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Shaffick Hijazi manuevered the truck through the traffic of Baalbek. The design of the street-- a civic project of French colonial administrators fifty years before-- had failed to anticipate the commerce and the vehicles of the future. Too narrow to allow parking and the free flow of traffic, the one lane of pavement forced drivers stop and start as they wove past cars and trucks parked sometimes on the asphalt, sometimes on the sidewalk. Only motorcycles and bicycles moved quickly. But Hijazi drove a loaded truck.

Horns blared. Motorcycles whipped around him. The buildings on both sides of the street rose three floors, the street level shops, the second and third stories offices and apartments. In the narrow vertical space between the opposing buildings, the noise of cars and motorcycles and the blaring music from the shops reverberated in an unending cacaphony. The line of cars eased forward meter by meter, exhaust clouding up from the traffic to create a noxious, gray pall.

Hijazi felt sweat running through his beard. Sweat coursed under his long-sleeved shirt. The two-hour drive Jounieh had left his clothing soaked. He thought of the truckers in New York driving in undershirts and swim trunks during the summer. Here, in the areas controlled by the Iranians and the Party of God, short sleeves

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and bare legs meant an interrogation and a warning. For only comfort, Hijazi would not risk a confrontation with the Islamic radicals. His documents identified him as a Sunni Moslem with an address in West Beirut. But his business required travel between Jounieh, East Beirut, and the Beeka Valley towns of Shtaura and Baalbek-- a route very suspicious to the Iranians, who questioned every contact with the Christians and foreigners of non-Moslem Lebanon. If the Iranians held him and requested a Syrian check on his background-- though he had manufactured a believable past and a legitimate import company, the facts of his training at Fort Benning, Georgia in the United States and his liaison work with the Marines the year before in Beirut meant death if discovered. He avoided all contacts with the Iranians and Syrians-- even if he must wear a beard and long-sleeved shirts in the Lebanese summer.

As he strained against the steering wheel, easing the truck around a Syrian Army staff car, Hijazi saw an officer in camouflage fatigues leave a shop. A clerk followed the Syrian with a wheeled cart stacked head-high with boxes of American cigarettes. Hijazi glanced in the rear-view mirror and calculated the profit of the shop on the cigarettes. He guessed at the profit of the Syrian when the officer resold the cigarettes in a souk-- one of the open marketplaces in Damascus where merchants displayed goods smuggled from Lebanon.

A good profit for the shop. A good profit for the officer. Perhaps a month's army pay.

Sounding the air-horns, Hijazi slowed at the shop of his

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cousin. A shop boy ran out. Hijazi endured the heat and exhaust and the blaring horns of the traffic as the boy moved cars from the curb in front of the shop. He finally steered the truck into the space and eased the wheels over the curb.

A group of cousins left the shop. Hijazi unlocked the rolling steel door of the truck and searched through the cargo of cardboard boxes and shipping crates. He found a box marked FRAGILE and went into the shop as the cousins formed a line to unload the cases of Japanese tapes and electronic units.

In the shop, floor-to-ceiling racks featured stereos, speakers, video tape players, wide-screen projection televisions, and home video cameras. Locked, glass-covered bookshelves displayed the titles of hundreds of video tapes, thousands of stereo cassette tapes. A rhythm and blues tape played on the shop sound system, Mississippi voices singing in an American dialect incomprehensible to the teenage Revolutionary Guard militiaman buying a cassette-to-cassette duping deck.

"Here are the recordings from Europe!" Hijazi called out.

"Good, good." Raman directed a clerk to count the piles of cash the Iranian spread out on the display case. "Go direct to the office." Raman unlocked the stairwell leading to the second floor.

"Did it come through Jounieh or the airport?"

"The airport is closed again." Hijazi went up the narrow stairs as Raman locked the door behind them. "I had these couriered through Cyprus."

At the top of the stairs, Raman unlocked another door. "The

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taping is going quickly and without problems." He closed the door and locked it. Dropping his voice to a whisper, he asked, "Did the Americans make the payments?"

"Always," Hijazi set the box of record albums on a work bence.

"They were not late with the money. It was the fighting. With the telephones not operating, I could not call the bank and confirm the deposit. It took time to cable and receive an answer."

"The bank sent the money to the university?"

"Of course. The next time you come to Beirut, I will show you the bank forms. Why don't you transfer the money to Ali's account. He can write checks for his expenses. And for the school of Hussein."

"Trust a boy of his age with that amount of money?"

Though actually cousins, Shaffik Hijazi thought of his cousin Raman Hijazi as an uncle. Twenty years older than Shaffik, Raman had many years of experience as a merchant and the respect of his extended family of cousins, brothers, uncles, and sons. But when he spoke of Ali as 'a boy', Shaffik laughed:

"He is in the United States. He is twenty one years old. If you cannot trust him with money, you sent him to the wrong country for his education. With money, you can buy anything in America. Anything."

"I do not want to hear that. For him and his brother, I am a spy and now you tell me that the money will only lead them into error. Do not tell me that. Leave me in my ignorance."

"You are not a spy--"

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"Then what?"

"A technician. Do not say it. Do not think it. And no one will ever know."

"Then let us stop talking of it. Come check the machines."

Rows of machines for the duplication of cassettes-- both music and video-- lined the walls of the second floor. Here, above his shop, Raman operated a recording center furnishing imported entertainment to Baalbek, the Beeka, Syria, and Iran. For music, Raman ordered new albums of American and European releases. Hijazi delivered the air-couriered albums to the shop. He and his sons recorded a master reel-to-reel tape of the album, conformed the tape to the cassette format, then used a high-speed gang recorder to make as many as ten cassettes at a time. A local printer supplied Arabic labels for the cassettes. Without the expense of foreign attorneys and licensing fees to the European and American companies, Raman made a good profit.

Video cassettes required a more complex international organization. As soon as the Hollywood studios released a film in the United States, entrepreneurs copied the film onto one-inch reel-to-reel video tape and sent the tape to a Beirut processing center offering computer-generated subtitling. Translators prepared Arabic subtitles. Technicians electronically superimposed the subtitles on the master tape, then recorded several high-quality cassettes. Those cassettes-- complete with Arabic subtitles-- went to distributors who owned duplicating machines. Within the month of the release of the American film, Lebanese and Egyptian and Kuwaiti

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merchants distributed thousands of copies to Arabs with video tape players-- without paying a cent to the Hollywood studio for licensing. Raman operated two of the video cassette duplicating machines.

Raman took his cousin to the third floor. In a back storeroom stacked with albums and tapes, two other duplicating machines stood against a wall. The power lights remained dark. Hijazi flipped open a service panel. He saw a footage counter advance one number. The cassette in the right-hand machine had recorded an entire cassette and automatically transferred the incoming signals to the left-hand machine. That machine still had tape remaining in the cassette.

The machines did not duplicate films. Though the machines looked identical to the duplicating decks in the other room, these machines recorded radio signals. American electronic engineers had added masses of circuitry to the consoles. Though the machines could duplicate video cassettes, the new circuitry scanned the low-power communication frequencies used by the Syrian Army and the several Iranian and Lebanese militias, the machines digitally encoding, then recording the many transmissions on standard video cassettes. The wide, high-density magnetic tape allowed the machines to record days of walkie -talkie and radio talk on every cassette. When a machine completed a cassette, circuits switched to the other machine and a new cassette. Raman checked the machines every day, changing the video cassettes when necessary, then passing the recorded video cassettes to his cousin Shaffik for transportation to the Americans. For this, he received a monthly deposit

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in a New York account and student visas for his sons and daughter to attend universities in the United States.

Shaffik reloaded the machines. "Did you see any special units? Is there any talk in the town?"

"Only of the Israelis. And the Syrians. There is talk of war."

"There will be no war. The Israelis want out of this country. Unless the Syrians attack the Israelis, they will be gone. What of the Iranians?"

"Those dogs. They turn the youth against their parents, against their teachers. They are taking disturbed young men into their gangs. You have heard of the car bombings. The Iranians are involved in that."

"Do you have names?"

"There is only the talk. I have no names. I risk my life to ask names."

"There is no need. You are doing enough--"

A telephone rang. Raman rushed out. Hijazi stacked the recorded cassettes and reset the counters. Flipping down the access panels, he checked the fuzes, then pressed the button activating the diagnostic programs-- no problem.

"An Iranian speaks no Arabic and he wants tapes that are not English or French. Will you talk with him?"

"Of course." Dumping out the imported albums and video masters, Hijazi filled the box with the unmarked video cassettes and went down the stairs to the showroom. A clerk from another shop

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waited there.

"Come, this Iranian is waiting at the shop of Reyal."

As they walked through the traffic to the business of his uncle on the opposite side of the street, Hijazi asked, "What does this Iranian want?"

"Music from Spain."

"Tell him to go to there."

"He is Pasdaran. And he has been drinking alcohol."

"An Iranian drinking?"

"Please. Talk with him. Get him to go away and not bring trouble down on us."

They entered the narrow shop as the Iranian shouted in English:

"It's Spanish. It's a language, you know? The language the people speak in Spain. Most of the people south of the Rio Grande speak Spanish. So what's the big problem? You got tapes here from Denmark. Why can't I get what I want? I need a court order? A decree from the Ayatollah? You want to see my money?"

The Iranian wore the uniform of the Revolutionary Guard-- beard, short-cut hair, mismatched fatigues. Though he did not carry a rifle, he wore a pistol in an old Lebanese army holster. He looked perhaps forty years old, white hair streaking his hair and beard, his eyes red and bloodshot. Except for his age, he looked like any of the other Iranians occupying Baalbek. But the idiomatic English meant he had lived in the United States. "Sir, the clerks do not quite understand you." Hijazi affected the British English of his high school. "Their English, unfortunately, is not as

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excellent as your own. Is it possible I may help you? What is it that you wish to purchase?"

"Tapes. Disco, rock and roll, folksongs, songs-- in Spanish. Like maybe a hundred tapes."

Making a note on an order pad, Hijazi smelled the alcohol on his breath. "Music? Or video?"

"You got them? Music and video in Spanish?"

"No, sir. But I am the foreign buyer for a number of concerns. I can order and deliver whatever you desire."

"How about a blow-up love-doll?"

Hijazi pretended not to understand. "Is that a title or a group?"

"Can I order a selection? And a catalogue?"

"Certainly. However, because this is an extraordinary purchase, we will require payment in advance. Would that be too much to ask?"

"You take dollars?"

"American dollars? We would, in fact, prefer dollars. I will give you--" He turned to Sayed, a thin, stoop-shouldered bookkeeper who had married into the Hijazi clan. In Arabic, he negotiated buying Sayed out of this deal. "I want his dollars. I'll pay you ten per cent in Lebanese if I can take this business for myself."

"And you may keep the ten per cent if you will take him away without violence. I will not sorrow when this strange foreigner is gone."

Speaking in English again, Hijazi told the Iranian, "Thirty

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five Lebanese pounds a tape. Plus fifty American dollars for the air shipping cost from Europe."

Using a hand-held scientific calculator, the graying Iranian computed the exchange rate, then took a roll of American currency from his fatigue pants and pulled off four bills. "I want three hundred and fifty dollars worth of tapes. Get all kinds. And I want a catalogue of what music they've got. And get me a catalogue of Spanish movies."

"Do you read Spanish? Or should I request this catalogue in English?"

"Fuck no. I won't be watching that shit. Get it in Spanish. So you order this stuff from Europe? How long will it take?"

"I must order all the cassettes from Europe, sir. There is no recording industry in Lebanon. As to time, expect your order within a week. I will telex the instructions to my European suppliers this afternoon. And I will of course instruct the suppliers to purchase what you order only from the companies of nations other than the United State--"

"I couldn't care less where you buy this shit. Buy it from old Ronald MacDonald himself. Listen, if I give you company names and addresses and parts numbers, can you get some tools and parts for me?"

"Exactly what would these tools and parts be?"

"It's too technical. But any computer maintenance supply would have it all. You know, like for personal computers. But I want it fast. A week."

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"There will again be a fee for special air handling."

"I'll pay it. I'll put together my list. If you come through with all that Spanish shit, maybe I can send some more business your way. What's your name? You speak great English."

"I am Shaffik. I was fortunate to have British teachers throughout my education. Is there a number where I may call you when the merchandize arrives?"

"Yeah, here." He wrote a number on one of the hundred dollar bills. "But give up the telephones. I'm working in town here. I'll stop by the shop. One more thing. Can you get me a tape of 'Deep Throat'?"

"Pornography?"

"A shitty movie. But a classic. I saw it in L A, years ago. Can you get it?"

"It would be a fearful risk. You know that the Pasdaran will lash anyone who deals in pornography."

"Won't whip me. You can, get me a cassette of it. I'll pay the going price. Later, Shaffik."

"And sir! What is your name?"

"Mohammed Ali. Like the fighter."

The Iranian stepped into the gray smoke of the street and walked away, glancing at the windows of the other shops he passed. Hijazi spoke quickly with the teenage shop clerk. "Take your bicycle. Follow him. Don't let him see you but follow him until you know where he goes."

"Why do you send the boy out?" Sayed asked. The gray,

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stooping old man stood at the shop's door, looking out at the Iranian. "I think that foreigner is only trouble."

"Trouble he is. But he pays with one hundred dollars bills and he has many more to spend. I want to know more of that foreigner."

In the afternoon, Hijazi returned to Jdaide, a commercial sector on the highway to Jounieh where he had an office overlooking the Bay of St. George and the Mediterranean. He operated his company alone, working without a secretary or clerks, an answering machine taking telephone messages and an IBM personal computer managing his inventory and orders. A telex machine maintained his contacts with foreign suppliers.

He switched the telephone to replay and listened to the calls of the day as he taped a box together. A shipping agent in Tripoli offered him a pallet load of Kalashnikov rifles from Hungary. A militia captain wanted a video camera and recording deck. A shopkeeper finally had money to pay a bill. Odd calls separated the messages as the failing circuits of the Beirut telephone system switched random calls to his telephone. He smiled at the confused questions of the strangers as he packed the bubble-wrap protected video tapes in the box.

Turning on his mini-computer, he printed a mailing label for the box and a series of customs forms for the enclosed video cassettes, which he described as blank, defective cassettes returned for credit.

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Then he typed a report of his meeting with the Iranian named Mohammed Ali, describing the Iranian in detail-- his request for the Spanish-language tapes, his idiomatic English, the money, the scientific calculator, his mention of Los Angeles, and his request for computer parts and tools. He added that the Iranian worked in a sprawling trucking yard two kilometers south of Baalbek. Until recently, a company had repaired and sold trucks from the fenced lot and garage. Now, Revolutionary Guards seemed to be rebuilding diesel trucks and trailers for heavy transport.

Finished, he plugged a cable into the back of the computer, then ran the cable to a modified stereo cassette recorder.

He transferred the report to a music cassette. The label of the cassette listed a group and songs in French, but the narrow band of oxide between the A and B tracks now carried the report on Mohammed Ali. Hijazi taped the cassette to the inside of the box, then closed the box for shipment.

Calling a courier service, Hijazi sent the box to the air freight office at Beirut International Airport for shipment to Germany, where Americans would forward the tapes to Fort Meade, Maryland and the technicians of the National Security Agency.