A father told of saving his severely burned children and the children of his brother, but watching his brother die in the fire. Niles photographed the father-- his hands bandaged, his face blistered, his hair gone-- comforting his crying son. At another bed, Chardon heard how the collapse of a roof orphaned three boys. Niles composed a group photo of the brothers in the row of beds.

Staying back as the others talked, Niles watched the victims through the viewfinder, listening as the children talked, waiting for the exact moment, then snapping photos of suffering and remembered horror. The Marine Corps had taught him photography and news photographers had taught him the routine. War had taught him to switch off his emotions and thoughts-- no matter how pathetic these innocent victims of strike and counter-strike, he had to act the role of the calloused news photographer. If he failed, if he betrayed himself, he would not survive.

He finished the first roll of film and went to the window to reload. Looking

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above the rows of sandbags, he saw the signs of shops and the windows and rooftops of the second floor apartments. He set the shutter speed on automatic and the lens on infinity, then reloaded the camera. He took a bit of gauze from a nurse and cleaned imaginary dust from the lens as he took two photos of the rooftops opposite the hospital.

Chardon listened to a last story from a burned girl, then began an account of the second strike. In the next series of interviews, children told of jets, explosions, and bullets, of their parents falling, of blood. Niles photographed a nurse injecting a legless boy with painkiller. Speaking into the recorder, the nurse described the scene of the town's wounded and dying crowding the emergency rooms and wards, then cars and trucks with casualties arriving from the Palestinian camp outside Baalbek, of victims of the Israelis bleeding to death after the overwhelmed hospital staff exhausted their supply of plasma. Niles took a series of photos of the nurse crying as she told the story.

In the early afternoon, the doctor returned to the ward. He invited Chardon and Niles to lunch. They crossed the street to a cafe. Merchants and a few orderlies crowded the warm interior. Taking a table outside in the afternoon glare and intermittant wind, the doctor and Chardon talked in Arabic while Niles checked his camera and lenses. He took a series of photos of Chardon talking with the doctor. The backgrounds included the hospital, the streets, and the surrounding area-- including the anti -aircraft guns on the rooftops.

A waiter brought tea and plates of spiced meat with rice, canned vegetables, and bread. Niles ate and watched the hospital. Two sentries paced on the roof. Revolutionary Guards and squads of the Hizbullah patrolled the streets. One of the patrols saw the woman sitting at the table. They circled the table, speaking in Farsi, gesturing at Chardon. The doctor dismissed the men and apologized to her. Chardon explained to Niles that her lunching in public-- with two men-- had offended the morals of the gunmen. Niles only nodded and continued eating-- while he watched the

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hospital.

The Iranians in the suits passed in a Land Rover. Niles lost sight of the men and their bodyguards when their truck entered the parking lot. But watching the second floor windows of the hospital, he saw venetian blinds open. One of the Iranians looked down at the foreigners on the sidewalk. The second Iranian stood at the window for a moment, then the blinds closed.

After lunch, Chardon went to an adult ward and interviewed men. Niles took only a few photos-- the burned and wounded men did not present the pathetic images he knew the newspapers wanted. Instead, he listened to the stories from the men and watched the ward. He saw that the orderlies did not take Chardon to speak to some of the patients. With French and hand-signs, Niles asked a silent one-legged teenager if he lost his leg during the air raid. The teenager answered in Arabic that the Iranians shot him. An orderly told the boy to be quiet. Niles pretended to understand nothing they said.

The nurses did not allow Niles to accompany Chardon into the women's ward. While he waited, he paced, memorizing the number of doors, the distance between the doors, and the length of the corridor. He found a service elevator-- which did not operate.

Arguing in Farsi, a group of Revolutionary Guards entered. Stopping, going silent at the sight of the foreigner in the hospital gown, the Iranians stared at him. One man spoke to the others. The Iranians continued up the stairs. Niles paced to the opposite end of the hospital.

The corridor ended at double fire doors. Outside, he saw a wall of sandbags sheltering the doors. Steel and concrete stairs came down from the second floor. A steel gate blocked the stairs. Guarding the gate, a militiaman leaned back in a chair, sleeping in the late afternoon sun.

Only a fire alarm secured the double fire doors. But looking outside again, Niles saw hundreds of cigarette butts littering the walkway-- militiamen stood guard there at

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night. Sitting in a chair, Niles folded his hands behind his head and faked sleeping. He watched the length of the corridor under his lowered eyelids. The hospital activity continued-- orderlies pushing meal trays, nurses going from ward to ward, a doctor leaning against a nurse and stroking a breast. But no one used the elevator. And only militiamen went up the stairs to the second floor.

An hour later, Chardon ended her interviews of the women. She passed the camera and recorder to Niles and chatted with a nurse. He checked the camera. Three exposures remained. He took a shot of Chardon walking with the nurse, framing the photo to include the entry, the stairs to the second-floor, and an orderly who wore the regulation uniform. Setting the camera on automatic and opening up the lens to f1.8, he pushed down the timer-delay lever. Then, when they stopped to strip off their hospital gowns and reclaim their coats, Niles set down the camera on a cart and pushed the button. In the noise and voices, no one heard the camera take a timed exposure of the corridor. He reset the exposure and lens, snapping a last photo, then backwound the roll and pocketed it. Playing the professional, he quickly checked and cleaned the film guides, then reloaded the camera. He snapped off two frames to advance the film, then put the camera in his equipment pack. We must hurry, Chardon told him in French, If we want to return to Beirut before night.

I know, I know.

Waving goodbye to the doctor and the nurses, they hurried out. No guards stood the door. But in the parking lot, Revolutionary Guards sat on the hood of the Ford, waiting.

"You come with us," an Iranian told them in English. He wore pressed fatigues, a new Soviet greatcoat, and new web gear. On the collars of his coat, emblems of a raised arm holding a rifle identified him as an officer in the Revolutionary Guard. The other Iranians gathered around them.

Niles looked to Chardon, as if he did not understand.

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She translated the Iranian's order, then asked, "Why are you delaying us?"

"For questioning." The Iranian officer looked directly at Niles and asked: "Who are you? American? Israeli?"

Niles turned to Chardon and asked in French what the soldiers wanted. In his peripheral vision, he saw the Iranian lunge, throwing a punch at his face and he flinched back, turning his head so that the Iranian's fist hit his skull just above the hairline. The blow jarred Niles but he heard the Iranian curse, the Farsi obscenities becoming a shuddering gasp as the pain of the broken bones screamed through the Iranian's brain.

Other fists hammered Niles, hands grabbed him. He did not attempt to fight-- he felt the muzzles of Kalashnikovs jammed into his back and gut, another behind his ear. Raising his hands and crouching, he protected his face and ears as the group of men all tried to beat him at once.

He heard Chardon shouting out in French and Arabic, telling him and the militiamen that they had made a mistake, that she and her photographer had official clearance, that they assaulted friends. Then a shout from a man stopped the melee.

The Revolutionary Guards stepped back. Niles looked up to see one of the well-dressed Iranians from the second floor offices. Chardon tried to explain the situation. The man stepped past her and spoke quietly to the militiamen in Farsi. He ignored Niles. Turning to Chardon, he said in slow Arabic:

You will go with these men. I apologize for the inconvenience, but there are some questions.

Where are they taking us? Chardon asked.

To a hotel. You must remain in Baalbek tonight. If you attempt to leave, you will be arrested. Again, I apologize for the inconvenience. I am Moinfar. Please call me if there are difficulties.

Militiamen pushed Niles and Chardon toward the Ford. But another shout from

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Moinfar stopped the rough treatment. The Revolutionary Guards stepped back, allowing Niles to open the door for Chardon. They sat in the back of the Falcon. Demanding the keys from Niles, one of the men drove. The officer rode in the front seat, holding a pistol in his left hand. Other militiamen crowded into a pickup truck and followed the Ford through the narrow streets of Baalbek.

"We interrogate you, American," the officer with the broken hand told Niles. "Then we shoot."

We are French, Niles answered. Chardon said nothing, but Niles saw her trembling.

"Talk English."

I speak only French. Miss Chardon speaks English--

"Lie! Interrogate. In French. Man comes. He prove you lie."

That explained the polite detention. The Iranians wanted to confirm their French nationality but the interrogation required an Iranian who spoke fluent French. Niles' French had satisfied the Syrians and most of the Iranians. Maybe Niles had made a mistake. Or maybe the Iranians wanted to question Niles as a routine security check. That would explain the apologies to Chardon from the Iranian who worked in the offices above the hospital-- Moinfar. But a French-educated Iranian would immediately hear his accent and limited vocabulary. And why the courtesy of the hotel? Because they needed to send for the French-speaking interrogator.

So we return tomorrow, Niles told Chardon in French. It is nothing.

Chardon stared straight ahead. He leaned back in the seat and watched the town scenes pass-- looking for hidden anti-aircraft emplacements and military posts-- as he waited for what came next. He had until tomorrow to escape.

The Revolutionary Guards stopped at an old three-story hotel. Inside the arched entry, an old Lebanese woman rag-mopped the polished tiles of the lobby. The officer-- his broken hand balled into a fist and wrapped with a cloth-- shouted out for a

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clerk in Arabic. The old woman set aside her mop and shuffled to the desk, looking with hatred at the militiamen and Niles. But seeing Chardon, she smiled, showing white porcelain teeth and greeting the young woman in awkward, provincial French.

Good evening, Madmoiselle. May I offer you a room for the evening?

Good evening, Madam, Chardon told her. These soldiers say that my friend Jean and myself must stay here.

Jean? The woman looked out to the street. Where is Jean?

I am, Niles told her.

Jean is my photographer, Chardon explained. We need a room.

You are with him? She glanced at Niles' gray-flecked beard, his short hair, his deeply tanned face. Blue eyes! And I thought he was one of them.

Pardon me, Madam. I am ugly. But I am not an Iranian.

The woman laughed and pushed the hotel register to him.

Niles signed the register in the name of Jean Monory and wrote down his passport number. He saw that only six guests had stayed there in the past month. Please ta

The old woman nodded. Niles started upstairs with their equipment. But he did not go farther than the first landing on the stairs. Waiting, he listened as Chardon dialed on the telephone.

She spoke in Farsi, then Arabic, very slowly asking to speak to--

Rajai-- the name of the Iranian working with the militias in Beirut.

Niles listened as she spoke.

Struggling with Farsi, Chardon asked to speak with Rajai. The Iranian who had answered the telephone told her Rajai had gone. He asked her name and why she called. She did not speak enough of the language to explain her detention by the Revolutionary Guards. She explained in Arabic, but the Iranian interrupted:

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I do not understand Arabic. Why must you speak with Rajai?

Is Hasani there? she asked in Farsi. I want to speak with Hasani.

Rajai and Hasani have gone.

When will Rajai return? When will Hasani return?

I do not know. Perhaps tomorrow.

Where has he gone?

That I cannot discuss.

Is Akbar there? Akbar who guards Rajai.

Yes. Why do you want to speak with Akbar?

Does he speak Arabic or French?

No.

I must speak with Rajai.

Giving him the name of the hotel, she hung up. She saw her hand shaking. She had tried to exploit an opportunity twice-- and failed. First, to bring the American to Baalbek and collect his money. Second, with the American's confidence, to trick him and the colonel into a trap and sell them both to Rajai. She had reasoned that if the Revolutionary Guards discovered the American's identity, she could immediately betray him to Rajai. But Rajai had left the country. If he had gone to a meeting somewhere in Lebanon, Akbar-- his bodyguard-- would be with him. Chardon now faced interrogation by the Revolutionary Guards-- without Rajai to explain the role she played in his group, without Rajai to explain that she had brought the American as a ploy to lure him out of Beirut. She had gambled and lost.

Voices came from the street. Chardon saw three militiamen push through the door. Bearded, wearing wool caps pulled down over their foreheads, they grinned at her like a pack of dogs and Chardon shuddered with fear.

Tomorrow, a minute after the interrogation of the American began and the Iranians learned his nationality, she became the property of those ragged militiamen--

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those creatures of medieval Islamic rage. She could only hope for accidental death during the torture. Without the luck of a quick death, the horror would continue for years, unending. Or could she hope for escape with the American?

In the small second floor room, Niles found no windows to the outside-- only frosted glass louvers to the hallway. The room had no bathroom or toilet. He looked down the hall and saw a common bathroom. There, he found a concrete arabesque serving as a vent-- but no window. Outside, he saw the night sky and the lighted windows of another building. He looked for another stairway and found nothing-- no stairwell, no windows, no emergency exit-- only the front stairwell leading down to the lobby-- and to the third floor.

Niles paused and listened for movement below him, then went up to the third floor. A door blocked access to the roof. An old padlock secured the door. Feet came up the stairs and he rushed down.

"What will we do?" Chardon whispered.

Speak French. First we have dinner.

How can we escape? They are down there.

Niles studied the woman. Her lips trembled as she breathed. She looked terrified. What game did she play? Acting terrified because Iranians suspected her of being a spy while calling other Iranians? Rajai-- could the name be only a coincidence? Looking at her, he did not believe she faked the fear.

First we eat.

Returning to the lobby, Niles saw two Revolutionary Guards sprawled on the couches, drinking tea. The old woman smiled and nodded and led Niles and Chardon into a dining room. Warmth and the smells of bread and spices came from the

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kitchen. The woman explained that she had only soup ready but if they waited, she could somehow make a dinner.

We have time, Chardon answered.

Niles kept quiet. He turned on the dining room lights and took chairs off a table. The door to the street remained locked and crossbarred. Rolling steel shutters covered the windows. Niles turned and saw one of the Iranians watching from the lobby door. He ignored the Iranian. Tuning the dining room's radio to the Phalanist pop station, he turned up the volume, then sat at the table with Chardon.

Now we can talk, he whispered through the noise. They cannot hear us.

I cannot hear you, Chardon laughed. She moved her chair around the table until she sat shoulder-to-shoulder with him. You are a strange one. Why are you not afraid?

I have no time to be afraid. I am thinking.

How can we escape?

Tonight.

Shuffling to their table with a tray of soup and bread, the old woman saw them sitting close together and smiled, showing her perfect false teeth. She nodded and smiled as she set the bowls in front of them.

Will chicken be good? she asked them in her awkward provincial French.

Oh, very good, Chardon answered. More than we expected. Niles only nodded.

And wine?

Impossible, Niles said. He looked at the Revolutionary Guard watching from the doorway.

The shit, the old woman cursed. They come and tell us of Allah. You lovers can have wine. Even if you must take it to your room.

He started to correct the woman. No, we only work--

Putting her hands over Niles', Chardon smiled to the woman. Thank you.

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Perhaps it will make us happy. Tonight will be very difficult.

Difficult! The woman looked at the Iranians. They made our city a prison. And brought the war. The shit. And now I must cook for them. But you lovers first.

She shuffled back to the kitchen. Niles felt Chardon's hands shaking, a slight almost imperceptual quivering of fear. No one could consciously force their nerves and muscles to simulate that state. He wondered how she succeeded in controlling her fear and not screaming in panic-- if she acted with him, she faked calm. Niles disentangled his hands and tore the bread, pushing the ragged hunk of bread into the steaming soup. He watched the Iranians.

If we are in one room, Chardon told him. It will be easier. True. But it will go bad for you if we cannot escape. They know you. It is me they want. You can tell them I lied to you. I lied and you hired me.

Chardon shook her head, no. Do you think the Iranians care? It would not matter what I told them.

Throughout the dinner, as the radio blasted French and English lyrics, Chardon questioned Niles, trying to determine what had triggered the suspicion of the Iranians. She had watched him throughout the day and she had not seen any errors in his impersonation of a photographer-- in fact, she wished her cameramen showed his professionalism. He had remained quiet and attentive to the interviews, photographing her subjects as they spoke rather than demanding lighting and poses to display his camera art.

But I forgot to put film in the camera.

Her laughter brought the Iranians. Chardon shuddered when she noticed them staring.

Only once did Chardon attempt to talk of the children in the hospital. Niles cut her off, telling her, I've seen it all before. And no talk ever made a child whole again.

But you fight, she whispered. In Viet Nam, in other countries, against the

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militias, you fight and kill. And you know that sometimes the bullets and bombs hit the innocent.

Niles noted what she said of the militias-- he had never mentioned fighting the militias. But he only replied, I always fought soldiers. Maybe if you ask to the Syrians and the Iranians and the Palestinians, they will tell you why they place their weapons and soldiers near the homes of civilians.

From the kitchen doorway, the old woman signaled Niles and held up a wine bottle. She pointed up, meaning the room. He nodded. Smiling, showing all her gleaming porcelain teeth, the old woman returned to the kitchen.

Now it gets serious. Niles left Lebanese bills on the table-- for the meal and the rooms-- and went to the kitchen.

Her back to the doorway, the woman worked at the sink, scrubbing at a scorched pan. She hummed along with the radio's pop music. Niles scanned the kitchen. On a magnetic rack over the cutting board, he saw a row of knives-- long carving knives, boning knives, short paring knives. One old knife had a full grip and a short wide blade. He reached out and jerked the knife from the magnet and slipped it into his coat pocket. The woman sensed the movement behind her and turned.

In deliberately slow Arabic, Niles said, Thank you.

The old woman scowled. You think I am an Arab? Speak our language. Here. Handing him the wine bottle wrapped in a dish cloth, she waved him away. Go with her, go!

Niles concealed the bottle under his coat and walked across the lobby with Chardon. She put her arm through his, like lovers.

Don't, Niles hissed.

Why not? They think I'm a whore for working with a man. They will be less cautious if we confirm their ignorance.

It could go very bad for you.

RECON

I know.

In the room, they saw the equipment bags open on the bed. The recorder and cameras lay open, the cassette and film rolls gone. Chardon searched through the bag. She found no film or cassettes, not even the unopened boxes.

"They've taken the film!"

Niles shook his head, no. And pointed to his coat pocket. "And I have the cassettes." Laughing, she shook the pocket of her dark coat and he heard the rattle of plastic. "So they found nothing of--"

He reached out and covered her mouth with his hand, then pointed to the hallway. Chardon nodded. Niles unwrapped the dishrag concealing the wine bottle. The old woman had twisted a corkscrew into the cork. Niles jerked open the bottle and poured wine on the rag. He draped the rag over the louvers to the hall. The smell of the wine filled the room.

Hands touched his back. He turned and she pressed herself against him, holding him, her body shaking. He put his arms around her, trying to reassure her and she raised her face and kissed him, her lips warm and fluid, her hands clutching him. For a moment, he returned the kiss, his hands grasping the slight form of her torso. She arched against him, her lips going to his face, his neck and boots scuffed in the hall. They heard laughter and the clatter of a rifle.

Chardon looked at Niles. Wanting her, simultaneously incredulous and cynical, Niles eased away from her. She grabbed him, trying to pull him back.

"Later," he whispered, his lips touching her hair.

"Why not now?"

"In Beirut." He turned his back and listened to the boots of the Iranians on the stairs. They joked and laughed, their voices echoing. He waited, listening, the stolen knife in his hand.