Adrian Markov entered the large warehouse, just off San Fernando Rd. in Sun Valley. Surrounded by industrial buildings, storage facilities, auto shops and junkyards, it was the perfect place for a meeting of this sort. Nobody around here is gonna ask questions, nobody around here is gonna care at all. He felt as if he was a bit over dressed. Jeans and a blazer, around here, he looked like a fucking cop and that was the last thing he wanted to be made as. He hurried into the metal door of the building trying not to have too many eyes on him. It smelled of oil and old rust inside. Must have been a machine shop at one time. The place was large, with a huge roll door just to the right of the smaller door he entered. Aerospace maybe, whatever it was it was all gone now, there was nothing in the entire huge space except for a table and six chairs directly in the center, and a rolling white board in front of that. A man stood at the white board putting up photos and writing names. There was another man, sitting about ten or more feet away from the table. He was dressed in an all black suite, white shirt and a thin red tie. Probably secret service, he’d never seen him before, Adrian was sure he didn’t work for “The Company”.

“Good afternoon Mr. Markov. Glad you could make it.” the man at the white board said turning to Adrian. “Have a seat. The rest will be here soon. ”

The man turned back to the white board and continued putting photos up. He was in his mid forties, curly brown hair, and short with gray at the temples. He was in a cheap yellow dress shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows, and brown polyester slacks. Did they even make things from polyester anymore? He looked like a man who was so overworked that he didn’t have any time to put himself together. Sloppy some would say, but Adrian could see it, he wasn’t a slob, he was focused. So focused he had little time to put on airs. The door opened spilling sunlight into the dim warehouse. Time for roll call.

A woman entered, she definitely stuck out like a sore thumb. She wore a dark blue skirt suit and black sensible heals. Now, she works for “The Company”, he could tell, she had that arrogance in her stride that said, “I don’t give a fuck, my clearance is so high I could find out the results of your last colonoscopy.” fuckin’ spooks, she better play nice, he had a lot riding on this.

As she approached the table and pulled out a chair, the man at the white board said “Ms. Polzin, pleasure to see you again.” He hadn’t turned around to look at her just continued to write on the board.

“You too Stanley, thanks for the invite.” she glanced at the second man sitting alone away from the table. Adrian could tell she was suspicious of the man, guess he’s not CIA then. Looking at the pictures being added to the white board Adrian recognized some of them. At least two of them were on the FBI’s most wanted list. Every agent committed those faces to memory and Adrian was no different. He had his marching orders though, get the intel on Sadaf Yassin, where he is, where he goes, who he meets with. It should be smooth as silk, as long as everyone else can keep their shit together. The door opened again, this time two men entered.

The first one to reach the table, shaved baled with a goatee, gray and black plaid flannel with the top button done and a white t-shirt beneath, pulled out a seat, turned it around and sat. Both men were covered in tattoos. The second slowly walked up, black Dickies work shirt with black Dickies pants, pleated and rolled, he wore a black and white bandanna and was shaved bald as well. Adrian could see what the tattoos were, he was FBI, and they were on his radar. The facial tattoos marked them as Maras. These guys were Mara Salvatrucha, MS13. So brutal was this gang that the Sinaloa Cartel recruited them to fight Los Zetas in Mexico. What the hell were these guys doing here.

The man at the white board broke the tension. “Mr. Silva. Now that you have arrived we can start.” he moved to the side of the board so that everyone could see.

“OK everyone, this op came together pretty quickly and we have a very short window to get this done. I know not all of you have been briefed so I appreciate your quick response and patience. Let me start by saying. I don’t give a fuck who you are or who you work for, I have it from on high that this is my op and the rest of you are here in a support capacity. I know you have your own agendas, but listen up, your agencies wouldn’t have the chance to get in this close if it weren’t for us. We’re happy to have you hitching a ride but this is a DEA operation people. I don’t wanna see shit go off the rails because of some other priority. These men’s lives depend on you all doing what they tell you to do. So don’t fuck it up. I also want you to know there is no extraction plan. You are expected to operate completely on your own. Mr. Silva has more details for you, Mr. Silva.” at that he moved for an empty chair. It was the first time since Adrian had shown up that he sat down.

Silva stood, the tattoos covering his face hid his mood, he was in a perpetual state of scary as fuck. How could we be working with MS13 Adrian thought, these were some of the most brutal criminals on the planet. The tattooed man walked to the white board and regarded it for a moment, then turned to face the others. “My name is Alto Silva, some of you are feds”, he looked at Adrian, “and you may have heard my name a time or two. Forget everything you know about me. It should go without saying that what I am about to say cannot leave this room”. He looked into the eyes of each person, holding for a moment.

“I am an undercover DEA agent. I have been under deep cover for the last five years. I grew up in Los Angeles. Connections from my youth helped me infiltrate MS13. I climbed the ladder and I am now on the Council of Nine, the top of the organization. I have done things to get there that, well; lets just say I’m a wanted man. You may have seen my face in connection with some truly bad shit. Now you know, I’m on your side. This is Himee Hernandez.” He motioned to the other tattooed man. “It’s the same for him. He isn’t as high ranking as me, but he is the leader of what they call a ‘Clica’ in El Paso, he runs groups of soldiers on the streets. You may have seen him on a wall as well. He’s undercover DEA, three years in the gang. I tell you this because I want you all to understand the gravity of the situation. If you fail to listen to Himee or myself, it could get us killed. Not to mention dumping five plus years of work down the toilet. After this op I’m out, everything I have done to this point comes to a head here. Himee too. So you better believe we want this to go smooth. I have to live with the things I’ve done and this”, he gestured to his face with two fingers, “it has been long and hard but this is the end of the line. I only say this because if you compromise the mission or hang back when its time to go, I will leave your ass. Believe it.”

He turned to the white board and paused. Moving one of the photos to replace another, the photo that was replaced he threw on the table. “He’s dead.” he said pointing to the photo, it was an Afghani man in his late forties maybe. “So, here it is. I found out that MS13 operates a distribution line out of San Antonio, Texas, which is the largest supply line of heroin into the U.S. that we have ever seen. The interesting part is that no one can seem to find out where it’s coming from. It just seems to appear in San Antonio and then MS13 distributes it from there. We could never figure out where it was coming from until I overheard some conversations regarding it a year and a half ago. Mara Salvatrucha has been working with someone in Afghanistan. We suspect it is the Taliban or one of the other extremist groups providing the drugs for money to fund their operations. I have been working to find more information for over a year. I have positioned myself in a good place to be put on the management of this supply line. Last week we got a break. A drone strike killed two Maras who were in Afghanistan overseeing the operation. They needed a new boss out there and my ticket was pulled. This is an opportunity like no other. Because of that, we allowed other agencies to hitch a ride, we wont get an opportunity to be inside the belly of the beast anytime soon. You two”, he said pointing at Adrian and the woman across from him with his pointer and pinky fingers. “are acting as Russian mafia, I have been working the Russian angle with the higher ups, telling them we need to expand globally. It’s all bullshit, no one but me has been talking to the Russians so I can introduce anyone and they will think it’s legit. This is the volatile piece that could back fire on us. If anyone from MS13 starts to try and contact the Russians, we are gonna be in a world of shit. They are letting me deal with it for now so you have your cover story. It’s just the four of us, we are going in with no backup and no extraction plan. If we can pull this off we will be cutting off a supply line that provides over forty percent of MS13’s revenue. This will cause some serious problems for them. Once done there are several smaller operations that will take out other key supply lines. In the end over half of the money MS13 brings in will disappear overnight. It’s quite possible this will collapse the organization entirely. In addition this also cuts off the flow of money into Afghanistan in a big way. This is big, folks. So here’s the plan.”

“Himee and I will be flying into Kandahar together, you two will fly in separately, routed through somewhere in Eastern Europe. We will have rooms reserved at the Kandahar Hotel, so when you get there ask for a reservation under your name. After that we wait for my contact to get in touch. The main objective of this operation is to break the supply line from Afghanistan to San Antonio. We will do that by assessing the operation from the far side, getting all of the intel we need on the who’s, what’s and where’s. We’ll then be making the full trip, from Afghanistan to San Antonio, traveling with the drugs. We’ll be going on the cover story that we need to see the operation in its entirety. That will be our ticket home. If something goes wrong and we can’t make the run we are stuck out there. On the states side we will have provided the location of the drop. Agents will be waiting to take the location on our go. At that point we will be on the inside. We can drop cover and try to take out any high-ranking objectives. None of our people will know who we are, they will only know there are four agents on the inside. If we can pull this off we will be cutting off a huge supply of money to both MS13 and the Taliban. The Afghans don’t trust the Maras and we don’t trust them. You two, no fucking one is going to trust you. We have to play this smart and low key. Let me do the talking. We’ll have to figure out which one of you is in charge for the Russians. Who ever it is can do the talking for you. We wont get a second chance at this, once Himee and I blow cover, it’s all over, we will either be killed or be out of MS forever.”

“Any Questions?”

Ms. Polzin leaned back I her chair, “Weapons?”

“No weapons, we have to fly, and we are supposed to be civilians. We will have to come up with any heat once we get there. I may be able to talk them into giving us something, it depends on how jumpy these fuckers are.”

“Pretty fucking jumpy, I suspect.” Adrian broke in.

“We’ll they know us, and they know we aren’t gonna be anywhere unless we have coverage, you know what I’m saying?”

“What if something goes down on the trip back to San Antonio?” Adrian’s expression changed, a darker look came over his face.

“We’re fucked.” It was the first thing that Himee said.

“I don’t like it”, Ms. Polzin protested. “How long will we be there before coming back with the drugs?”

“As long as it takes, they have to be ready for a shipment. Could take a few days. We don’t know.”

Adrian stood up and went to the white board, inspecting the faces in the photographs. There were six photos up on the board currently and one of them was Sadah Yassin, the man he was after. He turned back to the others “Where will we be staying?”

“We are going to deep tribal country, areas completely held by the Taliban. They are the ones putting us up. We will be right there at the poppy fields, inspecting the whole operation.” Alto sat down.

“What kind of support can we expect from our people there.” Nina Polzin spoke with a thick Russian accent and had a very dry personality. It seemed every word she spoke dripped with contempt for everyone in the room. Adrian knew the type, that stoic Eastern Block persona. Somewhere in there was a person, she just wasn’t about to show it. She was definitely a spook, when shit gets hairy though, Adrian knew who to stay close to.

“We will be in the middle of Taliban controlled territory, we have Special Forces available, but there’s no way they can get in there. They’ll be dead before they reach us. Like I said we are on our own. We are gonna have to play this just as our covers dictate. Himee and me, we are MS13, don’t give a fuck about any of this terrorist bullshit. We are just working our drug supply lines. You are Russian Bratva, you don’t give a shit either, and you just want to get your hands on some of that distribution. We need to play this as criminals who don’t have any political affiliation. We have to be just as ruthless and hard as they are toward us. They have no play in killing us or taking us hostage. We make them money, they make us money. None of our governments will give two shits if we are hostages. There’s nothing to leverage, as long as we keep our cover we are safe.” Alto stood again and walked to the board.

“This man Sadah Yassin, he is Taliban, he is also my contact in Kandahar”, Alto pointed at the photograph of Yassin. Adrian was gonna be closer to him that he thought. “This is Aasif Basha, he is in charge of the security around the poppy fields. He controls a small army in the area of somewhere over one hundred soldiers.” He moved to the third photo on the board. “We don’t know who this is, we think he is the money man but we aren’t sure.” He pointed at the last photo on the board. “We know this man only as Bridger, he is American we think, we don’t know what his connection is but he is always around.”

“So that’s it, I know you two have people of interest in this, I don’t wanna know unless it’s absolutely crucial. We stick to the plan, get intel on these men, observe on the trip back and shut it down state side. Simple, right. OK, you Russians need to get in costume.”

Adrian knew it was coming, if he was going to be impersonating a brigadier, he would need the tattoos to prove it, Ms. Polzin also. The ink they were using would begin fading after a week. That had better be enough time. No damn way was he gonna do what Silva and Hernandez did, tattoos all over their damn faces. That was a serious price to pay. He had respect for these men; they had infiltrated a dangerous organization and were willing to pay the ultimate price to gain trust. There was no going back from that. Once they were out they would need to be undercover the rest of their lives. Marked men. This was serious, for the first time Adrian began to have second thoughts. He had to suck it up now, this was what he had been waiting for, a chance to make a real difference, a chance to win one for the good guys.

To be continued…

Nina Polzin, stood naked in front of the streaked hotel mirror. Her hair dripping on the bathroom floor revealing the piss poor cleaning job the maid service had done. She traced the outline of a star, which was drawn on her skin. She wanted to rip it off, cut it from her, those bastards. Now she was pretending to be one of them. This had better turn up Whitelace. These men she was with, she worried they wouldn’t make it back. Too many different objectives here, this was gonna be a cluster fuck. She’d make it out. She always made it out. The only difference this time was that she was going off book. If the Company finds out they’ll kill her themselves, there really was no good way for this to go.

She dressed quickly, covering up those fake tattoos as well as she could. The Bratva had taken her only friend from her, turned her into a heroin addict and a prostitute. She had been close to finding her a few times but things always seemed to get in the way. The Russian mafia was spread out all over. It was comprised of many organizations working and fighting against each other. Tracking down Nadia was next to impossible, and mostly hopeless. The CIA had given her opportunities that she would not otherwise have but there were some things even they could not penetrate.

Everything she needed fit in a single duffel bag. No weapons on this op, so that helped but she always traveled light. What did she have to bring? Nothing, she didn’t even have a permanent residence. She was the perfect black book operative, never a worry about personal entanglements, there was nothing to leverage with her. The only thing she cared about, even in the least, was Nadia, and no one but her knew that story.

It was 4:00 am. Darkness greeted her as she stepped out of her room. She looked onto the streets. City of lost angels, there are no angels here. She dropped the key in the night slot, best to leave without being seen, even if that meant she’d have a lot of time to kill before the flight. No matter, it was better if she slept on the plane; it’s a long way to Afghanistan. As the cab pulled up, she compared this city to her life. They all came here with hopes of fame and fortune, most lucky just to get out of this city with their dignity and their lives. She knew what it meant to be stuck. She always had been, she was stuck before she was even born. Daughter of spies, how could she ever believe that isn’t what she would become? The cab pulled away, she stared out the window wondering if there was a place for her. Some place where she could be normal, the only place she could think of was in a pine box.

Whitelace, he got close to her once. It was the one time, her one moment of weakness, and it nearly got her and a lot of people dead. She’d been waiting for his name to come up again on her punch list. What the hell was he doing in Afghanistan though? Why would an intelligence agent from Iran be slumming it with poppy farmers in Afghanistan? There was a play there but Nina couldn’t for the life of her figure what it might be. It doesn’t matter; if she gets another chance with him staring down the barrel she’ll pull the trigger this time.

The terminal at LAX was dead, which just meant it looked like a busy airport anywhere else. She headed to the check in kiosk and entered her confirmation number. The ticket printed, Helsinki, well if there was a layover at least she knew someone to have a drink with. She scanned the terminal for any sign of the others. This was a well-planed operation; there should be no chance for them to be seen on the same surveillance footage. Satisfied she headed to the gift shop. The sound of a vacuum running near the back of the store by the trashy magazine rack was the only indication that she was not alone. She grabbed some gum, and a bottle of water. These were the times she hated, the times before the mission. The times when all you had to think about was yourself. Without a mission to execute there wasn’t much else in her life. She looked at her phone, just a burner she picked up before she came here. There would be a drop somewhere in Kandahar City where she could pick up the rest, for now this was it, her life line, her friend.

Alto Silva stepped onto the plane. He positioned his duffel bag in front of him and moved down the aisle. As he passed the first class passengers he could feel the eyes on him. Most of these people had no idea what the tattoos on his face represented, but they all knew it couldn’t be anything good. He thought back to his college days, before the DEA, before MS13. He could walk down the street then and not be stared at. Let them look; he was a bad man, just like they thought. Even though he was doing this for good of all these people, he was still a bad man. They were all better off staying away and marking him for what he really was, a killer, a drug dealer, a criminal.

He hated this part, waiting for the people ahead to get in their seats so that he could pass. Everyone he looked at averted their eyes. Would he ever be able to look at someone in the eyes again? He finally made it to his seat, E2, at least he had the window. He put his duffel up in the overhead bin and sat down. Sliding up the plastic shade on the window he stared out onto the tarmac and watched as two men threw luggage onto the conveyer belt. What would it be like if he had gone another direction in life? He could be happy, moving luggage, having friends, getting a drink after work. That’s bullshit, he was the one who was gonna take down MS13 and punch the Taliban in the balls at the same time. He could hear whispers behind him. “That man with the tattoos.” He was made for this, this was gonna be big, a major blow and no one would ever know.

He watched the lights of L.A. turn to tiny dots outside his window. In the air, no turning back. Either pull it off or die trying. He knew Himee was on point, nothing to worry about there, but those other two, the Fed and the spook, there were wild cards. He just had to be what he was pretending to be, Mara Salvatrucha, a Mara. Every friend he had was going to go down because of him. He could help some of them after. Convince them to drop dimes. Then there was Gina, he loved her, she loved him, but she would burn with the rest of them and hate him for the betrayal. There was no coming out of this clean; he never thought there would be.

Closing his eyes he leaned the seat back, they never went back far enough to matter. By the time he woke up he’d be in Afghanistan. He never thought this job would take him there. Heading to a war zone was definitely not in the brochure. After this he was out, the brass said so. He could almost taste it, freedom, free from MS and free from the DEA. He planned to leave the country after, find someplace that MS13 wouldn’t look and try to live a normal life. He had stockpile of money he had put away, siphoned off from MS13. He was set for life, as long as he lived through this mission.

Himee Hernandez clenched his fist as the plane touched down. Flying wasn’t his thing, and this flight was the longest he had ever taken. He looked around the plane; everyone was Persian as far as he could tell. It was strange to hear only Farsi being spoken, it was clear that he was a long way from home. Standing up he glanced at the man in the seat behind him. The man averted his eyes. It must be the tattoos. Marked for life, MS13, he will see it in the mirror everyday for the rest of his life. A high price to pay, they better take these fuckers down or everything would have been for nothing. He managed to keep himself distanced from other members of the gang. He kept his relationships surface at best, knowing one day he would burn all those bridges. Grabbing his duffel from the overhead he turned and started down the aisle.

He trusted Alto, five years in the shit and he still had his head on straight. This was like nothing they had ever done. The time they spent with the Sinaloa cartel was about the closest thing he could think of. Alto got him through that. He hoped he would get them through this as well. He just had to be MS13, treat this like any other supply line he had managed. He steeled himself but could not help feeling that this was gonna get real bloody before they got home.

He stepped off the plan and down the stairs to the tarmac. It was a decent walk to the terminal from the plane. It was hot, desert fucking hot and dusty. He tried to act like he belonged there even though it was obvious he did not. Sweat began to roll down his back. The heat was oppressive but at least it wasn’t humid. Dust blew on the wind and stuck to he dampness off his forehead. Welcome to Kandahar, he thought. It looked like Arizona rolled back in time. He could see U.S soldiers patrolling the airport, which made him feel a bit more comfortable. With the tattoos on his face it was hard to say if they would help or just turn a blind eye if he ran into trouble. He was relieved to feel the cool air hit him as he entered the double doors leading into the airport terminal. He just wanted to get to the hotel room and lay low until Alto got in contact. He couldn’t read the signs, he couldn’t speak the language, he was alone. The sooner he made contact with the rest of the team the better. A solider eyed him as he passed. Maybe he recognized the MS13 tattoo on his neck, or maybe he just recognized the general look, either way the look in his eye was not favorable. He realized then that he was truly on his own, even the U.S. soldiers would see him as a criminal and likely leave him to die if it came to that.

The Kandahar Hotel was not far from the airport and he had studied enough Farsi to get himself a cab and tell the driver where to go. Kandahar was the second largest city in Afghanistan, it was teaming with people and surrounded by mountains of jagged rock and hot desert sands. Himee was surprised at how modern the city was. He didn’t really know what he was expecting. They passed by burned out and broken buildings, reminders of the constant strife that has been part of the countries normal for so long. The American presence was obvious in the form of MRAPs passing by on the opposite side of the street and fully geared soldiers on the streets. “We’re not in Kansas anymore” he thought as the cab pulled up to the hotel. It was a large five-story hotel situated on what seemed to be one of the main arteries of the city. Exiting the cab he stepped out into a river of people, he hated crowds, too hard to control the situation. He quickly made it across the deluge of humanity and into the hotel doors. The cabbie didn’t complain about the money he gave him. He would have complained if it wasn’t enough. For all he knew he just gave the man a weeks pay.

The AC in the hotel was a welcome change from the heat outside. Making a b-line for the registration desk he did his best to ask about his reservation. The man behind the desk found his name quickly and gave him the key. Himee walked away as the man began explaining something in Farsi, he didn’t care, he just wanted to get into the room and wait. The less time he spent with his face in public the better. He looked at the room key, the symbol on the key was obviously the room number but he couldn’t read it. He should have studied the field guide more. Eventually he found the room. It was on the fourth story and apparently the rest of the group had rooms on the same row. He hadn’t seen any of the others yet and it was better that way. Sliding the key into the electronic slot and watching the light turn green gave him a feeling of relief. Solitude, and a shower, then it was time to wait.

The call came just before eight pm. He picked up the phone and heard the familiar voice of Alto on the other end. They were all to head to the lobby but have no contact with one another. Once the contact showed up they would all follow Alto out and be taken to the meeting point. This was only a vetting process. These guys where ultra-paranoid, once they felt that everyone was on the level they would setup transport to the poppy fields. This was the first step, this time tomorrow morning the team would either be deep in Taliban territory or dead in a ditch somewhere. Himee got dressed and stared into the mirror, he was a Mara, he’d faced down death before, but this felt different somehow.

The lobby of the hotel had a few sitting areas and a gift shop. As he walked out of the hallway leading into the lobby he spotted Ms. Polzin casually looking at things in the gift shop. Like him she stuck out, but in a different way entirely. His face was covered in tattoos and he looked like a typical gang banger, but she was different, Eastern European and dressed like a business woman. There was no denying that Alto was with him, they both had the tattoos and dressed similar. If anyone had seen American T.V. they would identify them as gang members. Polzin could be here for any number of reasons; most would think she was on a business trip or that she was a diplomat from some European nation. Adrian on the other hand looked like a tourist who got off at the wrong stop. He sat in one of the cushioned chairs just outside the gift shop. Khaki shorts and flip flops, a Hawaiian print shirt buttoned down to the middle, aviator sunglasses and a straw fedora hat. He looked like he was at Disney World with his family, not in the middle of a war zone. Respect, he thought, of them all Adrian was the least likely to be pegged as a cause for alarm. Walking over to a chair that had a good view of the door Himee sat down and began to wait.

Alto waited until he had eyes on the others before he made contact. The lobby was busy enough that four foreigners dispersed throughout the room would go unnoticed. He pulled out the phone that was waiting for him in the room when he arrived and hit the only contact in the phone, just a number, no name. The others could see Mr. Silva speaking on the phone for only a brief moment before ending the call. Ten minutes passed as they all went about their business each taking casual glances at Alto to see what the next move would be. The phone rang and Alto again spoke briefly, then moved toward the door, depositing the phone in the trash can near the entrance. The others could see him through the glass doors. He turned to his right and moved up the sidewalk disappearing from their view. Himee was the first to move, he followed deliberately out the door. Ms. Polzin was buying something from the gift shop and seemed not to notice any of this. Adrian put down his newspaper and was the next one to reach the sidewalk. He could see Himee in the crowd ahead of him. It was a good thing for those tattoos, he worried for Polzin, and he hoped his god-awful shirt would help her keep eyes on him. Himee made a turn down an alley up ahead, Adrian looked back as he turned into the alley and was relieved to see Ms. Polzin coming down the sidewalk looking as if she had no idea he was there. There was a taxicab in the alley, as Adrian approached Himee was ducking into the back seat. He did the same and kept the door open for Polzin. Once Nina was in the car Alto nodded to the driver to pull out of the alley onto the busy street.

They winded their way through the city. Alto wasn’t sure if they had told the cabbie to confuse them or if this was just a fucked up maze of a city. Either way there was no way he could get back to the hotel reliably on his own. After a silent and agonizingly long car ride they pulled up in front of what could only be described as a nightclub. Alto wasn’t sure how Ms. Polzin’s presence would be taken; it was his understanding that the only women allowed in a place like this would be employed there. This was going to be an interesting night to say the least.

As soon as they stepped out of the cab the car speed away, it seemed the driver was not interested in sticking around and must have been paid ahead of time. The sidewalk was clear of the mass of humanity that was present on the street where the hotel was and it was nice to get a bit of personal space. A man stood on either side of the door. Straight out of a Time magazine cover, they wore long baggy white shirts and brown baggy pants. They both had full beards and fez style hats. What Alto noticed most was the AK-47s slung around their shoulders. He put aside any preconceived feelings and stepped up to the men as a Mara, nothin’ to fuck with.

“Here to see Yassin.” He stared at one of the men.

The man said nothing, simply motioned with his head towards the door. Alto made a motion for the others to follow and walked through the door as if he owned the place.

Inside was a dimly lit hallway with no doors that opened into a larger room at the end. The light from the room ahead filtered through curls of smoke. The sounds of voices and music could be heard, emanating from the main room beyond. The others followed Alto, Himee taking up a customary position to his right and back about a foot. If anybody came at Alto, Himee would be on them in an instant. The other two walled shoulder to shoulder behind the Maras. Plozin looked every bit the Russian Bratva but Markov looked more like a tourist. Alto noticed that Adrian had opened his gaudy shirt a bit revealing just hints of the tattoos that marked him as a Brigadier. It was hard to tell how the Russian angle would work. The Afghans had spent years fighting the Red Army, it would stand to reason that they would have issues working with Russians, even if they were Russian criminals. Alto was sure the Afghan’s had a rich history of being suspicious of anyone. First they fought the Russians with U.S. backing and now they fought the U.S. Nobody was on their side really, they were pawns on the world stage as other nations grabbed for resources and positioning.

They reached the end of the hallway and stepped into a large room with many tables and booths. There was a lit dance floor of sorts in the center of the room and what seemed to be a bar along the right wall. A group of men occupied two booths in the far left corner of the room, they were the only people in the place. A man who carried himself with a superior air motioned them over. This must be the top dog, Yassin. Adrian spotted Yassin as soon as he entered the room. Trying not to betray his surprise, he scanned the room for exits and tactical positions. He hadn’t realized their contact in Kandahar would be Yassin. He expected him to be at the compound where the drugs were but not in the city. It was obvious that our forces in Afghanistan were sorely uninformed on the matter. Or maybe they weren’t and a drone had this club in it’s sights right now. This was a very dangerous place to be.

“You Yassin?” Alto said flatly.

“Mr. Silva, I presume?” he replied with a thick accent.

Alto nodded, “This is Himee Hernandez, Maxim Popov and Svetlana Semenov.” he motioned to the others.

“Ms. Semanov, it is customary for women to cover their hair when in public.” He seemed to be attempting to provoke her.

Nina said nothing only stared at him and held his gaze. Alto broke in, “Who gives a shit, we are not here for a lesson in culture, homie. When are we gonna get to the spot?”

Yassin smiled. “You will be taken tomorrow. I wanted to meet you first, see who the Maras were sending to us.”

“These two.” Alto waved at Nina and Adrian, “They are the connection to the Bratva, they don’t talk much. I was assured they are high level and speak for the bosses. If they agree to the terms and approve the logistics, they will setup a drop point on their side somewhere. That’s between you.”

“We have a place, but lets not talk business here. You all should relax, would anyone like tea?” Yassin motioned to the table and chairs closest to the booth he was in.

They all sat down, “Sure, whatever you got.” Alto was taking stock of Yassin’s security detail. Five men around him, two standing at either opening of the booth and the other three sitting with him. He could tell they all were heavily strapped but none of them seemed to be wearing any body armor. There could be more men in this building somewhere. Alto had to remember that he was MS13, they would take revenge on anyone who tried to take him out, even here.

“You got cuete’s for us?” Alto held up in hand pointer finger and thumb out in the form of a gun.

“I’m glad you asked. I have a surprise for you. I think you will really enjoy this.” Yassin nodded and this guards moved out of the booth to let him through. Yassin wore traditional garb and sported a long dark beard covering most of his face. He had a brown pashtun cap on over his long shoulder length black hair. He motioned for them to follow him. They all got up and moved to follow. Three of Yassin’s guards followed and the other two stayed behind. They entered a door behind the bar and walked through a small kitchen area then through another door that opened into a long hallway. Alto started to feel like they were walking toward their demise and began looking at possible escape routes. They passed a few doors as they continued on and finally stopped at one.

“The American’s were told where our operation was, and they sent in a drone. It killed your men, your Maras.” He opened the door to reveal an Afghan man tied to a pipe in the corner of the room. He had dried blood on his face and was sweating profusely. He must have been there for at least a few days judging from his clothes and the smell of the room. “This is the man that told the Americans where to target.” Yassin pulled a SIG Sauer P220 from under his shirt and handed it to Alto.

Alto took the gun, “Para mis hermanos” he said as he crossed the room. Under his breath he muttered “Perdoname madre.” extending his arm to the mans forehead he fired one shot spraying the back of his head against the wall behind him. He turned to Yassin, “We need one for each of us.” he said as he tucked the gun into his pants at the small of his back, “ammo too.” Alto walked casually out of the room and back down the hall toward the bar without stopping to see if anyone was following. Yassin lingered a moment on the dead man, he turned to one of his men, “Get them what they need.”

After more uncomfortable conversation and posturing, Yassin’s man came back with a gun for each of them. The guns and ammo were in a tattered red backpack. Alto took the pack, and after inspecting the contents, nodded to Yassin.

“We will have a car for you at the hotel tomorrow morning. I will call your room, you can get the others together. Make sure you are not followed. The American’s have assets all over this city. You’re not used to this, you won’t notice them but they will notice you. They may not know you are connected to us but they will certainly wonder what you’re doing here. If you’re followed we will have to pull out and wait for another time to get you. If they know we are here and what we are doing we will certainly be taken out. I will leave tonight, if you are not with me you may have a better chance. If you are, they won’t hesitate to destroy a whole city block just to be sure.”

“You will leave here separately,” he continued, “and head back to the hotel. I will be in contact. We will arrange for your transport to the compound tomorrow. Be patient, we can only move out when it is safe to do so. Do not draw attention to yourselves. We have limited opportunity to get you out of the city unnoticed.” he spoke softly to one of his men. Alto didn’t speak the language so it wouldn’t have mattered even if he could hear what they said. “Go now, I will see you all at the compound, safe journey.”

Yassin’s men coordinated cars for each of them. They were taken separately back to the hotel and dropped off at varying distances away. It was up to them to walk the last few blocks back to the hotel and make sure they were not followed. Alto was glad to be on the streets. Every car ride seemed like it would be his last, and that club, he was sure they were being lead to their deaths. It felt good to be on his own time, on the streets where he belonged. Sure these were the streets of another country, miles from where he was from, but the streets had a heartbeat and Alto could catch the pulse of a city no matter where he was. The people on the sidewalk parted as he approached, he was an apex predator, foreign and strange but there was no mistaking what he was, a bad, bad man.

He made it back to the hotel and headed to his room. As he opened the door, Agent Malkov approached and followed him in. They entered the room quickly and shut the door. Alto turned on Malkov with venom in his eyes.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing culero? If anyone sees us together we are fucked”

“No one saw me come up, what the fuck was that at the club, Alto?” Adrian was visibly shaken.

“If you can’t cut it you can get the fuck out of-”

“He was an American asset Alto, not some street rat” Adrian cut him off.

“Yeah, and if I hadn’t.” Alto faltered a moment, his eyes downcast.

“You think his contact is gonna just let that shit go. If he was giving coordinates out for drone strikes, he’s a CIA asset. They will be crawling up our ass this time tomorrow.”

“If I hadn’t they would have killed us all. I do what I have to do. I kept us all alive. If I hesitated for one fucking second we would have been made. You just keep your fucking emotions in check, gringo; we can’t risk it now, not here. We will die out here unless we become who we are pretending to be.”

Adrian stared at Alto. “ Para mis hermanos? For my brothers? That’s what you said, you were getting revenge for your Maras. You are in too deep man and I am not gonna go down because you can’t make that distinction.”

“I have to play the part. So do you, go to your fucking room and keep your head down until they make contact.”

“You can’t just-”

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. I have given everything I have to this. I have become everything I hate and there is no redemption for me, I am gonna get us through this and then you won’t have to see me again. But don’t pretend to know why I do what I do, and never put me on the wrong side.”

“This isn’t over, Alto.” Adrian flashed him a cold stare as he walked out of the room.

Alto closed the door behind him. Malkov was going to get them all killed. He stood in front of the bathroom mirror staring at his reflection. He was right; he had become as bad as the men he was here to put away. Mara Salvatrucha, maybe he was extracting vengeance for the Maras who had been killed. Had he really gone this far down the rabbit hole? This was it for him, one last chance at redemption. He just had to stay alive long enough.

To be continued...

The beat up white SUV barreled 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 sections of broken asphalt torn up by explosions from mines and missile strikes. It was a forsaken land of dead and dying vegetation cruel heat and scarce water, compounded now by the wreckage of 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 bad. 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 died. 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 SUV 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 and the air seemed to suck the moisture out of their 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. He 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 archeological site there, Mundigak. There was a series of mounds; once they uncovered them they found a town. The archeologists still want to get in there to excavate the site but since its in Taliban controlled country they can’t.” he gave a casual glance at their driver. He might not be Taliban but he was definitely working for them.

Adrian looked out towards the mountain range. “The site was 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 sort of 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 some where in the 7th or 6th millennium BC, and there were still older structures beneath those. Archeologist 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 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, everyone 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 and lead them 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. 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 a tall order indeed. Couple that with the local’s knowledge of the terrain and you have a recipe for an unwinnable 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 for only a few hundred yards before it opened up allowing a view of the valley beyond. They all silently acknowledged the incredible natural defense this provided. The road beyond began to meander downward towards the valley floor. A cluster of structures barely visible below, beside 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 line. No roads continued out of the village, which was backstopped by steep cliffs and jagged mountain ranges. Just outside of the village, a large collection of ruins, situated beside a river that snaked its way through the valley providing water to the fields, was the first sign of civilization they had encountered since leaving Kandahar. They passed the ruins as the sun set behind the mountains. 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 village and up a single dirt path to the base of the tall cliffs. 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 confused 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. Close spaces weren’t his strong suite, 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. He couldn’t help but think of the tons and tons of rock surrounding them on all sides. 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 foot. 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 were apparently their accommodations. “Here.” One of the soldiers said in a thick accent, motioning with his hand to the doors on either side of the room. “Wait for Commander Yassin.” With out further pleasantries the two solders exited through the opposite tunnel they had entered and were gone.

Himee moved to the first door on the right. Opening the door 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 own 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. He was surprised to find it well maintained. He didn’t really 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 sitting at the table. 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 cords, 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 wont really be here that long. Just remember the orange cord. If you need anything tell one of the men, most of them speak English. I will have someone come and get you for dinner; we eat in shifts because there is not 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 had all gone to the seclusion of their own rooms to rest after the long journey through the arid unforgiving desert. This had to be the furthest down the rabbit hole she 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 fine 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 if anyone would like dinner they were to follow him to the mess hall. 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. This was the mess hall. It was large enough to accommodate over fifty soldiers but 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. 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 these deserts a long time. Each with long hair and beards, each more stoic than the next and 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 stalk of the various things that could be used as a weapon. As she surveyed the room, a man walked in thought the far entrance of the room. He strode up to the table. He was dressed much finner 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 hear, they were unfortunately casualties of war.” turning his head to regard Nina and Adrian the newcomer brightened. “And who do we have here Commander?” he said at 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 node 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 hear is unfortunately not related to your endeavor my dear. However if you find the operation to your liking we may meet here again some day 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?” Malkov 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 left through the tunnel they had entered. Nina and Golshiri were deep in conversation; Adrian was looking 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 as well, passing the tunnel he had told the others to follow. The sound of laughter and men speaking could be heard echoing from that direction. Nina wondered who would be worse off, Himee and Adrian or the poor souls who they found to play with. He led her through a winding maze of tunnels that she instinctively keep a mental note of. She was certain she could make it back on her own. 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 blowing passed 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 dim lite browns and greys of the cave walls. 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 away from the cave entrance and 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 came in at some fifty feet or more. It was hard to tell in the tunnels weather you were on an incline or decline. Looking out over the valley floor, the lights of the village were like a cluster of stars surrounded by the blackness of space. The horizon was barely noticeable. Only 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 deasel fuel coming from the generators whose continues 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 that 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 and 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 waist 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 just admit, we could have been good together. A different time, 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 stock piling 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 not exit plan. I am here indefinitely. I was able to make a short trip to Kandahar and get message to the CIA station chief, I assume that is why you are here.”

“They want me to get you back to America safe.”

He smiled broadly, “Isn’t that sweet, what about the other men you are with?”

“FBI and DEA, they have their own 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 only keep this charade up for another full day and night. There were things they needed to discuss but it was unclear weather they would have a chance to be alone together. This was going to be a dicey play but so far they seemed to be pulling it off.

Adrian woke to the sound of talking in the main room that centered the four small rooms 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 but he needed to establish himself with the men so they would not question his presence around the village today. He had plans 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 he glanced at his watch. It was impossible to tell what time it was in these caves, eight, not too bad, he thought he may 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 out, “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 was going to 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, if they made it through this he owed the man a few drinks.

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 to 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. He 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.

Managing to mingle in with the general population he made his way to the village without issue. It was apparent from the numbers of soldiers he was noting around 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 and other groups spread out in various other locations engaged in other 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 obvious they were training for urban combat. It was difficult getting through the section of road between the cave entrance and the village. Near the caves the villagers had no presence and between the village 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 he could while he was near 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 soldiers 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. He 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 thing he was simply a field worker walking back to the village. He made sure to say far enough from the workers to not arouse suspicion from them as well. Once he made it to the first poorly constructed outbuildings of the villages it was much easier to travel unnoticed.

The village was almost empty with the exception of some women, children and older men who were not working the fields. Dirt roads and paths crisscrossed between the small mud bricked square shelters with thatched roofs that appeared to be the living quarters of the populace. Dust hung in the air, kicked up by occasional breezes sweeping down from the high peeks 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 center of the village 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, and 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 open expanse of the market, he spied two men walking together passed the Mosque. These men were much more lavishly dressed than the other denizens he had seen. The both wore robes of deep red cut across the chest in a diagonal line with a bright orange sash. Both men had hoods pulled up revealing only a portion of their faces. Adrian could see that both men sported tattoos under the left eye that from this distance looked like four large dots. The men passed the Mosque with out seeming to notice it at all. Neither man gave any of the customary acknowledgements as they passed the Mosque. These were not Muslim men. This caught Adrian’s attention and he waited a few moments and began to follow behind them keeping buildings and other obstacles between himself and the two men.

They made their ways to the edge of the village where a cluster of buildings stood that were of a completely different construction than the rest. These buildings were stone and where much more extravagant than even the village Mosque had been. Adrian hide himself 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 largest and most elaborate of them, two to the west were about half the size and less elaborate 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 entry way. It was no stretch to assume these two were guards.

Others came and went from the buildings in the west, all dressed in the same red and orange robes as the first two. It was obvious 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 also a marked absence of women from this area. Who ever 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. These men never spoke to the villagers or soldiers and those who passed them case 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. The detained man was obviously from the village judging from his clothing and sandaled feet. They led him past Adrian’s hiding place and to the small building to the east, which had obvious 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 as they entered. 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 obvious torture being perpetrated he melted back down the alley and 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 were 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 center of the village. As he hurried down a small cramped and dirty corridor between some dwellings and the Mosque he spied one of the robed men passing by the passageway ahead. He quickly found a crumbling gate that barely stayed together as he quickly opened it and ducked inside. Finding himself in a small courtyard just off the main Mosque building. He crouched down and waited for the footfalls of the robed man to fade into the distance. He surveyed the courtyard and 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. He quietly moved to the curtain and pulled it back to have a look inside. The room beyond was a small and 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 room. One of the men looked up and him and held his finger to his mouth, mumbling something in Farsi.

Adrian knew enough to understand that the man was saying 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 they were in. Other men in the room began to mimic the words, some began to scream in terror and writhe on the floor. It was obvious they were all deeply disturbed. The look in each mans 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 elderly 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 new comers that Commander Yassin brought?”

“Yes, I got lost trying to make my way back to the caves I heard something in her and came through the court yard.”

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 for feel sweat as it ran down his face.

“Yes, they are called Conscripts of Leng in your language. 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 to 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.

“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.”

“I can not 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.”

“Allah will guide me, take this.” The old man moved to a trunk that was in the corner covered by rugs, he opened the trunk and pulled out an object covered in tattered rags. He offered it to Adrian with his out stretched arms. Taking it in his hands Adrian pulled back the rags to reveal vary old and tattered 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 obviously very old, it was nearly falling apart in his hands. He covered it back up and removed his backpack from beneath his robes. Placing the book into the backpack he looked up at the old man.

“What is this.”

“This is the reason that man you saw was taken by the Conscripts. 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 old 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…