Chapter 3

The beat-up white SUV barrelled down the road. It was half paved and half covered in dirt and sand. A trail of dust rose behind them as they drove, drifting off into the parched endlessness of the Afghan desert. In all directions was a vast expanse of tans and browns ending in dark, jagged peaks in the distance. The SUV bounced on the barely maintained road, occasionally slowing to navigate entire broken asphalt sections torn up by explosions from IEDs and missile strikes. It was a forsaken land of dead and dying vegetation, cruel heat and scarce water, compounded now by the wreckage from years of constant war. Oceans of sand in all directions, once they were at the compound, there would be no running away if something went wrong. Miles and miles of rocky desert that appeared the same in all directions. Himee looked out the window, wondering if this would be the place he would die. It seemed likely, but he wasn't about to go easily. Stay cool, follow Alto's lead, and keep his mouth shut. That was what would get him through this op, that and the heater he had tucked in his belt. It was hard to believe anyone lived out here, much less an entire farm of poppies. He stared off at the horizon, trying to determine the cardinal direction, East. He looked at the cheap gas station compass stuck to the dash. He was right.

They traveled for hours with the sun mercilessly beating down on the truck as it plowed its dusty path through the desert of Kandahar. All the metal in the car was hot to the touch, the dust and sand stuck to their sweaty skin. The air seemed to suck the moisture out of each every pore.

Adrian Malkov AKA Maxim Popov was the first to speak after hours of silence. "Up there." he pointed to the mountains ahead of them in the distance. His accent sounded thicker and more foreboding after the extended period of silence. "That range of mountains near the upper drainage of the Kushk-I Nakhud River, I looked into the area before we left. There is an archaeological site there, Mundigak. There was a series of mounds; once they uncovered them, they found a town. The archaeologists still want to get in there to excavate the site, but the Taliban control the area, so they can't." he gave a casual glance at their driver. He might not be Taliban, but he was working for them.

Adrian looked out towards the mountain range. "The site is comprised of several sections, each of varying age and style. They found it back in the twenties or thirties; it was ruins built on ruins built on ruins. The last thing there, which was old and crumbling when they found it was a mosque. It was built on top of some other temple that was more ancient still. The further they dug, the older things got, and it seemed to be the same each time. Some temple or holy place was built on top of the last temple or holy place. Some say it was to honor something at that location, something of significance. Others say it was to protect the world against something. The team who excavated it found items dating back to what we now know as somewhere in the 7th or 6th millennium BC. There were still older structures beneath those. Archaeologists and historians have been trying to get permission to excavate the site, but with the war, there is no way anyone is getting in there."

"They call it dahan khater jahannam. It means the mouth of hell. It is very close to the compound you go to." The driver said plainly. The question that was on everyone's mind was now answered. The driver could understand them. Everyone took a mental note not to say anything out of line. Once the realization sunk in, they stayed quiet for the rest of the hot and painfully monotonous journey to the compound.

They pulled off the main highway for the last leg of the trip. Bouncing down the dusty unpaved road, which looked to be not much more than a wagons path, they continued into the jagged, towering mountains beyond. The terrain of ancient undisturbed valleys and mountain passes spoke of something out of a biblical story. One would expect to see the burning bush just beyond the next rise. Sparse vegetation coupled with searing heat and endless clouds of dust against jutting spires of unforgiving rock rising from the desert sand was a stark contrast from the bustling city from which they came. Adrian could now see first hand how difficult the task of finding and rooting out insurgents in this terrain would be. The difficulty of finding anyone in this rocky labyrinth of deadly sun-baked crags and broken stone was indeed a tall order. Couple that with the locale's knowledge of the terrain, and you have a recipe for endless war.

The travel up the road into the mountains was difficult and slow. It seemed to take an eternity to climb the last few miles to the mountain peaks they had been heading towards the entire trip. Finally, the road leveled out, and the speed picked up slightly. The sun was beginning to set behind them, casting long shadows off the mountain spires, obscuring visibility even more. They entered into a choke point in the road. On either side, sheer cliffs rose a hundred feet or more to the sky. They were in this corridor only a few hundred yards before it opened up, allowing a view of the valley beyond. They each silently acknowledged the incredible natural defense this provided. The road beyond began to meander down towards the valley floor. A cluster of structures barely visible below, besides vast fields of poppies, marked their destination. The road conditions improved as they closed the distance to the small village, which was, it appeared, the end of the line. No roads continued out of the town, which was backstopped by cliffs and jagged mountain ranges. Just outside of the village stood an extensive collection of ruins. Situated beside a river that snaked its way through the valley, providing water to the fields, it was the first sign of civilization they had encountered since leaving Kandahar. They passed the ruins as the sun set behind the mountains. The fully armed guards surrounding a specific set of crumbling structures within the ruined complex eyed them suspiciously as they passed. Passing through the village provided the same looks from the civilian denizens and more armed soldiers who went about daily activities. Finally, the SUV continued through the town and up a single dirt path to the tall cliffs base. Cave entrances could now be seen spaced along the cliff wall, guarded more heavily by Taliban soldiers. They stopped just outside of the largest of these cave mouths. Soldiers moved towards them, shouting in short phrases, which the driver responded to quickly. He motioned for them to get out of the vehicle, "We are here. I will help get your things."

They were led into a vast series of tunnels that crisscrossed and winded haphazardly through the mountain rock. It was nearly impossible to ascertain the direction they had entered or which direction they were currently traveling. The confusing nature of the caves was intended as a natural defense. If an enemy entered these caves, those inside would retreat to a central location that was not obvious from the tunnel layout. One could wander for hours, not realizing where the central chamber was located. Other secret passageways were used to pick off stragglers or split up units so that they would have to fight on two sides. Himee could not help but feel a shortness of breath as he followed down these dark and sometimes cramped tunnels. Tight spaces weren't his strong suit. He hoped they wouldn't have to stay here long before taking the drugs back to America.

Dim lights hung on the walls connected by an electrical cord that ran along the top of the tunnel. Himee couldn't help but think of the tons and tons of rock surrounding them. Dust kicked up as the two soldiers lead them through the tunnels. The smell of cool dirt hung in the air. They passed occasional wet sections where water seeped through the rock and moss grew. For the most part, it was clean and cool. Now and then, an opening would reveal a separate passage or open up into a room of sorts. Eventually, they were led into a cavern squarely cut into the rock that was roughly fifteen by fifteen feet. There were two doors in each of the right and left walls and another opening without a door directly across from them. A table in the middle of the room, surrounded by four chairs, acted as a common area for what was apparently their accommodations. "Here." One of the soldiers said in a thick accent, motioning to the doors on either side of the room. "Wait for Commander Yassin." Without further pleasantries, the two soldiers exited through the opposite tunnel they had entered and were gone.

Himee moved to the first door on the right. Opening it, he discovered a small five by ten room with a cot, a small table at the back of the room, and a single light with a switch. He threw his duffel on the cot, "Looks like a fucking cell." He could hear the others opening doors to their rooms. He didn't have anything except a few changes of clothes and the gun Yassin had provided. He sat down on his cot and began cleaning the weapon.

The gun was surprisingly well maintained. Himee didn't know why he expected it to be neglected. These were soldiers, after all. After cleaning and reassembling the weapon, he loaded it, tucked it into the front of his pants, and went to sit at the table in the center room. Adrian was already there starring at the electrical cable with lights spaced evenly running along the top corners of the room. The other two were still in their cell-like rooms.

"So, what do you make of it?" Himee asked.

"Defensible, clean, seems like a well-run outfit." Adrian eyed the room.

"Seems like a fucking tomb to me holmes." Himee shook his head.

"You claustrophobic?" Adrian's mouth opened in a wide grin.

"Fuck you," Himee said as he sat across from Adrian. "I don't like not knowing how to get out of this shit hole. I'm not gettin' buried alive in this fucking desert esse. You remember the way back out?"

"No." Adrian was about to stand up when Yassin walked in, this time with two different soldiers.

"Where is Alto?"

Both Himee and Adrian pointed to the room Alto had chosen without a word.

Alto emerged from the room at the sound of his name. "This is where we are staying, right?"

"Yes, I hope it is not too, how do you say, rustic. We don't have luxury rooms here at the camp. I would put you with some of the villagers, but I am afraid their accommodations are not much better. No matter it will only be two days until the shipment is ready. You are leaving with the shipment, correct?"

"Yeah," Alto replied. "This is fine. I wanna take a look at the process too. The whole thing, from the plants to the grease, I wanna make sure we aren't wasting any time or money."

"Of course, Mr. Silva." Yassin pointed at the power cord that attached the lights. There were two that came in and went back out of the main room. These fed smaller cables, which connected to the lights in each of their rooms. "The orange cord." He pointed to the two lines that ran along the ceiling. One was black, the other orange. "Follow the orange cord, and you will get to the exit of the cave. Follow the black, and you will probably get lost." He smiled. "After a few days, you will get to know the tunnels, but you won't be here that long. Just remember the orange cord. If you need anything, tell one of the men, some of them speak English. I will have someone come and get you for dinner; we eat in shifts because there is no room for all of us. We will dine together. You can ask any questions then. Rest now. I am sure you are weary from your travel here." Yassin gave a quick nod and left the room, the two soldiers trailing behind him.

Hours passed slowly in the oppressive isolation of the cave compound. Without any natural light, it was impossible to determine the time. Nina looked at her watch. It was nearing six o'clock. Dinner would have to be served soon. They each left to their rooms' seclusion to rest after the long journey through the arid unforgiving desert. It had to be the furthest down the rabbit hole Nina had ever been. To infiltrate an enemy base was one thing, but being this far into the belly of the beast was another thing altogether. If they had to fight their way out, there was no way she could guarantee that the others would make it. She didn't even think she would be able to make it out alive. Everything had to go off without a hitch, or they were as good as holes in the desert. Even if she did get out, where the hell would she go, miles of desert in every direction? No, this had to be played out like a subtle symphony.

Details were important. Things had to make sense. These Taliban soldiers hadn't lasted through wars with the two world powers by being stupid. Any slip, and they'd be made.

A soldier came into the common room and announced that they should follow him to the mess hall if anyone would like dinner. They all filed out of their rooms and followed the man through a series of tunnels that exited into a large room some thirty feet by fifteen feet lined with rows of wooden benches. It was large enough to accommodate over fifty soldiers. At the moment, there were only a handful of people eating. One of that handful was Sadaf Yassin, looking much more at home than he did at the club in Kandahar. He was motioning for them to come to the bench where he and four other men sat. The four men, obviously his guard detail, looked like they had been out in this desert for a long time. Each man more stoic than the next, not a single one of them so much as hinted at a smile. Yassin appeared in a good mood. He greeted them and called for more food to be brought to the table. Everyone took a seat and waited for the food to arrive, there were nods, but no one spoke a word. Nina gave the room a quick scan, taking in each person, their distance from her, ranking them from toughest to weakest. She spotted all of her exit points in the room and took stock of the various things she could use as a weapon. As she surveyed the room, a man walked in through the far entrance. He strode up to the table. He was dressed much more refined than the rest of the men, wearing a clean and neatly pressed Iranian uniform. His hair and beard cut close and clean, and he carried himself with an air of power that could not be mistaken. Whitelace, Nina could barely hold back the desire to raise her weapon and put a bullet between his eyes. He didn't let on, he was good, didn't even glance in her direction, but she knew he'd seen her.

"Commander Yassin, I trust you are doing well tonight? I came to meet your guests." the newcomer said, giving everyone a friendly smile.

"Allow me to present to you, Alto Silva and Himee Hernandez, replacements from our good friends in MS13." Yassin began gesturing to where the two tattooed men sat.

"My deepest condolences for the lives of the men you lost. The drones are merciless. It was over quickly, at least. I fear they were after men who had nothing to do with your business here. They were unfortunate casualties of war." turning his head to regard Nina and Adrian, the newcomer brightened. "And who do we have here, Commander?" he said as he took Nina's hand in his and brought it to his mouth for a light kiss.

"Svetlana. Svetlana Semenov," she said, smiling back at him like a schoolgirl fawning over the prom king. The rest of her group looked visibly shocked by the amount of honey Nina was putting on each syllable.

"Maxim Popov," Adrian added with a quick nod in the man's direction.

"Forgive me. I am Major Arman Golshiri. Pleased to meet you all." he lingered on Nina for an uncomfortable amount of time and then sat down beside Yassin.

"When can we make the trip back to America?" Alto got right down to business.

"You waste no time, my friend." Yassin gave an approving nod before he continued. "We have a shipment that will go out in two days. You can take that trip or spend more time getting to know the operation and take a later run. We have a shipment twice a month."

"We'll take the first trip. Once I get a chance to see the full operation, make sure there isn't anything that needs my attention, I'll be back on a plane out here to oversee things. I want this done quickly, time is dinero, and we've wasted enough of that already." Alto was good, even speaking with commanders of two armies, enemy armies no less. Alto managed to take control of the room. "Tomorrow, I wanna see the growing operation and how it's processed. I need to see as much of the full operation as I can before we leave. The Russians are gonna take the trip with us. If they are satisfied, they will get in touch with you. That's between ya'll."

Adrian looked across the table at Yassin. "If it is to our liking, we will be back. As I understood it, we would be limited to a receiving location?"

"Yes," Yassin said plainly.

"And where would that be?"

"You will be provided that information when you come back. You must understand we need to protect our supply lines."

"Of course." Adrian took a drink of the tea that had been brought to the table.

"And, you, Mr. Golshiri?" Nina included with a bright smile.

"My business here is, unfortunately, not related to your endeavor, my dear. However, if you find the operation to your liking, we may meet here again someday soon. I, for one, would very much enjoy that." Mr. Golshiri was not hiding his flirtation at all from the others.

"I think I would as well." She replied, sipping her tea.

Adrian broke the building sexual tension between Nina and Golshiri, "The ruins just outside of the camp, is that Mundigak?"

Yassin's eyes moved to him, "Yes, it is. You have an interest in ancient ruins?"

"A passing interest, yes. I read about this site. It was a temple, no?"

"Of a sort, there are many tales that circulate among the locals. Some say it is a temple. Others say it is a shrine. Some of them say it was meant as a site of worship to some ancient forgotten god. Others believe it was constructed to guard against something from the underworld." He smiled wickedly.

"And what do you believe?" Markov laughed.

"I believe that he who holds the reverence of the people holds the power. The locals believe this is a place of power, and we control the location, so they believe we now hold that power. We have also made some incredible discoveries inside the ruins, but I will leave that for another time." His eyes moved to a soldier who had just entered from the north tunnel and was standing patiently. "I must bid you a good night. Tomorrow we will tour the operation and prepare for your trip. My men have been instructed to provide you with anything you need." With a nod, he stood. As he did, the other four men rose as well. They walked off toward the north tunnel, where the soldier who had just entered began speaking to Yassin quietly. The echo of boots trailed off as they disappeared into the darkness of the cave.

Mr. Golshiri remained at the table, and they finished their meals in relative silence. Nina and Golshiri continued their cat and mouse game throughout. Alto was the first to leave the table. He clapped his hand on Himee's shoulder and went through the tunnel they had entered. Nina and Golshiri were deep in conversation; Adrian looked around the room at the cabling that connected the electric lights hanging from the ceilings and mounted on the walls.

"There's gotta be someone playing cards somewhere." Himee stood looking in the direction that Yassin and the others had left. "Soldiers are soldiers, right?"

"Through there," Arman pointed. "about a hundred feet or so, the first tunnel on the right. Follow that. You will find the barracks rooms. There is usually someone playing Nowrang or Panjpar. They will show you." He gave a sly smile as if to say, good luck.

Himee looked at Adrian and raised an eyebrow. "Da," Adrian said and took a large pull of his tea. He stood and followed Himee through the north tunnel.

"Is there somewhere we can go?" Nina's voice lost all of the flowery tones she had been using while the others were present.

Golshiri nodded and motioned for her to follow him. They left through the north tunnel and passed the tunnel he had told the others to follow. The sound of laughter and men's voices could be heard echoing from that direction. Nina wondered who would be worse off, Himee and Adrian, or the poor souls they found to play with. He led her through a winding maze of tunnels that she instinctively kept a mental note of. She was sure she could make it back on her own. The occasional sound of men speaking Farsi could be heard, but it was surprisingly quiet in the underground complex. Finally, she could feel a fresh breeze coming from the direction they were heading. She could barely distinguish the dark purple of the night sky speckled with dots of light in opposition to the cave walls' dim-lit browns and grays. Trying to suppress her desire to run toward the open-air, she held her composure and walked calmly out into the desert night.

They walked from the cave entrance up a slope to the left that ended in a semi-circle of rock, which made up the cliff face. Nina was surprised to realize that this cave entrance was above the one they had first come in at some fifty feet or more. It was hard to tell in the tunnels whether you were on an incline or decline. Looking out over the valley floor, the village lights were like a cluster of stars surrounded by space's blackness. The horizon was barely noticeable. The addition of stars to the dark purple of the clear night sky betrayed where the sky ended, and the mountains began. A chill desert wind blew up the cliff face carrying the fumes of spent diesel fuel from the generators whose continuous hum could be heard from somewhere down below.

"Beautiful night…"

"Cut the shit, Whitelace. This isn't a social call." Nina resisted the urge to put a bullet in his head right here.

"Whitelace, I haven't heard that in a while. You Americans and your code names, do you want to know what we called you?" He said, staring out onto the valley.

"I don't care what they call me. I care that you betrayed us. Ten people died that day, ten people I was responsible for. I should have fucking killed you when I had the chance."

"You don't know the whole story. Those hostages, the innocents that you cared so much for, I saved them that day. I had a choice between them and those Marines and CIA personnel. Would you rather soldiers die in a war or innocents?" He turned to face her.

"What choice? You played us. You played me."

"I was made. They knew I was giving information to you. I had to make them believe I was playing you. I had to divert their attention so that your Special Forces could get the hostages out. I tried to minimize the damage as much as I could by directing them to the adjacent building. It was only a matter of time before they found your position. I told you to leave."

Nina found herself unable to believe the words that she had longed to hear. He hadn't betrayed them; the hostages were rescued that day. Many of the people from the station had made it out. It was her group that took the force of the attack on the chin. Taking a ten thousand foot view of it, it seemed to fit. He had given up their position but did so in a way that led to the least amount of casualties possible. Was he still the man she met those years ago? She wanted to believe but had to keep her distance. He was better at deception than she was. He was always so many steps ahead. Be careful, she told herself.

"So what are you doing here?" she walked to the edge of the cliff and kicked a rock over the side.

"I think you know, or you wouldn't be here."

"I don't know. I only know that they want me to bring you in."

"I reached out. I need help. You have to help me get to America. There are things in play that are going to blow up in my face. I will be at the end of a rope before too long."

"That's the mission, but I thought I would put one in the back of your skull and tell the Company you didn't make it." Their eyes met.

"You don't have to waste the energy, just leave me here, and I will suffer a worse fate if you hate me that much. If you refuse to believe me." He took her hand. "I am telling you the truth, Nina, I love you. You changed everything for me. I gave up everything for you. You can leave me to die but admit. We could have been good together. A different time, a different place."

Pulling her hand from his slowly, she took a step back. "So why are you here? It was only dumb luck that I was able to get here. I am piggybacking another op. You are not the priority."

"I don't know the full scope of it yet, but we... Iran is tucking in weapons; they are stockpiling them here. Not just guns, heavy stuff, and vehicles, you name it. They are also training the Taliban and sending men their way. Something big is happening. They are planning an attack on American soil, and it has something to do with how they are getting those drugs in. I can't get Yassin to tell me how he does it."

"An attack, shit, I think that trumps the other op. What was your plan?"

"I have no plan. I was sent here to oversee the delivery of weapons and the training. There was no exit plan. I am here indefinitely. I made a short trip to Kandahar and got a message to the CIA station chief. I assume that is why you are here."

"They want me to get you back to America safely."

He smiled broadly, "Isn't that sweet? What about the other men you are with?"

"FBI and DEA. They have their missions."

"Well, let's hope they don't fuck this all up."

"Let's hope."

The rest of the night passed without incident. Himee and Adrian managed to find and insert themselves into a game of Panjpar the soldiers were playing. They returned to their small closet-like rooms late and tried not to disturb the others who were already asleep. Tomorrow would be a difficult full day in the camp. They needed to have their wits about them and not drop character. Luckily the delivery would come the day after. They needed to keep this charade up for another full day and night. They needed to discuss things, but it was unclear whether they would have a chance to be alone together. It was going to be a dicey play, but they seemed to be pulling it off so far.

Adrian woke to talk in the main room that centered the four small spaces where they slept. It was a man and a woman speaking. His head ached from lack of sleep. He shouldn't have stayed up so late playing cards with the soldiers. He needed to establish himself with the men so they would not question his presence around the village today. He had planned on doing some recon work, and he needed to go unnoticed through the area. As a bonus, they had met a man named Amed, a new recruit who seemed to be very interested in western culture. His loyalties were fledgling and tenuous at best. Adrian felt he could exploit that to their benefit. Amed told them he didn't know anything about how the shipments made it to the states but that he would be one of the Taliban detail going with them on the trip. Putting on his clothes with his eyes half-open, Adrian glanced at his watch. It was impossible to tell what time it was in these caves, eight, not too bad. He thought he might have overslept. It wasn't as early as he would have liked to get started, but it would do. Pushing the door open, he groaned, "Any coffee around here?"

"We were just heading to the mess hall to see. Himee is already there." Alto seemed worried.

"Shit, I can't believe he is already awake. We were out pretty late."

"Who can tell what the hell time it is in these rabbit holes," Nina said as she slung a backpack over her shoulder.

"Hey, let Yassin know I am not feeling great, and I am gonna skip the tour today." He made a quick circle in the air with an upward pointed finger, indicating he would be looking around. The others nodded. Alto gave him a glance that said, don't do anything stupid. He gave back a reassuring nod.

The coffee was strong and shitty. The conversation was just shitty. Adrian did his best to look sick and played up all the tiredness we felt from a restless night of sleep. The others left with Yassin to survey the growing and processing operations. Alto was adamant about seeing every aspect of the process. He was quick to drop hints that he would be cracking skulls if things were not going tip top. It was clear to everyone that Alto was not a man to be played with, and even surrounded by armed men, he seemed untouchable. Life on the streets taught him to take the upper hand even when you are not the strongest man in the room. Never show fear. It's like blood to a shark. Adrian thought to himself that he owed the man a few drinks if they made it through this.

Adrian waited thirty minutes after the others had left. It seemed like an eternity. He was anxious to get out of these caves and feel the sun on his face, even if that sun was bound to be blistering hot and unforgiving. As Yassin had told them, he followed the orange cable through the caves, and sure enough, it led to an exit. He thought this was the same cave mouth they had entered through, but he couldn't be sure. Adrian took stock of the various landmarks and his position from the village. He was lucky enough to find some robes on his journey through the caves and a Pashtun hat. From a distance, he would look like one of the villagers or soldiers. At close range, he would be recognized, but he didn't intend to get too close to anyone who might wonder why he was snooping around.

Adrian managed to blend in with the general population as he made his way to the village without issue. It was apparent from the numbers of soldiers he was noting that something big was happening here. Not counting the soldiers who might be in the caves, he would estimate there were well over a thousand Taliban soldiers in the area. He saw groups running drills near the north cliff. Other groups spread out in various locations engaged in training activities. Some were using the firing range and learning their weapons. Others were performing raids on a makeshift building they had constructed in the southeast corner of the valley. It was apparent they were training for urban combat. It wasn't easy getting through the section of the road between the cave entrance and the village. Near the caves, the villagers had no presence. Between the town and the caves, it was odd to find any villagers wandering around alone. He managed to put himself between vehicles and large equipment as much as possible as he navigated the area around the caves. No one had noticed him as far as he could tell. At least no one had stopped him. The distance between the edge of the soldier's camp and the village was much more difficult. Taking a wide-angle against the cliffs of the valley, he hid behind rocks and bushes. The small distance was doubled by going along the cliffs instead of taking a straight path to the village, but he could not afford to be seen and questioned. Markov made it to the edge of the poppy field, and army crawled his way close enough to the field workers so that he could stand and walk freely to the village. From here, anyone seeing him from afar would think he was simply a field worker walking back to town. He made sure to stay far enough from the workers to not arouse suspicion from them as well. Once he made it to the village's first poorly constructed outbuildings, it was much easier to travel unnoticed.

The village was almost empty except for some women, children, and older men who were not working in the fields. Dirt roads and paths crisscrossed between the small mud bricked square shelters with thatched roofs that appeared to be the populace's living quarters. Dust hung in the air, kicked up by occasional breezes sweeping down from the high peaks into the valley. There were larger buildings toward the center of the village. He made his way toward them, keeping out of sight as much as he could, pulling up his robes over his head and face when he could not. Children played in the streets and alleyways, goats and other animals roamed freely throughout. The village must house a few hundred field workers and, most likely, some merchants and priests. As he moved further into the village center, he could see a small clearing with thatched awnings covering carts of various goods that seemed to be a market place. A few men and women tended their wares, most of them sitting together conversing. The bulk of the village was in the fields, which left the market empty. Further in, he found a makeshift Mosque. Though it was poorly constructed and desperately archaic, it was the most lavish structure he had seen in the village thus far.

Pausing at the corner of a building before moving through the market's open expanse, he spied two men walking together past the Mosque. These men were more elaborately dressed than the other residents he had seen. Both wore robes of deep red cut across the chest in a diagonal line with a bright orange sash. The two men had hoods pulled up, revealing only a portion of their faces. Adrian could see that they sported tattoos under the left eye that looked like four large dots from this distance. The men passed the Mosque without seeming to notice it at all. Neither man gave any of the customary acknowledgments as they passed the Mosque. These were not Muslim men. That caught Adrian's attention. He waited a few moments and followed behind them, keeping buildings and other obstacles between himself and the two men.

They made their way to the village's edge, where a cluster of buildings stood, which were of a completely different construction than the rest. These buildings were stone and were much more extravagant than even the village Mosque had been. Adrian hid behind some empty barrels and watched as the two men entered the building in the center. There seemed to be a total of four buildings. The center structure was the most massive and most elaborate of them. The two structures to the west were about half the size and less detailed but still maintained well. The final building to the East was small and plain. There were two men dressed in the same fashion as the men Adrian had tailed standing on either side of the entryway. It was no stretch to assume these two were guards.

Others came and went from the west buildings. All dressed in the same red and orange robes as the first two. It was evident to Adrian that these buildings must be housing and general facilities. It was also clear that these men were segregated of their own volition from the rest of the village. There was a marked absence of women from this area. Whoever these men were, the villagers avoided them, and the Taliban soldiers held them in some regard. More than once, he saw soldiers give way to these men as they passed. They never spoke to the villagers or soldiers, and those who passed them cast their eyes downward. Who could they be, and why would the Taliban let them be here if they were not subservient to them?

He was about to leave his hiding place and return to the village proper when he saw two of the robed men leading another man, whose head was covered with a burlap sack, down the street. Judging from his clothing and sandaled feet, the detained man was obviously from the village. They led him past Adrian's hiding place to the small building with guards posted at the entrance. As they approached, the guards opened the door for them, and they pushed the man into the darkened entryway. The door shut quickly behind them. It was only a short time before Adrian began to hear violent, terrified screams coming from the guarded building. Shocked to hear the sounds of apparent torture being perpetrated, he melted back down the alley. He moved quickly away from the strange building toward the village Mosque.

Adrian needed to get himself out of this area as soon as possible. It did not seem that these robed men were under the control of the Taliban, and as such, there was no telling what they might do with him if he was found snooping around. He tried to stay to the smaller and less traveled alleyways as he moved back toward the village center. As he hurried down a short cramped, and dirty corridor between some dwellings and the Mosque, he spied one of the robed men cross the passageway ahead. He quickly found a crumbling gate that barely stayed together and ducked inside. The entrance led to a small courtyard just off the main building of the Mosque. He crouched down and waited for the footfalls of the robed man to fade into the distance. A quick scan of the courtyard found that besides the gate leading back to the slim alleyway, the only other way out was a curtained opening that led into the Mosque. Quietly, he moved to the curtain and pulled it back to have a look inside. The room beyond was a small plain fifteen by fifteen room with no windows and a single door directly across from the curtained entryway. The room smelled of the unwashed bodies of eight men who laid in various states of malaise on cushions and rugs strewn about the space. One of the men looked up at him and held his finger to his mouth, mumbling something in Farsi.

Adrian knew enough to understand that the man said something like "it is coming" or "they are coming." He looked around for a place to hide, thinking the man was referring to someone coming to the room. Other men in the room began to mimic the words. Some started to scream in terror and writhe on the floor. It was clear they were all deeply disturbed. The look in each man's yellowed eyes was that of ultimate terror. They stared right through him as if he was not there, as if they could see beyond this small dirty room and into the cosmos itself. There was no place for him to conceal himself. He turned to exit back through the curtained entryway when a rough but quiet voice sounded behind him. "Who are you?" the voice inquired flatly in English. There was no urgency to the question; he turned to regard an older man in priestly robes whose long full beard was as white as his loose-fitting garments.

"Maxim," he said instinctively. He was happy that he hadn't blundered and told the man his real name.

"Are you one of the newcomers that Commander Yassin brought?"

"Yes, I got lost trying to make my way back to the caves. I heard something in here and came through the courtyard."

The man stared at him for a moment. "I am imam khatib here, ah priest to you, I suppose. This is our Mosque. These," he made a sweeping gesture with his hand, "are soldiers who have lost their way."

"These are Taliban soldiers?"

"Yes, they traveled with the drugs to America. This is how they came back. The price of tampering with evil. Allah could not save them."

"These men went with the drugs? How? Where did they go?"

"I don't know, and I don't want to. They went into the ruins with those… men. The ones who come back, come back like this." He motioned his head toward the men on the floor. "We should not be consorting with such men, I have said as much, this is the price of evil."

"The men in the red robes?" Adrian started to feel the sweat as it ran down his face.

"Yes, they are called Conscripts of Leng. They were here before this village, before the Taliban, Yassin has made some deal with them."

"We are to travel with the drugs back to America."

"I will pray for you then."

"The villagers, are they sympathetic to the Taliban or these Conscripts of Leng?"

"Neither. The villagers were taken from their homes and brought here to work the fields. The Taliban provide food and shelter, but they do not require loyalty. We are here because there is nowhere else for us to go. The others are cruel and evil men. Villagers have gone missing. I believe they are to blame."

"I saw them take a man into one of their buildings, and I heard screaming." Lines of concern were visible on Adrian's face. "They can't be allowed to do this."

"I will pray."

"Listen to me, tomorrow my group and some of the soldiers will travel to America with the drugs. When you see us go, you have to leave this place." It was clear that Adrian was concerned for the well being of the villagers.

"I cannot leave."

"You must. You can gather as many as you can and leave this valley. Once we go, you will have only a short time. You must leave quickly."

"Why are you so concerned?" He stared at Adrian as if he was looking directly into his soul.

"These people have no connection to all of this. They shouldn't pay the price for being caught in the middle."

"Allah will guide me, take this." The old man moved to a corner of the room and opened a trunk covered by rugs. He pulled out an object wrapped in tattered rags. He offered it to Adrian with his outstretched arms. Taking it in his hands, Adrian pulled back the rags to reveal an ancient and worm-eaten book. It was approximately two foot by one foot and some four to five inches thick. Bound in leather with metal hinges and clasp. It was ancient and nearly falling apart in his hands. He covered it back up and removed his backpack from beneath his robes. Placing the book in, he looked up at the old man.

"What is this?"

"This is the reason the Conscripts took that man you saw. It is their book."

Adrian looked around instinctively; he slung his backpack on and covered it again with his robes. This could spell disaster for the mission. If those men found him with this, it would be all over. The look in the older man's eyes told the story he knew but did not want to admit. If the book stayed in the Mosque, they would find it. The old priest would be killed, and the Mosque destroyed. The villagers would pay a high price for this bit of treachery. He took a deep breath, this was going to get everyone killed, but he had to try. "Remember when we leave, you have a very short time to get out of here."

Adrian pulled back the curtain that lead to the courtyard. Without a word, he slipped silently out of the room, leaving only the swaying of the unwashed curtain behind.

To be continued…