

The Spice of Death

By Anne Swardson

“*Monsieur*, do you have any caraway seeds?”

The old woman was so tiny that I had to lean over the mounds of spices on my table to hear her. Clad in several layers of dusty black clothing, she spoke French with what sounded like an Eastern European accent.

I was desperately trying to succeed at my new life selling herbs and spices at this market near the Seine, six months after I’d fled Algeria. But I had no idea what caraway seeds were.

“I don’t believe so, *Madame*, but I might be able to get some,” I said in my Arabic-accented French.

“*Votre altesse*, please. Princesses should always be addressed as Your Highness. I want the servants to sprinkle it on the *saratele* so we can eat it at Sunday lunch.” She rubbed her wrinkled fingers together. “Do your best to procure it.”

Suddenly, a beefy young man in black jeans and a leather jacket strode up and grabbed her arm. He spoke in a language I didn't understand as he pulled her away. The vendors on either side of me didn't even turn to look; they must have seen this before.

"Let me go, you fool!" she cried loudly, trying to wriggle out of his grip as they crossed the street and headed down the sidewalk. "Don't make me have you arrested!"

I looked over at Jean-Pierre, the vegetable seller in the next stall. "She claims she's a Romanian princess," he said through his huge gray mustache. "But she doesn't have a *centime*."

"Who's the guy chasing her?" I asked.

"His name is Codrin. He comes for her about this time most days."

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She returned Wednesday. Her black wraps were folded even tighter around her; the October chill had set in. My supplier had sold me a mountain of caraway seeds, so I hoped her purchase would be a big one.

"I'll have 10 grams," she said, holding out a grimy paper bag in two fingers.

"*Madame*, that's nothing. I ordered this especially for you!"

"Very well, 15 grams." I measured out and bagged the tiny portion. She took it and, turning away faster than I would have thought possible, started trotting up the long aisle between the two lines of stalls.

“My servants will be back with the payment,” she threw over her shoulder.

Some people might have let it go. I couldn't and didn't. I darted around the table and blocked her path.

“That's 1 euro 50,” I said firmly. “Payable now.”

She pulled herself up to her full 4 foot 10. “I am Princess Ileana. Royalty does not carry money.”

“I have to make a living.”

She gave a big sigh. Fishing in a tattered leather change purse, she pulled out a few yellow coins and dropped them in my hand. Then she looked behind me, gasped and dashed away. I felt a bump: Codrin, brushing by as he went after her.

I hurried back to my stall, where a small line of customers was forming. But I couldn't stop thinking about the old woman. Was she a princess? Why did she have no money? And who was that thug who kept chasing her?

I knew the type. That closed expression, that furtive glance, those threatening gestures. Algeria's version of such men haunted my wife, Fatima, after she joined the protests during the Arab Spring. Against my wishes.

“Why must you do this?” I asked, stroking her hair as we lay on our mattress at night, on the rooftop to escape the Algiers heat. “We don't even have any children to fight for.” “That's exactly why,” she answered. “It's for the future of our country. I know it troubles you, Hakim, but it's something I must do.” Some husbands would have forbidden it, ordered her to stay home. But I knew how much she needed to make her voice heard.

Early on, Fatima hid her identity by wearing her burka when she protested. She and the other women protesters were covered from head to toe. But then someone revealed her name to the authorities. After that, undercover cops in blue jeans and baseball caps always lurked in front of our apartment building or trailed after us on the street.

She knew her arrest was coming, and she knew what she would face in Algeria's prisons. She acted first. One day, as a massive crowd of demonstrators waved signs in front of the parliament building and the cops prepared to move in, she sat down in the plaza, poured a can of gasoline on herself and pulled a cigarette lighter from her robe. One flick and I was a widower.

Oh Fatima! If only I'd begged to you to stay home that day. Or demonstrated with you to support and protect you. I never dreamed of a life without you.

I knew who had given her name to the cops: A so-called friend. I found where he was, and my razor-sharp *flyssa* did its work. And then I left the country, with the help of Fatima's friends in the movement. A contact in Paris got me set up at the market. Another sold me a truck, with low monthly payments.

Best of all, Fatima's nephew invited me to share his apartment. Khalil was younger, and Fatima had always said he hung out with a bad crowd. But he had proven to be a trusted roommate and willing confidante.

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I was standing behind my table. On my left were 10 containers of olives, each cured and prepared in a different way. In the middle, bins of raisins, dates, dried figs, apricots, and piles of grains and beans. On the right were mounds of spices, their orange, yellow, brown and rust colors calling to the passersby.

Before I even was aware of it, she was at my side.

“You must help me get away!” she whispered fiercely. “That man will be the end of me!” She fixed her claw-like hand around my forearm.

“*Madame*, uh, your highness, what do you want me to do?”

“Take me away in your truck,” she said.

“Why don’t you go to the police?”

She gave a shudder. “They’re in league with the *Geamănu*. They won’t help.” Without asking, she picked a black olive out of its bin and slid it in her mouth, then delicately placed the pit under the table.

“The who?”

“You would call them the Romanian Mafia.” She spoke in staccato fashion. “That man won’t leave me alone until I tell him my Swiss bank account number.”

Jean-Pierre was right, this woman was totally crazy.

I moved away to help a customer who wanted a bag of chickpeas. When I turned back, she wasn’t there. It was almost 1 p.m., near closing time. I figured she must have wandered off to beg lunch from another shopkeeper.

Maybe Jean-Pierre could tell me more. “Hey, have you heard about the Romanian Mafia?”

“Of course. They pick pockets not 300 meters from here, over by the Eiffel Tower. They run prostitute operations in the parks of the Bois de Boulogne. I’ve heard they even traffic in weapons. Is that man who pesters the crazy princess one of them?”

“She says he is.”

Closing time was nearing. I packed almost all my wares into the back of my panel truck and returned to the table to pull off the plastic tarp.

As I reached underneath, my hand hit something warm. Was it a dog nosing for scraps? I bent down. The so-called princess crouched there; her layers of clothing were wrapped around her as if she were a package. Her eyes were shut.

“What are you doing?”

She stiffly unrolled herself. “What the vegetable man told you is true. Codrin will hurt me, I know it. You must get me out. I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Why can’t your family in Romania help you? If you’re a princess, you must know powerful people.”

“I, uh, they.... we’re not in touch.” She reached for another olive.

This had to stop. I didn’t have time for people who wanted things without paying for them, people who thought I was a tool to be used, whether they were crazy or not.

“Please understand, I have a business to run here. I can’t give you olives, I can’t sell caraway seeds at a loss and I can’t drive you anywhere. Don’t ask me again.”

She didn’t give an inch. “Young man,” she said—I was 45— “you are showing a significant lack of respect. And ambition. When our properties were restored in 2000, a substantial amount went to me.” She turned haughtily and stepped away, tripping on the long black drape that passed for her coat.

What bravado. Algeria was filled with desperate people, some of them nuts, but none claimed to be a princess.

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That night, Khalil and I shared a roast chicken with onions in our tiny apartment in Le Blanc Mesnil, one of the many grim suburbs encircling Paris. He talked about his day repairing computers and I told him about Ileana.

“Why do you care about a crazy bag lady?” he asked. “Shouldn’t you be focused on building your business and paying off the truck?”

“I can still do that. What if her story is true?”

“It isn’t,” he said, tearing off a piece of *baguette* and stuffing it in his mouth. “Why can’t she get her own money? Look, if somehow she’s really rich, that gang guy will get the payout before you. Anyway, if she gets the money, she’s not going to give it to you.”

“I just wonder who she really is.”

“So ask her.” He shrugged, patted his beard and got up. Under it, I could see Fatima in his face. “I’m going to go watch the PSG soccer match with the guys at the café.”

“Don’t go out on the street afterward. There’s nothing the cops would like better than to pick up you and your friends on some pretext. And then charge you with making a bomb or something.”

He just smiled and left. I turned on the TV and tried not to think about Fatima. Her piercing eyes, her soft mouth, her gentle heart. She would have loved Paris.

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A few days later, I was picking up a load of fresh herbs at the Marché de Rungis. The wholesale market north of the city was spread over more than 200 hectares. I loved to stroll down the long concrete aisles past the stands of iced fresh fish from around the world, the apples and pears in rows of boxes, the many stalls of goat cheese, or hard cheese. They even had Klila cheese, reminding me of home.

On this day I was headed back to my truck through the flower section, enjoying the roses of all colors. Emerging from one of the aisles, carrying six long, flat boxes over his shoulder like a pair of skis, was a grim-faced man wearing a leather jacket. Codrin. Why would he be here?

I trailed discreetly behind him. He exited toward a back door and walked a few steps to where a panel truck was parked, back doors open. With a grunt, he slid the boxes inside. The contents were clearly far heavier than long-stemmed flowers could possibly be.

The driver, who looked like he was from my part of the world, handed Codrin an enormous envelope. They put their heads together and muttered for a while, then separated. I hustled back to my truck. I was pretty sure what Codrin had just been paid for.

A few days later, Ileana appeared at my stand. She didn't plead for help or serve herself any food, which I considered progress. I asked her if her guard dog was in the arms business. She shuddered and looked down the line of stalls, as if expecting him to come charging up at that moment.

"The servants betrayed my father to the dictatorship and we had to come to Paris," she said. "He died without ever going back." She reached deep into her wraps and produced a dog-eared black-and-white photo. It showed a middle-aged man in suit and waistcoat and a young woman in a wool coat and gloves. They were standing in front of a wall of light-colored stone, with a huge door. Behind, the top floor of a large mansion was visible.

"We lived here until Daddy ran out of money. Now those horrid Arabs are swarming all over it," she hissed fiercely. She pointed up the street, toward the place d'Iéna. "It's MY house, not theirs. I'll have it back as soon as I can get my wealth."

I ignored the insult to my culture. "Does Codrin sell weapons or not?"

She just sighed dramatically and shuffled away.

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I was more and more worried about Khalil. Every night he left, saying he was going to hang out with his friends. But we were in difficult times for young men of Arab origin. If they didn't have their bearings, they might be tempted to join a radical mosque and get recruited into terrorism. And even if they had good sense, they were still easy arrest targets for cops looking to fill their detention quotas.

He was all I had. No children, no wife. I had to make sure he didn't get into trouble.

One night when he left and got on his motor scooter, I jumped into the panel truck. It wasn't hard to stay behind him.

He drove to a nearby apartment complex, as cheerless as ours. Parking the bike, he headed toward one of the buildings. In the dark, I could creep quietly behind him. Just before he reached the door, he intersected another man, who was carrying a large, long bag. The light above the door showed me his face: Codrin, Ileana's pursuer. The two shook hands and went into the building together.

Grabbing the wall to keep my knees from giving out, I considered the possibilities. Was Codrin selling guns to my nephew? Could Khalil be involved in a terrorist scheme? What could I do to stop him?

When he came home, past midnight, I was waiting.

"I followed you," I said. "I saw who you met."

He stood there for a second. I could see the possible lies playing out across his face. In the end, he made a different choice.

“Uncle Hakim, it’s not as it seems,” he said. “Yes, some of my friends have dreams about committing violence. Every night we argue about politics, religion, France. But I’m trying to talk them out of it.”

“I know the man you met at the door,” I said. “He sells guns. Did you buy what he brought?”

“No. He knows a friend of mine who works at a butcher stand in the Rungis market. He wanted to show us the different kinds of automatic rifles and how they work. He’s a very aggressive salesman and I’m afraid my friends are going to swallow his line. He’s coming back in a few days to pitch us again.”

“Can’t you just stay clear of them? Owning such weapons is illegal here. One word to the police and you’ll all be in prison for years.”

He shook his head and stroked his beard. “We took an oath. If I could get out of it, I would. Anyone who leaves the group becomes the subject of an anonymous tip to the *flics*.”

“A person who would betray you to the cops is not your friend,” I said, thinking of Fatima. “Let’s go to bed and talk tomorrow about how we can fix this.”

We hugged each other as my mind started churning with ways to rescue my nephew.

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It took only a few days to figure out a plan. But the task required more than one person. I knew who I needed.

She came to the stall on Saturday. Khalil was standing by. As soon as the princess showed up, I came around the front of the stand, motioning to my nephew to take over sales.

“*Votre altesse*, look! Here is a plate of olives for you. Let’s go sit down and you can enjoy them while we talk.”

Her eyes lit up. We crossed the street behind the stand and sat on a green bench.

“I know a way you can be rid of Codrin,” I said, proffering the plate.

Maybe the olives gave her a jolt of lucidity, because she sat up straight and looked right into my eyes.

“Tell me more.”

“I can make him disappear. But I need your help. I can’t lure him away from the market to a private place myself. Can you do that?”

She took a green olive covered in basil and oil and slipped it gently into her mouth. “I think so,” she said softly and slowly. “I’ll tell him I’ll hand over the number of the account.”

“That sounds good. Say, why didn’t you ever just get the money yourself?”

“Oh, I lost the number years ago.”

The market was in a touristy part of Paris, near the Place de l'Alma. The crowds on the streets would give us some cover, and I'd found a private place to do our business. The house in the photo Ileana had shown me had a number: 4, and when I found it, it turned out to be perfect. The street was nearby and quiet.

I asked a few of my customers who cooked for the rich Arab families in the *quartier* and quickly learned who lived there. As I had hoped, I knew their cook already.

When I reached her, she told me that the Qatari family she served was in one of their many residences around the world and she was the only person occupying the place. I had to pay a lot of money, but she agreed to give me the keypad combination for the gate and to stay away that day.

I'd driven my truck through the entrance gate, parking it just inside, and opened its rear doors. A plastic tarp lay on the floor. Khalil was manning the stall back at the market, where Ileana was to lay our ruse. I surveyed the house and the elaborate garden in front of it. Had Ileana ever really lived here?

My phone buzzed: a text from Khalil.

C'est bon. En route. They were coming.

It was the most agonizing wait of my life. I had estimated it would take 10 minutes for them to walk here, but it felt like a month.

I heard their voices outside, speaking Romanian loudly. The door—which I had already propped open a tiny bit—creaked. I was behind the truck, trying not to breathe.

There were footsteps, then an angry question.

“I wanted to come to this place because it was my house,” she responded in French, probably so I could understand. “I’m going to buy it back when you give me my share of the money.”

Another angry question. Another calm response.

“It’s too risky to carry with me. I put it in a purse in the back of that truck. Move along, young man.”

The footsteps approached the truck. I was behind Codrin before he could move, and quickly deployed my *flyssa*. Just as I had planned, the body fell right into the back of the truck, onto the tarp. All I had to do was drive to the butcher section of the Marché de Rungis. Khalil’s friend was standing by to throw Codrin, or at least pieces of him, in with the beef leavings headed to the crematorium.

I turned to look at Ileana. She was pale but didn’t seem faint.

“That’s how our gamekeeper used to dispatch the boars before we roasted them,” she said softly.

She looked around the courtyard of the house.

“It looked better in my day. I really don’t care for that gold fountain.”

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I had worried that Codrin's gang mates would find us, but he must have been engaged in a solo shakedown. His disappearance gave Khalil's friends second thoughts about buying weapons, especially after Khalil hinted that the salesman had met with a bad end. My nephew eventually stopped hanging out with that crowd, to my great pleasure.

Ileana never came to the market again, but I heard about her the following spring. The cook who'd given me the gate code came to my stall. She told me she had a new employer: The Qataris had gotten such an enormous bid for their house that they'd agreed to sell. The cook liked her accommodations, so she stayed and went to work for the buyer.

"She's not an Arab and she's very old. Quite nice, although it's hard to understand her accent in French," the cook said. "And she has this craving for caraway seeds. Do you have any?"

I did. I sent a huge bag, and a bucket of olives, as a housewarming present.

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