

# michael fertik

## HUNTING IN NANGARHAR

I KNEW FROM SPECIFIC EXPERIENCE that the rescue was doomed. Ruby would never come back alive. The Americans understood there was risk; they weren't stupid. But they were optimists.

I was in the theater for years already. The town of Batal Hazar, in the Nangarhar Province across Kunar River from Jalalabad and snug in the lee of the Safed Koh mountains, is now the best place in the world for hunting humans. For 150 kilometers in all directions, the quality of the fighting is high. The fighters are trained and expert in the territory. They are professionals and take no unnecessary risks. They are lethal but not brutal. They learn swiftly. They use late model contextual weapons but do not rely on them because the terrain won't permit it. Where else would I be?

Our mission was to control the river valley and the mountains around it. The Taliban fed themselves on poppy sales. Here in the east, the poppy came from fields stretching from the valley and across and beyond the arêtes. The commanders decided this was too much territory to police directly. The farmers irrigated their land from the karez, ancient underground channels that drew water from the winter runoff coming down the hills. When the runoff dried, they channeled directly from the river. The Taliban controlled the irrigation, so they controlled the farmers' crop. If we controlled it instead, the farmers couldn't grow poppy, or if they tried, we could shut off the water. If the farmers could not get water from the hills or the river, they could not sell poppy to the Taliban, who could not sell the paste to the Iranians and Pakistanis for rockets and C4. No water, no poppy, no paste, no money, no materiel, no Taliban. Simple as that.

We patrolled in six man squads and ten-by-ten forward operating bases made of sandbags, rocks, and camouflaged aluminum that our CO called Sierra Mike Mike, which stood for Shaolin Murder Monasteries. His name was Eben Foster. Foster grew up in a small college town in central Ohio. When he was a kid, he consumed comics and later the college's library books on Shaolin monks. He wrote his senior

thesis on Zhang San Feng, the legendary ascetic and practitioner of Shaolin wushu. Unless he was giving orders, he usually spoke with a heavy Chinese accent. I had trouble understanding him at first. After a while, most of the guys in our unit spoke with a Chinese accent, too. Whites, blacks, and Mexicans walking around Afghanistan imitating Jackie Chan. Foster was an excellent warrior. Deliberate, cool, fast, funny, modest, and murderous. He carried a small tube of Savon face cream in his pack; his only complaints were about the assholes in Washington and the dust that buried itself in his pores. According to Foster, so long as we used our Shaolin Murder monk stealth, we would be invisible to bullets and baneful to our enemy. He was right. Our platoon of twenty-four men had forty confirmed kills in six months and no casualties.

Not until Ruby.

We had captured some of theirs before. When they ran low on fire, they would retreat. When they ran out, they would try to attack us by hand so we'd dispatch them to the virgins. Sometimes we captured them.

The Americans were civilized when they captured a Taliban. They would restrain him, interrogate him, feed him, and then remove him by arduous ambulatory extraction or by helicopter if fortune and NATOCOM in Kabul favored their week. I was impressed. There was law, and the Americans followed it. They were professional.

I was surrounded by professionals in Afghanistan. The Americans, the mujahedeen, French, British. They all knew what they were doing. And there were others. They don't read about it here in America, but there were others. Many others, who came for the fighting like me. They liked that there were no tanks, no Hummers, no aircraft supremacy, no fire from Cape Canaveral. They liked that the quality of the fighters would answer the questions. Russians, Arabs, Pashtun, rough Chechens, Chinese, Chileans, South Africans. Soldiers of fortune who could not keep away after going home from the fighting in their own countries. The ones who had a taste for it, for hunting men. They did not seem to prize the money. Few had ideology. They came to rank themselves against the great warriors of the past. They came for the smart fighting.

The war here is not as violent as the reporters say. The journalists who cover the wars don't cover the other fighting, the really violent fighting, so they don't know how to compare. Many die every day in Afghanistan, that's true. But that's warfare nowadays, death from light arms and small explosions. But there is little overkill. There are few massacres. We normally didn't desecrate bodies.

For brutality, you're better off in Mexico. Juarez is the worst place on earth. Think of Algeria or Cambodia. Families murdered in their homes. Kill the whole nightclub to get to one enemy. But you relied on bad intel, so you killed the wrong 200 people, so you go down the street and do it again. Kill the wives and children so the police refuse to serve. Bodies appear evidencing hours or even days of torture. Every finger and toe is broken, and in different places, which means they weren't all smashed at once, but individually, over time. Wounds that show bloodletting before death. Gums where teeth used to be. Splinters in the remains of orifices. Cheeks so swollen no visual ID is possible. Juarez is worse than it was in Algeria or Cambodia. There is no fighting over the government in Juarez. Controlling the treasury, the public works, the land, the army—that holds no glamour for the drug kings of Mexico. They do it for the money. And their gangs do it for the killing. There is so much blood in the murders no other explanation satisfies reason.

Mexico is for meatheads. I'll leave it to my brother. Give me Afghanistan.

Yes, give me Afghanistan. Last night I drove to a restaurant called Helmand in Beverly Hills to get a taste of the country and to hear the language again. They serve mostly Persian food but there are Afghan dishes if you know the menu and some words in Pashto. Frail nostalgia! You make us all twice poorer than we would be. To steal from us our proper memories and to substitute in their place dim aspirations of what they truly were is not enough for you. You also make us lust for what we had until we seek out desperate echoes to refresh our senses but that instead dull what once was bright. Sly connivance. To make me taste lamb where I had the fine red dust and sun of Nangarhar on my lips. The women at the table next to mine compared Fendi to Louis Vuitton and looked at me sideways wondering how I had messed up so badly that I was dining alone.

I fought alongside nearly everybody there. I started with the Americans, naturally, both the mightiest and the least sure-footed. They had studied the Soviet war in detail, but the Taliban had evolved since then. Still, the Americans adapted fast. Later I made my way into a French encampment and claimed secondment from the Foreign Legion. The French were tough, the ones the American special operating forces respected the most. Then the British, who remembered being there again after all those decades and felt like they had to finish the job permanently this

time. Later the Canadians, competent and self-righteous policemen. Then a band of South Africans, former Executive Outcomes and Sandline types, ruthless and fearless, practical, lawless, the new Vikings. Then the neutral mujahedeen, the ones with vague religion and good humor, the ones who still liked America and hated Russia, militia who wanted peace and tranquility for their home towns but knew they would have to kill first. Then, once I felt I knew the land well enough to pass among them, I moved to the Taliban. Most of them were gray, grave bastards. A handful were conscripts. They rarely talked except to submit to Allah or exchange tactical information. Vile, ignorant men who believed in raping boys as punishment and acid and beheading. They knew nothing except handfuls of Koranic verses, family trees, and warfare. Not even the Vietnamese were this tenacious, not the Thais, not the Gurkhas, not the Apache. The Afghans from the countryside had never known a prosperous time. Happiness wasn't in their national narrative. Instead they had blithe expectations of short bursts of gunfire, birth screams, and breathing. Their industry was shooting, their temples were rock outcroppings, and the only expression of compassion they had ever known was swift murder. I never saw them capture an enemy, but I knew they would have to kill him if they ever did, no matter what they might say about trades, hostages, or negotiations. They talked about it. The Taliban immediately killed opium users, men who kept dogs, and parents who gave their children books. They would never let an enemy outlive them.

Over ten years I rotated among the fighters, disguising myself so they would not recognize me. I learned the languages, the land, and the secrets of their warfare. I taught them what I had learned. It was important and fair to even the odds and spread knowledge of tactics among them. I hid my form under my fatigues or salwar kameez, and I hid my true voice by bellowing instead of talking and by growling when stealth required me to whisper. My only enemy was sleep. I could not control myself then. That has always been a problem. That is when my dreams would strangle me. Sometimes they made me speak or sing in other languages, and I would awake to raised suspicions. I would disappear behind a cliff or stage my death that afternoon and move on. When I made my way back to the other side, I would come with new clothes. It wasn't easy. When it came down to it, there weren't more than a few hundred men operating in the immediate area, and they were all good observers. I had to be deft. I used light, shadow, sunglasses, and a keffiyeh for the most part. Then I had other advantages. Still, it made me nervous when those men looked at me with their hard

eyes and asked themselves if they had seen me before somewhere.

Ruby wasn't even a member of our unit. He was a journalist in the field for the AFP, embedded with us for the season. Marine ROTC had paid for his college. He missed the first Gulf War by a whisker, but the training allowed him enough credibility to have the squad ask him for opinions, at least about movies and politics if not the terrain. He was quick on his feet and did not put himself in danger until the night he was grabbed.

"It only takes once, pukes," Foster told us one morning as we sat on the dust floor of SMM Hotel Sierra, which stood for Shaolin Murder Monastery Hajji Slumber, or what was known on the maps at HQ as Fort Unsheathed, our bivouac for the week's patrol. "Shut your third eye just one time, and you'll be deader than Daniel Pearl."

Gutierrez, our M240, tapped Ruby on the shoulder and said, "That means you, my man. No half-steppin'. Don't be going back to the US or France or wherever without your head." They smiled at each other, and Gutierrez turned to Foster to nod. M240 Gutierrez possessed wisdom. He also grew up in New York City, which made him the only other person in our squad who realized Ruby was a Jew.

As soon as they said it, I had a powerful premonition that the news was bad for Ruby. There is no lying in premonition. Ruby got nabbed on that patrol.

It was quite a smooth feat, actually. The Talibs figured it well. Our fireteams had built up a reputation in those parts. We'd killed their guys, blown them up, cornered them in caves, decapitated them with missile strike, ambushed them, enticed them with two apparently lone riflemen and then surrounded their kill-team and murdered them, grenade-launched their hide, ID'd their logistical support, RPG'd their vehicles, captured them, handcuffed them, rendered them, and sniped them in the head. I wish I could have cloned us.

The Talibs were dogged, though. The night they grabbed Ruby, they were following our patrol close behind, as usual. We had in mind to go through a split in the boulders single file and suppress them when they came out. They knew that we knew that they knew that we knew that just finding a firing position on the other side of the boulders would be way too obvious an ambush. So once we were out of sight, we double-timed it quietly through the split single file, and Foster kept us at speed because he knew they weren't coming through any time soon. We split into two teams,

and we wrapped back around the long way to a perch overlooking the mouth of the gap. Ruby was with Foster's team. A lieutenant named Drake had us in the second.

Sure enough, when we double-backed, we saw six guys kneeling near the split figuring their next move. I thought I had seen eight, but it was hard to be sure unless you were among them. I could sense a sharp battle coming, and I sniffed in the cold, wet air and grinned. Drake motioned to us. We would canalize the enemy against the rock, and Foster's team would kill them.

Someone's boot slipped—it happens all the time—and skipping pebbles gave away our position. The Talibs crouched and started shooting. The Iranians were giving them Chinese-made night vision these days, so they had us spotted and pinned immediately. I breathed out. This still wasn't old for me.

Foster's team replied. From their vantage point, they could hit every Talib below, and they struck three immediately. The enemy took cover behind rocks and edged toward the split in the boulders. I could make out Ruby crawling on his belly back toward the top of the gap within his infrared camera. This would be heroic footage. Our team recovered and was able to lay down suppression near the Talibs' toes to keep them inching forward toward the split. Foster sent three of his guys to work their way down to the Hajjis' six. Once they got there, they'd be spraying fire down a narrow alley. A near-perfect killbox.

I caught a glimpse of a Talib face emerging from cover on the way to the gap, and I squeezed my trigger and his head exploded. I felt a tremor. His face was familiar. That was Iqbal.

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Iqbal believed he was over thirty years old, which made him one of the more aged fighters who still possessed his ten fingers and toes. He was pious but no fanatic. He knew only of the Koran, his family, and his tribe. He had never been outside Nangarhar. He was totally illiterate except for specific words like “explosive” and о п а с н о с т ь. Somehow along the way he had picked up admiration for Abraham Lincoln for freeing the slaves, but he used this fact to explain that he did not detest the British and Jews. He also admired Richard the Lionheart because Saladin had. He did not hate Christians or any People of the Book. He had distaste for the elders of his tribe who did, especially his uncle, whom he considered weak, effeminate,

and abusive of his tribal power even though he had never fought the Russians when they were there last time. He deeply admired Osama bin Laden but felt the vanities of dying his beard black and exaggerating his exploits were unworthy of him. Iqbal hated the Americans for having replaced the British and the Soviets and the Mongols. He wanted them out, and he wanted in their place a peaceful caliphate where the groves could take deep root and he could pray, finally, in tranquility.

I knew all this and more because Iqbal and I had become close when I was with his unit the previous spring. Iqbal was lieutenant to a handsome, charismatic commander named Ahmad whose remit was a broad-ranging reconnaissance and war-making patrol covering three hundred square kilometers, nearly four times the ground Foster's squads would ever have to safeguard. Ahmad and Iqbal were friends since childhood. Iqbal was the silent partner between them. Before taking important decisions, Ahmad would take him aside to ask his opinion. When Iqbal had something to say, Ahmad stopped speaking. It seemed to me that Ahmad was a year or two younger but Iqbal had somehow known who should be in charge. They were inseparable. I had never seen them more than meters apart. Like two deer, if one was visible, there was sure to be another nearby out of view. From time to time, we saw them embrace. The other men made nothing of it, but I had more experience in such things. Men in their unit had died or suffered terrible wounds. They were replaced as fresh supplies allowed. But Iqbal and Ahmad were largely pristine. They were fierce, calculating, and smart. They insisted on taking no risks without opportunity for massive reward. They would kill without being killed, without taking shrapnel, sometimes without even taking fire. They were marvelous.

Iqbal! In another time you would have been Gawain or Galahad. You were determined, ardent in your love, and tender.

I admired him for months and sensed him noticing me. When I looked in his eyes, he would avert them and sometimes smile to himself as he turned his back or knelt to pray. I would kneel near him to pray, as well, and later he would wait for me to kneel first so he could avoid me and remain pure in his thoughts as he submitted himself to God.

One night, as he alone maintained the vigil, and as my moon turned bright and huge and marble white and looming over the mountains, I came to him and revealed my form under my salwar kameez. He shrieked and consumed me hungrily. He had

not been with a woman for a year, and I had not felt a man for longer. I watched my moon grow brighter and larger, and then I shut my eyes to concentrate on him.

As soon as he finished I saw his face overtaken with a mask of terror and shame. He covered himself briskly and then wrapped my body in my clothing and crouched facing the valley below. I dressed and then touched his eyes so he would forget and feel no shame, and he looked at me, his friend Shahrukh, and he smiled and knew nothing of what had happened.

It was thus every night I could steal away to him from then on. I longed for his turn in the rotation to maintain the night vigil, and I longed for the moments in our timeless, endless circuit around the territory when we would stop in the cloaking terrains of boulders and forests so that I might linger with him longer. On the nights we had firefights with the enemy, I regretted the disturbance of my chance to find him alone and took no enjoyment in the battles. I paid no attention to learning new warfare. Instead I became expert in the hiding places of the land, and I used my growing influence with Ahmad to steer us toward them. That Iqbal did not know me in between our times together made me burn more hotly, and I secretly wrenched my hair from my head in despair when I could not come to him. There were reports that spring and summer in Afghanistan of exceptionally long spells of a large, unblemished, full moon waxing and waning more quickly and dramatically than usual.

One night, as I crouched with Iqbal in a dewy bower outside a deep cavern our men had dubbed Rachel's Tomb, I sensed someone watching. I looked up, across Iqbal's shoulder, and I saw Ahmad. He paused and stood silently, expressionless, staring. He saw my eyes, and he saw my face and the whiteness of my form and the darkness of Iqbal's. Iqbal didn't notice, and he didn't stop. I said nothing. Ahmad made no noise. He looked for minutes at least and then walked backwards into the darkness of the cave, the bright reflection of his eyes disappearing last.

Ahmad made no signs the next morning that he had seen us. As usual, Iqbal was ignorant of what had happened. Ahmad perceived no guilt, no hesitation, no shame in his friend. He looked at me maybe a second longer, a centimeter closer than he had before, trying to see if he could discern my nighttime form in my daytime face. I was sure he could, but still he said nothing. For him, maybe, the insanity of the time allowed what had always been haraam. Or perhaps he was mourning the loss of what had always been his. Or perhaps he thought I was a witch sent by a devil to despoil



his men or his perception of his environment. Whatever he made of it, he elected to watch and wait.

My old premonition returned. I knew that if I stayed, Iqbal would surely die and I might come to some humiliation. I did not want to be responsible for Iqbal's death, and I could hardly afford to be humbled. It was only two days after this that I stole away during an encounter with a NATO force led by Italians. I staged my demise in a fiery explosion. As if I might be murdered by Italians! I blended with the rocks to watch my Iqbal and the others weep over my loss. They all wept, except Ahmad, who neither wept nor rejoiced but stared in turn at the horizon and then the waning, yellowing, stained moon and then at the face of his childhood friend.

I flew away and joined the Americans. Since then I had known Foster's squad and Ahmad's were circling each other, and I had sensed our fighting before, but I had never seen the faces of my old friends, and I presume they had never seen mine.

Today, I had exploded Iqbal's noble skull with a single 5.56MM direct gas fired M16A4 shell. I felt the earthquake in my stomach as I watched him perish. Kindness gave me immediate solace that I had spared him the terrors of age. Fate just as quickly reminded me that the poor boy was destined to die young in Afghanistan, anyway, so that I might not congratulate myself but instead curse myself for dispatching him with my own hand. Fate, you are our permanent enemy, and dreams are your wretched handmaids. I feared sleep as swiftly as Iqbal had died.

Iqbal should not have died. Something had gone wrong. Not with my skill or my weapon. But Iqbal should not have been there. How could he have found himself in such an obvious killbox. I had not known him or Ahmad to do it. They played advanced chess with light arms. Think ten moves ahead, and you would not be found in a narrowing path surrounded on two sides by rocks feeding into a single-fire split between high boulders. You would be nowhere near them if you were tracking an enemy that moved in their direction. There were too many chances to be murdered.

And where was Ahmad. A meter behind Iqbal, no doubt, ready to pop his head out or reeling and mewling from the loss of his friend.

I saw a hand creep from the rock cover. I held my fire, awaiting a clean shot to a vital organ. Someone else didn't. The gravel lit up with sparks as a shooter opened up, and the hand disappeared. I held my breath. I knew what would happen next. Foster's team was already wending its way five body-lengths in either direction to get

clear line of fire into the covered zone where the Talibs were hiding. This would be over in minutes. Only a desperate breakout attempt could delay it, and then it would only delay it. Those guys were dead. Our job would be to keep them in place till the others could clean them up and to shoot anyone who emerged. I steadied my rifle and eased my neck in anticipation of opportunities for any long distance murder. Unsurprisingly, I was the best sniper in the squad, and it was my preferred method of dispatch. Hence the single shot to Iqbal's head. I cursed myself. Then I cursed my skill and my pride in it. Then I cursed Ahmad for letting Iqbal maneuver into such an unworthy end, and I uttered some quiet words of longing to see him again so that I might rejoice and then shoot him in the shoulders and then neck. I laughed to myself as I recalled my old instinct to punish *everything*.

Foster was too good for me. His fireteam eliminated whoever was behind the rocks and then descended into the crevasse for confirmation. They radioed thumbs up. All Hajjis dead.

Up top in our squad, we surveilled the gully and then the horizon line.

I was not the first to see Ahmad seizing Ruby. That was Gutierrez. He heard the scuffling and the falling rocks, and he painted two Taliban grabbing Ruby three hundred meters away where he was hanging out on his belly waiting for the Hajji crew to creep their way into the gap so he could photograph them overhead on the hunt, taking fire, and then getting killed. The rest of us saw a second later. We couldn't shoot. Ahmad and another Talib I didn't recognize bundled Ruby in front of their bodies as they retreated down the other side of the gap. We were two minutes away across the distance and gap in broad daylight. Foster's team would have to scramble up the hill, so it was worse for them. And there was no daylight and no moon. This would be rough, and I knew in that instant that Ruby was going to be dead soon.

I stood to give chase, and an RPG exploded nearby. The concussion threw me to the ground. "DAMN!" I yelled out loud, breaking the radio silence. The night exploded again in yelling, tracer-fire, and rockets. "TAKE COVER!" I shouted, and the fireteam ducked. Foster barked into his radio, and we followed the trails to our flank, four hundred meters to our left, directly away from the gap, directly away from Ruby and Ahmad.

The Talibs had another squad following a click behind, hanging back to suppress us at the right time so Ahmad and his helper could make good their escape with

our man Ruby, the weakest goat in our herd. It was altogether a smart move, and I rubbed my tongue on the outside of my left lip as I appreciated the intelligence of our enemy. Ahmad, for sure. He had followed us with his team of eight, set up six to die so that he and a mate might grab one of ours, and organized a second fireteam to bring up the rear to perfect the kidnapping. *Salut*. I'll see you again, rat bastard, but a fair showing. My old brother used to say our hubris kills our friends first. I bet Ahmad had been watching us for weeks, long enough to spy Ruby as someone just a little out of place, as someone who took himself out of the envelope of fire support to take his photos, long enough to deliver himself into the hands of the enemy if Ahmad organized it correctly.

Fifteen minutes after they'd fired the first RPG, the enemy dispersed. Their job was done. Ahmad, Ruby, and the other kidnapper had disappeared from view. Foster's unit would have to return to base with a man down, and a live, vanished casualty at that, the worst and most legendary type of fate, the kind the kids made Viking pledges to each other to avoid, "one bullet to the head if you see me wounded and waiting for the Hajjis to get me, promise, you hear, promise me now, don't fuck it up when the time comes or so help me, motherfucker, I'll rise up from the dead and frag you so bad you'll wish the world was flat so you could flip it and be back on top" kind of promises, and a civilian, live, vanished casualty at that, even if he was a soldier back in the day, and on top of that there was the other thing, about which Gutierrez and I kept our mouths shut for the time being, even though it was dead to coffin nails that no one would have uttered a syllable about it even if they all knew stone cold. This was massively fucked, massively non-Shaolin.

The only solution, the way those Americans think, was a rescue operation.

It was a beautiful, lyrical, micro-epic idea. Americans are blessed. When their backs are up, they know of no other way than to raise the ante till they bring down the house. This is why they always win. The universe loves guts. How else do you explain the appearance of Earth and the rest of us in the first instance? Displays of guts shouting into a billion kilometers of soundless, soulless, mindless darkness.

Foster was on it from the moment we bivouacked. The idea was to give the Hajjis no time to rest or retreat.

"Use the maps," he said, thrusting a sheaf onto the small trunk that served as

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table, storage, chair, and sometime bed in  
Sierra Mike Mike Echo Tango, our point  
of departure and return for the night's  
murders. The Talibs hadn't slept, but  
neither had we. Foster pointed to six of us  
to start. They complied. The rest of would  
be poring over the plastic laminates, looking  
for roads or routes or holes in the ground  
where you might stow a captive. The bigger  
the better: the next step would be to film

him suffering, make demands, then film yourself decapitating him with a Bowie knife.

It took us two hours to identify a set of routes and hides to target and an additional thirty minutes to narrow the field from six to three. Foster called in for satellite support, and we started receiving digital enhancements. I found myself distracted, wanting to step outside, to isolate myself, to breathe the frigid morning air and calm myself. I never got used to this feeling. I never thought men deserved it or that we did, either. I admired the steadiness of insects for forbearance in passion and a different idea of how to distribute the workload. But I could not let myself leave the table of charts even for a minute. Perhaps looking carefully at the maps made me feel as if I was doing something sooner to assemble my vengeance. Then I thought it was another reason: I felt self-conscious, as I had not before in a long time. I worried that a need to leave would reveal instantly to these men who and what I was. It was silliness, of course, but that only compounded my mourning. I felt tears well up for my inability to weep openly.

A thought crossed my mind as I looked across the table and out the window of Echo Tango. It disappeared as quickly as it came, and I grabbed a map to find it again. Yes, there it was. Smack dab twelve clicks from the bivouac. Rachel's Tomb. A long hoof but short enough to get you cover before daylight brought cavalry and hellfire. The same bower, the same cave opening as before. Ahmad had led the men back to the deep cavern where I had first gone to Iqbal. There was plenty of room to disappear there, plenty of rooms and corridors in the cave to make your escape or your redoubt. The Soviets had bombed the Bogram cave near here for 57 days before the mujahedeen had walked out unharmed. When they descended after the

evacuation, the Soviets found 41 distinct rooms, carpeting, generators for light, air conditioning and heat, a mosque, cushions and steel frame beds, and a functioning ultrasound machine. After a right-hand turn off the main entranceway, sixty meters into the shadows, the mujahedeen had placed a captured T-62 battle tank in the passage with the muzzle facing out. From then on the Soviets stopped trying to fight their way into the caves. They dropped incendiary weapons into the mouth as soon as they discovered any. Everyone inside burned alive or suffocated, including the villagers who had taken to hiding in the karez since Genghis Khan had come through. That was when the war got really bloody and the resistance sought American succor. That was the beginning of the end for the Soviets. You don't have to be a foreign journalist on a bender in Kabul to know that the end of the Soviet empire followed the underground discovery of a captured battle tank and an ultrasound machine.

"HE'LL BE HERE." I glanced at the map to find reasons to explain my certainty. "LOOK AT THE MOUTH OF THIS HIDE. HAJJI COULD SEE TO PAKISTAN FROM HERE. IT'S WHERE I'D GO." This wasn't the best recital of logic I'd ever heard evidenced. I have always admired the smooth-tongued, but I gave up in frustration long ago. I tried to control my anger. If I exploded the whole point of my being in Nangarhar would be forsaken. If I exploded, I could never return unless I slaughtered all the men in this hut.

"HE WILL BE HERE, AND WE HAVE TO PICK ONE, ANYWAY." I looked at Foster in the eyes and emitted a low growl.

"Okay, why the hell not," he said. "If we're in the killing mood and have a fire under our ass for one place over another, let's get there first. We'll go now. We'll switch if we get intel from CENTCOM that the Hajjis took Ruby somewhere else."

We left without sleeping and called into HQ to pick us up and drop us far enough away that the Talibs wouldn't hear the rotors.

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I took point as we slid down the short hill and onto the berm above the cave mouth. No one was around. Maybe no one was in the cave or maybe there were only the two Talibs left plus Ruby, hovering and preparing to die inside. Or maybe yet again Saladin's entire army was lurking inside the cavernous infrastructure, surrounding Ahmad and his final man, plotting ambush for the Americans who

would come after one of their own. I quivered as the promise and uncertainty of good hunting loomed.

I crawled on my belly over the lip of the cave mouth and peered below. The whole thing was crazy. Ahmad stood right there dead center of the bower where I had met Iqbal, resting his Kalashnikov in his left elbow crease and smoking a cigarette with his right hand. I hesitated. I could put a bullet through his ear from here with no chance of missing unless an earthquake threw me from my position. Line it up, pull back the cord, and let the arrow fly straight into his ear canal and through his skull.

Foster didn't want us to strike. He didn't have to tell me. It was an unwise move. If I took out Ahmad, the rifle report would wake up whoever was in the cave. Foster told us they might kill Ruby if we fucked up, but I knew that was sadly beside the point. His length had been spooled when Ahmad seized him, and there was no undoing that. If I could crawl down the berm, down the side of the cave mouth and put my stainless MK 3 blade into the soft spot beneath his skull and muffle his cries with my left hand . . . but that would work at night, not now when daylight was openly broken. From their vantage inside the cave, they would spot us plain as day. I'd be silhouetted and in Technicolor at the same time.

There was no avoiding it. I had to watch as Ahmad slowly burned down his Bahman Dooli cigarette.

I smoke Bahmans now. It's a dirty habit, of course. But it gives me a flavor of the place. I can get the Iranian Bahmans all over Persian LA. Smoke is everywhere in Afghanistan. The fighters don't consider it haraam. Ahmad himself once wearily joked to me that if Qu'ran 2:195 applied to smoking, that if one should consume no tobacco because we must "make not your hands contribute to your own destruction," then how could they justify continuing to make war every day for thirty years? No, the fighters all puffed happily. If there was ever any doubt of the collaboration between the Iranian intelligence services and the Afghan fighters, all you had to do was count the cigarette consumption. The tiny, skinny, fey Bahman cigarettes drowned the mujahedeen market. Even Lakson's Morven Gold and Diplomats from Pakistan—much finer blends and better smoking—were a distant second. The ISI were no match for the penetration of Iran's KGB-trained security services. They were more adept liars, smugglers, and extortionists. Even in the far east of Afghanistan, over the hills from Pakistan but a country away from Iran, Persian

materiel was easier to find than Pakistani. I go nowadays to the back patio of the Ruby Room in Beverly Hills, before the guitarist shows up and frightens away the strays, and nibble on pistachios and look at the koobideh on my plate while I let the smoke waft up from the ashtray into my nostrils from my Bahmans.

In Batal Hazar, the fighters would smoke so much that the wind, small fires, and butts would sometimes give away their position. I saw a commander shoot his man in the head for leaving a butt on the ground as we broke camp. That, he said, was suicide as well as the murder of your comrades, both of which were haraam.

This time, Ahmad's body gave away his position. Tiresias could have seen him from across the valley. I counted off the time till his cigarette burned down and then flattened myself further as he turned to reenter the cave. He looked relaxed and ready to sleep off the day, though I knew he would not.

Foster crawled up next to me as the men fanned out to take controlling positions. "You seen this guy before?" he asked me. I nodded. "So have I," he said. "Looks like we're in the right place." He turned to the men behind him and signaled one man, our man, below and near the cave mouth.

Foster decided it was unwise to wait till nightfall to invade the cave. If any of the Hajjis were sleeping, they'd be sleeping now. At night they'd be alert and on the move. And if there was going to be a rescue, the sooner, the better.

I edged a mirror over the top of the cave mouth but could see nothing inside. I could hear no movement, no talking, no cries. The hairs on my arms stiffened as I knew they were in there, doing something, waiting or sleeping or on the move deep in the earth to emerge on the surface in another place. You could fit an eighteen wheeler down the ramp of this cave and move more than one journalist if you needed to get somewhere in secret, though I had never known where it came out or even if it really did communicate with another entrance. I felt the old thrill of sensing prey ahead of me and not knowing if I would kill him without being discovered first.

I crept into the opening, pushed myself against the wall of the cave, and switched on my night lenses. The space was Mars black only meters inside. The fireteam followed. The only sounds were dripping water and the motion of wind over the lips of the cave.

"Allah o Akbar!" It was quiet enough but firm. We knew what was coming, and we hit the deck hard and covered our hands and ears and shut our eyes. Next came

the explosion, the flash of light and then sound, heat, and concussion, in that order, but over and over again, as many devices erupted in tandem along the corridor.

Ahmad had waited until we were inside before detonating his charges. He had used his bait to lure an American squad into the caves so he could take us all out at once. It was a masterstroke. The walls ricocheted the blasts and propelled scissors of rock at our men, firing small shards from the sides and collapsing deadly slabs from above. The cave turned Ahmad's small grenades ordinance into Semtex.

The smoke and the coughing came next, though not enough. I counted five men wheezing and hacking, and one vomiting, though he could be doing both, and Foster and one other shouting to take cover. I made myself cough and tried to peer through the smoke. Too thick. I edged backwards on my belly towards the cave mouth. Gutierrez was dead behind me, tongue gaping, a huge hole in his chest and guts next to him. Sieter from California was dead, too, and Thompson from Atlanta. The Hajjis had spread the devices along the wall so we'd all get got. I hoped a few of us had remained outside. They could take vengeance.

The smoke started to clear when I reached Foster. He was shouting orders and names to take roll, but he was in bad shape. His face and right leg had taken shrapnel, and he was hoisting himself to tighten a tourniquet around his thigh.

Foster looked up at me. The pain in his face turned to horror and confusion. "How?" I heard him say, and I didn't understand. I looked behind me but the night goggles saw nothing but acrid smoke and the cavern wall. Then I thought to look at myself. My sleeves had been blown off and were hanging in rags. My pants were in tatters. The front of my jacket had been destroyed and was barely covering my modesty. There was no flak jacket underneath. And yet of course I was not bleeding. I can't fake my mettle, even in a weakened condition. By rights my body should have been cut in half by the blast closest to me, but my skin is thick. I could tell Foster didn't know if he was witnessing a ghost. He stopped speaking and just looked up.

"Where are you, Shahrukh?" Ahmad boomed in Pashto. The men who could move ducked or shifted their weight to get low and take aim into the darkness. "Show yourself, Shahrukh!" We saw a flash and heard the report of a pistol. The moaning of a man farther down the entrance ceased, and I knew Ahmad had mercifully killed one of his own or one of ours.

A generator started, and the flash of light burned my eyes before I could strip my



goggles. A line of lamps hung from the cave wall. Thirty meters away, Ahmad stood behind Ruby, pointing a gun at his head.

“I know you’re here, Shahrukh! I can feel it. Where are you? Which one are you?” Like any fireteam that had spent years embedded in Afghanistan without email or Coca-Cola, our men had learned enough Pashto to know that this man was looking for someone named Shahrukh. I glanced at Foster, whose eyes were wild with shock and disarray.

I rose, and Ahmad looked at me hard. He examined me carefully, mapping my form to his memory of how I had appeared to him, recalling the whiteness of my skin and seeing it anew, and then he nodded to himself and smiled. He tossed back his head and cackled.

“Allah o Akbar,” he said, “it is amazing. I knew it. I knew I was right. It was crazy. Crazy! But I knew I was right. You are one of those who cannot die. You are a demon. You prey, you murder, you give false oaths of brotherhood, you abandon, you seduce.” Now he looked rigid, angry. “You destroy what men love and what God commands of them. And yet you cannot die, so you think you cannot be punished.”

I felt the old fury boiling my blood, and I fingered my rifle and then considered if I could bring the whole cave down on him instead. Then I felt the eyes of the Americans staring into my back as this Talib spoke to me with strange and obvious intimacy. I noticed Ruby, making no noise but terrified from his eyes, not knowing what was going on, not understanding. I realized that even now the Americans would want to rescue him, still not figuring out that there was no way Ruby was leaving this cave alive.

“Shahrukh! Demon! You seduced Iqbal. You violated him time and again. You are without pity or remorse. I could tell he never knew in the morning. I could tell you had bewitched him with your sorcery. But he was there at night, seduced and ecstatic. You defiled him before God. And you both defiled me.

“I had to kill him. He had to die. But I wanted you to feel the pain. I wanted you to see him die, to be responsible for his death. I could never know that you would pull the trigger yourself, but Alhamdulillah, you did.

“And then I lured you here. I returned your treacherous seduction with my own. I knew your American friends could not resist coming to rescue one of theirs. And

here I can humiliate you and make you defile yourself as you have defiled those who have loved you most purely.”

I already knew what he meant. He had succeeded.

I raised my rifle and shot Ruby in the chest and Ahmad in the head. I turned around and shot the wounded men in my squad one by one. Pandemonium seized Foster’s face as he died. I walked outside, hailed “all clear” to our squad and killed the remaining two soldiers when they approached.

There was no permitting any man to live after they had seen me. It was my oldest reality. They could not walk out of here alive, nor could I make so many forget.

I told you my old premonition had been right. Ruby was never going to come back alive.

I walk along the pier in Santa Monica and sing of Iqbal and pray that I may have the strength to make no friends. ❹