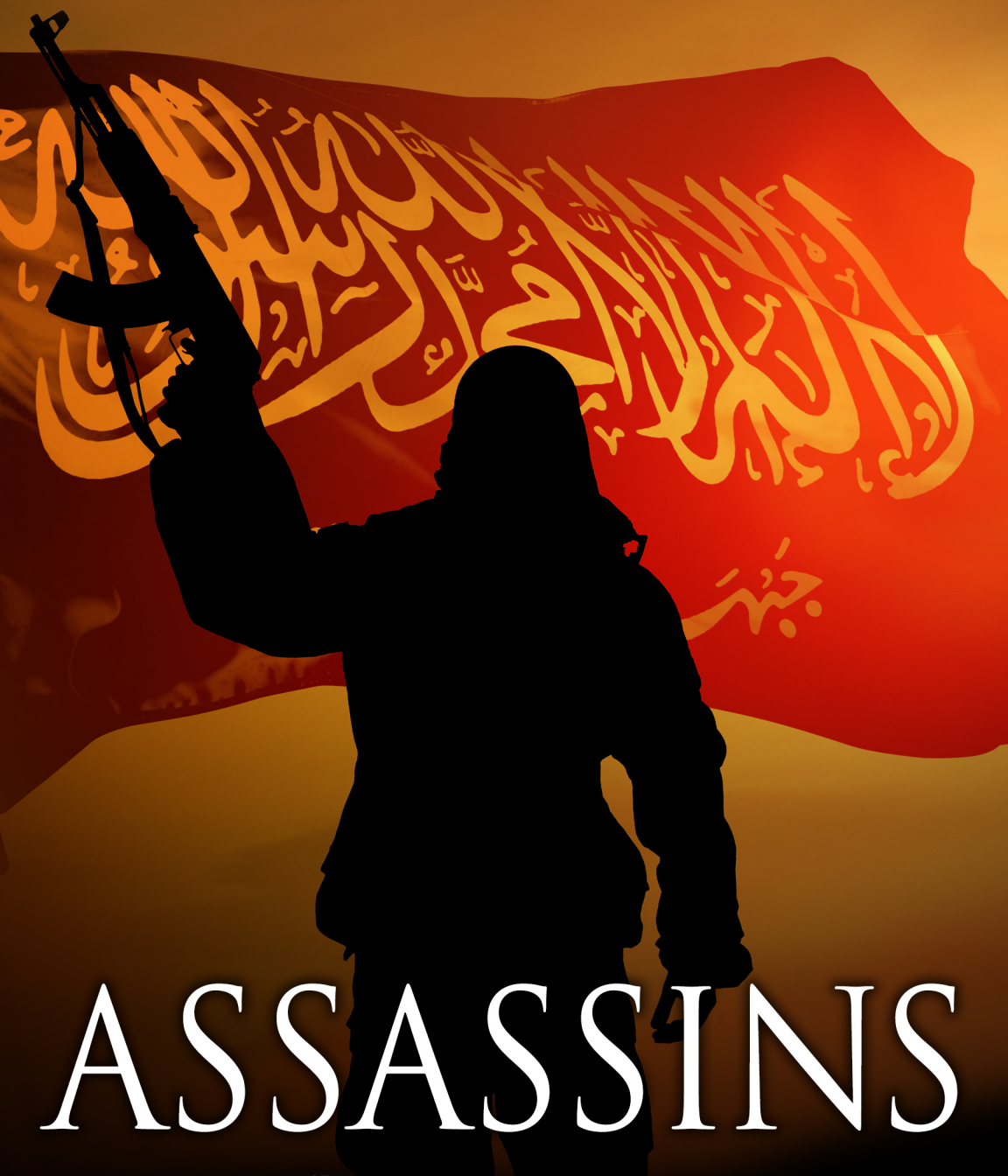


"AN EXHILARATING SPY NOVEL." —KIRKUS

# MIKE BOND



# ASSASSINS

"ONE OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY'S MOST EXCITING AUTHORS."

—WASHINGTON TIMES

# ASSASSINS

MIKE BOND

ALSO BY  
**MIKE BOND**

*Snow*

*Holy War*

*The Last Savanna*

*House of Jaguar*

*Saving Paradise*

*Killing Maine*

*Tibetan Cross*



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*And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.*

– New Testament, John 8:32, inscribed on the wall,  
CIA Headquarters, Langley

*One who knows neither the enemy  
nor himself will invariably be defeated.*

– Sun Tzu

*You can go your own way.*

– Fleetwood Mac

## An Evening in Paris

*November 2015*

IT WAS WARM for mid-November. They sat on the terrace of a little restaurant. Anyplace in France, she said, how wonderful the food, the delicious wine, the gentle harmony of others there for love, food, friendship, ideas, freedom, the joys of life.

They had been through the wars together, fallen in love amid the hail of bullets and thud of explosions in cities drenched with blood. Knowing, as the cliché put it, any moment could be their last.

It gave an intensity to love, that this person dearer to you than life itself could be extinguished at any instant. Someone you cherished so completely, composed of neurons, cells, muscles, bone, tissue and memories, could be blown apart, riddled with bullets, any second.

“I love you so much,” she said. “But I think I love you even more in Paris.”

“France does that to us all. What was it Hemingway said –”

“Paris is a moveable feast.”

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“Yes, and we will happily feast, in whatever life brings us.”

“As you’ve said, to follow the path with heart?”

“Yes.” He caressed the back of her hand. “For us, the wars are over.”

“For us the wars will never be over. You know that.”

He looked out on the quiet street. “Let’s take time out. Then we decide.”

“Decide what?”

“Whether we keep fighting or run for cover.” He smiled at the thought. Not once in all these years had he ever run for cover. Nor had she.

“Your buddy Owen said that people like us, once we’re in, we can never get out.”

“Look where it got him. You want that?” Again he checked the street. It was automatic, this watchfulness. On the edge of consciousness.

He scanned the passing pedestrians – happy couples hand in hand, an old man with a wispy beard, a little girl walking a black poodle, an ancient limping Chinese woman, a kid on a skateboard.

But it worried him, this *something*; he wished he’d brought a sidearm, but Home Office didn’t want you carrying one here. And everything seemed so peaceful. He sipped his wine, the raw ancient roots of Provence...

A black Seat slowed as it came down the street. A grinning face full of hatred, an AK barrel aiming at them out its window, a blasting muzzle as he leaped across the table knocking her to the sidewalk and covered her with his body amid the hideous twanging hammer of bullets and smashing glass and screams and clatter of chairs and tables crashing and the howl of the Kalashnikov and awful whap of bullets into flesh as people tumbled crying.

It couldn’t be, this horror, he’d left it all behind.

I

Afghanistan



# Death Mountains

*March 1982*

**H**E GRABBED FOR THE RIPCORDER but it wasn't there. Icy night howled past, clouds and black peaks racing up. Spinning out of control he yanked again at the ripcorder but it was his rifle sling. He snatched for the spare chute but it wasn't there. *I packed it*, he told himself. *I had to*.

Falling out of the dream he felt a surge of joy it wasn't real, that he was safe in his bunk. Then waking more, he realized he was in a thundering tunnel, huge engines shaking the floor, the aluminum bench vibrating beneath him. *The plane*.

"Jack!" The Jump Master in a silvery space suit shook him. "Going up to drop height! Twenty minutes to the Afghan border." The Jump Master bent over the three others and gave them a thumbs up: *The mission is on*.

He took a deep, chilled breath. The engine roar loudened as the two Pratt & Whitneys on each wing clawed up through thinning air. He bent his arm, awkward in the insulated jump suit, to check his altimeter. *8,600 feet*.

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“You’re falling at two hundred miles an hour,” Colonel Ackerman had reminded them last week in Sin City, “at sixty below zero. Guys die if they wait one extra instant to deploy their chute. Always remember, *Maintain Altitude Awareness.*”

Tonight anything could happen over the Hindu Kush. MiGs, high winds, tangled chutes, enemy waiting on the ground. Hindu Kush – *Death Mountains*. He thought of his father’s last Huey into Ia Drang twenty years before, the green hills below the chopper’s open doors, the rankness of jungle, guns and fear. Do you know when you’re about to die?

Glancing around the rumbling fuselage he was stunned at how lovely and significant everything was: a canvas strip dangling from a bench, the rough fabric of his jump boot, a rifle’s worn stock, the yellow bulb dancing on the ceiling, the avgas-tainted air. Next to him Owen McPhee stood up, awkward and bearlike in his Extended Cold Weather suit, smiled at Jack and shrugged: *Never thought we’d get to do it.*

“They might still abort,” Jack yelled over the engine noise.

McPhee grinned: *Stop worrying.*

Jack turned to Loxley and Gustafson. “Time to get ready, girls.”

Bent over his rucksack, Sean Loxley gave him the finger. Beyond him Neil Gustafson glanced up, his broad face serious. “I was fearing,” he called, “we’d get scrubbed.”

Jack tugged his kit bag from under the bench to final-check its contents: two goatskin bags of grenades and AK cartridges, a padded wool Afghani jacket, long wool shirt and trousers, a blackened pot of rice and dried goat meat, two Paki plastic soda bottles of water, a woven willow backpack, a Soviet Special Forces Spetsnaz watch. He

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slid on his parachute, nestled the canopy releases into his shoulders, secured all the straps and turned to help Loxley. "If these chutes don't open," Loxley yelled, "we'll never have to do this again."

At first Jack had been put off by Loxley's California surfer cool, his gregarious grin and jokes about Home Office and military politics. But Loxley had always backed it up, always put his buddies first. And he made them laugh; even tough-faced sarcastic McPhee with his small hard mouth, tight on the balls of his feet as a welterweight, couldn't keep from grinning. "You dumb hippie," he'd growl, trying not to laugh.

The Jump Master raised both arms sideways, bent his elbows and touched his fingertips to his helmet. Jack nodded and slid his padded leather helmet over his head, tucked the goggles up on its brim, settled the Makarov pistol on his thigh. Now the JM raised his right hand, thumb to his cheek, and swung the hand over his nose. Jack took a last breath from the plane's oxygen supply and slipped on his radio unit and mask, gave the JM a thumb up to say his own oxygen was working.

*22,500 feet.*

"To avoid Soviet and Paki radar," Colonel Ackerman had said, "it has to be a Blind Drop."

"No marching bands?" Loxley had snickered. "No girls waving panties?"

"We've calculated your Release Point based on your DZ," Ackerman said. "And where we think the wind'll be."

"In the Hindu Kush," Loxley added, "I can't imagine wind will be a problem."

"Shut up, Sean," Ackerman said. "And there'll be no external resupply. No exfil. We've devised an Evasion and Escape but you may want to change that on the ground."

"You're making it sound like we're not really welcome."

“Remember up there, *Maintain Altitude Awareness.*”

“That’s right, girls. Know when you’re high...”

Ackerman glared at him. “If this mission were to exist, its purpose would be to build an Afghani guerrilla movement against the Soviets, not tied to the Pakis but on your own. By themselves the Afghans can’t beat the Soviets. But with our help – *your* help – we might just reverse the Soviet conquest of Asia and get the bastards back for Vietnam. But we don’t intend to start World War Three or fuck up our relations with ISI. So once you drop out of that plane we can’t help you.”

Slender and rugged with a black moustache and graying curly hair, Levi Ackerman had lost his right forearm in the same Ia Drang battle that killed Jack’s father. Ever since then Levi had watched over Jack, got him into West Point, then after that fell apart and Jack had finished at University of Maine, Levi got him into the military ops division of Home Office – “I want you near me, kid,” he’d said. Would Levi now send him to die?

In the thundering airless fuselage the JM swung up his left hand and tapped the wrist with two fingers of his right, opened and closed his palms twice: the Twenty-Minute Warning.

34,000.

“When I was a kid,” Loxley said, “my Grandma use to make Afghans–”

“Your Grandma,” McPhee yelled, “was a chimpanzee –”

Jack plugged in his backpack oxygen and checked his AIROX on/off valve.

“Whatever you do, guys,” Ackerman had added, “don’t get separated from Jack. He’s your squad leader, knows the lingo, the country. Lose Jack you die.”

The Red Light over the rear ramp flicked on. Courage isn’t the absence of fear, their weapons trainer, Captain Per-

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kins, used to say in Sin City, but action despite it.

They could still abort. The JM would give the abort signal if an Unsafe Condition existed either in the aircraft, outside it, or on the DZ. As if the whole damn mission weren't insanely unsafe.

Haloed in the Red Light the JM gave the Ten-Minute Warning. Eight times his hands closed and opened: Wind speed 80 knots.

Way too fast. They'd have to abort. But the JM swung his arm outward, the command to check their automatic ripcord releases. Jack slid his combat pack harness up under his parachute, its seventy-pounds added to the chute's forty-five making him stagger backward. He checked that the sling of his AKMS rifle was fully extended and taped at the end, that the tapes on the muzzle, front sight, magazine, and ejector port were tight and not unfurled except where he'd folded over the ends for a quick release.

"*Strela?*" Jack called. McPhee lifted up a long heavy tube wrapped in sheepskin and lashed it vertically on one side of Jack's combat pack. Jack helped Loxley and McPhee lash two more *Strela* tubes to their packs. Jack secured his rifle muzzle-down over his left shoulder, the curved magazine to the rear so it nestled against the side of the chute and wouldn't tangle in the lines.

With a fat gloved thumb he pushed the altimeter light. 39,750. The JM gave the Two-Minute Command. Jack tightened his straps, checked everyone's oxygen pressure gauge, patted their shoulders. *Be safe*, he told each silently.

His breath was wet and hot inside the mask; his beard itched. His goggles fogged, the Red Light danced. Buzzing filled his ears, his stomach was an aching hole. The plane shivered, the ramp cracked open, began to drop. Air sucked past. Beyond was black. A styrofoam cup scuttled down the fuselage and blasted out the ramp. The JM gave the Salute

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Command: *Move to the Rear.*

Jack switched on his bailout oxygen and disconnected from the plane's oxygen console. This was what happened when you got executed, you numbly stood up and let them put a bullet through you.

The JM gave the thumbs up Stand By Command and Jack gave it back. He thought of his father in the chopper, his father's Golden Rule: "Do what you say, and say what you do." Keep your word, and speak the truth. So when you die you've lived the way you should.

The Green Light flashed on. The JM swung his arm toward the hole and Owen McPhee dropped into the darkness. A second later Neil Gustafson. Then Sean Loxley.

Jack halted on the ramp. *You're going to die. That's all.* The JM swung down his arm. Jack arched his back and dove into the night.

## Tao of War

HE SLAMMED into the plane's wake, spinning wildly, stars flashing past, flung out his arms into the Stable Free Fall Position but the off-balanced *Strela* made him spin faster. Tumbling in a dizzy spiral he was icing up, had to *Maintain Altitude Awareness*, couldn't see his altimeter. Cold bit through his gloves into his fingers and into his elbows and knees where the jumpsuit was tight.

*You drop a thousand feet every five seconds.* How long had he fallen? He hunched to balance the pack but that made him spin worse. He shoved the chute left to offset the *Strela* and combat pack; the tumbling slowed, the huge white-black Hindu Kush rushing up. Grabbing his left wrist he pushed the altimeter button. 29,000: he'd dropped ten thousand already. But in a few seconds, at 25,000, he could deploy the chute.

*Safe now.* Thicker air hissed past, the black ridges and white cliffs of the Death Mountains rising fast. To the east, behind him now, Chitral Valley and Pakistan. To the west the snowy peaks, barren slopes and desert valleys of Afghanistan.

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27,500. He couldn't see the red chemlites on the others' suits. But no one had broken silence. *So they're fine too. We made it.* He felt a warm happiness, the fear receding.

26,500. He reached for the main ripcord handle.

25,250. He pulled the ripcord; the pilot chute yanked out the main bag and he lurched into a wide down-pulling arc. Tugging the steering toggles he swung in a circle but still couldn't see chemlites, only frozen Bandakur mountain rising toward him, the snow-thick valleys eight thousand feet below, dim lights to the east that could be the village of Sang Lech. He lined up to fly northwest across Bandakur so he'd hit the DZ on the mountain's western flank. The stars above the black dome of his chute were thick as milk. The great peaks climbed past him, entombed in ice. He sucked in oxygen, felt peace.

A huge force smashed into him collapsing his chute; he somersaulted tangled in another chute, somebody spinning on its lines. "Cutaway!" he screamed. They looped around again, caught in the lines. Jack wrenched an arm free but that spun him the other way, the tangled chutes swung him down and the other man up then the stars were below him so for an instant he thought he was falling into space. He yanked the chute releases and dropped away from the tangled chutes, accelerating in free fall till with a great *whoof* the reserve chute jerked him up and the tangled chutes whistled past, the man wrapped in them. "Cutaway!" Jack screamed into his radio. "This is Tracker. *Cutaway!*"

"This is Domino," McPhee said. "What's your situation?"

"Tracker this is Silver," Loxley said. "I can't see you. Over."

"Come in, Whiskey!" Jack yelled at Gustafson. "If you're caught, cut away the main chute and deploy reserve. *Maintain Altitude Awareness. Cut away!*"



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His hands had frozen. "Whiskey!" he screamed, "what's your situation?"

He switched off his oxygen. Below was a tiny chemlite. "Whiskey," McPhee radioed Gustafson. "Do you read me?"

Rocky ridges coming up fast. If Gustafson hadn't deployed his reserve he'd have hit by now. A fierce wind was blowing snow off the peaks; they had to land into it. Short of the DZ, way short. Maybe in the boulders. *Bend your knees. Roll with the fall.* He snapped off his chemlite.

"Whiskey," McPhee radioed. "Do you read me?"

*Bend your knees. Loosen shoulders. Adjust rifle so it doesn't smash ribs on impact.* The ground raced up. He dropped the combat pack and *Strela*. The mountain slammed into him; he tumbled backward his head smashing boulders. He leaped up and scrambled downhill unbuckling the chute harness and stamping on the chute, dragged it together and knelt on it.

A steep stony slope, wind screaming, shaly rock clattering down. He snatched off his helmet and clutched his head, blood hot between his fingers, the pain unbearable. He untaped his rifle, checked the safety. "Tracker here," he whispered, gripping his skull to hold in the agony. He feared his skull was broken, the way the blood poured out. "Touchdown. Over."

"Silver here," Loxley answered. "TD. Over."

"Domino here," McPhee said raggedly. "TD. Over."

"Whiskey!" Jack called. Silence, hissing of wind in the radio. "Stow your chutes in your packs and link up," he told them. "Look for my chemlite. Over."

"Domino here," McPhee said. "Come to me. Over."

"I want us uphill." Jack gritted his teeth. "Get up here."

"Hurt," McPhee grunted. "Not going anywhere."

The blood running out Jack's nose had frozen in his moustache. Clutching his skull he steadily descended the

slope, each step jolting new agony into his head. When he reached McPhee, Loxley was already there. "Goddamn rocks," McPhee groaned. "Goddamn leg."

Clamping a light in his teeth Loxley eased off McPhee's boot. "Tibia and fibula both broken."

Behind the wind Jack heard a faint rumble through swirling snow. *How could a helicopter be up here at night?* "Wrap it," he snapped. "Chopper!"

"Can't see us in this," Loxley yelled into the wind. "What happened?"

"Gus hit me from above," Jack yelled back, making the pain worse. "About eighteen. We tangled. I cut away at the top."

"He streamed," McPhee said, as if stating the worst might prevent it. He gripped his radio. "Whiskey! Do you read me?"

"Stop sending!" Jack said. "We'll get the Russians on us." He stuffed all their jump gear under a boulder and jammed it with snow. Now except for their *Spetsnaz* watches, Russian field glasses, AKs, pistols, and *Strelas*, everything they had was Afghani. "Leave the channel open. In fifteen minutes try again."

"Gus is our medic," Loxley yelled. "Owen's got a broken leg. If we abort, try for Pakistan –"

"Abortion's for girls," McPhee snarled. "We find Gus."

Jack thought of Gus falling tangled in his chutes, icy rock racing up. "If his reserve didn't open his body's way behind us and there's nothing we can do. If it opened he's somewhere on this ridge."

The radio buzzed, stuttered. "That's him!" McPhee said. "Whiskey!" he coaxed. "Come in Whiskey..."

The radio was silent. *One man gone, another injured.* Jack's head pounded like a jackhammer. He'd failed, the mission screwed before it even started. He broke away the

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chunks of frozen blood clogging his nose and mouth, slung McPhee's rifle over his own, and pulled McPhee up.

"You asshole," McPhee hissed, "you're bleeding."

"Bit my tongue when I landed," Jack spit a dark streak on the snow. "No big deal."

Loxley shouldered McPhee's combat pack, stumbling under the weight, stood and looped the *Strela* tube over his other shoulder. "Where to, Boss?"

"We find a place to stow Owen," Jack said. "Then we find Gus. Before the Russians do."

WITH MCPHEE HOBBLING between them they climbed Bandakur's south ridge through howling snow that froze in their beards and drove icicles through their coats. Every fifteen minutes they tried the radio but there was no sound from Gus.

It was worse than Jack could have imagined; they might not live, let alone complete the mission. Pakistan seemed the only choice. *If* they could get McPhee back across the Kush without being caught by the Soviets or Pakis. He saw Ackerman's taut angry face. *You didn't do what we trained you for.*

"It's not to put you in shape that we drive you so hard," Ackerman had told them in Sin City, speaking of the five a.m. runs with full packs, the crawling on hands and toes under machine gun fire, the rappelling down cliffs and buildings. "You men were already hard as steel when you came here."

"Not McPhee," Loxley snickered, "he's never been hard at all."

Ackerman ignored him. "It's so you *know* you can do them. Once you've done them, even in training, you'll *know* in Afghanistan you can endure almost anything..."

"And you're going to learn everything you can about ordnance," Captain Perkins added. "From Makarovs to SA-

7s, about setting ambushes and nailing a guy in the head at eight hundred yards. How to set Claymores and dig pit traps, how to get the jugular when you cut a throat, how to recognize Soviet infantry units and tell a T-72 tank from the later T-72S, and the RPG-7 from the RPG-16. And *no*, RPG does *not* stand for ‘rocket-propelled grenade’. It’s Russian for rocket anti-tank grenade launcher – *Reaktivniyi Protivotankovyi Granatomet*, and I want you girls to know how to spell that.”

“We’ve been agitating these damn Afghanis for years,” Ackerman said, “fed them fanatic Islamic stuff till we finally got a fundamentalist government going in Kabul and the Soviets *had* to come in, for their whole soft Muslim underbelly – Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, *and all that oil* – was at risk. Now,” he’d added, “We’re going to do to them in Afghanistan what they did to us in Vietnam. We’re going to bleed them dry.”

Now the peaks blocking the stars and the sheer icy canyons filled Jack with a vast, desolate despair. It was a perfect place to bleed and die.

“The Special Forces man is the essence,” Ackerman said, “of the Art of War. He’s not *where* he appears to be, nor *what* he appears to be. He strikes where and when the enemy’s not ready. He inflicts great harm with few resources because *he* is the Tao of War.”

“The SF man,” said Perkins, “makes losing part of the enemy’s fate.”

Jack smiled, shook his head. “That is *such* bullshit.”

“Someday, if you’re good enough,” Levi Ackerman had answered, “it won’t be.”

Now within two months they had to report to Ackerman in Rawalpindi. Even if Gus was dead, they might still be able to reach Jack’s old village, Edeni, where people would care for McPhee. Then Jack could find his former

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enemy Wahid al-Din, now a famous warlord fighting the Soviets. They could still start a third front uniting the Afghani opposition...

He took a breath, bit back the agony in his head, spit a clot of blood snatched by the wind. "Edeni," he yelled. "Even if we can't find Gus we're going to Edeni."

## Morphine

**W**AHID AL-DIN followed his squad of fourteen mujihadeen in darkness from their cave in the hills below Bandakur down the defile of the Varduj River toward the Soviet encampment outside Sang Lech.

The men moved quietly, just a hiss of footfalls on the hard-packed trail, the rustle of worn leather and padded coats, the clink of a rifle buckle where a tape had worn through.

After midnight they reached the River valley and the narrow road from Khoran to Ishasshim on the Pakistani border. At the ruins of a bombed farmhouse they dashed across the road and turned north through an overgrown apple orchard then untended fields of oats and barley, stepping single-file behind a man who knew the way between the land mines.

In a few places where farmers had tried to harvest crops there were pits where mines had exploded. It irritated Wahid that the farmers were such fools – only poppies were worth lives, the lives of orphans sent out to pick the ripened husks.

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Mines had no significance except you avoided some areas or tried to entice the enemy into them. Eventually the crops would come back. That, like everything else, was God's decision. *For the grain that ye sow, do ye cause it to spring forth, or do I?*

He thought of the Soviet soldiers sleeping in their tents along the River outside Sang Lech, their officers billeted in the farms on the edge of town. In a few minutes these farmers would lose their eternal lives, for hadn't they consorted with the enemies of Islam? *They shall have garments of fire fitted on them, and boiling water poured on their heads and their bowels rent asunder, and also their skins, and they shall be beaten with maces of iron.* They'd read the Koran. They couldn't say they didn't know.

Bitter wind moaned down from the white cliffs of Banderakur. The River was high and icy. He wanted to fire from here at the Soviet tents on the other bank and then run, but his men had too few bullets. Nine of his seventeen men had old bolt-action .303 Enfields and a handful of cartridges. The rest had Soviet AK-47s but only a hundred twenty-four rounds of 7.62 mm cartridges total, barely half a 30-round magazine each. No, they had to move closer, kill fast and take what arms they could before surviving Soviets could reach their tanks and open up with their machine guns.

Wahid waved his men down the gravelly bank into the fast-moving water. *I was nothing*, he reminded himself, *until this war*. Now he might control the Panjshir when the Soviets left. *I must be careful not to die before then.*

The River rocks were cold and slippery, but moving carefully behind his men he did not founder. He reached the far bank two hundred yards from the nearest Soviet tents, his men moving forward through the willows.

He let them go ahead – he was needed back here in case anything went wrong. Someone yelled and he dove into the

grass. Gunfire rang out, the Soviets shouting. A grenade exploded and his heart congealed. A bullet snapped past his ear and he squirmed lower into the grass clawing the dirt.

A man scrambled from the first tent. Wahid sprayed rounds at him, afraid he might miss and the man would kill him. Amid the horrid thunder of guns, voices in Russian and Kazakh, Wahid crawled forward to grab the man's pistol and the man fired, the bullet searing Wahid's side. Moaning he bellied back through the willows toward the River.

Tanks rumbled, rifles chattered, machine guns snarled, flares flashed shadows and bullets whacked past. He fell down the cutbank losing his rifle. Fearing to cross the open water he ran splashing downriver till the rumble of guns and tanks faded behind him.

The Russian's bullet had burnt a crease along his waist. It stung terribly but there was no blood. *Morphine. Back at the cave there was morphine.*

At a bend in the River he crawled across, soaking his coat that froze as he climbed the canyon above the trail. Below in the starlight he saw the dark shapes of his men cross the River and jog up the trail. Eleven – only six lost, though several seemed wounded. He would wait then come up behind them saying *You left me behind to fight alone.*

Far away a *whack-whack-whack* nearing fast. Three helicopters thundered around the mountain; their white-red flares caught out his men like puppets on a string, their machine guns stitching them to earth. So faraway, a game really, how they fell.

Wahid squirmed tighter into the rocks. The helicopters drifted down and settled among his men, monstrous wasps in the flares' flickering gleam. Now and again the wind carried up to him the bang of a pistol as the Soviets finished off a wounded man. Then like sated vultures the helicopters flew away.



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Shaking with fear and cold he huddled there a long time then descended timidly and searched the dead till he found a new AK and trotted back up the trail toward the cave. At the cave he could get morphine. To kill this awful pain. Then he'd tell everyone how his men had deserted him and were annihilated by the helicopters because they'd run from battle.

There had to be a way to kill the helicopters.

Or he would fail and never control the Panjshir.

How could God want that?

IN THE KABUL CLINIC of Médecins Sans Frontières, Sophie Dassault knelt beside a shepherd boy with lovely eyes and a gray pinched face, his golden hair sweaty with agony, both legs and one arm gone, shards of metal jutting from his belly and chest. Why was it always children who stepped on mines? And not the men who planted them?

A voice called her, Didier the nurse. "Man named Ahmad for you, Doctor."

"Tell him wait." She touched the boy's face. "*Au revoir, mon cher tout petit Prince* –"

The boy's eyes caught hers and she saw he knew no miracle would save him. It didn't matter she spoke French for now he understood all language, knew like the Little Prince that words are the source of all misunderstandings. She tightened the tourniquet around his one arm, held up the syringe with its five milligrams of morphine, flicked it to clear it of air that could cause an embolism, tried to find a vein, waited just a second for the strength to do it and pushed the plunger home.

"Wait a little, just under a star," she whispered, words she'd heard so often as a little girl, "If a child comes, if he laughs, if he has golden hair..." She recapped the needle and softly tousled his hair, thinking *his last human touch*, held

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his hand as if he were her only son, felt the pulse soften as his breathing slowed and stilled, waited for the pulse to stop.

“He’s yours,” she said to the crippled old man who with his retarded nephew was responsible for dragging corpses from their cots and carrying them to Kabul’s graveyard of wrecked cars where an artillery shell had made a hole big enough to shove in the bodies. She stepped out of the tent’s stench of kerosene, hydrogen peroxide, bile, and blood, and looked up at the stars. “If You existed, and I could get my hands on You, I’d kill You!”

She seemed to float from the ground and looking down saw herself in her dirty gown, long-limbed and thin, with her tangled auburn hair and long face. Didier called her again. “This man Ahmad says it’s urgent.”

When she’d come from Paris she’d told herself this would happen, the horrible torturing wounds and senseless deaths, the endless nights of no sleep, fatigue and despair. “You got what you asked for,” she muttered to herself, stepped into the tent, in its dim lantern light a slender unshaven man in a long white shirt, a weary face and thinning hair, a man young just a few years ago. “What do you want?” she said in Pashto.

“Please come. I have sick children.”

She thought of the boy she had just killed. “Who doesn’t?”

“There are many –”

Her body ached so with exhaustion she wanted to fall down in the mud and die. “What’s wrong?”

“They keep going, they can’t stop, it comes out of them like water. We have two hundred. It’s an orphanage. Some thirty, maybe, have this sickness.”

“I don’t have enough medicine, just a few doses...”

“It’s not too far – Shari Kuhna, behind the old mosque.”

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"I'm a westerner, a woman... I can get killed just being there –"

"We all can, Doctor."

She took her medical bag and stumbled after him. Shrapnel was falling with a random ticking sound. Shells were hitting toward Hazara and Bagnal in the north, bright red and yellow flowers, their shock waves slapping her face. With its telltale whooshing chatter a PK machine gun opened up, a few rifles returning fire, and the sharp crescendo of cracks she had come to know were grenades from a Plamya launcher.

"Why are you here?" he said.

When she didn't answer he said, "I was a teacher. In Edeni, a village in the Kush."

"Never heard of it."

"No one has. But now my brother Wahid's a famous warlord – Eagle of the Hindu Kush. Soon Edeni also will be famous," he added sarcastically.

"Assassins," she gasped. "You're all assassins."

He picked up speed. "Here is the dangerous part. Hurry!" They ran down an alley to a cratered boulevard and along a line of deserted sidewalk stalls. Something came up behind them, footsteps. Ahmad grabbed her hand. "Faster!"

A light flashed on, shapes surrounding them. "What *have* we here?" a deep voice.

"A foreign woman?" another said. Men with guns, *mujihadeen*.

"You bastard," Sophie hissed at Ahmad. "You set me up."

A hand whacked her mouth. "Cover your head, slut!" Someone yanked her kerchief over her eyes and shoved her into the street. She fell banging her knee, tried to stand but he pushed her down. "Here?" one said. A snick of rifle bolt.

A muzzle jabbed the back of her head. "No!" she begged.

“She’s not Russian!” Ahmad screamed. “She’s a doctor! Saving our children!”

A 155 hit with a great fiery whack knocking them down. Ahmad snatched her arm and they ran through clouds of dust and crashing stones, beams, and roof tiles, the air wailing with bullets. Ahead the street caught fire, red flashes of exploding ammo and gasoline. Two machine guns were firing to the right, rifles everywhere. They dodged through markets blasted by explosions, shrapnel glowing like coals. The Salaam Hotel had been hit, the front wall gone, empty rooms staring through the smoke, a bed standing sideways in the street like a tethered mule.

The orphanage was a low building with shuttered windows and three candlelit rooms where children lay on straw and burlap sacks. Holding her breath against the stink she stepped around piles of mucused bloody feces. “I have only twelve doses,” she said. “We pick the sickest ones. But not those who’ll die anyway.”

One by one she treated them, scanning their feverish eyes, her cool hand on hot foreheads. “Feed them rice and lots of boiled water. Be sure to boil the water. Most of them will live.” She stood, fighting the pain in her knee where she’d been knocked down. “Now let’s look at the other kids...”

Daylight began to slink through the shuttered windows. From distant streets came a hubbub of voices, women calling children, storekeepers announcing their wares, sounds of cars and animals... It seemed unreal that after such a night of carnage and terror anyone still lived. “I’ll go back with you,” Ahmad said.

“No, it’s safe now.” She tasted blood in her mouth where she’d been slapped. “With the veil I’m fine.”

She limped the rubble streets through the beautiful bright morning. A loudspeaker crackled with a muezzin’s

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call to morning prayer. A deep despair filled her. Again she wondered why she'd come: had her life in Paris been so bad?

Why be a doctor? What in all this insanity was worth saving? She thought of the boy she had killed, and again of St. Exupéry: the parable of Mozart assassinated. Would that angelic boy have grown up just another religion-maddened killer? How could he not? She fell to her knees tugging aside her veil and vomited on the street. A man walking by kicked her. She raised herself dizzily, refastened her veil and continued on her way.

## Tracks

**I**T'S GUS!" McPhee pointed at the footprint in the crusted snow.

Jack knelt beside it, fighting hope. An Afghani boot, large. "Could be a shepherd, anyone."

"It's *his* size. Tracking toward the DZ."

The rising sun was a dim yellow orb in the snow blowing north from the peaks. The wind cut like acid, making his head throb. The pain was so awful he feared it would kill him, wanted desperately to take codeine but couldn't risk the numbness. "We need to stow you somewhere," he said to McPhee. "So Sean and I can look for Gus."

"I want a suite with a bar and Jacuzzi. And three hookers. It's in my contract."

"You couldn't even get it up with one," Loxley grunted.

"Chopper!" Jack yelled, shoving McPhee behind a boulder as a black gunship screamed over the ridge and down the far side.

"Coming back," Loxley said.

"No," Jack said. "That's trucks." He ran to the ridgetop. In the valley below three halftracks with red stars on the roofs and twin machine guns were coming up a dirt road. Grabbing McPhee Jack ran for a gully, knocking down

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rocks that clattered into the valley. The halftracks growled nearer. There was no place to hide, just rocks in sight of the chopper or the halftracks that had stopped two hundred feet below. Soldiers jumped from them and deployed along the road.

“Chopper!” Jack snapped, “northeast.” The soldiers were coming up the road. The chopper roared back over and dropped out of sight.

One halftrack driver stood smoking in his open door. In Jack’s sights he had a boyish familiar mouth, sandy hair poking from under a gray fatigue cap. Shielding his eyes with one hand he stared up at them. “Oh shit.” McPhee tucked his rifle into his cheek.

A hawk drifted over, low and broad-winged. The boy tossed his cigarette, jumped down and watched it slip over the ridge. “Regular ornithologist,” Loxley said.

“Let’s waste him,” McPhee said. “All three drivers.”

“Can’t,” Jack said, “that patrol’ll have us –”

“Here they come anyway.” The Soviets crossed the road in patrol formation and started up the ridge, short dark-faced Kazakhs in burly coats and flat gray hats. “Too many,” Loxley whispered. “Can’t get them all.”

“Coming up both sides of this gully –”

“Let’s hit them now,” McPhee said.

“Rest of them’ll get us.”

The chopper flitted back over, an alien bird guarding its brood. A deep voice called and the soldiers turned parallel to the slope, one passing below Jack with his fuzzy hat low over his brow, eyes on the ground. The officer called again and the soldiers quartered back down to the road, stamping snow off their boots as they climbed into the tracks.

“How the Hell,” Loxley said, “didn’t they *see* us?”

“Didn’t expect us to be here,” Jack said. The halftracks gurgled to life and snarled back down the road. Jack no-

ticed he was clenching his rifle, tried to relax his fingers but they were frozen to the stock. The last halftrack halted in a puff of smoke. With a ragged *ya-ya-ya* the starter turned over but the engine wouldn't catch. One by one the soldiers jumped out of the back, one glancing uphill.

"Here we go again," Loxley said.

"The other two are around the turn," McPhee said. "Let's take this one out. *Now*."

"No!" Jack hissed. "It'll bring the chopper back."

"What's that!" Loxley said. "In the back?"

A reddened body lay on the track's deck beside a pack and tangled parachute. "We don't have to look for Gus anymore," Loxley said quietly.

The soldiers push-started the halftrack and climbed on, standing on the muddy bloody form that had been Gus. "Our cover's blown," McPhee said. "They'll be all over this mountain."

"We're moving out fast." Jack eyed the sky. "Snow's coming."

Everything before now seemed unreal: the C-130 from Sin City to Guam, the mess hall and bunks the night before, the last bottle of tequila, screwing the last Filipino girl on the beach, riding the last soft phosphorent roll of surf to the shallows, Gus singing off-key to the Eagles and Pink Floyd –

The Russian boy on the track had seemed like Jack's friend Cole Svenson, made him think of Cole's grin as he pulled in a trout and almost fell out of the canoe, or the night he and Cole had gotten stoned with Susie and Barb in the woods where two centuries ago Jack's ancestors had farmed, and now it was forest again, old rock walls snaking between the trees.

Cole a Marine now in Beirut. Keeping the ragheads from killing each other.



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ALL DAY THEY CLIMBED the mountain into a blizzard that burned their lungs like fire. After dark they laid up for a half hour in the rocks. Jack checked his watch: 21:20 hours. 11,740 feet. 41 below zero. The glow of the watch blinded him. His fingers were freezing though he kept sticking them in his crotch to warm them. "Another twenty hours maybe, to get there."

"This guy in Edeni –" McPhee chewed his icy mustache.

"Wahid al-Din –"

"– better be easy to find."

*Edeni. Warm fires, warm stone huts, warm smiles. Something to stop this head from hurting. Food. Safe.* Jack shouldered his and McPhee's willow backpacks and goat bags, slung the *Strela* tubes alongside them, and picked up his rifle. He spit another mouthful of blood, pulled up McPhee and started up the mountain.

DUSK WAS DYING on the high black cliffs of the Little Kowkchek River as they neared Edeni. Climbing the riverside path toward the village Jack switched to point, Loxley with McPhee a hundred feet behind. "If there's something I don't like," Jack said, "I'll wave you back."

But what could change in three years in Edeni? They might even ask him to start teaching again. His blood brother Ahmad, genial and harassed, glasses sliding down his nose. Ahmad's mother singing Tajik folk songs as she crouched over the fire cooking goat stew and barley. She who tried to be the mother she'd thought Jack'd lost, because no mother would let her son come to this bedeviled country. Her evil son Wahid finger-combing his beard, the Koran like a bulletproof amulet clutched to his chest.

The night he and Ahmad had cut their palms and clasped bloody hands saying the tribal oath, "Now you are my brother." Wahid in the background smiling through his

hatred.

Jack's old students, their ready jokes and laughter. The snake in his desk drawer, the mouse in his tea, the burrs under his saddle the first time he'd ridden *buzkashi*. When Jack had asked a class, "How can I share nine goats among three brothers?" a boy had laughed, "I'd keep seven, and give one to each of my brothers."

Home Office had sent him to Afghanistan with a Peace Corps cover before the Soviets invaded because he spoke Russian, had learned it with French and Spanish at U of Maine. He was quick with languages and had learned Pash-to easily, and they wanted "viable Intel on the evolving situation". Though he'd been thrown out of West Point he still owed four years and this was one way to do them. Soon he had come to love the village and teaching and his kids, and now he was coming home with one buddy dead and another smashed up.

The time he'd shown the kids a *Time* magazine photo of Manhattan's night skyline, the two new Towers gleaming, and a sour-tempered boy named Suley quoted the Koran about the cities God destroyed because their inhabitants lived in too much ease and plenty.

The Koran. Wahid's contemptuous glare, endlessly finger-combing his beard and spitting proverbs. "How is it," Jack once asked Ahmad, "that you and your brother are so unlike?"

"He was from a different father who was killed by the Uzbeks for stealing sheep. My father died fighting Pitav men who tried to take our horses, so we both knew sorrow. But he can never see joy in life. Most people when they see a happy person it makes them happy too. But Wahid when he sees a happy person says *Just wait, some day you'll be miserable as me.*" Ahmad shrugged. "Maybe why he loves the Koran."

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“Either unhappy people are drawn to religion,” Jack said, “or religion makes people unhappy – I’m not sure which.”

“Islam means *I submit*,” Ahmad answered. “But how can we submit to God’s will in a world with so much pain and evil? Are pain and evil what God wants?”

The trail into Edeni had changed, no tracks of horses, goats, or men. Rifle off safety, Jack eased round the last bluff.

Bare blackened timbers pointed up from snow-covered shattered walls. His hut was gone, and Ahmad’s mother’s. He crouched watching, saw no movement, took up a position in the ruins of his hut against the pile of flat stones that had once been its roof.

After a while he waved the others up. “Now what?” McPhee said.

“We kill them all.”

“They look to be already dead.”

“The Russians. We kill them till the last one in Afghanistan is dead.”

“No problem,” Loxley said. “There’s only a few million.”

Jack checked the perimeter of the dead village. *I should have killed the blond kid at the halftracks. I should’ve killed them all.*

*Every Russian in Afghanistan.*

*Now I will.*

## Necessary Evil

WHEN THE PRIEST'S brown Dodge had pulled up the drive one warm November afternoon eighteen years ago Jack's mother had screamed and clasped her hands to her face. Fearing he'd done something wrong Jack ran into the barn and climbed up among the sweet-smelling prickery bales. But she'd soon walked tall and tear-streaked into the barn to call him down and tell him his father had died in a faraway place she called Viet Nam.

He could still smell the spicy hay, still hear the song on the radio that warm November afternoon, *To dance beneath the diamond skies with one hand waving free.*

Wind from the Kowkcheh canyon walls blew ice down his neck. "These ruins," he said, "were my neighbor's house. Those walls, that's where I taught school."

"Let it go, Jack," McPhee said.

"There was a huge old tree shaded the whole place..."

Loxley slid a chunk of wood into the flames. "To think *you* were their teacher! No wonder this country's so screwed."

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"Everyone lived on nothing and worked like mules. Half their kids died before they were five. But they were happier than the young Americans the Peace Corps sent to teach them how to live."

"The guys have multiple wives," Loxley said. "Of course they're happier."

McPhee eased himself up against the broken wall. "Are you *nuts*?"

"The idea," Jack said, "was stir up the Muslims, send in all these Korans, fund the *mullahs* and bomb-throwers. Pay the Soviets back for Nam. But this..."

McPhee cut goat meat on his rifle stock. "Everybody knows war sucks." He chewed a piece, working the toughness back and forth in his teeth. "Except the politicians who start them. Who won't get hurt in them."

Jack leaned aside to spit blood. Sometimes he feared the pain might crush his brain, spread in waves down his spine. "It's a bad concussion," McPhee said, "bleeding like that."

"It's getting better."

"Stop lying, asshole."

Jack glanced at McPhee's leg. "Three weeks till you can walk."

"So where's my hookers and tequila?" McPhee brushed snow off his shoulders. "My damn Jacuzzi?"

"We should abort," Loxley said, "get this numbnut's ass to Pakistan."

"We're not supposed to go there," Jack said. "Or be *here*, for that matter."

"Military intelligence," McPhee sighed, "is an oxymoron."

"Remember the night driving to Vegas," Loxley said, "and Gus asked is an oxymoron a dumb steer? And you said no, it's a bum steer, and he said no, that's a hobo driving..."

MIKE BOND

"I keep seeing him," McPhee said. "But he's not here."

Jack stepped outside to dig in the snow for more wood, tugged a long hard piece from the drifts but it was a skinny arm and hand with curled frozen fingers. He dropped it and wiped his hand but the greasy frozen flesh stuck to his palm. He kept looking for wood, rubbing his hand on his pants.

New tracks crossed the snow. *Loxley, out hunting wood like me.* The tracks skirted the last burnt houses and vanished. Fear snaked up his back. He crouched to make a smaller target, blew on his hand trying to loosen his fingers, reached for the Makarov.

"Touch that gun," a voice from the ruins said in Pashto, "and you die."

"I'm not Russian."

"You're a foreigner. I'll shoot you just for that."

"My friends are in the hills. They'll kill you."

"You have two friends. One of them's wounded. Both are in that hut over there. I can kill them both from here. You're injured too, aren't you?"

Jack felt fury that he'd duped himself into feeling safe. "I was a teacher here. I've come back to help my friends."

"What friends?"

"Ahmad al-Din."

"Brother of Wahid?"

"It's cold. Come to the fire and talk."

The man was short and wiry, in his fifties, named Sayed, icicles in his short black beard, dressed in a knit hat and sheepwool coat, with a worn and polished Enfield that he kept close. As he tore through the goat meat Jack gave him he said he'd come to Edeni to bury his cousin, but when he'd seen their fire decided to wait till morning and kill them. "I thought you were Russian," he said. "You weren't speaking Pashto."

"Only I speak Pashto," Jack said.

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Sayed nodded his chin at McPhee and Loxley, meaning *what about them?*

"They also come to help my friends."

Sayed smiled. "Everyone's helpful these days."

"Where can I find Wahid?"

"My uncle might know. He lives an hour upriver."

"We'd be grateful, Sayed, if in the morning you could show us."

"And your friend there, with the broken leg?"

"We'll walk slowly, and help him."

"It's foolish to help the injured. If God wants him out of the way, why interfere?"

SOPHIE CUT AWAY the woman's veil where it had hardened with blood to her face. The woman snatched her hand. "No!"

"I have to cut it to fix your face."

"Mule. Mule kick very much. Not take away the veil."

"And broke your arms, too? How did it kick the back of your head?" Sophie ducked into the tent where Jean-Luc, a flashlight in his teeth, was operating on a farmer who had stepped on a mine. "I need another morphine," she said.

Jean-Luc put down his scalpel and the flashlight and wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his arm. "Who for?"

"That woman's been beaten. Won't let me take off the veil. It'll infect."

"Damn it, Sophie! Every one you give to takes it from someone else."

"You think I don't know?" She took one of the last vials outside and injected the woman. After a few moments the woman quieted and Sophie pulled the veil from her skin. Both cheekbones were broken, top front teeth gone, one eye swollen shut. "Tell me," she whispered, "who did this to

you?”

“Mule kick. Mule kick very bad.”

Sophie covered the woman with a blue UN tarp and left her half asleep on the stretcher. Soon she'd come down from the morphine and there'd be no more to give her and the pain would drive her crazy. And in the morning there'd be new wounded coming in from the bombing of Charikar.

She took a bucket to the well but it only brought up mud. Staying on the path that had been cleared of mines she went to the stream and came back with a half-bucket of foul liquid, but the gasoline stove wouldn't light. She searched among the gas cans but they were all empty. She cast around for wood chips or camel dung for a fire but they were gone too. She lay on the ground beside the woman's stretcher and wrapped herself in her robes. To hell with Jean-Luc. To hell with all men. Either they beat women or destroyed the world. Or both.

Unlike this woman she could leave any time. Another PIA flight to France, another job in a Paris emergency room. But what good was experience treating napalm burns and land mines there? What good would Paris *be*, after this?

SAYED'S UNCLE lived with three sons and their families in a stone compound above the Little Kowkchek. Cherry trees grew in the courtyard and junipers along the walls. An old man with a knife scar down his face, he sat by the fire holding his baby granddaughter.

“Infidels!” He spat; it hissed in the fire. “Each time they come we kill them. Long ago the Persians. Then the Greek Alexander. Genghis Khan. Tamerlane of Samarkand. The English pale-skinned like you – three times they came, three times defeated... Now these Russians spill our blood and we theirs.” The baby whimpered, he stroked her head.

“Vengeance is a joy divine, the Koran says,” Jack an-



swered.

“Vengeance is poisoned meat you feed your enemies. But you must then eat yourself.”

“I’d like to leave my friend here – he of the broken leg. Till he’s better.”

“You have to pay. If the Russians come we leave him.”

Next morning one of his sons led Jack and Loxley up the cliff past frozen waterfalls and across an icy log over a crashing tributary of the Little Kowkcheh to a hanging valley where junipers grew along a cliff. “I ain’t doing this again,” Loxley said. “I do *not* intend to die falling.”

Hidden by a fallen rock slab a Russian Army blanket covered a cave mouth. They crawled down a long tunnel into a smoky cavern stinking of spoiled mutton, sheepskins, sweat, clove tobacco and gun oil. In the gloom men crouched round two fires drinking tea and cleaning weapons; others lay sleeping on a rocky platform. Wahid stared up at Jack, surprise then anger contorting his features. “What evil jinni brings *you* here?”

“When I left, before the Russians came, I said I’d return.”

“But why?” Firelight deepened the cobra-shaped scar on Wahid’s right cheek. He had grown angular and thin, Jack noticed; gray snaked through his tangled hair and beard.

“What happened to Edeni?”

Wahid half-smiled. “The Russians can’t defeat us, so they kill our families.”

“Ahmad?”

“Run to Kabul. War’s too rough for him.”

“Your mother?”

Wahid swung his head, meaning *Don’t ask*.

“My students?”

“Their deaths were a necessary evil. To give us strength.”

Jack stared into the fire seeing their faces. Yesterday he

thought he had all his children. Now he had none. He wanted to clasp his aching head, lie down forever. "We bring you weapons. And the promise of more."

"When you left Edeni you were a teacher. Now you're a soldier, promising guns?"

A man brought *chai*, the cup warming Jack's hands. "More than guns."

"A few infidels from across the ocean, you're going to kill a million Russians?"

"No. We're here to help *you* kill them."

"No. You want the Russians tied up in Afghanistan forever. We've been fighting them while you Americans have been drinking liquor and consorting with your women. We can kill them, blow up their tanks and trucks. But not helicopters. Because of the helicopters we can't hide, can't travel except at night. We're easy to track in winter. In the last battle I was the only one who survived, and even then I was wounded."

"To destroy Russian helicopters you need missiles. From us infidels."

"So I've heard. *Strelas*, the Russians call them..."

"It means *Arrow*. It's also called SA-7. We've brought you two, and a launcher."

"You come here, after *three* years, with *two* missiles, and expect to be welcomed?"

"The hungry man shouldn't complain how he's fed –"

"We don't need infidels to kill infidels."

With his Russian combat knife Jack cut a loose thread from his sleeve. "Any time the Russians want they'll chop-per you to pieces."

"Yes," a gap-toothed man said. "We should try these *Strelas*."

"That's true, Aktoub," another added. "I'm tired of hiding from the helicopters."

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Wahid smiled. "I was only angry because two missiles is not enough. Of course you should try them – next time the Russians come up Kowkcheh canyon."

Aktoub nodded. "In a week perhaps they come. We can try them then."

"Bring the Algerian named Husseini and the other new Arabs," Wahid said. "Let them taste blood."

"In a week, then." Jack sheathed his knife. "If the *Strelas* work we might find more. With two hundred camels of *Strelas* maybe you could win this war."

## Ghost Bait

**D**AWN BLOODIED the peaks above the Kowk-cheh canyon. An early spring wind hissed through last year's dead grass, bringing the rushing sound of the river up from the canyon far below. A hawk circled overhead and dove fast digging its talons into the grass, then flapped slowly upward, a brown rabbit jerking in its claws.

"See how well we're hidden," Hassan Husseini said in French. "If the hawk can't see us surely the Russians can't."

Jack scanned the rocky, bouldered slope below where Loxley and Wahid's other *mujihadeen* hid in their spider holes, glanced down at the dirt road snaking along the edge of the cliffs beneath them. "The hawk saw us. She just didn't care."

"*He*," Husseini said. "It is the male that hunts."

Jack tried to ignore the dull throb in his brain. "*She*. The male is brighter-colored. And they both hunt."

He tried to recapture his thoughts. Perhaps due to the danger, they flitted quickly from one memory to another. He had been thinking of his dream last night where all his students were still alive and were singing and playing and hap-

py. Then seeing the hawk had made him think of the fields and forests of home, why Susie didn't love him, if anyone would ever love him. Would he have been different, more lovable, if his father had lived?

He rubbed his chin on the breech of his AKMS. For months in Sin City and now in this month in Afghanistan his beard had grown, but still it itched. "Pull your muzzle in under the overhang," he said to Hussein, "so it doesn't reflect, and a MiG sees it."

"MiG? I see no MiG."

"There'll be one. And he'll pick you out just like the hawk did that rabbit. And you'll squeal, too, when you die."

"In a bad mood today? Miss your television, easy women, going to the mall?"

From almost beyond hearing came a far rumble. He felt a stab of fear, a weird frailty, an uprushing in his throat. "The Russian tanks!" Hussein shivered. "They're coming!"

"They're climbing to the pass. It'll be twenty-two minutes before they're here. *If* they don't take the other road."

"*Inshallah.*"

"Forget God's will. Just do what *I* tell you."

Hussein pretended Jack wasn't there. Pouting like a girl. But push him too hard and he'll shoot you in the back and call it another victory for Allah. You couldn't trust the Afghans – many who'd rather bury a knife in a friend than a Russian. But even more you couldn't trust these holy warriors Home Office was bringing in from Egypt, Saudi, Yemen and other Muslim countries. Even the Afghans said *Never let an Arab walk behind you.*

Particularly Algerians like Hussein, although they spoke French. The France you loved they hated. All of them finding their way to Hell for a shot at Paradise.

If the tanks didn't come then everything would be fine. In three weeks they had to report to Ackerman in Pakistan;

maybe there'd be no need to return here. But if the tanks came there would be a firefight and he might die, Loxley too, when otherwise they would have lived. His stomach fluttered; sweat slid down his arms; he feared Hussein might see.

"You shouldn't smile," Hussein said. "I am doing this for a spiritual reason. I am not a mercenary like you."

Jack sighed. "Aren't there any atheist Muslims?"

"It is against Sharia. To be a Muslim is to know that the Koran is the exact perfect word of God. A Muslim who does not believe the Koran must be killed."

"If the Koran is perfect it has no mistakes? Then who's right – Sunni or Shiite?"

"That came later –"

Jack felt an itch to needle him. "The Koran says the world is flat. Yet you came in an airplane around it."

"God brought me –"

"Sura Twenty-two says one of God's days is a thousand of ours, but Sura Seventy says fifty thousand... The Second Sura says God created the earth then the heavens, but the Seventy-ninth says the opposite. If one's wrong, how can the Koran be perfect?"

"Do not challenge God. Or you will burn in Hell forever." Hussein shrugged. "Actually, as an infidel you will anyway."

The vapor trails of two MiGs cleared the peaks, pink in early sun, the planes silver pinpoints before them. Jack checked his watch. "Eighteen minutes," he called to Loxley.

"Eighteen minutes," Loxley answered.

"And why," Jack turned to Hussein, "does the Tenth Sura say God guides us to the truth, yet the Fourteenth says God leads astray whom he pleases? How can we know if we're guided to the truth or led astray?"

The tanks made a steady grumble now, mixed with the

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jagged whine of APCs. How many troops in those APCs – a hundred? How were twenty-one *mujihadeen*, plus five new Arab “warriors of God” like Hussein, and him and Loxley, going to stop well-trained Soviet troops with tanks and APCs? And if choppers came?

If the *Strelas* had been damaged in the jump? They sometimes misfired anyway – what then? His wrist was trembling; he reminded himself of what had happened to Edeni.

Once long ago you went to war with a stone, a knife, a club. You faced the man you fought. You didn’t die from a speeding chunk of lead you never knew was coming. Then came the thrown rock, the spear, the arrow. Death you can’t see coming. Now this.

Hussein was rubbing his thumb on his AK sling, a little scratching noise. *Scared too.*

If the tanks came this way and the MiGs could make the cut down the canyon, he and the others would be blown apart. He imagined his body in bloody chunks; it made his gut lurch. But Wahid’s men had said the MiGs couldn’t make the cut.

If he died here no one would ever know where or how.

God guides us to the truth, yet God leads astray whom he pleases. *Fools.*

*If you’re never afraid*, Captain Perkins had said back in Sin City, *we don’t want you.*

He checked his *Spetsnaz* watch, wondered what had happened to the Soviet Special Forces commando who once had worn it. “Eleven minutes.”

*Think what they did to Edeni. Get them for that.*

**IN THE LEAD T-55 TANK** Captain Leo Gregoriev was also thinking of death. How it came when you least expected – you were bending to tie a shoe and stepped on a mine, or taking a leak beside your tank like Kostlev and a

sniper spread your brains across the turret for crows to feed on. “Throttle back!” he yelled at the driver. “Number Two can’t keep up.”

“It’s not him, Sir. He’s slowing for those damned sardine cans behind him.”

They bothered him, those APCs, the men packed into them. He shoved up the tank’s hatch and dawn poured in lovely after the oily stench inside, the wind sharp in his lungs. It made you so alive to breathe this air, see these mountains. Even in Afghanistan, dung heap of human misery and cunning.

“Which way at the top, Sir?” the driver called.

Ahead the dirt track widened as it eased up the slope to the pass. He stopped the tank and stepped down. *Only danger and love make you alive.* Was that why he was here?

Gravel crunched under his boots and hissed away on the wind. Among the rocks so many places a sniper could hide. The thought made his chest feel hollow, afraid. *You’re the one who asked to be here.* The battle of modern civilization against backward fanaticism, science and reason versus superstition and hatred. *Is that why?*

A half-fallen cairn cast a rumpled shadow where the road forked. One fork bent east toward the headwaters of the Mashhad River. The other cut right and dropped round a cliff toward the Kowkcheh canyon.

His body ached to climb inside the safety of the tank. Instead he walked a few meters down the right fork, saw another section far below notched across walls of stone. Vertical canyons below it, above it cliffs and wide avalanche fans of tawny rock.

His men called the Afghanis *duki* – ghosts. We’re ghost bait, the men said. You go on patrol to draw fire so the Air Force can come down and hit them. But by the time the MiGs arrive the *duki* are gone.



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That's why they call them ghosts.

On the left fork there'd be no *duki* on the saddle, but they could be down in the valleys above the Mashhad River. But on the right fork, toward Kowkcheh canyon, where would they hide in the steep rock and still have good fields of fire?

Either way could be *duki*. Which way did *they* think he'd go? *Imagine you're a superstitious peasant and you hate everyone who comes here. How would you think?*

Would they think he'd go left because the first part was less dangerous? Or that he'd first think that but therefore go right?

If the patrol's purpose was to entice the *duki* to shoot at you then you should take the fork where they might do so. Where *they* felt safer. Or thought you were more exposed. Far above two MiGs sketched rosy trails across the brightening sky making him feel safer.

With his seniority and combat time he could be in Moscow, vodka bars and luscious willing girls, working his way up the promotion ladder. He hitched his jacket and kicked a rock off the cliff. "We're going right," he called climbing onto his tank. "Spread the word."

The tank lurched forward, slowed where the road squeezed round the cliff. The sky narrowed, darkened. The canyon was like this war: *the deeper you go the worse it gets.*

With a shock he realized Number Two had pulled within ten meters. "Speed up!" he yelled down. He couldn't hear the driver over the clanking treads and roaring engine. He bent down into the open turret.

"No traction, Sir," the driver called. "Road's getting bad."

Behind his tank came the second T-55 then the line of sardine cans and a last tank. He felt better when the two

first tanks and the first APCs had passed the rock face, the road slanting sharply down, on the right a four-foot high shoulder, on the left abyss.

The tank slowed to nudge its way round a nose of rock. Ahead there was no road, nothing but straight cliff where the road had been. And far below the river.

“Back up! Come in, Rabbit!” he yelled into the radio.

“Rabbit here!” came from the last tank. “We’re taking fire, Sir.”

“Turn upslope till you can fire the fifties over the shoulder!” He snatched the airlink radio. “Othello this is Truelove!”

Through the tank’s armor came the whack of bullets, the ear-cracking shudder of a grenade. “Come in Othello!” he radioed to the MiGs high above, “Truelove here!” The tank lurched back, whammed into the tank behind it, snapping his neck.

“Othello here.” The pilot’s voice was tinny, indistinct. “I hear you, Truelove.”

“We’re being hit! Get down here!”

“On our way.”

“They’re up the canyon above the road. They’ve cut it in front of us. You can’t hit them from above, you have to drop on them from the west.”

“Can’t from the west, Truelove. No approach.”

“You have to! Drop them high.”

“We might hit you –”

“*Do it!* Otherwise we’re fucked. Call the choppers!”

“Hinds on their way.”

“You’ve *got* to hit that slope.”

“Coming down. Keep your kids indoors.”

Leo yanked an AK from the clips on the turret wall and unsnapped the hatch, tugged on a radio helmet and leaped out into the roar of machine guns, thudding grenades, the

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horrid *whap* of an RPG into steel, the scream of tank engines. The first APC had turned and its rear treads hung over the edge. "Tell APC One don't back up," he yelled into the radio.

The road edge behind APC One buckled. He squirmed under it and hammered on the rear door. "Tell APC One open up!" he radioed. Bullets howled past his head. The first MiG roared in, sheered for the bend and screamed for altitude, the air cracked and split apart, the earth writhing with the blast of bombs. The APC settled lower, on his chest.

Its door opened. "Thought you were *duki!*" a soldier shouted. Again the earth and sky compressed as the second MiG came down. Its bombs shuddered the canyon and the APC lurched as the road fell away.

"Get out!" Leo screamed. "Get out! *Get out!*" Soldiers scrambled past him, one falling as a bullet hit him. The APC tipped up and spun over the cliff, the agonized face of the last soldier framed in its door.

He dragged the one who'd been hit to the shoulder, bullets spitting along the road. The others had taken up positions firing over the shoulder. "Call APC Two," he yelled. "I want their Fifty firing straight up the canyon, not to the left."

A thud exploded his head and he realized he was dead, felt a fleeting touch of earth beneath his back, heard a howl in his ears wondering *how can I think if I'm dead*. A kid with a bloody face dragged him to the shoulder. "Medic!" the kid yelled. "Medic!"

*I'm at peace*, Leo Gregoriev thought. *I'm at peace in this world.*

WHEN THE FIRST MiG screamed into the canyon its napalm pod seemed first tiny then huge, crashing high overhead, flame spouting up the cliffs searing Jack's face.

The second MiG banked into the canyon and there was nowhere to hide; it would blow them to shreds. "Shoot ahead of it!" he screamed. One man fired an RPG that darted upward, missed the MiG and fell end over end into the void. The MiG howled for altitude, its bombs hammering the cliffs. Boulders bounded over them, missed the APCs and dove into the canyon.

The first MiG came back, wingtips nearly scraping the cliffs, the pilot's courage astonishing him. Its tracers ripped the slope but it couldn't get low enough – Wahid's men had chosen this place too well, and his terror switched to fierce exaltation.

"Stop hiding!" he yelled at Hussein. "Nail that burning APC!"

Hussein screamed something. In Jack's ears a huge roar, Hussein's lips moving but making no sound. "The MiGs come back!" Hussein wailed.

Jack snatched Hussein's gun. On the road below an officer was dragging a wounded man toward the safety of the shoulder. Jack squeezed off a round, and the officer dropped, headshot. Another Russian grabbed him and dragged him to the shoulder. "Aim carefully!" Jack yelled, shoved the AK at Hussein. "*For Allah!*"

Hussein sprayed bullets. "There. I *got* one. A medic."

The back of Jack's hand caught fire. He shook off the chunk of hot metal and ran across the slope to two Afghans whose machine gun had stopped firing. One lay wide-eyed against the cliff, a red hole in his forehead. "It's jammed," the other yelled.

Jack shoved him aside and flipped the gun over. The cartridge belt entered at an angle; he tugged but it wouldn't come loose. "He pulled the belt backwards," the Afghani said, "when he was hit. So it's jammed."

Jack yanked at the PK's cartridge belt but it would not

come free. Bullets drummed off the rock. "We're pulling back," he called. "Take it with you."

The Afghani nodded at the body. "I take him."

"He's dead!"

"He's my brother."

Jack ran back along the slope, bullets sucking at his head. "Go! Go!" They ran after him, one with his dead brother over his shoulder, another lugging the PK, through a notch between the cliffs up a steep ridge and along a goat trail to a bend where they'd dug spider holes the day before overlooking the road a mile above the ambush. He dashed from man to man checking that each one's magazine was full and he was hidden from both road and sky.

"Now we'll see," Hussein panted, "if infidels can predict the future."

"They're coming!" an Afghani called.

Choppers coming, the flutter of heavy rotors. *If there's more than two... Crazy to survive the MiGs then die from choppers.* "Aktoub!" he called. "Bring the RPG!"

Aktoub ran up with the RPG. "But you have this *Strella!*" he gasped.

The first chopper came up the valley four hundred feet above the road. Again Jack felt horror and fear. The Mi-24 was armored; even machine gun bullets bounced off it. He slid his SA-7 into the launching tube.

"It won't work!" Hussein moaned. "And we'll be dead."

A second Mi-24 dropped into the valley, serene and deadly.

"You take the first," Jack called to Loxley, trying to keep his voice steady. "Me the second." With a whine Jack's SA-7 locked on and launched with a peaceable *whuff* as the missile cleared the launching tube. The rocket motor ignited and the white trails of both missiles accelerated toward the fast-approaching choppers.

With a great white-black blast the missiles hit the chop-

pers. The first Mi-24 broke apart, tail section spinning upward, the cockpit continuing on as if determined to reach its goal. A man tumbled grabbing at air and bounced along the ground. The other chopper drifted onto its side, its rotor exploding like daisy petals, settled into a steep dive and blew apart as it hit the road. "They worked!" Jack yelled at Hussein. "They worked!"

A third chopper swung down the valley.

"Now we're truly dead," Hussein screamed.

"Fire at the rotor!" Jack called, knowing it was useless. He leaped from his hole and grabbed the RPG from Aktoub but the chopper swung away, climbing fast, and he realized it was spooked by the SA-7s, didn't know they had no more.

"Pull back!" he called, counting the men as he and Loxley ran after them into the morass of cliffs and hanging valleys where even choppers couldn't find them.

Gasping for breath he glanced back at the cliffs and the twin pillars of black smoke rising into the blue sky.

Again he saw the man fall from the chopper, saw it crash and explode, the Soviet troop carriers, the soldiers pinned down and dying along the road.

For three years he'd been trained to kill. Now he had.

He imagined those soldiers' families back in Moscow or Kiev or somewhere, getting their telegrams.

It doesn't bother me at all, he told himself.

First blood.

## Opium

“WHEN THAT BULLET hit your helmet,” the field doctor told Leo, “it punched a lot of metal and plastic into your skull. We need to chopper you to Kabul, find a surgeon to dig it out.”

*Alive.* Leo felt giddy exuberance. “Fine with me.”

“But we don’t have a brain surgeon in Kabul. And with all this crap in your head we can’t fly you to Moscow. Only reason you feel good is you’re high on morphine.”

“Afghani opium no doubt.” He wanted to laugh; ecstasy surged through him. *Alive.* He had tried to be brave, risked death but had lived anyway. The road ahead was bright and joyous. Why do people fight when they have this mysterious gift, this magic joy, of life?

Even this field clinic piled with bloody bandages, this morose doctor with nicotined fingers and dead eyes, the stainless steel coffins stacked up the wall – all seemed imbued with sacred immanence. “I can’t keep anything in my head... What happened?”

“I’m told it was a great victory. Many *ghosts* dead, weapons deserted...”

“How many dead?”

“Central Command didn’t say.”

“How many our dead?”

“Twelve that I’ve seen. And ten wounded, plus three criticals already flown out.”

His exuberance died. “And matériel?”

“They say one APC –”

“I saw three,” he now remembered. “Two burning and one went off the ledge.”

“– and...” the doctor glanced out the window, “two Hinds.”

Leo snatched the doctor’s arm. “A disaster, wasn’t it?” The road ahead was no longer joyous; it was narrow and steep and ended in the middle of a cliff.

He thought of the boys now still alive whose bodies soon would be inside these silver coffins flying in the Black Tulips back to Russia. “We’re killing and dying for nothing.”

“That’s war.” The doctor held out a cigarette pack. “Have a Yava.”

Leo waved it away. “I’m giving up smoking.”

AT DUSK Jack and Loxley descended the canyon of the Little Kowkcheh and crossed the River above Edeni. Loxley turned upstream toward Sayed’s uncle’s farm to check on McPhee, and Jack climbed the path into the mountains to Wahid’s base.

He ducked under the Russian Army blanket into the smoky fetid cave. The men cooking a sheep by the fire moved to make him a place. Wahid lay on sheepskins with his head against a Russian blanket roll. “Now you have faith in *Strelas*?” Jack said.

“Whatever good a man does comes from God – you know that.”

“Then we’ll take our *Strelas* elsewhere. To Hekmatyar, perhaps?”



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“He’s nearby I hear. But you have no more *Strelas*.”

With his combat knife Jack sliced off a chunk of mutton. “More *Strelas* can be bought in Pakistan, for they are also made in China. But how to get them over the Hindu Kush?”

“Why not across the same mountains the opium goes out? One camel carries a hundred fifty kilos of opium. How much weighs one *Strela*?”

“Eleven kilos for the launcher, nine for each missile.”

“So seven to a camel...”

“You need more missiles than launchers.”

Wahid sat back, finger-combing his beard, watching Jack down his long nose. “And these *Strelas*, who pays?”

“I’m not here to give them. Just to help you find them.”

“So why do other Americans working with Pakistan give guns to Hekmatyar?”

“Perhaps *he* will be Eagle of the Hindu Kush? He has more of Afghanistan than you.”

“The Pakistanis own him.” Wahid unclipped his bayonet and cut a chunk of mutton. “No one owns me.”

Jack glanced at the rings of a burning branch in the fire, imagined the tree that had clung to the mountain for so many years. “Probably no one wants to.”

Wahid grinned. “For having killed so many Russians you are not happy?”

Jack glanced at a man in the corner sharpening a knife on a stone, another playing a flute, those dozing round the fire or sleeping on willow mats. “I don’t need to kill to be happy.”

“You’re a coward then.” Wahid chewed the mutton off the end of his bayonet, blood dribbling into his beard. “These *Strelas*, when America buys them –”

“America has no part in this. *You* buy them. That’s what I’m telling you.”

“I am a philanthropist? I do this for pleasure?”

"You do this to kill Russians."

"You are fucking the wrong dog, my friend –"

"I leave that to you. And I'm not your friend."

"Your blood brother is my brother –"

"You are not my brother."

"You love Hekmatyar? He's a whore's cunt. A hundred fifty-four mules and camels of opium I sent last year over the Kush to Pakistan. Hekmatyar didn't even send seventy."

"I don't give a shit about opium –"

"Since Pakistan won't share their American weapons with me as they do with Hekmatyar, you think they'll trade Chinese *Strelas* for my opium?"

"My job was bring those two *Strelas*. To see if you could use them."

"And so I did." Wahid waved a hand at the cave entrance. "I have ten camels leaving for Pakistan next month. So go with them, bring back as many missiles as you can?"

"I thought you didn't need *infidel* weapons."

"The Koran says to use infidels any time we want, your souls don't matter... So, ten camels of *Strelas*, perhaps, are worth one camel of opium?"

Jack stood, slung his rifle. "I'll talk to my infidel friends." He stepped through the Army blanket into frozen night and turned down the trail toward Sayed's uncle's farm. A step hissed the snow behind him and he spun round aiming his gun.

"You mustn't fear me," Aktoub said.

"I fear everything. That's how one stays alive in this place."

"Please, *Jyek*, do not bear him ill will. He's proud."

"A commander should love his men more than himself."

Aktoub raised his hands, a gesture of helplessness. "We thank Allah for your help."

Jack felt a rush of affection. "Thank the American peo-

ple.” He turned and started down the mountain, walking fast and steadily, for in the falling snow he needn’t fear Soviet patrols, would leave no tracks. The cold thin air tasted wonderful after the putrid cave.

In the ambush he’d been so *alive*, aware in slow motion, seeing everything – the white Cyrillic letters on an APC’s gray door, a green fatigue cap tumbling, a man’s surprised face as he was hit, a spent round spinning in the dust, the chopper’s spiraling death.

Impossible that he was alive and the men he’d killed were dead.

If he’d stayed with Susie they’d have kids now. He’d be coming home at night from some job, fixing up the house on weekends. But she’d fucked another guy and got knocked up and now what they’d had they didn’t have any more.

If Home Office wanted him and Loxley and McPhee to start this Third Force, one not run through Islamabad or by the Saudis, then Wahid was right: how would the *mu-jihadeen* pay for it except with opium? Had Home Office known all along and never said?

What would his father think of trading opium for guns? Didn’t we do that in Nam, tons and tons of opium and hash flown out by the CIA’s Air America, keeping Americans high while our bombs obliterated Indochina?

Ahead on the trail a dark spot coming. Jack dove into the boulders aiming at it. If it was a patrol they’d see his tracks. If it was just a few Russians maybe he could get them all. But the Russians never patrolled with just a few. *Asshole*, he swore silently at himself. *You’re going to die.*

The dark spot grew, a man coming fast. Afghani maybe. On whose side?

*Shoot him before he gets you.*

A tall man, rifle slung, jogging uphill through the deep powder. Jack tightened his finger on the trigger. “Who are

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you?” he yelled in Pashto.

The man stopped, raised his hands. “I seek Wahid,” he said, in bad Pashto.

“You asshole!” Jack yelled. “I almost shot you!”

“Jack, hurry,” Loxley said. “We’ve got to go down!”

“You missed dinner. *Chez* Wahid.”

“McPhee’s not there. At Sayed’s uncle’s.”

“Not *there*?”

“Gone.” Hands on knees Loxley caught his breath.

“Fuckin place. Empty.”

## City of the Blind

LEO DREAMED of running along a street in Ekaterinburg rolling a willow hoop with a stick, the childish joy in such a simple game. Now, awakening, the elation slid away and he looked up into a young woman's face, beautiful but drawn, her green surgeon's mask pulled up over glistening auburn hair.

"*Xorosho?*" she asked. A strange accent.

"Yes, good," he answered. "Fantastic. Who are you?"

"She doesn't speak Russian," an orderly said. "She just operated on your skull."

"Where's *our* doctors?"

"Our hospital got hit."

Leo shook his head in frustration and the woman spoke angrily. He'd understood what she'd said, he realized slowly. "*Vous êtes française?*"

Her eyes widened. "You speak French?"

He tried to remember why. "I was an attaché. Paris. Why are *you* here?"

"I'm in Doctors Without Borders – the French medical group. Why are *you* here?"

"Soldiers do what they're told."

"Who told you to come destroy Afghanistan?"

"The heart has its reasons," he started to say, making a joke of Pascal, but her eyes hardened and he stopped. "I don't know," he said, and drifted away.

JACK AND LOXLEY RAN along the tracks of Sayed's uncle and his family and one larger unevenly treading boot that might be McPhee's. After descending the Little Kowkcheh toward Edeni the tracks split, the women and old man continuing downriver and the three men – perhaps the brothers – and McPhee climbing the switchbacks above the Panjshir River.

Jack brushed snow from his hair, pulled a chunk of bread from his pack and gave half to Loxley. First he'd lost Gus and now maybe McPhee. What was he doing wrong? How many men had his father lost at Ia Drang before he died? What does it feel like, seeing your men go down? Fury and despair.

The snow fell harder. "Now we'll lose their trail," Loxley said matter-of-factly.

Jack ate some snow. "Maybe they'll keep climbing. Above the clouds there'll be no new snow."

The snow eased; stars slid past gaps in the clouds. The tracks led up an icefall on one side of a steep scarp. Chunks of snow came scooting down from Loxley's feet into Jack's face. *How did McPhee make this?* Jack kept thinking. *Maybe it isn't him.*

They reached a ridge between two ice-clad peaks, the scarp below them now. Dawn clouds filled the east. "We can't get caught up here!" Jack yelled over the wind. He pointed up at the pyramid of black rock and ice above them. "That's Bandakur. The other side of those mountains was our DZ."

“Month ago.” Loxley took a breath. “Another life.”

As they followed the trail down the tracks grew fresher. From a rocky spur they saw down into the Panjshir Valley, a huge canyon of red and brown rock soaring up into glaciers and vertical peaks. Far below the River sparkled in its black bed like a new-skinned snake.

Beyond was Pakistan. Strange that they could cross that and in days be in Peshawar, take a plane home. He sat on the rock spur. There was a howl like the wind, growing louder.

“Plane!” He shoved Loxley into the rocks as the MiG screamed down at them with guns blazing and the world exploded.

“EVERYTHING’S OKAY on your X-rays,” Sophie said.

Leo held his head steady. Every time he moved it the damned thing hurt like hell. “I suppose I have to thank you.”

“It’s my job. If I had the choice I’d let you all die.”

“In that field clinic, when I realized I was alive, that I had a new life...”

“Sometimes that happens when you’re wounded. We normally don’t realize how close death always is.”

“Before this I was just a tank commander. Now I don’t see the point.” It irritated him how difficult it was to understand what he wanted to say, how the drugs made him mumble.

“Your young men who come in here all shot up. Nineteen years old, a pretty girl at home and now they have no legs, no testicles, or they’re blind. Ask *them*.”

A rat scampered along the wall and hid behind a gurney, its tail sticking out like a gray string. “So you think Afghanistan would be better as a feudal theocracy?” he said sharply. “People killing people because they wear the wrong kind of veil?”

“So you’re killing them so they don’t kill each other? Is that it?”

“To hell with all that. As soon as I’m better will you have dinner with me?”

“With *you*?”

“What, you have a husband or something? To hell with him too.”

“I don’t have a husband. Or something.” Her green eyes hardened. “Why would I spend time with a killer? You realize what you’re doing to Afghanistan?”

This was his new life, he told himself, he didn’t have to be reasonable. We’ll go to the officers’ mess, or the Hotel International –”

“I just took twenty-six pieces of metal and plastic out of your skull.”

“My father’s lived forty years with slivers of *Panzerfaust* in him.”

She turned to check a monitor behind him. “So get him down here and we’ll operate on him too.”

New sun through a bandanna stretched across the window warmed his face. He started to stand. “Don’t do that!” she snapped but the damn room spun around and the edge of the bed came up and smacked him in the face.

She had him by the arm; he stood. “Got to do what you feel. Life’s too short.”

She sat him on the edge of the bed. “And you, back in Moscow –”

“Leningrad. Once was called St. Petersburg but we don’t mention that.”

“– you don’t, back there, have a wife or ‘something’?”

“I wouldn’t ask you if I did.”

She was gone. Yet he could imagine her clearly as if he’d always known her: a runner’s tall lithe form – when could she have time to run in all this insanity? Strong cheekbones



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and a wide mouth over large white teeth, long honey-auburn hair – the beauty of someone who doesn't know how lovely she is.

He couldn't breathe, dizzy. His head throbbed; blood was trickling down inside the bandages. *Valley of the Moon*, the words came to him but he did not know why.

JACK COULDN'T understand what had happened, then remembered. "Where's the MiG?"

"Left us for dead." Loxley said. "I *told* you we shouldn't get caught up here."

"Asshole," Jack laughed, dizzy with joy at evading death. "I was the one said that."

The world was silent but for the hiss of falling snow. Jack glanced at the sky: no snow was falling. "My ears." His voice bounced around inside his head like a ping-pong ball.

"Me too," Loxley batted an ear with the heel of his hand. "Gonna need a hearing aid. Like my Grandma. Suppose that's covered in our retirement?"

"Yeah, just like Owen's twenty-four hour hookers and Jacuzzi."

Loxley pulled him up. "So let's go find him."

They jogged along the tracks down toward the Panjshir River and southward toward the Soviet base at Parian. "They're gonna sell him to the Russians," Loxley said.

Jack thought of Sayed's uncle and his three sons who had led him to Wahid. If you couldn't trust the people from one valley to the next, how could you unite them?

"If the Soviets get him – whole thing – will unravel." Lose another man and he was a failure as an officer. As a man. The words echoed in his head, a metronome pacing him as he ran, *Lose another man... Failure as a man... Lose another man...*

The snow thinned and soon the tracks picked up a mule

trail that was wider and easier to run on. "He's dragging one foot," Loxley said, "going slow as he can."

"He goes too slow they'll shoot him." Jack saw the three brothers shooting Owen and that made him run faster, holding the AK in his right hand, gripping one strap of his willow basket pack against his shoulder with his left.

LEO SAT IN MORNING sun in the hospital ward, a book on his lap, watching his fellow wounded soldiers. The one-legged hobbling on crutches, the wheel-chaired somberly rolling, another going round in circles by himself. A few with wrapped heads sitting quietly, some with bandages over their eyes. One on a bench kept chuckling as he snatched with his left hand at a right arm that was no longer there.

Heroes of the Soviet Union. For this wound he'd get a – what medal was it they gave to those stupid enough to step in the way of a bullet? And he was a lucky one.

"Still alive?" the doctor said, her French alien amidst the din of Russian. "I did too good a job –"

"I've been watching these wounded men. And trying to understand why, in the vast chaos of life, did they end up here to be killed or ruined for life?"

"It disgusts me, healing people so they can kill again."

"Me too. I don't understand why we fight... this damn wound has ruined me... But why are *you* here?"

"Too many injured Afghani women – the male doctors here won't touch them."

"Damn it, that's why *I'm* here – to help change this place!"

"Evil always starts with good intentions."

"A waste of time, talking with you." He turned away, furious yet not wanting her to leave, surprised to find himself reach out and take her hand. "You look exhausted..."

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She yanked it away. "Been here all night."

"Doctors Without Borders – I thought you pulled back to the refugee camps in Pakistan?"

"I had a choice, stay or go."

"So you *stay*?"

"Like I said, I'm the only one to treat the women." Her face was half-turned toward the sun; he could see the tendons in her neck, the steady pulse in her throat, the smooth luster of her skin, her small full breasts and the long indent of her waist. He imagined her naked, his mouth dry. Yet how defenseless she was, soft skin and long limbs and lovely lips. Wasn't it better to be in a tank with seven inches of steel around you? But then the *duki* hit you with an RPG that drives through the steel and fills the inside with flame, so nothing's left of you but charred teeth.

"*Now* what are you thinking?" she said.

"The Big Bang."

"Big Bang?"

"This physicist in Moscow, he thinks the universe began with the collision of two particles, two neutrinos maybe. But of course the question –"

"Where did the two neutrinos come from?"

"Do you know *City of the Blind*, by the Afghani poet Sana'i? When an elephant arrives, all the blind people touch a different part of it trying to understand what it is." He picked up the book, translating slowly,

*"Those who touched the ear said an elephant is thick  
and flat as a carpet*

*Those who touched his trunk said it is a terrifying shape  
like a pipe*

*Those who touched its foot said it is long and straight  
as a column*

*Each one, discovering a part, formed the wrong idea,*

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*And not understanding the elephant as a whole, remained in blindness*

*This is how people think of God  
And why the reason goes astray."*

"You believe that?"

"Like them, I believe only what I can feel for myself."

A bell was ringing. She stood. "Incoming."

He flinched. "It's not your problem."

"My problem *is* injured people. People hurt by soldiers like you –"

"I don't want to argue with you, damn it. Before you came I was thinking of Rumi –"

*Before death's swordsman charges,  
Call for the scarlet wine  
You are not gold, O careless fool!  
To be buried and dug up again."*

She moved to the door. "So what's the point?"

"The point is you should have dinner with me. We'll drink wine, like Rumi says. Because once we're dead we'll never drink wine again."

IN BRIGHT sun Sophie crossed Al Minaya, humming under her breath so none of the passing men would hit her for speaking aloud.

"What a lovely day!" she exclaimed to the old crone at the desk as she closed the door of the woman's shelter behind her.

The woman glanced at Sophie over her spectacles. "You were out all night."

"Extra wounded." Why, Sophie wondered, am I explaining myself to this rancorous prude? These women who be-

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come what their men see in them...

In the hall she went to the sink and turned on the faucet. It spat air, then nothing. What a fool she was to think there'd be water. She took water from a pail on the woodstove and washed her hands in the sink and with an old toothbrush from her pocket scrubbed under her nails. Galaya the new girl came into the kitchen with another pail of water. "I put aside some rice for you last night," Galaya said. "Sorry there's no lamb. The other women ate it all."

Sophie restrained the ditzy urge to hug her. "They need it more than I do."

Galaya smiled then caught herself and hid her face. Sophie took the bowl of rice to her room. "Having a good day?" she said to the crucifix over the bed. She did not feel sleepy. She sat at her desk eating the rice and studying her Russian lesson book. *Сегодня ясное небо*, she wrote, *и птицы летают высоко*: The sky is clear today, and the birds are flying high.

## Rue the Day

THROUGH HIS SOVIET field glasses Jack scanned the stone farmhouse hunched in the lee of wind-stripped trees in the valley below. Two mules huddled against a wall, tails between their legs. Smoke pointed like an arrow northward; a bright spot of green was a Soviet tarp pinned by stones to the roof and crackling in the wind.

“He’s got to be here.” He checked the setting sun.

“They’re not mounting watch,” Loxley said. “Think they own the place.”

“We got two grenades left. If he comes out to piss, we take the guy with him and toss the grenades inside?”

“One guy on each side of the door.”

“Or one guy in front, the other in back.”

“I don’t want you shooting me by accident, asshole.”

“What if he don’t have to piss?”

“Owen? All he ever does. Remember Vegas, him pissing in that fountain?”

Jack settled into the rocks. *The beauty of sleep.* “I’ll wake you in half an hour. Then I’ll sleep half an hour. Then

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we move in.”

“Imagine, those fuckers in there... Talkin shit. Eatin Mohammed up sideways. Don’t even know, dumb fuckers. They’re about to die.”

AHMAD CLIMBED a tank barrier of charred cars and splintered telephone poles, dragging his sack of food behind him. In the old days Kabul had been warmer, but now with so many buildings knocked down and no trees standing, nothing stopped the cold wind. In the old days of the king, before the Muslim uprising, when there’d been food for everyone, a multiparty assembly, a constitution, girls in mini-skirts, rock’n roll on the radio, cafés and movies...

Now by day he prowled Kabul’s bludgeoned streets for food – beet tops, rancid potatoes, spoiled feed from slaughterhouse pens, discarded Soviet rations, old cans from bombed-out basements. At night, exhausted and hungry, he carried what food he’d found or stolen back to the orphanage where a hundred seventy children – the number changed depending on who died, what new ones came – waited with bleak eyes and swollen bellies. It wasn’t an orphanage, really, just Ahmad and an ancient woman named Safir whose husband was dead and whose home this house had once been.

When he could he sent kids across the Pakistan border to the UN camps, but this was dangerous and expensive. And more and more new ones kept coming – in Afghanistan there was no lack of orphans.

Today he’d found five candles in a blasted teashop. This was a dilemma. It would be wonderful to have them when Safir amputated a gangrened or mine-shattered limb – this she did with a little curved saw her husband had used to prune fruit trees in what had been the garden. But if she used the candles he could not trade them for food, for a sack

of maggoty grain from the United Nations, or even a box of powdered milk robbed from the Soviet “Peace Through Friendship” warehouse.

A rustle behind him made him spin round: nothing. Rats, or a starving dog, or just this Kush wind from the north. When death comes they say sometimes you hear it coming.

A smashed Soviet armored car lurked in an alley. It might have rations, even vodka, God willing, that he could trade for medicine or use to anesthetize a child or sterilize a wound. Why say “God willing”? Anyone who’d lived through this would never believe in God.

He put down his bag, inside it the day’s find of barley swept up from a shop floor, a chocolate bar from under a bed in a deserted Soviet bivouac, seven good cabbages, a pigeon not long dead, the five candles. The armored car’s seats were carbonized and bent by an explosion; it looked like the interior of an oven. But in the back, that silver glow – a canteen, maybe? Gingerly he squirmed through the shattered windshield.

No, it was just a canister of some kind – teargas maybe, broken and useless for trading. He heard a noise outside, a skidding sound – *his bag*! He dove out the windshield and sprinted after a kid dragging the bag down the street. The kid caught an ankle in barbed wire and fell spilling cabbages and candles. Ahmad grabbed him. “You little bastard!”

“I’m *not* a bastard,” the kid answered, barely breathless.

Ahmad suppressed a laugh. This country with its insane proprieties, to be dying of hunger yet worry what someone calls you. “What are you, then?”

“My mother and father are dead. But I’m not a bastard.”

Ahmad pulled him closer. “I know you! From Edeni. It can’t be – Suley?”

The kid would not face him. “It’s me!” Ahmad shook him. “Your teacher!”



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Suley had grown into a gaunt fierce boy, perhaps thirteen, so skinny and dirty it was hard to tell. Grasping his wrist Ahmad tried to gather the cabbages back into the bag but they kept rolling downhill. He swore when he saw that two candles had broken.

Suley snatched at Ahmad's hand to pry it from his wrist. The kid's fingers were like steel. Ahmad grabbed his hair. "You're coming to our orphanage. There's other kids your age. And food, when guys like you don't steal it."

"You'll rue the day," the boy tried to yank free, "you found me."

"KNIFE –" Jack rubbed his hands, trying to warm them.

"Check." Loxley was shivering too.

"Full magazine mounted, two spares."

"Check."

"One grenade each."

"Check."

"20:03:15."

Loxley looked at his *Spetsnaz* watch. "Check."

"20:18 we're on both sides of the door, behind the wall. Anybody comes out is gonna be night-blind, we can move in behind them soon as the door's closed."

Night had fallen, bitter cold. Rocks stung Jack's hands as he crawled toward the door. To his left he could not see Loxley. Even when they had taken up positions he could barely make him out on the far side of the door. From inside a steady rumble of voices.

A voice moved toward the door. Wood squeaked on the mud floor as the door dragged open, then closed. An Afghani came out, relieved himself, burped and went inside. Odors of wood smoke and cooked barley lingered.

After a few minutes two voices came toward the door. A dark shape moved out into the night, then another, a third.

The door shut.

“Here I am,” a voice said in English. *McPhee*. “Out here with two assholes, one on each side, both with guns...”

“Shut up,” a voice said in Pashto.

“... and a bunch of people inside, one guy with a gun, the rest civilians...”

“Shut *up*!” the voice said again, a thunk of a rifle butt against flesh. After a moment, spattering sounds on the frozen ground. “Let’s go in,” another voice said in Pashto. “Catch your death out here.”

Jack and Loxley closed in behind them. Jack yanked back one man’s head and drove the combat knife into his throat. The man gurgled, dropped to his knees, tried to shake him off. “Owen!” Jack whispered. “It’s us!” He pulled the man back up to keep his rifle from hitting the ground.

“Where the fuck you been!” *McPhee* whispered.

“Grab their guns. Can you walk?”

They left the two bodies behind a boulder, circled back to the mule track and ran down it toward the Panjshir Valley. After a few minutes they pulled up.

“That was brilliant, telling us who they were,” Jack panted. “How many.” He wiped blood from his hands with snow, thinking that with each new death the killing bothered him less. “We have to run all night or these guys’ll catch us. There’s a trail along the west side of the valley, about a thousand feet above it. We take that toward the Soviet outpost at Parian, then swing back up toward the Little Kowkcheh.”

“Parian’s where *they* were taking me, sell me to the Russians.”

“They won’t expect us to go that way.”

*McPhee* took a breath. “What happened with the ambush?”

“We took out two Hinds,” Loxley said. “Blew them

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right out of the sky.”

“Who’d we lose?”

“One guy. We also got three APCs and a bunch of soldiers.”

“Jesus, Ackerman was right. If we can interdict the Russian air war with our missiles, the Afghanis might beat them on the ground. It could change the whole fuckin war.”

Jack shifted the two rifles on his shoulder. “Wahid wants more missiles. In two weeks we report to Ackerman in Pakistan, so we take one of Wahid’s camel trains over the Kush to Pakistan and maybe bring back more *Strelas*. We’ll leave you in Rawalpindi till your ankle’s healed.”

“The fuck you will. This’s *my* mission too. It’s gonna be a whole new war.”

LEO PACED the hospital garden where mortar-shattered fruit trees lay under a fresh dusting of snow. An orange sun was creeping over the Hindu Kush. To the east trucks or oil tanks were burning; from the north came a deepening thunder as MiG 28’s took off from Bagram. Somewhere a child was giggling.

He beckoned an army orderly, a young woman with a wide Ukrainian face. “Where’s the French doctor?”

“She’s in the critical ward doing her rounds.”

“She has no business there!” He ran up the stairs three at a time and stomped into the ward. There she was, bent over a heavily bandaged soldier, a young doctor beside her. “Who said you could come in here?”

She held a finger to her lips. “Wait a few minutes, till I’m done.”

Who was *she* giving orders? He stood in the entry, slippers sticking in fresh blood.

“You don’t even speak Russian!” he snapped when she came through the double doors. “How can you treat sol-

diers when you don't understand them?"

"Doctor Sushlev speaks French better than you. I'm working with him. Doctor Denisov said I could."

Denisov was the hospital commandant. *I've been ambushed*, Leo realized. But a battle wasn't a war. "For how long?"

She looked at him oddly. "Let's go outside."

He walked back and forth while she sat on a bench, hands in her lap, the sun on her face. "Things are going badly for us," he said. "So I worry about security."

"If the Afghanis didn't have you for enemies they'd just keep killing each other."

"Religion's man's oldest plague, isn't it?" He pulled a pack of Yavas from his breast pocket and lit one. "If these fundamentalists take over Afghanistan they'll undermine Tajikistan, Uzbekistan. Our empire falls apart. A civilized world falls apart."

She cocked her head. "You shouldn't smoke those."

He took the cigarette from his mouth. "You interfere in everything, don't you?"

"Empires always fall apart. You're a soldier – you know that."

"I'm just here because they sent me."

"You always do what you're told? You'll make some woman a fine husband."

Again he felt outflanked. "Or would you?" she smiled.

He flicked the cigarette away. "So if we leave?"

"You're bringing peace? *Peace through war* – the new slogan of international socialism?"

He ached to take out another cigarette but didn't. "So we leave, what then?"

"I'm only a doctor, Captain. I go where pain is and try to lessen it."

"How's that different from being a soldier?" Why did he

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keep explaining himself to her?

She pulled herself up on the bench. "Please, Captain, sit beside me. As we've seen, life's very short."

He sat stiffly. Why did he always do what she said? "Soon as I'm out of here I'm going back to the Panjshir. So it's good you have this other guy who speaks French."

"I'm learning Russian: *Ya govaryu ochen pa-russki*. See?"

"That's a good accent –"

"You're gone how long?"

"Couple weeks."

"Is it dangerous?" She turned away. "That's a stupid question."

He took her long fingers in his hand. "Speaking of dangerous – you should go back to Paris."

"I never do what I don't want." She turned over his hand. "How rough your skin is." She squeezed his fingernail. "See, you need more vitamins. What's this black?"

"Engine oil. All tank men get that – becomes part of your skin."

She said nothing, then, "It's not just saving the women that I stay for. It's the mystery of life – I'm closer to it here."

He looked out at the smoky Kabul morning, half-hearing the chatter of helicopters in the distance, the keening of jets, a rumble of APCs heading north on Karaya Boulevard. "I got bored with dull mornings in Leningrad, training exercises without purpose, social dinners with Army brass... At least here I'm doing something."

"We're symbiotic, aren't we, Captain? You kill people, I heal them."

"Did it ever occur to you that some men become soldiers to try to lessen killing, not increase it?"

"That's like making people sick to heal them –"

"Isn't that inoculation? How we develop immunities,

my dear.”

“You know it’s not the same.”

“I try to understand where we’re going,” he said after a while. “Why we do what we do. War’s how humans progress. Even space travel uses the technologies of war – all based on Nazi V2 rockets.” He took out another cigarette but didn’t light it. “Humans are a teeming mass devouring and destroying everything. The only excuse is,” and he looked away, trying to understand his thought, “is if we expand to other worlds. When I think of humans on this earth I think of maggots on a corpse. How they pick it clean. Then they turn into flies and fly to the next one.”

“You’ve been badly injured. You should go home. You don’t have to fight any more.”

“Then what?”

“Will you be in Kabul,” she said suddenly, “when you return from the Panjshir?” She seemed softer, nearly afraid, as if he’d say no.

“When I thought I was dead, you were *there*, speaking to me. You brought me back.” He kissed her, gently then hard, tasted her tongue and gums and teeth, feeling her electric angularity, the power of her body. A bell rang and she jumped up and ran back inside. He wandered the garden feeling useless and angry, thought of the poem by Attar of Nishapur, killed when an old man by the invading Mongols,

*If you love her do not ask about existence and non-existence...*

*Don’t talk about the beginning and do not ask about the end.*

But I hardly know her, he reminded himself.

## II

Pakistan

## Bandit

*April 1983*

“**I**’D WALK A MILE for a camel,” Loxley sang off-key as they followed Wahid’s camels up the stony trail through the mountains toward Pakistan.

“In the true religion,” Hassan Hussein said, trotting to catch up, “the camel is seen as an example of God’s wisdom. *De la sagesse de Dieu.*”

“Yes.” Jack watched the rear of the camel before him rise and fall with each step of its elongated, double-jointed rear legs. “It surely is.”

“The Koran tells how the prophet Salih gave the people of Thamud a she-camel as a gift from God, but they killed the camel and so God brought down an earthquake upon them.”

Jack stepped around a steaming manure pile. “Served them right.”



“It’s good to hear that even among infidels there is respect for camels.”

They came to a stream with a cluster of mud houses with shell-holed walls and charred beams, a shattered granary where crows flew away cawing. Wind had scattered barley the crows were eating. Wahid’s men began to gather up the barley and feed it to the camels.

Jack scouted the ruins hoping for a chicken to kill. A growl stopped him. He peered into the gloom of a shed. “Loxley!” he called. “Bring a light.”

Loxley came stepping around places that looked mined. “It’s a dog.”

“I can see that.”

The dog backed away from the light, straining at a chain, yellow eyes wild. “Somebody’s mined him,” Loxley said. “Go any closer and you’ll blow yourself to kingdom come.”

Jack knelt, extended a hand. “Here, puppy.” The dog bared huge teeth.

“If that’s a puppy I’m a fuckin dromedary.”

McPhee limped over watching the ground for trigger wires. “That’s a beautiful dog.”

“I guaran-fuckin-tee you,” Loxley said, “the front of this shed’s mined.”

“Yeah,” McPhee agreed. “Guaranteed.”

“Dog don’t like it,” Loxley said. “He knows.”

McPhee unshouldered his rifle. “Best to put him down.”

“No.” Jack raised his hand. “I’m going around the back, see if I can free him that way.”

“You’re gonna step on something and get your testicles all mixed up with your eyeballs.”

Jack unsnapped his bayonet and moved along the shed, probing the earth with its tip. The wall of the shed stank of burnt mud and dung. He heard the dog panting inside. He

moved around the back, still probing. His bayonet clicked on something solid. He backed away, stepping in exactly the same places. "Found one!" he called.

"Goddammit get out of there!" McPhee yelled.

"Moving around the side. Going to get him this way." Jack dug out a brick with his bayonet, widened a hole at the bottom, reached inside and grabbed the dog's leather collar.

The dog came out quickly, trying to pull away. He was huge and wolflike, black with a white blaze on his chest. As Jack tugged him closer the dog snarled and nipped his hand, so gently Jack did not let go. "Hey, puppy," Jack said. "Stop that."

"Russian shepherd," McPhee said. "The Afghanis tied him in there, hoping some Russian'd come along and try to free him, get blown away."

"What's that written on his collar?" Loxley said.

Jack looked down at the words in Cyrillic: БАНДИТ. "Bandit." The dog cocked his head. "Same in Russian as English." He tied a camel halter to the dog's collar and took him down to the stream where he lay down and drank.

The Afghanis were spreading prayer rugs beside the camels. Bandit growled at them, his back fur raised. Jack gave him a bowl of rice and mutton.

"In the Koran," Hussein said, "dogs are false messengers. Enemies of God."

"In the Koran," Jack said, "everything's an enemy of God."

When the dog had finished eating he sat on his haunches beside Jack watching Hussein and the *mujihadeen*, his tall pointed ears cocked forward, as Jack finger-combed his fur tugging out burrs and tangles. *Bandit's what the Russians call Afghanis*, he remembered, wondered who Bandit's master had been – a Russian officer perhaps – and what had happened to him.

With the camel halter tied to Bandit's collar he wandered down the trail. Soon the dog no longer shied away from him, and when Jack sat cross-legged on a boulder still warm from the sun Bandit sat next to him, nuzzled his arm and then reached up and licked his face. "Hey Big Ears," Jack laughed, "stop that."

He untied the halter from his collar. Bandit put a great paw on Jack's knee and looked into his face. For an instant Jack felt fear – this huge dog with his inch-long canines could rip his neck open in a second – but the look in Bandit's golden-brown eyes was warm and thankful – *I know what you did for me.*

He held the dog's paw in his hand, feeling the supple tendons and rough pads, the hard claws. "I once lost a friend like you," he said, feeling not at all weird talking to a strange dog in the wilds of the Hindu Kush. "I've never had a lot of friends... maybe I'm too hard to know, don't like attachments..."

The kindness in the dog's lustrous eyes with their strong black pupils seemed to accept everything Jack said, made talk unnecessary. He ran his fingers through the fur of Bandit's neck, undid the leather collar and massaged the thick muscles. "You're free," he smiled. "If you want to be with me, I want to be with you."

THAT NIGHT they led the camels over the ridge into Pakistan and down the Darband valley and in the morning tied them in a pine grove near a dirt road. Aktoub and another of Wahid's men walked down the road toward a distant village and came back in a Toyota pickup mounted with a machine gun.

"I want you out first," Jack told McPhee. "Go to our Embassy in Islamabad, the military section. Tell them you've come from Cleveland looking for a job. That's code to send

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you to Ackerman, who will be somewhere in Rawalpindi. The Pakis have the Embassy wired, so watch what you say. Soon as you see Ackerman, have them take care of that leg.”

McPhee left in the Toyota pickup and returned two days later wearing clean civilian clothes, bringing cold roast beef, apples, and three cans of dog food. “You girls look like shit,” he commented.

“And you smell like a Texas whore,” Loxley said.

“That’s shampoo, darling. First shower in months. You girls could sure use one.”

“What about Gus?” Jack said, killing the mood.

“Nothing from the Soviets – don’t know what they thought...” McPhee stared at the Afghanis, the hills. “Ackerman says we’re fucking heroes. That we can turn this war around.”

Jack shook his head. “It isn’t worth Gus.”

“Bastards at Islamic Jihad just bombed our Beirut Embassy. Sixty dead and hundreds wounded.”

“*What?*” Loxley yelled. “What they hit *us* for?”

“Don’t like Americans, apparently... Had an extra truck of Sementex.”

Jack glanced at the Arabs squatting with the Afghanis in a close circle by the camels. “And we’re breeding these assholes?”

“Tell it to Ackerman,” McPhee said. “He’s in the back of New Asia Paradise Heavy Tools Import-Export. I’ll tell you how to get there –”

At dusk Jack and Loxley reached Rawalpindi. The racket of motorbikes and clatter of trucks and buses spewing diesel exhaust, the canned *mullah* loudspeakers wailing, the sewage in chunks and rivulets in the gutters, the thronging scrawny men in rags and headwraps, the women in *yashmaks* and slippers tiptoeing through the muck, the odors of death and decay, the constant din and filthy air, and the

crushing presence of far too many impoverished people driven together by hunger, despair, and Islam's fanatic renunciation – all made him desperate to regain the empty vast mountains with their knife-edge air and blue-white vistas. If Rawalpindi was life, then fuck it the Hindu Kush was better.

New Asia Paradise Heavy Tools was a warehouse in a back lot in an industrial area where the long-distance trucks left for Karachi and Lahore. Stacks of steel pipe, coils of heavy plaited wire, rolls of sheet metal, and bundles of PVC pipe wrapped in white plastic were piled to the ceiling. In the back were offices, and a stairway up to a closed steel door.

"Took you long enough," Levi Ackerman said. "I been here, what, five days?"

"Probably good for you, Sir," Jack said. "Got you out of Sin City."

Ackerman glanced at Bandit. "That's a beautiful dog. He kill people?"

"Maybe."

Ackerman tugged a pencil from behind his left ear and spun it on his fingertips. "Your Dad would be proud of you."

Jack flinched. "Yes, Sir."

"We get Wahid enough missiles maybe he can retake the Panjshir." Ackerman tilted back his chair, dropped forward. "Thanks to what you've done, the stakes have gone up a notch. We've got a new Home Office guy flying in, Timothy Cormac. To look at the bigger picture. Strategy guy, not military." Ackerman shrugged. "You want to grow your career, get close to him."

Jack bent to scratch Bandit behind the ears. "I told Wahid we're independents, don't have a Home Office pipeline to give him SA-7s. So he's paying with opium. Did you know?"

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Ackerman tipped back again, making Jack fear he'd go over. "We've been through all this. What Home Office does with the Pakis –"

"You mean the weapons for Hekmatyar –"

"– is not our business. *Our* business is *you* guys building a third force to counter the Soviets without the Pakis or Saudis. Or Hekmatyar, or this new guy Massoud –"

"The one who signed the truce with the Russians?"

Ackerman rubbed the stump of his missing forearm. Jack wondered did it still hurt, after all these years? Does all pain endure like that, long after you think it will be gone?

"If that Goddamn truce spreads it'll kill our whole deal," Ackerman said. "We *need* the Soviets tied down in Afghanistan. So we need this Massoud dealt with."

"We help Wahid get his SA-7s, but he has to kill Massoud?"

"I didn't *say* that," Ackerman said. "They going to win, these *mujihadeen* of yours?"

"Depends how many weapons we give them."

"And if they do?"

"The insane ones like Wahid and Hekmatyar will take control. When the Soviets leave they'll go for each other's throats."

"We're sending ten more *holy warriors* back with you. From Saudi, Yemen, and Algeria. Ask *them* about the Beirut Embassy bombing, see what you learn."

"I don't want them."

"Jack, this war has to *seem* a pan-Islamic thing: Muslims versus Soviets. So we import holy warriors from wherever. Good pay, learn how to kill, maybe die for Allah."

"Like I said, we shouldn't be training these assholes –"

"You let Home Office worry about that." Ackerman stood looking out the office window. "Tomorrow we'll decide how many SA-7s and launchers you need." Ackerman opened a side drawer of the desk and reached inside to sharpen his pencil with an electric sharpener. "On the ad-

MIKE BOND

min side, you want any changes in survivor notification and benefits, that kind of thing?”

“Just my mother, like before.”

“A few house rules for while you’re here. We’re private citizens, not representatives of any government. Carry your sidearm at all times but keep it concealed. Always let Sergeant Malkowich know where you’re going and when you’ll be back. There’s a pussy shop down the street but I’m told the ones in Ketta Jalaya are better –”

“Levi, where are *we* in all this?”

“Nowhere. *We* don’t exist.”

“We’re trading opium for guns. We’re drug dealers.”

“That’s not how your Dad would see it. We’re taking down the world’s dirtiest empire. The one that killed *him*... We’re freeing a billion people from Communism –”

“To give them what? Heroin?”

“Think of it as a necessary evil.” One-handed, Ackerman took out more pencils and began to sharpen them one by one. “Because, as this new guy Timothy will explain tomorrow, you’re the one who has to run it.”