



What Remains

Author: *Ilsa J. Bick*

Category: Romance, Thriller, Suspense

Description: The past isn't dead.

After losing his lover, Roni Keller, John Worthy is on the way to rebuilding his life. Only one task remains: to bring back her bones. Do that, and all his ghosts will be laid to rest.

Except for the one who shows up and puts a gun to his head.

The past isn't even the past.

Once a Marine Raider, Daniel Driver crossed a line. He and his squad should be in prison. Instead, they are spooks and work in the shadows. Now, with Taz Davila out of action, Driver makes an offer John can't refuse.

And truth is only skin deep.

Poya Durrani is on the run. His father, a spy for the Americans, is dead. His father's handler was supposed to rescue Poya and his mother but never came. Now he is trapped with nomads in the Wakhan Corridor and time is running out. Poya must escape before he is unmasked.

Before everyone discovers that the boy, Poya, is a lie.

Total Pages (Source): 87

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

1

“Thanks, kid.” Retrieving two sweating six-packs of Red Bull from a grimy-looking adolescent, Flowers slipped the boy a fistful of Afghanis then rattled off something in Pashto to which the kid nodded, pocketed the money and gave Flowers a thumbs up.

As they pulled out of the Panjir Pump, John asked, “What did you say?”

“I asked him to set aside a couple more six-packs and then keep the change. There’s a guy at the gate, Maimon. He’s okay for a Zero. He’ll hang onto those babies until we get back.”

“You trust the kid not to just run off with the money?”

“Not really.” Flowers swung their Humvee onto the Russian Road, which ran west to east along the north side of the airport. “But I prefer to believe in humanity’s inherent goodness.”

“In Afghanistan?”

“Yeah, well. We live in hope, man.”

Not much of hope in Afghanistan either. To their north, the taillights of the other two vehicles of their convoy were nothing more than fiery twinkles. Roni was in the lead Humvee. With Driver, of course. The thought provoked a stab of jealousy that he tried to ignore but failed. “We’re going to lose the others.”

“We lose them, we lose them. Not like I don’t know the way,” Flowers said, carelessly. Then: “Better give that seat belt another tug, Doc.”

“What?” The word was barely out of his mouth before his shoulder slammed against the passenger side window as Flowers spun the vehicle into a sharp left. The jeep’s chassis dipped and bucked as the tires struggled to find purchase and then they were juddering over open desert.

The hell? Hooking a hand onto the grab bar above the passenger side door, he shouted, his voice hopping and skipping with every bounce, “T-t-take it eee-eee-easy!”

“Relax, Doc!” Flowers shouted above the vehicle’s creak and squeal. “A little shortcut! Got to put on some speed to catch up with the others!”

“Uh-uh-uh-huhuhuhuh.” The word jumped and jiggled in time to the rock and shimmy of the vehicle. Hooking his right hand onto a grab bar above the window, he shouted above the racket, “Wouldn’t call this ar-r-r-road!”

“Because it’s not!” In the green glow from the dash, Flowers’ teeth gleamed in a wide grin as they bumped and jumped along, their speed dropping then picking up again as the tires found purchase on stretches of flatter earth. They rocked in their seats as the vehicle dipped and swayed. Above the engine’s scream, Flowers bawled, “Hold on, Doc. Two minutes!”

Gonna be a long two minutes. Planting his boots in the footwell, he braced as the Humvee bounced and jounced, the beams of its headlights dipping up and down in wild, erratic arcs. It would be a miracle if they didn’t break an axle. Or me chip a tooth.

The next two minutes were punctuated by Flowers jabbing at the brake, jerking the

wheel, or spinning them right and left. Rocks pinged and ponged and ricocheted against the undercarriage as the tires churned, throwing up whorls of reddust, red dirt, red sand, and chalky debris. This, John thought, must be what it was like to take a joyride on Mars.

Then, Flowers spun the wheel right, a maneuver that would've thrown John into the man's lap if he'd not had the grab handle in a death grip. There was a tremendous bump and then a lurch as the Humvee jumped over a lip, reared, and then came down onto hard-packed earth.

"There we go." Flowers used his chin to point through the windscreen at a red wink of taillights. "See 'em up ahead?"

"Yeah." He had to push the word through clenched teeth. "Where'd you learn to drive like that? They teach you that in the Raiders?"

"Naw." Flowers jabbed a control on the dash. A half-second later, twin jets of water bathed the windshield as the wipers went to work. "Believe it or not, learned from a cop."

"You're joking."

"Honest to God. See, the cops in my town did this thing every year for people who wanted to write police procedurals. You know, become someone like that John Sandford guy, or Tess Gerritsen? Part of the course was you could learn how to drive like a cop in a high-speed chase, force someone into a spin, that kind of thing. So, I went."

"You wanted to write a police procedural?"

"Naw." Flower snapped off the wipers. "I just wanted to learn how to scare the crap

out of someone.” A pause. “You need me to stop so you can clean yourself up?”

“Very funny...”

2

A half hour later.

The Moon was new and the bowl of the sky milky with stars. Night, velvety and deep, seemed to drape itself like a heavy curtain over the earth. Other than the hum of tires on the packed dirt road as they sped north and the occasional squeal of the vehicle’s chassis, there were no other sounds.

Flowers was on his second Red Bull when John asked, “You going to tell me how you guys ended up ex-Raiders?”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

He watched Flowers, his face illuminated by the green glow from the dash, think about that. “Big ask,” the other man finally said.

“You going somewhere I’m not? We’ve got hours yet.”

“That we do.” Tipping his head back, Flowers drained his drink, the knob of his Adam’s Apple sliding up and down. Crushing the can, he lobbed the wad of crumbled aluminum over a shoulder. “Pop me another, Doc, wouldcha? Nothing like an icy-cold Red Bull on a hot night.”

“You forgot to add how much better it tastes when performing a court martial offense,” John said, plucking another can from the packs by his feet. “Like Roni and me being AWOL, however noble the cause.”

“You worry too much. No one’s going to court martial you or Roni. Ain’t like docs grow on trees. Now, if you wereregularmilitary, well...yeah, you would find yourself staring at a real unfriendly military judge.”

“Listen, the closest I ever want to come to a military judge is watching Jack Nicholson chew up the scenery.” A Few Good Men centered on Marines, but details. “I prefer a movie over Leavenworth.”

“Naw.” Flowers flapped a hand. “That only happens if you’re regular military. Worse they’ll do is ship you to a duty station at the ass-end of nowhere, say...the Antarctic or something.”

“There’s no army base there.”

“Alaska, then. They got a couple bases up there. Except you won’t land there either. You don’t need them, man, but they sure as hell need you.” Flowers flicked a look. “You really that worried, Doc?”

“I find worry to be a very healthy emotion. It generally keeps people from taking stupid chances.”

“Drink a Red Bull. You’ll feel better.”

Having once tried a can in med school, John doubted that. The stuff tasted like carbonated cough syrup. “No thanks. I prefer real coffee and real chocolate. I’m also unsure that caffeine is going to make me less jacked.”

“Then take a nap. I need you to be awake and alert just in case I got to catch a couple winks.”

“Are you kidding? The way you’re going through this stuff, you’ll be vibrating by morning.”

“True.” Flowers slipped him a sidelong glance. “Doc, listen, I know you’re worried, but if there’s any trouble about us slipping Shahida’s kids onto that last transport, we just leak it to the newspeople. Trust me, the military’s not gonna want that kind of negative publicity. How would it look if word got out that they denied a bunch of kids passage outta this hellhole?”

“Okay.” He wasn’t convinced. “But I thought this was a clandestine, spook-driven snatch and grab.”

“Oh, yeah. Well...” Flowers scratched the underside of his jaw. “Okay, so we leak about you and Roni, and maybe then we’ll get a commendation and, you know, our dignity back.”

“You forgot quiet pride in a job well done.”

“Not to mention a shitload of back pay,” Flowers added. “And likely reinstated.”

“Reinstated?” he asked lightly. “So, you were kicked out of the Raiders?” When Flowers didn’t reply, he pressed. “Does the fact that you need to be reinstated have anything to do with why you’ve hooked up with Mac and Shahida?”

“Why, Doc,” Flowers drawled. “Look at you, getting all sneaky. Don’t think I don’t see what you’re doing there.”

“Don’t think I don’t see you trying to change the subject. I know you guys have done this before. I know you’re working with a spook. The question is why?”

“Young boys ending up as sex slaves to perverts isn’t enough for you?”

“At the risk of sounding cynical, there are all sorts of things that force you to cross a lot of moral boundaries.” He knew what he was talking about, too, seeing as how he had first-hand experience. When he was fifteen, he crossed just such a boundary. With no hope of going back either. “So how is it that you guys get booted out of the Raiders only to end up with a spook like Mac? And don’t say it’s kind of a long story.”

“Well, it is.” Flowers paused then sighed. “Fine, fine, I guess we owe you that much. But I’m serious about the Red Bull. You stop holding it hostage, I’ll tell you.”

“You’ll tell me, regardless.” But he handed over the energy drink. “How long has it been?”

“That we’ve been with Mac?” Flowers took a pull, swallowed, then said, “Couple of years. We met him right after.”

“Right after what?”

“Right after...” Flowers trailed off then said, “Listen, you can’t breathe a word of this to Driver. Just keep this between us, all right?”

“Scout’s honor.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“This isn’t a joke, man. We’re talking life and death here, we’re talking...” Flowers fumbled. “It’s damn serious is what I’m saying.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and meant it. “What happened? What got you guys booted out?”

Tossing back a mouthful of Red Bull the way another man might do a shot, Flowers swallowed then said, “I hear you’re a movie guy. You ever seen *The Wizard of Oz*?”

“Sure.” He was puzzled. “Why?”

“What does that movie have in common with this place?”

“With Afghanistan?” He thought of that rich technicolor world, every hue so impossibly vivid. Afghanistan was, largely, a study in various shades of brown. “Nothing?”

“Wrong. Try again.”

“Well, it sure as hell isn’t the Yellow Brick Road.”

“Ah, but what grows along the Yellow Brick Road?”

“Grows?” Then he snapped his fingers. “Poppies.”

“Give the man a gold star.”

“You’re saying that the reason you were booted out of the Raiders is because of

poppies?”

“In a way. See, about two years ago, we were given this little no-nothing of a mission to this little no-nothing village to burn the hell out of their poppy fields.”

“And something went wrong?”

“And something went wrong.”

“What?”

“Everything, man,” Flowers said. “Everything.”

3

Only a single RedBull remained by the time Flowers stopped talking. A silence, not uncomfortable, settled between them.

Turning over what Flowers had said, John thought there might not be that much distance between these men and himself as he’d imagined. Like him, they had chosen the only possible course of action in an impossible situation, one where there were no winners and morality struggled with loyalty.

And then Mac shows up and offers to get them reinstated if they’ll go on a couple missions, help him out.

Flowers broke the silence first. “All that talking’s made my throat kinda dry. Hand me that last can, if you don’t mind. Oh, and check my pack. There’s a thermos in the pouch. Brought that along for you.”

After handing Flowers his drink, John unscrewed the thermos, sniffed at the curls of

steam unfurling, then said, “This smells real. Where you’d get this?”

“I got my ways. Drink up, Doc. Hope you take it black.”

“I do.” The coffee was as strong as its aroma implied and he swallowed back a mouthful with something close to a groan. “Man, that tastes good. Thanks.” He let a few moments slip by then asked, “And no one ever found out? Other than Mac?”

“Nobody. But he’s not holding it over our heads, if that’s what you’re thinking. Me, I’ve always had the sneaking suspicion he was more than okay with what we did.”

“Or that what you did fit very conveniently with his work. Isn’t it a little too convenient that Shahida just happened to be working with the same guy who helped cover your collective asses? Command didn’t think it odd that the whole squad left the Raiders right after?”

“Not really. We were asked, nicely, if we didn’t think it was a better idea all the way around if we slipped out the exit with no one really noticing. Look at it from their perspective, man. If the truth ever got out, the press would have a field day. We did the right thing.”

“As orchestrated by Mac.”

“I’ll grant you that. But, man, he kept our collective asses out of a court-martial.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“He did more than that,” John said. “He kept you guys from Death Row. He’s also your ticket to getting back in.”

Flowers was quiet for a few moments. Then: “I won’t deny that. Because JSOC, DARPA, CIA, all those alphabet agencies and forces are tied together, operating under the radar and in the dark. We’re the type of people Mac wants for this kind of work. But I don’t get any thrill out of it. This isn’t my own personal Mission Impossible. I’m also in this to, well, notatonefor something, that’s not it. I don’t feel bad about what we did or how Mac helped cover it up in exchange for working with Shahida. I don’t know what the right word is, exactly, for what I’m after.”

“Maybe what you’re after is redemption.” Lord knew, he understood howthatfelt.

He watched Flowers think about that. “Yeah,” the other man said, “that feels right. Every kid we get out of this place is a kind of redemption.”

“Meaning you want back in?”

“To the Raiders? I dunno, man. Things haven’t changed that much. I don’t know if I can go back to a system where we’re told to look the other way because it’s in the best interests of the mission or we want to keep some asshole of a police chief on our side. Not when you’re talking kids. So, there might not be a way to slot myself back in and pretend nothing ever happened.”

“Are you sorry?”

Flowers shook his head. “There’s war, man, and then there’s a time and place where

morality kicks in. No matter what Command said, we couldn't look the other way. Don't get me wrong. When you're getting shot at all the time or eventhinkingyou will be and you haven't had a square meal in three weeks and you're so dirty and stinking your clothes could keep on marching all by themselves, that's when it's hardest to stay, well,civilized. Even that's not quite it, though. There are lines you toe, that you come right up to jumping over, and then there are others that onlysomemen cross." A pause. "You ever hear of The Kill Team?"

John thought for a second. "That's almost ancient history, isn't it? Well, at least when it comes tothiswar. Happened over ten years ago, I think. Bunch of Army guys, right?"

"Yup." Flowers nodded. "And it was 2010, to be exact. Maywand District. These six Army guys killed a bunch of Afghan civilians just for kicks. Thrill kills. They admitted to three, but there were probably more. They took photos, staged things with the corpses. Even kept trophies. Finger bones, part of a skull, sick shit like that."

Why was his mind jumping to scenes fromApocalypse Now?His Uncle Dare had never become that jaded from his service in Vietnam. On the other hand, Dare had been a sniper. Picking off the enemy was his job.

You become a sniper,Dare once said,you're snuffing out a life. That person may not be an admirable man or even a good one, but that's between that person and his god. You can't do this job otherwise, son. You got to be ice, son. You got to be stone.

When he was fifteen, John had done exactly that. Doing what wasrighthad cost him everything. The same was true for Driver and his men.

Pouring himself another cup of coffee, he said, "You're drawing a parallel between that kill team and you?"

“No.” Flowers crushed his Bull in a fist and tossed it over a shoulder. The can let out a faint metallicchikas it bounced against a side panel. “I’m drawing a contrast. I’m painting a different picture. There’s a difference between, say, kind of suspecting that a guy is beating his wife andknowinghe is.”

“You don’t take out an abusive husband.”

“No, you leave that up to hiswife.” Flowers was getting hot. “That poor woman pulls the trigger, andshegoes to jail. Go look up the stats, you don’t believe me.”

“Easy, man, take it easy,” John said. “I’m not judging. I’m trying to understand.”

“Okay, then how about this one? Is there a difference between a neighbor who gives candy to certain kids a little too often and thesameguy saying to a kid that he’s got something to show him only the kid has to come inside or go down-cellar?”

John flashed to that movie he and Roni had watched on-call: the one about a murdered girl named Suzie who had worried about a lonely penguin in a snow-globe. “You know there is. But then you report the guy to the police.”

“Who might do diddly.”

“Can’t argue that.”

“What I’m saying is we weren’t acting on a hunch. What we did wasn’t for thrills. We did the only morally right thing we could.”

“That’s not true, and you know it,” John said, quietly. “You acted because you had no faith that the military would. You acted out of a sense of moral certainty.”

“And duty,” Flowers said, his tone grudging. “Wedid our duty.”

“I hear you.” He waited a beat. “Listen, true story. Roni was once asked to evaluate this kid. Corporal, at the time, worked in long-range surveillance on an E-3 Sentry. You know what that is?”

“Yeah, AWACS, Airborne Warning and Control System, right? Tracking satellites and enemy aircraft and monitoring radio traffic. I thought that was Air Force.”

“It is.”

“So, how come they brought him to an army base?”

“Because of the nature of what he’d done. Had to keep an eval on the down-low. Seems that while he was on-duty, the corporal let a Chengdu J-20 do a pretty close flyby.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“Whoa. Isn’t that China’s version of a stealth fighter?”

“Correct. So, there’s this Chinese stealth fighter in our airspace, but it was only when one of the other guys on the E-3 heard the Chinese chatter that people on the ground even knew how close that plane was. Now, those planes are hard to see on radar, which is the whole point. But, looking back over the flight data, Command figured that the plane was visible. Just for thirty seconds, but it was there, and the kid should’ve caught it.”

“And he didn’t?”

“No, see, that’s the thing. He did.”

“What? And he let that go by? Why?”

“Because he claimed he received instructions to allow that plane to pass by.”

“And there weren’t any instructions.”

“Nope.” John paused. “At least, not on Earth.”

Flowers was silent for ten seconds. Then: “You’re shitting me.”

“Cross my heart.” John drew an X over his left chest. “That boy said he’d gotten orders from his ‘superiors,’” he said, adding air-quotes, “and his orders were to ignore the plane. Problem with that was...the kid’s superiors were on a spaceship.”

Flowers was quiet a long moment. “Holy Mother of God.”

“Yup. Turned out that kid had been quietly psychotic for some time. I observed Roni’s interview through a one-way. That boy was so watchful and paranoid, he barely blinked. Face was really waxy, too. Practically no expression whatsoever.”

“So, what happened?”

“She admitted him. Loaded the kid with antipsychotics. He got better.” Swallowing the last of his coffee, John lowered a window and shook out the remaining drops. “And then the powers-that-be returned him to duty. Not in the same job, but...” He screwed the cup back onto Flowers’s thermos. “They did not board that kid out of the service.”

“What? They kept a psychotic kid on-duty? How could they do that?”

“Remember I said he was brought to our ER because of who he was? Turns out that the boy’s dad was a full-bird. So, you’ve got a kid with a boardable diagnosis for whom the rules were bent,” John said. “Just like you guys bent the rules, and they were, in turn, bent for you.”

Flowers was silent for so long that John thought their conversation was done. But then, Flowers drew in a long breath and let it out. “It’s not the same. Remember, we got separated.”

“But nicely. With the chance of return when you should have been court-martialed. An error of omission is still intentional.” Flowers opened his mouth, but John pushed on. “I don’t blame you guys. Your lieutenant was poison. There are some things you can’t forgive or look away from and pretend they never happened. So, me, I think you did the right thing,” he said—and then thought, what am I saying?

“Even if we had to sell our collective souls to the devil?”

Yes. Hadn't he, as a teenager, done exactly that? Much later, he saw a movie where a character talked about the needs of the many outweighing the needs of the few—or the one. Once upon a time, when John was fifteen, he'd weighed those needs—and then he had killed.

The one thing he also knew: he hadn't needed to kill. He could've wounded. He was that good a shot. But he hadn't.

Taking that kill shot made him a hero—until everyone decided he might be the next monster in their midst.

Aloud, he said, “Better the devil you know. Although the way I see it? What you and Mac and Shahida are doing? You're on the side of the angels.”

4

An hour later, the sun was up and revealed an eerie landscape: a vast expanse of semi-arid flatland edged with high, largely barren peaks. The colors were a monotonous study of browns and reds. The area must once have been farmland, John thought, if the occasional cluster of tumbledown structures and long troughs of defunct irrigation canals were any indication.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“Central Hindu Kush, north of Kabul. This is practically the only area in the whole country where the Taliban aren't in control, but that's mostly because no one lives here.”

“Why is that?”

“Look around you, man. There aren’t any rivers or even tributaries worth talking about in this area. They once had aqueducts, though, until the Russians took them out way back in the eighties. The aqueducts in this region were fed from the runoff of that big monster of a mountain to the right.” Flowers pointed. “ That’s Kohe Koran.”

He studied the mountain a moment, trying place why it look so different from others he’d seen. Then, as his eyes picked out specks of green topped by smears of white. “Why is there vegetation there and not anywhere else?”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“Ah.” Flowers held up a finger. “Excellent question, Grasshopper. What you’re looking at is wild licorice.”

“Where’s the water coming from?”

“Think about it a second. Just because the watersupplyto the villages got smashed, that doesn’t translate into no water at all. There’s a small spring there, a pool that stays filled most of the time. We figure the spring’s fed by the alternative track the water took after the aqueduct was destroyed.”

“So why didn’t people stay?”

“I don’t know, but I might leave if I’d been a target.”

“But if there’s plenty of water, are you saying they couldn’t rebuild or re-configure the aqueduct to bring the water to them?”

“Guess not. But their loss is our gain.” Squinting through the windscreen, Flowers grinned. “You want to see something interesting, I got a pair of binos in the glove box there. Grab ‘em and glass the base of the foothills.”

Popping the compartment, John rummaged through a couple MREs, a box of bullets, packets of chewing gum. Flowers’s binoculars had slid to the back and as he reached for them, he spotted a flash of orange plastic, which he fished out. “You carry a flare gun?”

“Sure. Never know when you need to signal someone. All the paratroopers carry ‘em.

Radios get busted, you know, and sat phones... You ever see the movie they made of that book, the one about the guy whose team gets wiped out? Starred the guy with the hamburgers."

Hamburgers?" "You mean, Mark Wahlberg? Lone Survivor?"

"That's it. Remember the scene where that guy trying to vector in the choppers has to get out in the open, so the phone connects? And then he gets shot? That's what I mean. If he'd had a flare, he coulda just fired it off. Sometimes the best tech is the lowest."

"You ever use this thing?"

"Naw, man, don't you see, that's why you pack it. It's like an umbrella."

"It never rains when you carry one."

"And only rains when you don't, that's right. That flare gun is like an umbrella. I've never had to use it." Flowers flashed a grin. "I re-load and switch out that cartridge every three years. Keep a couple spares. So far, though, knock on wood."

"If you say so." Slotting the flare gun back into the glove box, he pulled out Flowers's binoculars. "Where should I look?"

"To the right. Glass those foothills over there, at the base where the shrubs and that spring are. You watch, you'll see movement."

Squinting through the binoculars, John spotted something long and brown loping along the near flank of a solitary crag. He adjusted the focus, and the figure of a wolf coalesced and sharpened. "Wow. I didn't know they even had wolves here. How did you see them? I can barely make them out."

“I know where to look? They’re like clockwork. Plus, when they start moving, they stand out against the green. Same pack runs heads east toward the spring every morning. They’ll go back out to the west again at night.”

“There’s game?”

“Enough, I guess. Rodents, marmots, stuff like that.”

He watched as five more wolves emerged. The largest trotted up and nosed the lead as the remaining four rubbed and exchanged playful nips. “Looks like a family.”

“More than likely. Mom and Pop out with the kids for a little stroll. Everyone talks about the alpha male? That’s a buncha hooey. Most packs are held together by the dominantfemale.”

“They’re really quite beautiful.”

“ I know. What’s weird is how much people here hate them. Think they’re evil and unclean. Except, get this. Wolves are also supposed to be protectors. There’s this old myth. Might just be Iraqi, but what I heard is people believe that it’s good luck to have a wolf hanging out at your door. That way, come night, it can see the fingers of evil jinn coming up out of the ground from their version of hell.”

“That’s pretty wild.”

“Isn’t it? Anyway, that wolf will eat the jinn’s fingers and the family’s safe for one more night. And yet they treat wolves and dogs like they’re scum. That always burns me up. Like, who would kick a dog? Where my family’s from, dogs and wolves...they’re like a man’s brothers.”

“Where’s that?”

“Michigan. The Upper Peninsula. We lived on Superior. Couple kids in my class were Ojibwe.”

“Yeah?” His heart did a queer little flip, and he couldn’t help the alarm bell that suddenly clanged at the back of his brain. Michigan was next door to Wisconsin where he had been sent to start a new life as John Worthy. “Me, too,” he said. “Small world, man.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“Isn’t it?” Flowers agreed. “Anyway, we used to hang out. They were just, like, you know...kids.They didn’t live on a rez or anything, though. They said they were city Indians. You know any kids like that in school?”

“A couple.” He needed to steer Flowers away from talk about his history. “So, what’d you use to be? Before the Marines?”

“You fishing for information, Doc?”

“Yeah, maybe. To borrow a couple lines, who are you really, and what were you before? What did you do, and what did you think, huh?”

“Ah.” Flowers grinned. “Channeling Humphrey Bogart.”

He was impressed. “You know your movies.”

“Are you kidding?Casablanca is a classic. My grandparents used to watch it. Now that was one beautiful film, and a complete accident. No one really knew what they had until the thing opened and then everyone went Casablanca-crazy...oh, oh.” Flowers suddenly straightened out of his relaxed slouch. “Shoot, now see you got me talking, gonna miss my turn, hang on.”

Flowers hooked a right. The turn took them from the packed earth that was the road and onto rougher ground. As the Humvee crunched over rocks and mounted a rise, John spotted two distant dust plumes. “There are our people,” he said.

“Yup. Toward that defunct village down there.”

“I see it.” An array of blocky structures were snugged at the base of a soaring, largely barren peak. Other than the few green patches of the foothills, everything was brown or yellow or red: barren rock and patches of gnarly scrub clinging to thin soil. Squinting into the sky above the peak, John spotted large birds circling on an updraft. “Vultures?”

“No, probably steeper eagles. Beautiful birds. They tend to hang where there are people.”

“Why is that?”

“Because where you got people, you got water and livestock. Baby goats, baby lambs make for easy pickings. Mice, too. Green stuff’s mostly wild almond and a variety of pistachio tree, but again, they’re kinda starved for water. You look down at the buildings there, well...what’s left of them, and you’ll see the old riverbed.”

The riverbed was an undulating, deep furrow which meandered between the near edge of the buildings and wide, regular swaths of nearly level brown earth. He noticed, too, that instead of heading for the village, the other Humvees in their convoy had veered off toward a large, oval depression in the earth.

“What is that?” he asked. “Is that a crater?”

“No, old collection lake. All aqueduct systems in this area had them.” Flowers pointed their vehicle down a steep slope. “Hold on. Gets rough from here on out.”

That was an understatement. As they bounced and jounced along, he shouted over the ping and pong of stones striking the undercarriage, “D-d-dried up n-now, t-t-too?”

“Pre-he-he-he-ty much!” Flowers had the wheel in a death grip, his knuckles tenting his skin white. “You get a little bit down at the very b-bottom in sp-spring.”

“An-and the r-r-rest...” he began then stopped as the Humvee caromed onto level ground and the bouncing ceased. “The rest of the system? It’s still here?”

“The karez?” The other vehicles had thrown up so much dust and red grit, Flowers was hunched over the wheel and squinting. “Yeah, we figure that original system tapped into a massive underground reservoir. We’re talking hundreds of millions of gallons. Like having the Mississippi flowing next to your window. Break the glass and you’d be in trouble.”

“Where’s all that water going?”

“Right now, back underground. Some has made its way to the surface, though.”

“Like the spring where the wolves are.”

“Exactly. In fact, it’s practically around the corner. When you’re in the access tunnel, you can hear water through the wall. A lot of water gushing through there. We figure the same missile strike that destroyed the original aqueduct weakened the rock right next to this tunnel. Because, you know, you drill into stone, adjacent rock cracks and gets weaker.”

“Sounds like a flood waiting to happen.”

“Only if there’s a missile strike. But this area’s not active and we stay off comms, so no one’s the wiser. In fact, the water’s why it’s such a nice hiding place. Stays pretty cool inside even when it’s hot enough to fry an egg on a stone. Anyway,” Flowers said as he swung them around the dead lake, “remember what I said. Not a word about what I told you about our lieutenant or Shahida or anything, man.”

“Cross my heart.” John drew an X over his left chest. He left out the hope to depart.

No point tempting fate.

5

By the time Flowers slid their vehicle into a large mudbrick building and alongside the other two Humvees, the others had dismounted and were arranging their gear.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

Except, John noted, for Mac and Shahida. The two had moved off from the others and seemed to be in some sort of quiet argument. No raised voices, no shouts, no waving of arms. But Shahida was shaking her head in an emphatic negative while Mac leaned in. From his body language, the man was at the end of his tether.

Trouble in Paradise? Interesting, if true. These were Shahida's kids, boys she and Driver's men had rescued from lives spent as playthings for pedophiles. Many of the older boys had eventually become fighters under her command against the Taliban. Even if that hadn't been the case, he could understand why she wouldn't want to leave a single kid behind. From what he'd gathered, Mac already had doubts whether they could really get them all on a transport. There were just as many Afghans who'd worked for the Americans and deserved to get out, too.

Maybe that's what they're arguing about. He shrugged on his pack. Maybe there are just too many kids. Unless?—

“Hey.” When he turned, Roni gave him a tense smile that showed no teeth. “Everything go okay?” she asked.

“Fine.” How could anything be bad when I'm near you? “Other than Flowers really ought to try a Monster Truck derby.”

“What?” she asked, her brows knit, at the same moment that Flowers said, “Hey, I resemble that remark.”

Meeks, who was nearby, only rolled his eyes. “He do that to you, too? He's like that when he gets jacked on caffeine. That Red Bull habit of his?—”

“Enough chit chat!” Mac gave a brusque clap of his hands, like a scout master rallying a bunch of bored ten-year-olds. Which, oddly, John thought they sort of were. “We need to get a move on here,” Mac said in his clipped, almost Brahmin accent. Anyone listening to the man might be forgiven for thinking him British. “We have a number of boys to process and only limited time—andspace.” This last he seemed to direct at Shahida, who now stood with Musa, the two of them looking thunderous. Clearly, their argument with the CIA agent hadn’t gone in Shahida’s favor.

John put his hand up. “Can I ask a question?”

Mac looked first startled and then pissed. “Yes, Worthy, what is it?”

“You said we have kids to process.”

“Yes,” Mac said. “And?”

“And, well, processing means making sure the kids are fit to fly.”

Mac’s jaw worked as if he were mouthing something foul. “Do you have a point?”

John squeezed a bit of air between two fingers. “Just a teeny-weenie one. What happens if we find a kid who isn’t fit to fly?”

Silence. Everyone swapped glances. Finally, Roni said, “I haven’t found that to be the case, John.” At the same moment Shahida declared, “We no leave any boy behind.”

John put up both hands. “Whoa, whoa, easy. I’m just trying to understand what you want me to do. If I do find something, I need to know now whether or not I should outright lie. You know, falsify a record and in so doing, maybe put other people at

risk. Little things like that.”

More outraged noises from Shahida, some shuffling of feet, but it was what Mac said next that struck home.

“Why, lie, obviously. In fact, I should think lying is something at which you excel given all your years of practice.” And then Mac’s lips curled into a smile a crocodile would envy. “Isn’t that right, Captain?”

POYA: THE BOY WHO LIED

November 2023: Bam-e Dunya, Afghanistan

1

Everyone goes to the stoning. The villagers know to obey. Best not to attract the wrong kind of attention.

Poya walks ahead of Mami. He is his mother’s mahram now. He leads the way by several paces, not looking at his own feet but staring straight ahead, shoulders back, his face a studied neutral. He takes care not to check over a shoulder to see if Mami, hidden away in the billowing folds of a dusty blue chaadar, follows. Every escort knows he will be obeyed, even if that escort is a boy whose ears this very same mother boxed only that morning.

In matters such as this, a woman—wife or mother or sister—is a bit like a dog, although no one truly keeps dogs. A dog is najis, unclean and impure.

So, too, a woman’s face is awrah, not unclean but a temptation, just as the sight of a woman’s entire juyubihinnais meant only for a husband. Different label, same idea.

Touch a dog, though, and not only can you wash your hands, you get to keep them.

But touch someone else's wife? If the man is unmarried, he gets off with only twenty strokes from the branch of a date palm and a suggestion that heading into the wilderness is in everyone's best interest. All a man has to do is leave and keep it zipped.

But for the woman? No such luck. Her lush breasts and smooth belly, her supple skin, that throb along the side of her neck as her heart bounds with desire, her groans and sighs of pleasure, her juyoo bihinna? Every part of a woman, especially a young one, is forbidden flesh after which a man might lust.

So, everyone knows. For certain women, only death will do.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

The pit is outside the village. When Poya and his mother arrive, the girl, Chandra, is already in the ground. Bare-headed and clothed only in a simple shift, Chandra is still a beauty with a slender neck, high cheekbones, and wide, dark eyes.

The pit in which Chandra stands is narrow and comes only to her shoulders. An agile person would have trouble scrambling out, so a girl like Chandra doesn't stand a chance. Despite this, her hands are tied behind her back. No point in her being able to shield herself or, worse yet, grab a rock and fling it right back.

Six men ring the pit. Four are witnesses, the number required to make such a serious charge stick. The two remaining men are volunteers. Her father is one of these.

Each man selects a stone from a large pile next to the pit. All the stones are relatively uniform, as big around as a man's fist. Size is important. Too small, and a stone does nothing but bruise and sting or maybe put out an eye. Death would take forever. On the other hand, a stone shouldn't be so large that one good smack, and Chandra's skull caves in. The point of stoning is for the guilty to suffer and die slowly—but also to die so slowly and in such agony that any woman tempted to give herself to a man other than her husband thinks twice.

The first two witnesses throw badly. Their wind-ups are slow, their throws so tentative the girl has time to twist and offer her back and shoulders. Still, Chandra lets out small mewls as the rocks strike. But there is no blood and that will never do.

The third witness is younger. He is also the man Chandra was supposed to marry. His arm is much better, too. When he throws, his stone flies fast and sure and parts the air with a low whistle. His form is so expert, Poya wonders if he practiced. Given the

fury and hurt on the young man's face, the way his upper lip peels from his teeth in a snarl, Poya bets he has.

His stone strikes Chandra's right cheek. This time, there is an audible crack of bone and a jump of bright red blood. Her skin parts and gapes open as if a hidden seam has been undone. Crying out, Chandra begins to jabber and plead for forgiveness. She is sorry, she wails, she is so very sorry, she loves the man, she has always loved him, and she is sorry, sorry, so sorry. The words stream from her mouth on a gush of bloody drool that drizzles over her lips and chin.

At the sound of her voice, the fourth man—her father—lets go of a strangled cry of rage and hurls his stone with such force that Chandra's pleas abruptly stop because now she's choking and coughing blood through broken teeth and split gums.

This only seems to make her father angrier. Together, he and the jilted bridegroom hurl stone after stone, their missiles coming faster and harder, the impacts growing more sodden and duller.

Stop. An odd buzz sounds in Poya's right ear. Maybe he's even blacked out because the view shifts, like a jump cut in one of the movies his father likes. Now, Chandra's body slumps against one side of the pit. Her face is a ruin, her head a spongy mess of sodden hair and pink clots where her skull has shattered, and her brains leaked out. Chandra is silent and unmoving until someone empties a jerry can of gasoline over her head. Pulling in a strangled, gargling breath, Chandra moans and twitches and then her eyes bulge with horror as her father and the boy she would've married hold lit torches just above her head—and then there is a hollowwhup. The gasoline's vapors ignite and Chandra shrieks...

The sound of her scream merges with that odd buzz in Poya's right ear. He wants to turn away from the sight of Chandra in flames, but for some reason, he can't move. Meanwhile, the brrrin in his ear grows louder and stronger as black smoke, stinking of

gasoline and burnt kebabs, boils into a merciless blue sky.

And then, the scene shifts and now the buzz is the faint roar of an enormous plane rising into a blue sky and then?—

They are in a large, lush garden. Pink damask roses sweeten the air. Honeybees from Mami's hive flit from one pillowy blossom to the next. Poya's bibi had fussed over these bushes for twenty hot Kabul summers and snowy winters by the time Mami dressed all in white, crossed the threshold of her mother-in-law's house in Wazir Akbar Khan.

The neighborhood is a wealthy one with tall trees and nice houses. Not far from their house, there are embassies and the Presidential Palace, and they are only a stone's throw from the hospital where Babai is a doctor. A botanist at the university, Mami grew up in Herat, a garden city well west of Kabul where Alexander the Great built a great citadel. When she first walked into the house's backyard, Mami almost cried with relief to find flowers and trees instead of dusty chickens.

I heard so many stories, Mami says as she and Poya work in the garden, pulling weeds, taking cuttings, carefully planting tender seedlings begun in small pots along a high shelf in the gardening shed. All the gossip about how Kabul is so dirty and crowded. This is before I went to university where I met your baba, you understand, but school... Mami clucks her tongue. When you are a student surrounded by other students, when you are in a place where your only job is to learn... you forget that the real world is cruel. The real world is broken?—

And the scene shifts again.

Now, it is high summer. The air is hot, the light so bright that it cuts tears and bleaches the houses and streets to the color of old bone.

The drone is also there, as insistent as before.

He and Mami are in the garden near the hive. Perched on a low stool, Mami faces north toward the airport. High above, the many planes are like needles threaded with fluffy white cotton which they stitch into brilliant blue cloth. But the effect is chaotic and with no pattern and soon the fine threads shred and disperse on a westering wind.

Soon, there will be no more planes. Today is Thursday, the 26th of August. By Sunday, the Americans will be gone and the Taliban, who seethe through the streets like an army of ants invading a weaker nest, will take over for good.

They need to run. They need to get away. Baba has a plan. He's gone to the airport to meet with an American. His contact as he told Mami that morning when both parents thought Poya was still sleeping instead of huddling on the stairs to listen to what his parents don't want him to hear.

Are you sure he is there? Mami's voice was tremulous, strained. Are you certain he will keep his word? All those people at Abbey Gate, we'll never get in.

Hush, hush now. Poya could imagine his father gathering Mami into his arms and stroking her hair as if she were a little girl frightened awake by a nightmare. He will help us. There is another way into the airport the Taliban don't patrol. He will give me all the papers we need to get through, so you must be ready to go when he says.

They never say this man's name. Although Poya knows who they mean because he has seen this American twice before.

The first time happened very late one night this past winter when Poya awakened to the murmur of men's voices. The clock by Poya's bed said it was after two in the morning. Curious, he'd slipped from his bed and slid into the hall. Here, the voices were louder and, judging from a lemon-colored sliver of light leaking from beneath

the door the men were in Baba's study. Poya couldn't make out what they were saying. Their voices were too muffled, though from the occasional word he picked up, he knew they were speaking in English. So, he had slithered into an inky corner where he huddled and waited. He wanted to see just who his father's visitor was.

Why?

Because his father was a liar. A liar with a false face. Oh, the one he showed to Poya and Mami was real enough. The one he wore with his students or university colleagues or friends or guests was the truth.

But Baba also had another face. In fact, he had many. Poya had even seen them, hidden away in a secret room at the back of Baba's study. Like his father's other faces, from his hair to his nose to his eyes of different colors, Poya kept what he now knew a secret, too, because you never could tell.

He waited a long time in the shadows. The men finally ceased speaking just the near side of dawn as the faraway calls for fajr had begun. As his father's study door swung open and the men stepped out, Poya pressed back in his shadowed corner. The men paused on the landing to shake hands. The American had aimed a glance in Poya's general direction—and never saw him.

People were like that. They missed what was right in front of their nose all the time simply because they didn't expect to see anything. But Poya had an excellent view of the American as the two men paused to shake hands.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“How will he know you?” the American asked Baba.

“Easy.” Baba grinned. “Tell him I’ll be the man with blonde hair and black glasses and who looks like he needs to work out.”

They had laughed, and that made Poya wonder about Baba—and that study.

Poya would see the American again the very next spring. That was when he went on a secret mission with Mami and her students. The American drove one of the trucks and Poya sat next to him all the way to Herat.

That time, the American’s look was different. Not by much, but enough to call what he wore a disguise. Baba said the American’s name was Mr. White. But Poya thought that was a lie because he had seen the American’s true face the night his father shook the man’s hand.

And Poya never forgets a face.

Now, it is August, and his father has gone in search of his American, who will spirit them out of Kabul ahead of the Taliban.

“What will happen when we go to America?” Poya’s tongue skims salty pearls of sweat from his upper lip. “What will happen to the bees?”

“Nothing.” Mami’s voice is curiously hollow as if she’s fallen into a pit much deeper and darker than one for a stoning. “There was a terrible drought twenty years ago, and the hive lived through that. So long as there is no disease or some bandit steals all

their honey, the hive will survive indefinitely.”

“So, when we come back, they will still be here?”

“B-back?” The word wobbles as if suddenly so slippery, his mother’s tongue has lost control. Closing her eyes, she says, “We will not be back. We will never see this house again?—”

There is a sudden, oddcrump. The sound isn’t that of a rocket hitting a building, which Poya has heard before. This is a much duller and distant explosion. They both flinch and then Mami lurches to her feet, her stool toppling to the hard earth, as they turn to look north.

“Oh!” Mami clasps both hands to her heart. “Oh, your father!”

A distant pillar of black boils into a clear, cloudless sky though, weirdly, Poya’s nostrils fill with the scent of a burning girl and roast meat and crackling fat laced with the fainter tang of gasoline and hot metal and scorched rubber.

No, that’s not right. How can he smell ruined machines or people blasted to bits? Something’s wrong, this isn’t right. The sky above Kabul is a surreal blue: as intense as the center of an anazar, an evil eye, which has grown swollen and fat with men’s evil.

“That was the airport!” Mami wails. Her keening is the shrill scream of a rabbit in a wolf’s jaws, a stray dog being bludgeoned to death by a crowd of men taking bets on when the creature will finally have the good grace to die—or a young girl, stoned by her father because she has had the great misfortune to fall in love with a man he would never choose.

“Oh, my husband!” Mami beats her breast and tears at her hair. “My husband,

myhusband?—”

“Baba!” Poya gasped?—

And startled awake to a different nightmare.

2

Now.

Poya was on his right side, in darkness, his head on a crude pillow made of a cloth sack stuffed with lumpy clots of wool. Humid from his breath, the darkness stank of sweat, singed grass, and the fusty odor of pee. One thing he’d learned since coming to live in this place was that sheep’s wool, when damp, smelled of urine.

For several long moments, he lay still, swallowing back salt from the tears he’d shed in his sleep. Weirdly, the sound, which Poya’s sleep-addled brain turned into a bee, was still there: that buzz, muffledbrrr.

Quiet. Lifting himself on an elbow, he slipped a hand beneath his pillow and fished out Mami’s still-vibrating cellphone. Killing the alarm with a tap, Poya lay back and cradled the cell against a chest that was no longer quite so flat, a fact which often worried him because of what that would mean here.

Don’t think about now. Remember who you are. You are Poya Durrani. You are the son of Benjamin and Soraya. You are Poya.

This was a mantra he recited upon awakening every morning, his own and very private fadj as devout and fervent as any prayer. His parents, neither of them religious, insisted he learn as a matter of course. You need to blend in, they’d said. How they justified the many lies he had to tell and live back in Kabul, they never said, but they

made him study with a mullah who marveled at his memory and easy facility with languages.

How quickly he has picked up the Fusha! the mullah once said to his parents. Not a slip, not a mistake! Far faster than any of my other students and quite a few of the adults. He switches so well between Pashto and Dari, even English...have you ever given thought to his becoming an imam? Sending him to study at a private madrasa? No? The mullah had worked his arthritic fingers through the tangles of his long, henna-stained beard. Give it thought, give it thought. He is too quick, too bright and he would languish at a state school. A private madrasa will expose him to studies he will never receive anywhere else. How else to counter impiety?

His parents knew better than to send him anywhere and, regardless, Poya certainly didn't need religion to blend in with these people. In this place, so far removed from any true town or even small village, there was no adhan, no one to announce when prayers were to be said. The family he lived with weren't sticklers either. The closest Amu Alazar came to a prayer was a perfunctory one delivered before a meal and offered more out of superstition than actual gratitude. Anything Amu ate or wore came from sweat, hard work, and a cool head when bartering for supplies. No one studied Quran either. Poya had an idea this was because none of them could read. Amu and his fellow clansmen had televisions and DVD players and cell phones, but there were no schools, and no one had books.

Well, almost no one.

Poya was a boy with secrets. Look at it a certain way, and he was a secret.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

But you're smart. You can do this. You'll figure a way to escape before Amu finds out.

Howhe might do this would require more than book-smarts. More than supplies and luck.

The challenge was also trying to figure out where he could possibly go.

3

He and Mamica came to the literal end of the road in early September 2021 when the asphalt simply stopped at Sarhad, a sleepy, largely pastoral village of cheerful Wakhis. In Pashto, Sarhad means border or frontier. The name was apt, too. Sarhad was only about a hundred miles from Kabul, but out here, that was like being on the Moon.

Sarhad had no infrastructure. Electricity came from large car batteries or, for some, solar panels. There was no running water, no hospital, no road past the village. Just as well: there were few vehicles because petrol was both expensive and hard to come by. With little ready cash, people bartered. With no reliable cell service, a person went by yak or donkey or camel or horse to within a few kilometers of the Tajik border to pick up the T-Cell network.

Yet there was a school. A few shops. The village even had a nurse.

There was also a police station. Two officers were tasked with checking tourist visas for the Wakhan Corridor, a narrow panhandle bounded by Tajikistan to the north,

Pakistan to the south and, far to the east, China. Since there'd been no tourists for several years, the officers mostly picked their teeth.

Mami decided not to wait for the police to notice them and marched into the station the day they arrived. The duty officer studied their papers for a moment then asked after their business and where they were staying.

"With my husband's third cousin," Mami said smoothly and gave a name.

"I see." The officer cocked an eyebrow. If anything, his frown deepened. "And your husband?"

"Dead. I travel with my son, as is only proper."

"Indeed." The officer flicked only a cursory glance at Poya. "And where did your husband die?"

"Kabul, when the Americans fled." By then, Mami had repeated this so many times, her tone sounded as if she agreed that, yes, the weather was fine. "His death certificate is in the back of the packet."

His mother might be cool, but this was always the moment Poya's palms grew damp. No telling just which way the next few moments would go. He watched in quiet agony as the officer riffled through their papers to the back—and then paused. His hesitation lasted for so short a time that only the astute observer, or Poya with his heart pounding, might notice.

"This seems to be in order." Face now as smooth as fine porcelain, the officer proffered the packet between right thumb and forefinger the way a croupier did in a movie Poya once had seen. "Say hello to your cousin," he said while his left hand—and the money Mami had slipped into their packet—disappeared into a

pocket.

Because, of course, there was no death certificate. How could there be, with no body claim?

Time passed. They waited for Baba's American to appear. Mami paced the streets; Poya read books he'd scavenged from their home in Kabul. His mother had fussed, pointing out heneeded clothes, but he couldn't leave so many books behind knowing the Taliban would only burn them.

Eventually, Mami took a teaching job. Her pay was food and supplies. The local school was integrated. Boys and girls took the same classes, sat in the same rooms. There were only three other children Poya's age in his form, all boys, and none were particularly bookish or even ambitious. None knew a language other than Wakhi, which Poya hadn't known when he arrived. Languages were easy for him, though, always had been, and Wakhi was close to Dari. So, he picked up the language fast.

Things were not fine, only livable. At night, he and his mother would plot and plan, though there were few choices. With no relatives and Baba's American having forsaken them, only Khorog in Tajikistan seemed an option—and a bad one, at that. They might try crossing the river that divided the two countries, but the river was icy with melt in spring as well as deep. Snow was not unusual even in July. Given the altitude, there was little natural cover and certainly no trees. Plus, the Taliban rumbled by on regular patrols. They might bribe their way aboard a lorry; people knew people who knew other people who knew smugglers. These same people who knew people knew others who'd heard horror stories of refugees who ended up as food for wolves. Even if they managed a safe crossing, Khorog was many miles away. His mother knew no professors there either and living in a city, even a small one, would be expensive.

They went round and round for hours but never reached any conclusion about what to

do or where to go.

Until the beginning of the end was forced upon them: the day when the Taliban came.

The first truckloadsof men and equipment rumbled through what passed for Sarhad's village center in the early spring of 2022. It was like watching one of Baba's American movies when the outlaws ride into town. If the stony faces of the other villagers were any indication, Poya thought every single Wakhi knew that things were about to get much, much worse.

"This is not good." Mami's voice was tight. That day, for the first time since they'd arrived, she had veiled so only her eyes showed. She wasn't the only woman in the village to do so either. "This is very, very bad. Look at them, those workers. See how skinny? And their clothing, do you see?"

What clothing the men wore was all similar: an odd camouflage pattern of greens and browns, like something from an American war movie. "Soldiers?" Poya said.

"Yes. Afghan National Army. I remember when they started wearing these. You were young then, only five or six. The uniforms, they call them 'forest camouflage,' came from the Americans, but the choice was made by a defense minister, oh, long ago. I do believe the Americans tried to talk the ministeroutof the uniforms. As if there are forests in Afghanistan." She huffed a derisive laugh. "Better to dress them in pink."

He remembered seeing cast-off uniforms in the streets north of their house in Kabul. "Do you think they surrendered?"

"Who can tell? Captured or surrendered, it makes no difference. This is bad," Mami said again. "The Taliban will be here around the clock now, until winter. We need to be careful."

They were. Even so, things got worse. In the months that followed, Taliban overseers walked up and down the line of men laboring with shovels and pickaxes and wheelbarrows at the hard earth. Anyone who flagged from exhaustion was beaten. Any man who tried to run was shot. A man foolish enough to argue with a Taliban had his tongue cut out. After all, there were always more ex-soldiers to find, more traitors to root out.

Then, one day in the late spring of 2022, something strange happened.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

Poya and his mother lived in a cramped house of sun-hardened brick perched on the far eastern edge of the village. Essentially a very large square, the house contained a pot-belly stove on a brick platform at the center. They slept on pallets by the stove, pumped water from a well, and did their business in an outhouse with a corrugated tin roof. Their house was also a stone's throw from where the road had ended before the Taliban showed up. This meant they often saw and heard the Taliban as well as their prisoners who were housed in yurts. At first, so many Taliban milling around made Mami nervous, but after the first two weeks and no one showing up to arrest them, she relaxed. By and by, they grew accustomed to the racket, which started early and ended late.

Being so close, though, meant that Poya sometimes saw things he probably wasn't meant to see. One morning in the dawn's thin light, the distant grumble of a truck woke him. The sound was at first distant but grew louder. This was unusual. New prisoners normally arrived at midday.

His mother slept on. Curious, he slipped from his pallet and padded quietly to one of their four windows. Each faced a cardinal direction and had no proper glass, though they did have shutters with slats. Sidling up to the east window, he peered through a sliver between two slats.

There was only one truck, with a dark canvas cover over the rear cargo bay. This was strange; the Taliban weren't normally shy about their prisoners. If anything, they wanted people to stay afraid. As he watched, the truck braked. A moment passed, and then the driver and another man clambered down from the cab. Both were armed. Instead of releasing the tailgate so their prisoners could jump down, they waited, rifle butts resting on their hips, and looked east down the stretch of new road.

Nothing happened for another few minutes and he was about to go back to bed, when he heard the distant clop of hooves and a whinny.

Horses.

The riders trotted in from the east. He expected to see nomads. These were herdsmen who belonged to various clans and rotated their sheep and goats between various pasturelands in late spring through to early fall. Before the first snow fell and as soon as the melt began, these men would come to Sarhad for supplies, with their sheep and goats serving as payment. The nomads were different from the Wakhi, not only in their dress but their looks. To Poya, the nomads always seemed as if they'd just stepped over the border from China.

Instead of nomads, though, seven men, in traditional pakools and baggy trousers, trotted up to the truck. They rode with their rifles slung over their chests and double bandoliers of gleaming bullets, like something out of a Clint Eastwood western.

The man at the head, who was clearly the leader, rode a tremendous, muscled black stallion. The horse held its head high and the man looked like a king. His eyes were dark and his beard as black as his stallion's coat. When the man turned in the sun, a large golden pendant with a deep blueyaqutstone at its center winked and a massive golden ring set with another stone of lapis lazuli gleamed on a forefinger. If the stallion had been white and his owner a curly-haired blonde with a sword instead of a big pistol, the pair might have leapt from one of Poya's books on Alexander the Great and his fabulous horse, Bucephalus.

Curious now, he quickly slipped into trousers and a loose tunic then eased the front door open and tiptoed along the side of the house until he could spy from a corner. He was in time to see the man he would come to know as Sarbaz dismount and approach the soldiers. Gesturing, Sarbaz said something; in the next moment, the driver had pulled aside the canvas flaps and lowered the truck's tail gate?—

And boys jumped out.

What? Poya blinked in surprise. The two who jumped down first were clearly the oldest. Maybe sixteen, seventeen? Men, or nearly so. The others who tumbled out were younger. All were thin, in ragged clothing, and smudged with dirt. The younger ones, their faces etched with fear, cowered as if wondering not who would hit them but when.

He noticed something else about them, though, especially the two older boys. They were...pretty. Their hair was longer than was normal for most boys. A few seemed to have fine skin, and they moved differently. He couldn't put his finger on exactly what they did. He just knew they were doing it.

"Ah," said someone behind him. "So Sarbaz has bought more ruined boys."

What? Poya nearly jumped out of skin. Wheeling on his heel, he saw that he'd been joined by an old man named Zahid. He didn't like Zahid much. The old man was a religious sort in a town where religion meant virtually nothing and was always going around uttering pronouncements and curses. No one paid him any mind. Life was hard enough without worrying about retribution and bad luck.

"They arebacha bazi." Zahid's face screwed into a knot and his jaws worked as if turning over something foul. "Dancing boys," he said, cupping the head of his walking stick with both gnarly hands. He spat to the left to ward off any evil. "I'm surprised the Taliban haven't kept these chai boys for themselves."

"What's a chai boy?" What could possibly be wrong with brewing tea?

"I cannot speak of these things. To do so is to invite calamity, although..." The old man finger-combed his beard which was very long, stringy and stained with henna not because he had been to Mecca but because he was vain, and henna was permitted

to cover gray whereas black was not. A bad job he'd made of it, too; from the stain splashed at his temples, he looked as if someone had taken a hammer to his skull. "If such were the case, there would be few Taliban fighters left. I can tell because of the way chai boys mince," Zahid said. "The way they prance. They don't walk like proper men." Zahid let go of a dry cackle. "Or perhaps they are like dogs, trying to cover their arses up tight."

What? He was about to ask more, but that was the moment the horsemen's leader said something to the two older boys. Poya wished he could tell what, but then one boy pulled himself up straighter and replied. Too far away to hear the boy's tone, Poya could tell from the boy's stance that he'd said something either defiant or maybe only something the leader didn't like because there was a blur of movement and then the teenager was on the ground and the leader had a boot on the boy's chest and the muzzle of his weapon in the boy's face.

A moan went up from the boys. No one moved, not the boys or horses or soldiers or the other men. The boy on the ground was frozen, hands up and palms out. He looked a little the way Poya had seen strays in Kabul behave when beaten or cowed: on their back, tail between their legs. Only this boy didn't have a tail. If he had, Poya thought that would've been just like a dog's, too.

A moment slipped by and then another—and then the man took his boot from the boy's chest and made a curt flick with his free hand. At that, two more men dismounted and took coils of rope from their saddles. In only a few minutes, they'd bound all the boys' hands and linked them one to the other at the waist along another longer rope. When the boys were properly tethered, the soldiers stuffed money into their pockets and climbed back into their truck, while the leader and his men swung up onto their horses. Then everyone went his separate way: the soldiers back toward Kabul, the boys in their stumbling, staggering line further east and deeper into the Wakhan.

Like a chain gang. Poya's father once had a great collection of American films. One had centered on a man in a prison. The movie's star had intense blue eyes and a cool hand—Poya wasn't sure what that meant—and, in the movie, he'd eaten a lot of hard-boiled eggs. Poya had never understood the point, but his father said that the character was showing the other prisoners he was up to the challenge of showing other men what it was to be unbroken and unbowed. Poya thought a man didn't need to eat a lot of eggs to do that, but what did he know?

One thing he did know, though? Those boys looked pretty broken.

Later, Poya learned that the man's name was Sarbaz. No one knew much about him other than he was rich, and a magic charm was chiseled into his ring's lapis stone. From the chatter of the other kids, no one was quite sure what the charm did. Some swore the charm conjured up jinn. Not all jinn were evil, but there weren't all that many stories about good ones either. Others said Sarbaz used to be a warlord from Bini Kamar, due north of Kabul. Yet another said that, no, no, Sarbaz was an engineer from the Weka Dur and Kadar where—as everyone knew—there was supposed to be a lot of yaqut and endless deposits of gold.

This latter story he thought was probably the most accurate. There were the man's necklace and ring, after all, and that horse. Only what was an engineer doing here?

This scene would be repeated at regular intervals every week or so over the remainder of that summer and into the region's short fall before whatever operation Sarbaz had going closed down for the winter. That translated to a lot of boys being trucked in and hustled out, tied together like criminals while the villagers gawked. Zahid said Sarbaz must be working the boys to death. Otherwise, why did he need so many? And another thing: at the end of every year and before the first snows came, truckloads of men were carted out for the winter.

But no trucks ever came through with boys leaving Sarbaz's employ. It was, some wit

at school said, like that American commercial for some brand of cockroach killer: boys checked in, but they never checked out.

And one more thing.

As the road crews worked and new black asphalt stretched into the Wakhan, the trucks carrying boys bound for Sarbaz never went past the village but always stopped in the same place at the end of town. Later, he would think this was probably a way of breaking the boys down and shaming them. Maybe any destination would look pretty good after suffering that kind of humiliation, even if it was a labor camp.

Once, the driver brought a few women. If not for their grimy hijabs, they might even have passed as boys from a distance. No one could figure out what type of women they were, although their clothing was the same: khaki pants, loose khaki shirts, boots.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

But, oh my, did that set tongues wagging. Ex-soldiers, everyone said. Or police. There was also talk that these women might have been soldiers trained by the Americans. Not Zeroes, because those were only men, but a special female squad. Or they could be doctors. No one knew for sure. Although an older man suggested that, well, in a labor camp, men must have a woman to stay calm and not kill each other.

Not everyone believed that either. Only three women for all those men? Unless there were more where those came from, like those boys.

But, Poya wondered, why boys? What could boys do that grown men could not? Men could be very strong, but boys were smaller, quicker. Thinner. Easier to control, too. A boy with spirit might fight back, but a strong man could also tame such a boy very quickly. Look at how quickly Sarbaz cowed that teenager. And if such a boy would not learn...well...

The world was full of orphans and little beggar boys. Plenty to go around.

The end for him and Mami came in early 2023: seventeen months after the Americans fled and Kabul fell.

“I have to.” Mami knuckled away tears. “With so many Taliban here in good weather and so many men building the road, better for me to go, now, when work has stopped for the winter.”

“I’ll come with you.” Poya’s stomach knotted. “We shouldn’t separate.”

“But we must. Come this August, it will be two years since the Taliban took over.

Your father once said that, for his American friend, organizing a rescue...an extraction, he called it...took coordination, a lot of planning. But we can't wait any longer. If the American has not come here by now, he never will."

An extraction. As if they were rotten teeth in need of pulling. "Maybe the American can't come." He didn't want to say that the American might have tried to reach them but been killed. Or simply decided that with Poya's father dead, they were no longer his responsibility. "We could wait until the thaw. We're safe for now."

"But for how much longer?" The small muscles in Mami's jaw tensed. She was hollow-cheeked and her face, always smooth before, was lined with worry. "We've been running out of time since the Taliban started work on that road and since you...your..." Mami made a vague gesture. "Your time is short."

"I'm careful. I never go anywhere without my eyes."

She gave him a look. "You know it's not just that."

He did. Saying so out loud, though, made his problem much more real. His problem was something he couldn't quite cover up or mask, like his eyes. Although he had read of people like him doing such things. There was also a movie star...a teenage girl whose real name he couldn't quite remember but she was Dorothy in the movie...anyway, they had wound tight bandages around her chest. That way, she looked like the girl she was supposed to be instead of sixteen and coming into her womanhood. And, of course, there were dancing boys, many of whom looked like girls, especially the young ones. Given the right clothes, he could disguise himself just as well.

As if she'd read his mind, Mami said, "It's not simply a question of disguise. There is your voice. That will give you away. Past a certain age, your neck..." Mami gestured at her own. "Your throat will not be right."

A voice could be controlled. A throat might be hidden by a high collar. Didn't he already disguise his eyes? He was an actor in the play of his own life. So, he knew a body might be molded and taped and made to fit, and he said as much. "It is done all the time."

"This is not America. You would still attract attention." His mother's shoulders moved fractionally. "And who truly knows? Your father idolized the Americans and look where it got him, gotus. Besides, if you are found out..." She didn't need to finish that thought. Turning away, she fetched up a cloth and tugged open the grated door of their potbelly stove. The hinges cried out, a high-pitched squeal that always sent a shiver tripping up Poya's spine. "We've waited," she said, poking at embers with a metal rod before fetching up another large, black flat cake of dried yak dung. "And your father's American still hasn't come. For all we know, he tried but..."

"But what?" Poya asked as Mami's voice trailed off.

"But perhaps it is as I've said before. Your father's friend was captured." Slipping in the patty, she stared into the stove's glowing orange-red core. "Or he's dead. Or...I don't know, maybe I didn't understand the instructions and made a mistake." Shutting the stove's door, she stood, put a hand to the small of her back, and groaned. "Either way, this is no home for us, not permanently. Eventually someone will say the wrong thing at the wrong time to the wrong person and the Taliban will appear, ready to question us more closely. How we came to town and when. We've simply been lucky. But that road is almost done, and that means more traffic, more people coming through. Well, if China lets anyone through."

"But wouldn't that be a good thing? Maybe we could go to China." When Mami flicked a look, Poya amended, "Or maybe not."

"We have a hard enough time here," Mami said.

She really meant him. A bitter thought and one Mami didn't deserve. "Where would you..." Poya caught himself. "Where would we go?"

"We are not going anywhere. I am going back to Kabul." She let out that same short bark of a laugh. "For what passes as civilization."

"But you can't. You can't travel without a mahram."

"And how much longer can you be that? Truly?" When Poya didn't reply, his mother continued, "Believe me, a woman can buy a man to escort her anywhere. And if the money runs out...well, there are other ways."

Poya didn't want to think about that. "And what about me? What if you don't come back?"

"You don't think I've not thought about that? So many questions!" She made a cross gesture. "You will be fine for a while longer. I've reached an agreement with Ibrahim."

"Meaning?"

"What do you think?"

Money. Ibrahim was the man in Sarhad whom Baba had trusted to shelter them—had, in fact, supplied Ibrahim with goods as a down-payment. Again, something arranged by Baba's American handler, but charity went only so far. Money might not have a lot of meaning here, but that didn't translate to money having no meaning somewhere else or becoming of value soon. Funny, how money had meant virtually nothing here until the Taliban showed up. Now, with a road knifing through town and into the Wakhan—with the start of trade with China and tourists coming back through, say, Tajikistan or even China because everyone knew the Chinese were masters at

marching towards money—ready cash would have true value. “When will you go?”

“March. Best if I go before the work crews start again in April. With the road nearing completion, soldiers will likely set up their work camps further and further out. The last was a week’s journey on foot. Yes,” Mami said, with a note of finality, “March will be best. I have put aside enough to get me to Kabul. I will leave money for you to use if I don’t return by August.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“And then what? Where do I go?” He couldn’t possibly negotiate the mountains on his own. “I’ll have to come back to Kabul anyway. Doesn’t it make more sense for me to go with you?”

“No. You don’t have the luxury of that much time.” Mami paused as if to allow that to sink in. “Kabul will be much more dangerous. More Taliban about, more prying eyes and wagging tongues.” At the expression on his face, Mami’s expression softened. “I could be wrong, of course.”

He knew she wasn’t. No arguments could change that fact either. But the thought of trying to find his way on his own was almost more terrifying than what he knew was going to happen if he did nothing.

There was also no point asking what she would do once in Kabul. She must know some of Baba’s old...well, you couldn’t call them friends, could you? Not if they’d never arrived to help them. Handlers, yes. He’d heard spymasters’ underlings referred to that way in a movie in Baba’s collection. The film was a very old one about a spy in a divided Berlin. Something about the cold? As he recalled that story ended badly because the spy fell in love. Love made you do stupid things.

So did blind faith. If Baba hadn’t found his handler, just how did Mami think she stood a chance? That was the thing about adults. They often thought doing something was better than being still and watchful and patient.

On the other hand, the reality was as plain as the face he must hide. He was the impetus behind all this. If not for him, Mami would probably stay put. No one had discovered her thus far. The chances were excellent they would never ask. Although

would the Taliban allow her to keep teaching? Perhaps not. The Taliban never had gotten this far from Kabul before. That fact was the reason his father had sent them here to Ibrahim. Sarhad was a contingency, a place that was supposed to be a safe harbor to wait out the storm. Baba couldn't have known the storm would sweep through the whole country.

“So where, Mami?” he asked. “Where do I go? Herat? Try to find your relatives? Mami, I have never met them.” Besides, would her relations still be alive? If they were, would they be willing to take him in if he appeared without his mother? “Even if I did that, I still would be in Afghanistan, which we’ve agreed is no choice at all, not for me. That leaves only trying to cross into Pakistan or India.”

“Thanks to your father, you have a passport for both countries. You have one for Tajikistan,” Mami said. “He put by the cash for each country.”

“Which will run out eventually. Mami, even with the correct passport and papers, there will be no one to claim or speak up for me. There are no American aid agencies operating in any of those countries. We have no friends there. I have no way of even figuring out how to find Baba’s American or someone who worked with this American and might help me.”

“You could go to the American embassy in Pakistan or Tajikistan. You might even go to India.”

“And say what? Mami, I don’t know what the American’s real name is. Do you even know?”

He watched her debate how much she should say. “Yes. That is, I know what message I was to send and to whom.”

“A coded message?”

“Yes.”

“To?”

Her teeth snuck out to chew her lower lip. “Do you remember Mr. White?”

Ah. I thought as much. “I remember.”

When he said nothing more, she studied his face. “You knew.”

Not a question. “I had a suspicion.”

“Because?”

“Of what we talked about.” Which he didn’t want to get into now, so he said, “When you followed Baba’s instructions to come here, how long were you supposed to wait?”

Her eyes slid to stare at her feet. When she replied, her voice was meek. Or, perhaps, ashamed? Embarrassed? “Two months. Three, at most.”

“Threemonths?” She couldn’t have surprised him more if she’d slapped him. “Mami, we’ve been here for almost a year and a half! Why did you wait? We could’ve gone together to India or Pakistan, or back into Herat to find your family.”

“Please.” She raised her hands in a weak, warding-off gesture. “I don’t know. I made a mistake. I thought, Ireallythought Mr. White would keep his word and was only delayed.”

Delayed for almost two years? That wasn’t a delay. That was more a kick aimed at a stray dog. “Mami, without you, I’ll wind up in a refugee camp.”

“You will be alive.”

“Yes, alive but alone.” He didn’t add that if he chose that route, he wouldn’t even be who and what he was now. He would have to shed his masquerade, eventually—and then what? His prospects were even worse. If he did rid himself of the face he presented every day to the world, then his only true option was India. There, he might stand a chance. Now, he understood why his father made him sit through endless Bollywood movies. Most followed the same mind-numbing script of melodramatic meetups with more than the occasional large-scale song and dance numbers that made his head hurt. But he had learned the language well enough.

“I wish I had all the answers,” Mami said. “I don’t. All I can tell you is to make the choice to live. If I don’t return?—”

Her face blurred. “You’ll come back,” he said, blinking against a sudden sting. He couldn’t afford the luxury of tears. Tears were a problem. For him, tears gave true credence to the old saw about crying your eyes out. “You have to.”

“I will try. But if I don’t return, you must choose life.” Taking his face between her hands, she kissed his forehead. “Choose life,” she said again. “Go and live, any way and any place they will let you.”

He did what she asked.

He waited. He lived his lie in Sarhad, though no one was quite as friendly as before. With his mother gone, something changed. He thought he knew why. Everyone had always sensed his oddness, but his mother's presence helped to smooth the wrinkles, negotiate the sharp corners. Mami, who always had a plan. As her mahram, he fit in. A boy escorting his mother was perfectly normal. Mami had been as necessary a prop as that stage weapon, the gun which appeared in Act One and must go off before that final curtain.

Where he had been careful before, now he was paranoid, wary. Vigilant. He still went to school where he excelled, but then again, that was no different than before. He groomed horses for neighbors and corralled sheep in exchange for food and fuel. Every morning, he took exquisite care with his disguise because no element, not even Mami, was more important than his eyes.

The hammer came down very early one morning in mid-May. By then, the road to China was nearly done. Trucks still came with equipment and construction crews, but other trucks loaded with rocks, chugged out on their way to a refinery in Kadar. Sarbaz regularly rode into town from what was clearly now a mining operation, mostly to pick up more boys. That morning, a lorry for him and his men also arrived.

There weren't many people out; this early in the morning, most were tending to flocks, or having their morning meal of yak tea and flatbread. Since Mami's departure, he'd not been sleeping well, so he gulped tea and went out to watch the trucks go by.

The day was bright and very windy. Sarbaz and his men had stopped on the near side and were busy roping together their latest acquisitions when the wind picked up. Each fresh gust scooped up earth and tiny pebbles to swirl into small dervishes or spatter the undercarriages of the passing trucks with pings and pongs and hollow pocks. Poya winced as much against the grit as the sun and reached into a pocket for his sunglasses...which were not there.

Oh, no. He needed those glasses. How could he have forgotten them? He never went anywhere without them because accidents happened. His eyes might slip and that would be hard to explain.

Go. He turned on his heel. You're so stupid, how could you forget?—

A fresh gust swirled just as a particularly large truck labored past on an exhalation of oily black smoke. Ripping aside a canvas tarpaulin stretched over a load of sand, the wind churned, spinning a small tornado of fine grit. Screwing up his face, Poyaraised a hand to protect his face as sand pecked and stung his face. He blinked, once, twice...

That was when Poya felt a sharp stab of pain in his left eye and the sudden sting of fresh tears—and then the eye...slipped.

Oh no. A bolt of panic. His blood iced. Palm clasped to where, only seconds before, his eye had been safely ensconced, he backed away from the crowd of onlookers. He needed to get to the house. He'd run out of eye drops long ago, but clean, warm water worked. He needed to flush away the grit then look in his small mirror and slide his eye back where it?—

A hand clamped onto his left shoulder and dug in. "You all right, boy?" Zahid bawled into his face. "Something in your eye?"

"Yes," he gasped. The old man's teeth were pegs, brown and black with rot, and his

breath was no better. "I'll be fine," he said, wrenching free of the old man.

Suddenly off-balance, Zahid flailed; his hand snagged the crook of Poya's left arm and jerked Poya's hand down from his face.

And that was the moment everything changed: when Poya's world fell apart for a second time.

"No!" With a curse, Zahid backed up so quickly, his feet slipped out from under. The old man toppled, sprawling onto the dirt where he writhed on his back like an overturned beetle. "Dog! Demon!" Snatching up his walking stick, the old man jabbed the air. "Keep back! Kalb!" the old man screeched the curse in Arabic. "Yakhsaf Allah bin al'ard!"

"No, please." But it was already too late. A person might dismiss an old man's ravings, but not something as plain as day and the nose on their face. People had turned, curious to see what all the fuss was about. Pausing from marshaling his latest shipment of boys, Sarbaz stared. "It's all right," Poya said to no one in particular. Left hand clapped to his eye, his right patted the air as if to put everything back in its place. "It's fine. There's nothing the matter."

"Shaytan!" Jaws working, the old man let loose a gobbet of foamy spit which the wind snatched and flipped back into the old man's orange-red beard. "The Earth should open beneath your feet!" Zahid shrieked. "You should?—"

Poya never did hear what he ought to do next. Hand clasped to his face, he sprinted for his miserable mud-brick hovel, bulled the door open, and rammed it shut.

Then he fell to his knees and cried his eyes out.

Both of them.

Now, as he lay with his mother's cellphone clasped to his chest.

He'd once thought that Sarhad was at the very edge of anything remotely like civilization. He wasn't wrong either.

At the moment, he was trapped in a camp of Kyrgyz nomads and, on the northern edge of Lake Chaqmaqin. This was, quite literally, in the middle of nowhere. Sarhad was two weeks' walk away in the opposite direction. Karchyndy and Bourguitiar were closer, but these were outposts, little more than a handful of yurts and mud-and-stone houses. Even worse, the Little Pamir's current leader lived in Bourguitiar. Run there, and he'd be returned almost instantly.

Or maybe wind up somewhere worse. Yes, there was always that, given what he was. They might sell me.

Ibrahim had done exactly that, about two weeks after Zahid's spit oozed, slimy and slick, between Poya's toes. After his left eye slipped, Poya stayed close to home. Didn't go to school, didn't wander about by himself for long, though his neighbor still allowed him to groom his horses and herd his goats.

Everyone in Sarhad had heard some version of Zahid's story about the demon-boy. People had a field day with that. Some hinted that Poya had eaten his mother. Others worried that she might have been conjured or was a jinn in her own right, and what about the children she'd taught? Were they safe? Fearful gossip like that was a marvelous incentive towards making oneself scarce.

In a way, he really wasn't surprised when, one afternoon, Ibrahim brought Amu to look Poya over. (Although Ibrahim made sure Poya's eyes were in beforehand. No sense in spooking a potential client.) A frowning Amu poked and prodded Poya's

muscles and even checked his teeth before agreeing to buy Poya for twenty sheep.

That, Poya later discovered, was only a fifth of what a man might pay for a bride. Once a girl began to bleed, she was worth over a hundred sheep. Women were expensive out here since most died young and in childbirth. Their children weren't spared either. With no medical care and a limited diet, many never saw their fifth or sixth birthday. So, people bred early in the Wakhan and often.

Which meant his time was short.

Running was the only option.

But where? Could he even hope to outrun Amu? The man would surely come after him, especially if Poya took an animal. Yet, without a donkey or yak or one of the four ill-tempered camels the clan owned, Poya would gain very little ground each day.

Stealing an animal, though, also meant stealing feed. These people didn't have a lot for their animals to begin with. Could he doom some of their remaining animals to starvation? Or, worse, Amu or another clansmen having to walk for two weeks, in brutal cold, to Sarhad to barter for feed?

His father once showed him a film, *Catch-22*. Poya was smart, but he'd not understood it well at the time. Now, though, he did because he was living the movie's circular logic. On the one hand, it was suicide to run. But, on the other, if he didn't, he was almost certainly going to wind up in a position where he might well die anyway.

You'll think of something. You're smart. You know things.

Well, maaaybe. A small imp of doubt scratched the back of his brain. Yes, yes, you're very bookish. You know movies. You're smart. But can you hunt? Do you know how to start a fire or build a shelter in winter? Do you know how to find your way if you?—

“Oh, be quiet,” he muttered. Even if he'd known how to hunt, there was nothing

heretohunt. Every self-respecting snow leopard knew that. Although the felines stuck mostly to the mountains north and west, there were stories of hunger driving the animals down here into the Little Pamir. There was a reason children went for water together. There was safety in numbers.

As for building a shelter or starting a fire...there were no trees in a valley this high. None of the other children here had ever seen a tree or even a bush. Amu and the rest of clan—all the nomads, in fact—burned dried yak dung cakes.

He knew the math. One cake lasted about seven hours. Assuming his trek to wherever lasted a week, he needed at least two cakes every night. Add in a few days' extra fuel just in case...well, that was a lot of yak poo to drag around. He could do it, but he had other things he needed to take. Some were weighty, but he'd never leave those items behind, no matter what.

Which meant that he'd probably be lugging around at least twelve or fifteen kilos on his back. Thanks to the time he'd spent here, he was much stronger with more muscle than before but still relatively slim. Hiking over mountain passes in winter would be a problem, however, and that brought him, full-circle, right back to stealing an animal.

He couldn't wait for much longer either. Mami had been right. The decision, out of his hands before, was being made for him, in inexorable increments, with each passing day.

His hands balled with frustration. If only the American had kept his promises! Things would be so different. His parents would be alive. He wouldn't be in this mess. He wouldn't have to hide who he was in America. Oh, people might stare, but Baba had said that, in America, no one cursed you for being Satan's spawn.

If Poya wanted out, his own two feet would have to do. He couldn't wait until the thaw either when Sarbaz's mining operations would start up again. Sarbaz himself

came to check on things at intervals and there were always workers but no trucks. Once the snow disappeared, that would change. Could he stow away on a lorry? No, that was no good. The trucks were headed the wrong way. He needed to get out of Afghanistan not deeper into the country.

I have got to find a way out of here. Mami's cell phone still clasped to his chest, Poya felt a familiar sting at the backs of his eyes. Crying would be safe now. He was hidden behind his shayrdak. But his tears would change nothing. Gritting his teeth, he willed his eyes to remain dry.

You are on your own. What Poya wanted or who he had been didn't matter. That would change, however, if anyone discovered his secret. Gooseflesh pebbled his skin. Amu probably wouldn't kill him. But there were other things Amu could do. None would be pleasant.

Please, don't betray me, please. Poya pressed the cell to his chest. Please hold off just a little bit longer.

If his body cooperated, if he could just hold on until spring...well, then, he just might have a chance.

JOHN: GUYS WITH SECRETS

November 2023: Reza Garm-Chashma, Tajikistan

1

"Cepha...ow." Wincing, Davila gritted his teeth against a groan but managed not to snatch his bad arm out of the medic's grasp. "Take it easy," he said, the small muscles of lower jaw jumping. "There was a bullet in there not so long ago, you know. It really does hurt."

“Yeah, and that infection’s not doing you any favors.” A tall man with the muscular build of a swimmer, Harvey stripped off a pair of latex surgical gloves then checked the fluid level in an IV bag which hung from a coat tree John had found in the hot spring’s office. “Think we caught it in time, though. Lucky I decided to bring along a couple bags of cepha-gets-them-all.”

“What?”

“A flavor of cephalosporin,” John translated. That the medic was packing bags of the stuff was lucky. In the time since Driver had given John the shock of his life by showing up alive, Davila had gone downhill. He was pale, his skin shiny with new sweat, and the skin beneath his eyes was the color of used coffee grounds. That faint whiff of decay John had detected a few hours ago seemed stronger, too. “They’re a class of broad-spectrum IV antibiotics.”

Harvey grinned. “Never leave home without it.”

“Okay, so what does this mean?” Davila asked.

“The same thing it did...” John checked his watch. “Two hours ago. Even if the infection wasn’t an issue, you trying to hike your way out of here is a non-starter. We take you back to Dushanbe in the van, you have a better shot of your lung staying inflated and doing its job—and speaking of which.” He turned to Driver, perched on a rolling office chair near Matvey, the boy John had rescued. “What are you guys doing here? And don’t tell me you happened to be passing through.”

“Not exactly, no,” Driver said. “We parachuted in.”

“Seriously? In winter? Around all these mountains?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“Hey, don’t forget at night, too. Southeast of here. It was easy-peasy. Just, you know, go between the snowflakes. Of course, it was dark, so...” Harvey shrugged. “Made it interesting.”

“How’d you manage it?” John asked.

“With great difficulty.”

“I didn’t think you could do that on account of all the mountains.” Ducking his forehead, Davila smeared sweat from face on his good forearm. “In fact, I don’t think we used anything but fixed wings to go in and out.”

“Certainly made it interesting. We landed just as the storm revved up,” Driver said. “Fair number of mountain lakes in this area, east of Khorog. Just a matter of finding a bowl wide enough to account for drift.”

“And then we did some hiking,” Harvey said.

“Sounds rough,” Davila said.

“I’ve done some firefighting back home,” Harvey said. “You’d be amazed what you can parachute into and carry out on your back. Of course, some fires in places like Yellowstone where you got the animals and people, that can be pretty hard going. I remember this one flare-up...” Harvey launched into a story about a wildfire in Wyoming, but John had ceased listening about three or four seconds after Driver had talked about where but more importantly when they’d come in-country.

Well, I'll be damned. He broke in. "When did you make your drop? How long ago?"

"Ah..." Clearly surprised at the interruption, Harvey stopped in mid-sentence then said, "Two days ago. Then we got orders to divert."

"Divert?" And then John got it. "Oh, my God. We're not the reason you're here, are we?"

"Not, uh..." Harvey's gaze flicked to Driver then back. "Not officially. But now that we are, we'll just rescue your ass and then be on our way."

"On your way to where?" John asked at the same time that Davila said, "I can take care of my own ass just fine." They exchanged a glance, and then Davila said to Harvey, "To follow up on what John said, your drop was part of a different mission plan."

"Notice that he wasn't asking a question," John said.

"Thank you, John," Davila said. "And no, I was not."

"He was stating a matter of fact."

Davila nodded. "I believe I was."

"As an invitation to expand on the real reasons for you being in-country," John said. "More or less."

"Preferably more," Davila said.

"Well, I was giving them a degree of wiggle-room. Plausible deniability, as it were."

“Ah.” Davila nodded. “Good point.”

“I thought you’d see it that way.”

“What are you?” Harvey asked John. “His translator?”

“Merely the chorus,” John said. “You have them in every good Greek tragedy, which I sincerely hope this isn’t.”

“Really?” Davila looked impressed. “I didn’t know that about the Greeks.”

“Yeah, the chorus’s function was to summarize and provide information. Me,” John said and spread his hands. “I’m amplifying.”

After a quick look to Driver, Harvey said, “We were asked to make a detour. Really, man, we were as surprised to find you guys as you were to see us.”

“You weren’t told who we were?” John asked.

“No,” Driver cut in. “We weren’t. We didn’t know there were any friendlies in the area.”

“So, in other words, like cool and all that we’re alive,” Davila said, “but we’re not the reason you dropped by for a visit.”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“Yeah, well, no.But.” Flexing his fingers, Harvey held his hands over a heater. “You guysreallylucked out finding this hot spring.”

“Wouldn’t have without the van,” John said. “Or Matvey.” At the sound of his name, the boy’s dark gaze flicked toward John. When the men started talking, Matvey had hunkered down to a squat next to Davila.Which I would, too, if a bunch of guys are talking in a language I didn’t understand.Matvey was probably worried he’d be left behind. Or—given what the boy had been and seen and done—worse. “Don’t forget that. Matvey helped us.”

“After he fleeced you,” Harvey put in. “And shot your pal here.”

“An accident,” John said.

“Yeah.” Davila draped a protective forearm around the boy’s shoulders. “We’ve already kissed and made up.”

“And don’t change the subject,” John added.

“Fair enough, but let’s reverse the equation,” Harvey said. “How aboutyoutellmehow you knowDriver? You guys on a mission together or something?”

“Yes,” John said at the same time that Driver said, “In a manner of speaking.”

“Uh-huh.” Harvey stroked his chin. “So, which is it?”

John glanced at Driver. “You want to answer that? Seeing as how I was a touch

indisposed at the time?”

“Oh?” Davila’s eyebrows arched. “Indisposed? Do tell.”

“Maybe later,” John said. “If you’re good.”

“Which of you is the ventriloquist,” Harvey said, “and which is the dummy?”

“Him,” John and Driver said at the same time.

“Cute.” Driver favored them both with a dead-eye. “You guys practice a lot?”

“Only when I’m alone,” John said, cribbing from Woody Allen, a man with the moral compass of a chipmunk but who had, nonetheless, directed some spectacular movies. He made ago-aheadgesture to Driver. “Answer the man. Like I said, I was there only in body.”

Driver turned to his men. “Let’s just say that neither John nor I figured the other made it out alive.”

“Yeah? Sounds like some story, Boss.” After a pause, Harvey added, “That was a hint.”

“Noted,” Driver said.

“Don’t feel left out or anything, Harvey,” Davila said. “I’ve found out more in the last four minutes than I have in all the days I’ve been trapped up here.”

“That’s because it’s a long story,” John said.

Harvey checked his watch. “We got some time, I figure.”

John opened his mouth, but Driver cut in. “Nothing to tell.” His tone carried a note of finality, as in discussion over. “Ancient history.”

With which John begged to differ. “Driver, they told me at Ramstein that you were dead. That you’d died with Roni.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Harvey held up both hands like a traffic cop. “Died with who? What’s he talking about? When we got orders to divert, Boss, you never said anything about?—”

“First off,” Driver said, “because I didn’t know for whom we were diverting.”

Meaning what? John had to press his lips together to keep that from leaping from his mouth. That you would have slow-walked here if you had known?

“Second,” Driver continued, “it’s a long story and some things truly are only need to know.”

Davila cut in. “What he’s saying, Harvey, is however high your clearance or mine, it still ain’t high enough. Just to clarify, you understand. Which means you and me, we have something in common. We’re both working with guys with secrets. Me, I’ve gotten over that. You, though...”

Oooh, he’s good. John was developing a new level of appreciation for Davila. When in doubt, sow division.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

Harvey stared up at Driver for a long moment then said, “You’re team leader. If there’s something you haven’t told me yet, then you must have your reasons. I’m taking it on faith you aren’t gonna get us into any situation we can’t handle.”

“You know I wouldn’t. If I think there’s something you need to know, I’ll tell you,” Driver said.

John put up a hand. “Then I have a question.”

“Yes?” Driver gave him a weary look. “What?”

“You were asked to make a detour. Which means you were in communication with someone who...what? Did a flyby with a drone? Someone had to verify our signal.”

Harvey opened his mouth, but then Driver held up a finger and the other man zipped it. “We picked up your SOS,” Driver said, “because we were already in the general area. We relayed the information and then received orders to divert to this location and check it out. See if a rescue was warranted.”

“Without knowing who we were?”

“I guess someone knew your specific frequency or call signal.”

“I don’t know.” John made a face. “Ours is a pretty generic little satellite distress doohickey. Of course, it might only look that way.”

“Man, I love it when you get all techy,” Davila said.

Okay, the man never would be Flowers, but Davila was growing on him. He also realized, with something almost like a pang, that he would miss Davila once they parted ways. Because, of course, there was no question now of their continuing on with the retrieval of Roni's remains. Unless...he and Driver were two pieces of the same mission but didn't know it?

"Look," he said, "we were to meet up with a contact who'd get us to Roni's remains. Is it possible that the contact's job was to hand us off to someone else? Because, Driver...what are the odds that we're both in-country?"

Driver gave him a bland look. "What are you asking?"

"Don't play stupid. Could you and I be part of the same mission but not been told because of our history?"

"No," Driver said. "Because we're not here to retrieve remains. I don't know anything about Roni or why her remains are so far from where she died. Our missions are completely different."

Harvey scratched his head. "Yeah, but, Boss, you gotta admit it's a hell of a coincidence."

"As in no coincidence." John decided to press. "Driver, think of it probabilistically. It's like that old one about the chances of two people sharing the same birthday."

"That's an easy one," Harvey said. "The probability's one in three hundred and sixty-five because that's how many days there are in a year. Assuming no leap years and an even distribution of birthdays through a given year."

"Yes, but how many people in a random sampling do you need to reach a fifty percent probability of finding someone with your birthday?" After a moment's silence

and blank looks, John said, “Twenty-three people.”

“Get out,” said Harvey.

“No,” Davila said, “he’s right. Do the math. Increase the number of people in the room to seventy-nine, the chances jump to almost a hundred percent.”

“Actually, 99.9 percent,” John said.

“I was rounding up,” Davila said. “I didn’t want to confuse them. So, here you are.”

“So, here we are,” John said. “Driver and I in the same room, same region, same time. Given who we are and what we’ve done, there are only two reasons why that might be so.”

“Yeah, you already said that,” Driver ground out. “I told you, we’re not here for Roni.”

“I wasn’t going to say that. But I’d lay down good money that your mission is, at the very least, peripherally related. I’m willing to go even further than that. I bet your superiors figured you to be their ace in the hole in case Davila and I screwed up or couldn’t continue.”

“As, in some ways, we have and can’t. Well,” Davila amended, “I can’t.”

“So, whoever thought of putting you in the same theatre of operations was pretty damn smart. Underhanded, too, not to give either of us the skinny. Think of all the stars that have aligned. First off, we know each other. Second, we were in the same place at the same time when things went completely FUBAR. And now, neither of us was told the other was in the area.”

“Until you guys needed to know, only that happened sooner rather than later because Davila here got hurt?” Harvey shrugged. “Can’t beat the logic. Except why not tell you two?”

“Man,” Davila said, “you got to ask? Why do spooks hold anything back? Because they figure it’s a need-to-know thing and you didn’t need to know. Neither did we.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“I’ll give you that. But why did we not need to know?”

Bad blood. Although John couldn’t very well say that out loud any more than he could admit to unfinished business. If he had known that Driver was his backup or in theater or whatever jargon spooks used these days, would he have agreed?

Yes. For Roni, he could do anything.

“Tell you what.” Planting his hands on his knees, Driver pushed to a stand. “I’m going to check out that van. Worthy, that thing got chains?”

“Uh.” The abrupt change of topic caught John off-guard. “Yes, it does. I’m pretty sure.”

“Great, then let’s go check it out.” When John nodded, Driver tipped his head toward the door. “Harvey, start packing things up. Check the supply stores here, see if there’s anything we can use to make up for the detour.”

“Okay,” Harvey said, “but why do I feel like I’ve been given busy work while the grownups talk?”

“Because you have.” Driver turned on his heel. “Come on, Worthy.”

2

They took the path to the spring’s parking lot, holding onto the guide rope and battling their way down the mountain, both men bent nearly double as they fought the wind.

The air was glassy, and the wind threw fistfuls of icy grit that needled John's cheeks and cut tears.

As they rounded a flank and the wind's shriek dwindled, Driver straightened, put out a hand to stop him and said, "You thought I was dead, Worthy? No one told you?"

"That's right." John scrubbed bits of ice from his eyelashes with a gloved hand "No one."

"Did you ask?" When he nodded, Driver said, "And?"

"The only answer I got was along the lines of DanielWho? Same for Flowers and Meeks. Everyone stonewalled. I came up empty. Even your dad couldn't figure it out."

That made Driver's eyebrows arch. "You asked the old man?"

"Sure. That's how Roni knew about you to begin with. Before Afghanistan blew up, we were both stationed at Benning ...well, Fort Moore now. Asking hadn't gotten me anywhere and I didn't have any better ideas. So, yeah, I went to see him just as soon as I got back stateside. Poor guy couldn't believe you were still alive or, you know,hadbeen."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he thought you weredead, Driver. That's what your command initially told him. KIA was what he said. He near about had a heart attack when I told him what happened."

Driver cursed then shook his head. "I'm sorry about that. There's no love lost between me and my old man, but for God's sake, that's just cruel. How much did you

tell him?"

"About what went down? Not a lot. Not about Shahida and the boys or Mac, if that's what you're asking. All I told him was that Roni and I had seen you."

"How did you explain about Roni?"

"I didn't. He didn't ask and I never said."

"What did he do?"

"Tried to get your records, but he came up just as empty. It was like they'd erased you and your guys completely."

"Figures." Closing his eyes, Davila pinched the bridge of his nose between gloved fingers and exhaled a smoking breath. "Deniability up and down the line."

"Whatdidthappen?" He wasn't ready to hear how Roni had died, not just yet. "After that cave-in?"

"After I rose from the dead? Mac got over his surprise and then me and the guys were tasked with different assignments."

The guys?"Flowers made it?" When Driver nodded, he added, "And Meeks, too?" Another nod. "What different assignments? No, wait." He held up a gloved hand. "You couldn't tell me anyway. Or if you did, you'd have to kill me."

"Something like that. Although I can tell you that our merry band got split up, which is why I got a new crew. I guess me and my guys caused too much mayhem for the higher-ups."

Cryptic answers that were almost non-answers. Though he ached to know Driver's story and sensed the desire was mutual. They were, he reflected, survivors and veterans of a very specific war. But first things first. "Why are you in-country now? You know why I'm here, but what about you?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“I told you. A retrieval. Honestly, when we picked up your distress, I thought the people we were sent to retrieve had somehow gotten out.”

People?“So, these people you were sent to retrieve were or are on a separate mission?” When Driver nodded, he asked, “Are they prisoners?”

“That’s the consensus. They even might be dead by now.”

“How old is your intel?”

“Last contact with their command was in August. Last time they werespottedwas about six weeks ago.”

“Do you know where these people are?”

“Yes and no.” Driver’s sigh rode on a steam cloud. “That’s where things get fuzzy. All Command has is a broad outline, a general idea of a location based upon, well...let’s just say supplies being brought in.”

“That would suggest a fixed operation.”

“Or one with a limited reach, especially now that it’s winter.”

“Drone fly-over to confirm?” When Driver shook his head, he asked, “Why not?”

“Because of the various players involved. We’re not the only people with eyes in the sky.”

Of the countries in the area, he thought Russia and China were safe bets to be those eyes. “And no one wants to provoke an incident?”

“Or alert any of the involved parties who aren’t sympathetic to our interests. In a way, even diverting to you hasn’t changed our mission. There’s no ticking time bomb because no one knows we’re here. Well,” Driver amended, “no one knows that my team’s in-country. We don’t know if you’ve been compromised.”

“Parviz is dead.” The words came out hard and flat. “So are his two buddies.”

“You’re forgetting the Russian.”

“Ustinov?” He thought about that then shook. “I’m not sure that killing us serves Russia’s interests, especially if Ustinov was our point of contact. He’d have been vetted and honestly, I got the impression that his country is just as interested in what’s in them than in the hills.”

“What about the kid?”

“Matvey? He’s been with us the whole time.”

“You search him?” When John nodded, Driver said, “Find anything?”

“If you’re asking whether he had a secret decoder ring, the answer’s no. This is the only thing he was carrying.” He dug out the thin knife he’d found dangling around the boy’s neck. “Trigger is on the side. That little nub there.”

“Whoa,” Driver said as the blade leapt from one end of the handle. He squinted at the knife. “Nice OTF. Couple of knicks on the cutting edge. That point is pretty wicked, too.”

“Seen some action for sure.” Carefully butting the business end back into its housing, he slipped the knife into his pocket. “Given who he is...well,was, I’m not surprised. But if you’re asking if I went through his clothes, the answer would be no. On the other hand, it’s not as if people have storming up here to either kill or help us.”

“So, you figure him to be uninvolved?”

“Oh, Matvey was involved but only in a low-level kind of con. He picked Davila’s pocket, but that was about it. I think he was forced into the whole ambush thing. It wasn’t as if he was particularly skilled with a rifle.” He paused. “We both know boys like him, Driver.”

“Okay. Cool.” Driver’s head moved in a brisk nod as if he’d just ticked off another item on his to-do list. “I only worried that he might be a problem. Saves us both some trouble.”

Trouble?Because of the cold and the wind, they were standing close enough to one another for John to see how utterly void of emotion Driver’s eyes were and realized in that same instant that he just now might have saved Matvey’s life. Perhaps Driver wouldn’t have killed the boy, but if he suspected the boy was a plant, Driver would have searched and then probably given the boy a few supplies and left Matvey somewhere along the road to make it back to whatever home he had.

“What’s your next move then?” John asked.

“Get you guys to Khorog, then take the van. Davila needs better quality care than either you or Harvey can give in the field. Then...you know, fair winds and following seas, man. Have a safe journey back to the States.”

He shook his head. “But I haven’t finished what I started.”

“And? You’re saying you want to go on with your mission?” Driver’s tone held a note of amusement as if he were a tolerant parent watching the antics of a child. “And how do you figure on doing that? Just for grins and giggles, let’s imagine how you might accomplish this if you are both alone and absolutely ignorant of where to start looking or what to do when you get there.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“What if part of that equation wasn’t a factor?”

“As in?”

“As in I don’t go on alone?”

Driver’s eyes narrowed. “Meaning?”

“What, you want me to draw you a picture? I’m asking if you’d consider a swap.”

“A swap.”

“Do you hear an echo?”

“Don’t get cute.” Arms akimbo, Driver took a step back—carefully, given the ice and the path’s slope—and favored John with a slow look up then down and then back again. “You want me to swap out Harvey for you.”

“Yeah. Harvey’s a medic. I’m a doc. Same diff in a combat situation. I mean, I’m not going to do brain surgery out in the field.” Though with Matvey’s knife and one of Parviz’s hammers, he bet he could perform a pretty decent frontal lobotomy. “I won’t even ask you to find out where Roni’s remains are before we start.”

“No preconditions?”

“Word of honor. I help you do whatever it is you’re here to do and then you find out from your people, who clearly have a line to Patterson or else we wouldn’t be

standing here now...you ask them where we need to go to fulfill my mission. Then we get the hell out of this country. Really, it's a win-win for you."

"How do you figure?"

"Has the cold made you suddenly stupid? Erased your memory?"

"Careful." The word came out mildly enough, but now the laugh lines at the corners Driver's eyes smoothed. "Just because we loved the same woman doesn't mean we're buddies."

For a fleeting moment, he wanted to break Driver's nose. Get a grip. He's goading you.

"You're right. We're not buddies," he said with about as much inflection as if he were commenting on the weather. "We're also not rivals anymore. I am suggesting a logical alternative, and you know it. I'm a doctor, I can function under stress, and oh yes, by the way, I know my way around a rifle." He didn't say he thought he was a better shot than Driver, but if the man jumped to that conclusion on his own, well...c'est la vie. "You know I can be counted on in a crunch—and frankly? You owe me. When you asked for my help to get those kids to the airport, I gave it. I went AWOL."

"For which you received no disciplinary action."

"Being unconscious and near death at the time, I assume Command thought that would be redundant. But, no, I wasn't demoted. Actually, I was offered a promotion."

"Yeah? To what?"

"Light bird and any posting I wanted."

“In exchange for?”

My sanity? “What do you think?”

“Silence.”

He nodded. “And except for visiting your dad, I have kept it zipped.” He hadn’t even told his therapist at Brighter Days. “As soon as I was eligible to separate, which was PDQ, I did.” He paused a beat. “Do this, Driver. Take me with you. Is it so much to ask? I once helped you.”

“Not from the goodness of your heart,” Driver said, though his tone was mild. “You did it because you just couldn’t stand the idea of me being anywhere near Roni.”

Every word cut. “Say that’s even true,” he began then raised a finger as Driver opened his mouth. “Shut the hell up, okay? You had a chance to lob a grenade. Now it’s my turn.”

“Sure.” Again, that smug expression. “Go ahead. Be my guest.”

“Say I went along out of jealousy. But so the hell what, Driver? I helped. I went AWOL to help you and Shahida and those kids.”

“You want a medal?”

He brushed that aside. “What is more, I bought you guystime. Time to get those kids out. Time to get away. And don’t forget, when the chips were down, I came back for you. If it weren’t for me, you’d be worm food. So, cut the crap. It’s not like your motives are pure as the driven snow. Mac offered your team a lifeline, a way back into the Raiders, but only if you helped Shahida.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“So.” Driver cocked an eyebrow. “You heard about that.”

“Let’s just say we had a long drive, and Flowers had a lot to get off his chest.”

Silence. Driver’s features were as void of expression now as if the man’s face were carved from a lump of cold granite. Although his eyes, dark and glittery even in daylight, held a new malice and for the first time, John wondered if maybe he’d gone too far, revealed too much, shown his hand too early. Before this moment, he’d had no true idea what he could or even wanted to do with the story Flowers had shared during that drive to the aqueduct.

Finally, Driver said, “Blackmail, Worthy?”

This man could kill him where he stood, could snuff out his life with his bare hands. Get into a physical fight with Driver, and John had no doubt at all that he wouldn’t come up the winner. Driver could break his neck, do away with Davila so there would be no witnesses—and then report back either that, gee, the guys we were sent to rescue weren’t there or, gosh, all he found were bodies. If Harvey knew what was good for him, he would go along with whatever Driver ordered.

“No, not blackmail,” John said. “Manum manus lawate.”

“Ah.” Driver chewed on that a moment. “What do I get out of this? Besides Brownie points in the Cosmic Ledger of Life.”

“A damned good hired gun with very little to lose. Although I do, mostly, enjoy living and draw the line at jumping out of a plane. Will I have to?”

“Not unless you fall out or I give you a push. We will have to call for an extraction. That’ll be by helo, best guess, but that’s down the line. Depends on our people’s conditions.”

“As in fitness?”

“As in whether we need to hump them out in body bags. Broadly speaking, though, yes, how we get them out depends on whether they’re in one piece.”

“What happens if they can’t hike out?”

“How good are you at a fireman’s carry?”

“Are you serious?”

“Deadly. They might be wounded, in bad shape, or both. Why do you think Harvey has some serious muscles? But let’s cross that particular bridge when we come to it.”

“How many people are you retrieving?”

“Best case? Alive?” Driver held up two fingers.

“Do you know for certain that they’re alive?”

“No,” Driver said. “But we live in hope.”

3

Davila didn’t like it.

“I don’t like it,” Davila grouched. He had waited until before Driver and Harvey had

tramped down to the van with cans of gas and supplies. “We’re not supposed to get separated.”

“As I recall, you were the one who told me I’d have to go on alone. Left foot, please.” Having bundled Davila into his parka, he took hold of Davila’s left ankle and worked the foot into a left boot. As he tightened the laces, he said, “We’ve been over this. Harvey drives us back to Khorog, where there’s a decent hospital. We split up there. Harvey will stay and make sure you get the meds you need, and then the two of you will either go up to Dushanbe on your own or someone will come get you. Then you get your ass out of the country and back to your wife.” He paused then added, “I was going to say Patterson, but I think you’ll have way more fun kissing your wife.”

“True, but that’s not the point.”

“No. The point is you can’t go on, Davila, but I have to. This plan also gives you the best chance of making it back with all of your arm instead of only most of it.”

“I still don’t have to like it.” Davila scowled. “I don’t know those guys from Adam. You barely know Driver.”

“I know enough.” If loving the same woman counts. He concentrated on knotting the lace, throwing in a double-knot for good measure. “Too tight? Wiggle your toes.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” After a short silence, Davila said, “This makes me feel about five years old.” Then, without turning his head, he went on, “And what about our little Mowgli here? What’s going to happen to him?”

John didn’t look either, though he felt Matvey’s eyes on them both. The boy was sticking close, not talking much or moving more than necessary. As if he thinks that by making himself very small, we’ll just forget about him until it’s time to go back to the States. He bet if Matvey could, he’d fold himself into Davila’s duffel and take his

chances.

“I don’t know,” he said, slotting Davila’s right foot into a boot. “We aren’t going to do anything other than leave him with you. Then you will make sure he gets to some aide agency that can track down his parents.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“Somehow I don’t think his parents will take him back. Remember, if you’re right, they sold him off in the first place.”

“I can’t believe that any parent wouldn’t be thrilled to see his or her kid,” he said, slowly working the boot’s laces. “They might not have had a choice.”

“There’s always a choice.”

Between the devil you know and the one you don’t? If he wanted to retrieve Roni’s remains, he had no choice now but to partner up with Driver. “Not if his parents were starving,” he said. “Not if they were desperate.”

“As desperate as you are to go along with Driver?” Davila pressed. “John, you haven’t seen this man for almost two years. Then he turns up out of the blue and claims he didn’t know that you were here? That doesn’t add up.”

He made a sort of helpless shrug of a shoulder. “What would you like me to do? How many choices do you think I’ve got?”

“There’s always a choice.”

“Not always.” He’d certainly been in at least one situation where all elements of choice were taken away. But he’d not shared that part of his story with Davila: how he’d made it out when Roni had not. Possibly because he’d been essentially dead at the time.

“What makes you think he’ll keep his end of the bargain?” Then, without waiting for

an answer, Davila said, “What are you doing, tying a Gordian knot?”

“He will,” he said, though he saw that the knot he’d made was nothing more than an ungainly lump. Maybe a metaphor here. Teasing apart the laces, he started again. “Because you’re forgetting one thing. Driver’s already gotten in touch with his superiors.”

“And?”

“And his superiors know and approve, which means Patterson has to have been read in, if only to forestall uncomfortable questions. Given his connections, I bet Patterson might even have known Driver was here... wait, wait.” He held up “Before you defend him, remember that I don’t know Patterson the way you do. For me, Patterson showed up out of the blue and then, boom, I’m on my way to this—” He almost said hellhole. “Place. We meet Ustinov, a Russian running a clandestine op for Americans. Given the current political climate, you can’t tell me Patterson didn’t know about any of that.”

“But Driver said he wasn’t our contact.”

That bothered him, too. “Maybe it was need-to-know. We might’ve have met up with him eventually. Driver might not be as read in as he thinks. Maybe whoever’s pulling his strings decided he’d be better off with two more guys. We may never know, but I think we got to make peace with a little uncertainty. The whole thing is just too?”

“Crazy? Maybe going to get you killed?”

“I was going to say coincidental. What are the odds of Driver and me ending up in the same country? Of two guys who...” He almost said loved but caught himself at the last second. “Knew the same woman? Have this much history?”

“Not high.”

“Exactly.” He gave the boot’s laces a final tug then pushed to his feet. “Either way, you’re out of the game and our friend here,” he said, only giving his head a marginal tilt in Matvey’s direction, “will be much better off at the end of the day.”

“With an agency? Don’t bet on it.”

“Then do something about it. You’re a Protector, Davila. So, do your job. Protect this kid. Maybe he’s not your usual assignment, but he needs you. Now, come on, let’s get you on your feet, see how steady you are.”

“I can do this. I’ve been walking on my own for a day now.” Instead of pushing to his feet, Davila stared down at his hands and let go of a long sigh. “I don’t like it, John. I don’t like leaving you in a lurch, and I don’t like leaving when the job is half-done.” Then he raised his head and pinned John with a look. “We’re supposed to stick together. I know.” He held up a hand against any protest. “I know I can’t go, but that doesn’t mean it sits well. You are a pain in the ass and one of the best soldiers I’ve known. I want you to remember that.”

John was quiet a moment then said, “You don’t want to, like, become blood brothers or anything, do you? Because I really don’t like the sight of blood, especially my own.”

Davila let go of a snort and then they were both laughing until Davila winced and said that hurt his side like hell. At which point, Matvey leapt from his spot in the corner, crossed the room, and slid in close to Davila’s good side, took Davila’s right arm, draped that over his shoulders, mimed get up, and rattled off something in Russian too fast for John to follow.

“Thanks, kid. But if I lean on you too hard, you’re going to wind up two feet shorter.

But you are just about the right size for the old heave-ho.” Slowly pushing to his feet, Davila let the boy steady him before throwing John a warning glance. “Don’t say it.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” And then he couldn’t help himself. “But there’s this scene in the second Indiana Jones movie where Short Stuff?—”

“Posh-li, kid.” Hand still on Matvey’s shoulder, Davila stumped for the door. “Let’s get while the getting’s good.”

4

The plan was simple: drive to the hospital in Khorog, let Harvey exit with Davila and Matvey, wait until Harvey signaled the all-clear—a simple thumb’s-up emoji—and then drive away. A low-risk adventure, assuming no one knew Parviz’s van on sight.

Which is what they did. The trip took three hours and change. Harvey drove; Davila and Matvey hung in the front seat. He and Driver stretched out in the cargo bay. Driver promptly went to sleep, leaving John to brood.

About a half hour out of Khorog, Driver—who was awake and driving—said, “I didn’t expect to see you again.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“The understatement of the century.” John let a beat slip as he debated the best opening gambit. In the end, he settled for straightforward. “Look, you said we got three hours or so before we get to where we leave the van, right?”

“Yes.” Pause. “And?”

He signed. “Don’t play pseudo-stupid. You’re thinking so hard, steam’s coming out of your ears.”

Driver didn’t crack a smile. “I’m starting to think the way you are. That this isn’t a coincidence, you and me, in the same theater of operations at the same time and going in, essentially, the same direction.”

“So, you agree our missions might dovetail?”

“I don’t know, Worthy. I think I’m waiting for the punchline, the moment this all becomes clear. So far, I don’t see it.” Driver slid him a sidelong glance. “But there’s something more pressing on your mind, something you’re dying to know. Like...why we’re both not dead.”

“Yeah, I’m kinda wondering. You asked me if I remember what happened. Well, I do and the last I saw of you, you were making like Spiderman while half the cave was coming down. Roni was right behind you. I still don’t understand what you were doing, why you were going that way. But I guess it worked, since you’re here. So how did you, well, dot-dot-dot?” He waited then said, “That was an ellipsis, by the way. My invitation for you to fill in an open-ended question.”

Driver snorted. “You always were a smart-ass.”

“And proud of it. Don’t dodge the question, Driver.”

“What do you remember?”

“You always answer a question with a question?”

“What do you think?”

John had to smile. “You’ve missed your calling. You’d make a great shrink. Trust me, I know from personal experience, from hours with therapists, and I’m not talking about Roni.”

“Point taken. But, you first, Worthy,” Driver said. “What do you remember?”

“I remember everything,” John said, “until the moment I died.”

JOHN: GREAT BALLS OF FIRE

August 27, 2021: Kohe Koran, Hindu Kush, Afghanistan

1

Flowers led him on a tour. The abandoned aqueduct turned out to be more than simply a long tunnel. The front chamber was high enough for a person to stand comfortably and about twenty feet wide.

“Artificial, though,” Flowers said, aiming at flashlight at the walls. “See all the gouges, where the rock’s been hammered out? We think this was something done after the karez went dry. Anyway, pretty big and there are three tunnels that lead

to other rooms. Here.” He moved the light to an opening at nine o’clock. “Another straight in front of you and then this one to the right. We got the kids down this way. Notice anything about it?” Flowers asked as they moved from the front room and into a tunnel high enough for a man to walk without having to stoop and wide enough for two abreast.

John felt the strain in his knees. “Heading downhill?”

“Yup. What else? Give you a hint. Think in terms of a clock. You got nine and noon and?” Flowers paused. “Dot-dot-dot? Fill in the blank, man.”

Craning a look over a shoulder, John studied the entrance to this tunnel. “The opening’s not at three o’clock. It’s at two.”

“And give the boy a gold star.” In the flashlight’s glow, Flower’s smile took on a slightly devilish cast. “Got any guesses why?”

“Bad at geometry?”

Flowers let go of a short laugh, which sounded again in a faint series of echoes. “You’d think so, but that’s not it. Stop a second and take a listen.”

They did. After a short silence, John said, “I don—” But then he did hear: a faint burbling, liquid sound. “Water?” When Flowers nodded, John said, “Where the flow got diverted.”

“That’s what we think, yeah. Feel the rock.”

“Cool.” He noticed something else: Flowers’s breath smoked ever so slightly. “The water lowers the temp in this portion of the tunnel system.”

“Correct. It’s also why the boys are down this way. More comfortable, but if they want to move up into the big room, no one will stop them. Just nicer back here, easier to sleep.”

“Water sounds awfully close.”

“Probably because it is. This isn’t a natural cave system. Roundabout noon, things start getting pretty toasty, enough so the walls sweat. Probably accounts for why there aren’t any rooms branching off to the right. You don’t want to crack something open and then get a flood. But overall, pretty comfortable. See this?” Flowers pointed his light to a rocky lip a little over head height. “Shelves chiseled out of stone. Just the right height for a lantern or flashlight.”

John spotted another opening to his left, the top of which reached shoulder-height. “What’s that?”

“Ah, that’s an interesting place. Come on, we got a few minutes.”

They ducked through into another room which reminded John of the four-man cabins he’d slept in as a Boy Scout. “Bedroom?”

“That’s what I’m thinking. Look here, though.” Flowers played the beam of his flashlight along one wall. “See them?”

“Wow.” He wasn’t expert enough to know if what he was seeing was Arabic or Persian. “What language is that?”

“Pashto. You got a name and look, see here?” Flowers reached a finger to trace a deep curve and stellate divot gouged from stone. “Ten to one, that’s a crescent moon and star.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I think the guy died. You find crescents and stars on grave-markers. Plus, this is the east wall of this particular chamber. Gravestones always face Mecca.”

“Someone from the village that used to be here?”

“I don’t think so.” Flowers moved the flashlight’s beam down to another marking.

“Look at this word here.”

“More Pashto?”

Flowers shook his head. “Arabic.”

“You read Arabic?”

“Naw, but I recognize the word. It’s shaheed.”

“What’s it mean?”

“Martyr. And those three little divots just underneath that? They represent three drops of blood. Sort of standard Taliban practice. We’ve found these in a lot of other rooms.”

“So, Taliban lived here.”

“Yup, and probably other squads and armies before them. Great place to hide. You wouldn’t believe how many chambers there are. We explored some and it’s almost like this underground city. We found a couple bullets, a cooking pot, old fuel cans, some clothes further back. Probably a lot of other stuff we haven’t seen. I mean, the complex goes on forever. In fact.” Flowers snapped his fingers. “Know what it

reminds me of? Vietnam. The guys who went into VC tunnels.”

“Tunnel rats.” Dare had told him about those men. There was also a famous novel series featuring a homicide detective who’d been just such a soldier.

“Yeah, only the tunnel was called something else.”

“Black Echo.” Long after he’d become John Worthy, the books were made into a TV series but updated. Instead of Vietnam, the detective had been Special Forces in the First Gulf War. The very first episode referenced that black echo, too. Which had pissed him off because there were no tunnel rats in the First Gulf War. Vietnam vets deserved better.

“My grampa was in ‘Nam. He said when they come on these tunnels,” Flowers said, “they made the small, wiry guys go in, see if there were any VC. As in they had to go in there, no flashlight, no light and hope there wasn’t a VC waiting with a knife or a wire to strangle ‘em with.”

“That’s messed up.”

“Certainly messed up Gramps. Anyway, this complex is like that. A little further along this one corridor, there’s an actual seep, kind of this spigot punched into the rock. It’s plugged now, but from this trickle of water that comes through and the way the wall sweats? Pull a couple stones, you might get more than just a dribble.”

“Sounds kinda dangerous.” He hated to think what might happen if something jarred that plug loose. If this complex was even a tenth as extensive as Cu Chi, there were likely dozens of these plugged spigots. “You don’t worry about flooding?”

“A little, but the guys who drilled this complex must have worried about the same thing. Here and there along the corridors, you find these...well, I guess you’d call

them escape hatches.”

“Which are?”

Crooking a finger in a follow me gesture, Flowers snapped on a flashlight then led him further down the corridor. “You ever watch the original Star Trek?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“You’re kidding, right? The show’s a classic. Why?”

“You remember how Scotty’s always climbing into those utility tunnels to fix something that’s gone haywire and always just in the nick of time?”

“Jeffries tubes? Sure. They were named after one of the set designers, I think. Why?”

“Because I’d bet good money whoever built this probably watched the same show...ah.” Aiming his light to the left, Flowers used the beam to pick out a series of rough slots chiseled from stone that began a foot off the floor. “See here? How the steps slant up and into the wall?”

“Wow.” The handholds led up to an aperture wide enough for a man. “What is that?”

“You remember back at the airport when Driver talked about how they constructed these aqueducts?”

“Vaguely. He said something about wells?”

“Karez, right. The wells are what direct the flow of underground water and snowmelt.”

“And that’s what this tube is? An old well shaft?”

“Yup. The rungs driven into the rock are how guys got up and down to clean out the shafts or check on the flow. Goes all the way to the surface. There are about a half dozen we’ve found so far and likely a lot more. I’ve been up this one just to see

where it ends. Doesn't go all the way to the surface, though. It just dead-ends."

"Plugged?" When Flowers nodded, he asked, "Solid?"

"Enough so's I needed to spend a fair amount of time chipping myself out. I figure it happened because no one lives here anymore to keep them clear."

"Hunh." As they turned to retrace their steps, John said, "Nice escape hatch, though, in case an enemy gets inside."

"I suppose."

"You ever worry the guys who were here before will come back?"

"Since the dates we've found are from when the Russians were around?" Flowers shook his head. "Not really. This isn't near anything important anymore."

"But you still come in at night. You don't travel in or out of here during the day."

"Just pays to be careful. Same reason why we don't use comms out here."

"Complete radio silence?"

"Better believe it, brother." Flowers gave him a significant look. "'Cuz we ain't the only guys with eyes in the sky."

2

Four hours later.

He did another headcount just to be sure. Maybe he'd made a mistake. As it turned

out, he hadn't, which sucked.

He wandered into an adjoining chamber. As with all the tunnels and chambers here, this was lit with LED units placed atop lips chiseled from stone. This room was a little larger than his and opened into other parts of the complex through one of three arched openings. The two smallest were at nine and three o'clock, respectively. The largest was at noon.

Roni was listening to a young boy's lungs while another older child watched. As John slid up behind the kids, her green eyes ticked up: Yes? When he pointed at his watch and then inclined his head back the way he'd come, her eyebrows arched and then puckered into a slight frown before she held up a finger. One minute.

Nodding, he turned and retraced his steps, counting off the children here. He did this twice, hoping he was wrong.

He wasn't.

She took more than a minute, which was fine. Leaning back against the corridor's stone wall, he thought of how he could present this in a way that didn't come across as an accusation. Even though, that was precisely what he was doing. He didn't think she was the one who'd lied, though.

He thought they'd both been lied to.

"Hey." Roni ducked into the tunnel. "What's up?" But then when she saw the look on his face, her own clouded. "What?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

He couldn't blurt it right out. Maybe inching his way up to the problem would be best. "How's it going?"

"Well, a lot to get through." Roni lifted a hand in an unconscious gesture to brush away hair that wasn't there. An old habit, which John had noticed whenever they had been on-call together, and a surefire indicator that Roni was harried, overworked, in need of a break. Paperwork, of course, and then addressing each of the kid's problems. "Like that boy with the asthma. I don't have many inhalers on me, but..." She stopped herself. "This isn't what you want to talk about."

She knew him well. "You do a head count?" he asked.

"Do a..." She shook her head. "No, I just got down to work. Why? John, what's the matter?"

"The numbers. They don't add up. There are too many kids, Roni."

"Too many...?" Her voice trailed off as her eyes widened. Her mouth formed a small, astonished o. "You're sure?"

Would we be having this conversation if I wasn't? "Twenty-seven kids. That's what Shahida said. Tell me I didn't hallucinate that."

"You didn't hallucinate that," she said, her voice faint. "But...?"

"But that's not how many I counted."

“How many? I’m assuming you counted the boys in my group, too.”

“Yeah.” He pulled in a long breath. “Thirty-two.”

“What?” The word dropped from her mouth. “You’re sure? Shahida said?—”

He interrupted. “Roni, we’re not talking relativistic equations. I got eighteen boys. Counted them twice. You’ve got fourteen. In my land, that adds up to?—”

“Oh, my God.” Turning, Roni slumped back against stone, closed her eyes, and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Oh, my God.”

“I don’t think a deity’s gonna swoop down to save us here.”

“Don’t joke.”

“I’m not. Roni, we’re in some deep doo-doo here.”

“What are we going to do?” She gave him a stricken look. “John, we don’t have enough room. With only four vehicles, we barely have room as it is. What are we going to do?”

He hooked a thumb over a shoulder. “Let’s go talk to Driver and Mac. Then we all four go find Shahida. She’s got some ‘splaining to do.”

3

“What do you mean, she’s not here?” John asked.

“Exactly what I said.” Mac sounded like an aggrieved restaurant patron who’d just found a hair in his vichyssoise. “Driver and I went looking for her an hour ago.”

“Not that there are many places she might have gone,” Driver rapped. The glare bouncing off the desert beyond the main cavern’s entrance washed the color from Driver’s face, turning him as pallid as new bone. The skin under his bloodshot eyes looked bruised, yet unlike Meeks and Flowers, who’d been catching a few winks, John and Roni had found him pacing. “All we know is Musa’s jeep is gone, and she didn’t say a word to anyone. They must’ve left when we were getting you guys set up.” To Mac: “I told you, we needed to watch her. She’s been angry ever since we said there was a limit to what we could do. You know she blames you for this. That you guys didn’t move faster.”

“The thought,” Mac said, dryly, “had crossed my mind.”

Blames him for what? “You haven’t called her?” John asked.

“No comms, man. Remember?” Flowers stifled a yawn. “Except in emergencies.”

“This doesn’t qualify?”

“We don’t need comms.” Driver’s tone held an almost manic intensity. “We know what she’s doing, if not exactly where.”

“Uh-huh.” Driver was, John thought, pretty wired. How many uppers had he tossed back? “And what is that?”

“I know,” Roni said, her voice faint. “She’s gathering more boys, isn’t she?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

Mac nodded. "More than likely, retrieving them from wherever she's squirreled them away."

"Because she knows we can't refuse her." Driver's fists balled. "That's the only reason she pulled this stunt."

"Take it easy," Mac said, his tone still mild. "There's no need to get into that now."

"I'm sorry?" Roni looked from Mac to Driver and then back again. "You know why she did this?"

Okay, that was a surprise. He'd imagined Driver had told her. Flowers certainly had talked himself hoarse on the drive here and told him exactly what that was.

But that was the trouble with guilt of which he had a lot of firsthand experience. Talking didn't necessarily help. Guilt was the blood Lady Macbeth just couldn't wash away.

"Look," he said, making it a point not to so much as glance in Flowers's direction, "whatever history is between you guys and Shahida is your business. What's our business is what do we do now? Because we already have a very big problem."

They listened as he explained about the numbers, keeping it short and simple. After a moment's silence, he said, "You know where this is going, right? She already snuck in more than she 'fessed up to, and now she's trying to strong-arm you into taking even more."

“We don’t have the room,” Mac said.

“Maybe,” Flowers said, “if me and Meeks stayed behind?—”

“No,” Driver said at the same time that Mac said, “Absolutely not. We are positivelynotdoing leaving anyone behind. That is a setup for disaster.”

“Yeah, Flowers,” Meeks said, “volunteer yourself.”

“Get real. We’re adults. These are just boys.” Flowers shook his head. “But, man, IknewI shoulda gone that diet.”

“Mind you, I’m not volunteering,” Meeks said, “but Flowers does make a good point.”

“About a diet?” Flowers asked.

Meeks rolled his eyes. “We got to get rid of two adults or even three, but that still might not be enough room.”

“So, we need a bigger boat,” John said.

Mac blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“Jaws,” Flowers said. “Great flick. It’s criminal how underappreciated Roy Scheider is.”

He really liked this guy. He could imagine cracking a couple brews, popping some corn, and sitting through, say, a Humphrey Bogart marathon. Better yet, Cary Grant’s Hitchcock movies. But what John said was, “We need more vehicles.”

“Which we ain’t got and haven’t a prayer of getting, not in time,” Mac said.

“Unless Shahida brings back another vehicle,” Roni said. “She’s not stupid.”

“Oh, no? Shall I simply chalk this up to her impetuosity?”

“No,” John said, “you should chalk it up to the fact that she knows you won’t do anything about it. Nothing to her, anyway.”

“Whatever she does, we can’t leave kids behind.” When they all looked at Flowers, he shrugged. “We just can’t.”

“I’m open to suggestion,” Mac said.

They all thought about that for a second, and then John put a hand to his head. “We are so stupid.” When they all turned puzzled looks, he said, “We’re so focused on all or none. Why don’t we think in halves?”

“I don’t understand,” Mac said.

“I do.” Roni smiled up at John. “I think it’s the only option.”

Driver frowned. “I still don’t?—”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

John cut him off. “We have enough vehicles if one of us takes a load now.”

“What? Don’t be absurd. There’s no time,” Mac said. “It’s a six-hour trip, one way. You’d never get back to the airport and then back here before the last transport is wheels’ up?—”

“You’re thinking in straight lines,” John said. “If this were a movie, I’d say you’re displaying two-dimensional thinking.”

“I know that movie,” Flowers said at the same time that Mac, frowning, said, “What? What kind of nonsense is?—”

Flowers cut him off. “Man, it’s the old riddle. That fox, goose, and bag of beans puzzle, right?”

Mac’s eyebrows met above his nose. “What puzzle?”

“Kid’s game,” Meeks put in.

“Yeah, more like a mental puzzle. If you’ve got a fox, goose, and bag of beans on one side of the river and you can only take one across at a time,” Flowers said, “how do you get everything over without the fox eating the goose or the goose eating the beans?”

“I still don’t understand,” Mac said.

“Ido.” Driver had stopped pacing, though his eyes were still just a little too bright.

“It’s not quite the same but close enough. One of us takes a full load of kids halfway.”

“While an empty transport leaves Kabul and we meet at the halfway point,” John said. “They bring more fuel so the person who takes them has enough if he has any kind of emergency.”

“Like hiding.” Meeks spread his palms. “Sorry, man, but that’s why we drove here at night. Too dangerous during the day.”

“Do we have any choices that do not involve leaving a bunch of kids?” John shot back. After a moment’s silence which no one filled, he continued, “We transfer the kids into the empty transport and then our guy turns around and comes back here.”

“By which time, Shahida and Musa will be back,” Flowers said.

John watched Driver’s men and Mac all look at one another and then Driver said, “Okay, let’s plan for the worst-case scenario, the max we think Shahida would bring back.”

Before the others could answer, Mac said, “I know how many.”

“You do?” John asked and then he got it. “That’s what you were arguing about when we got here. She wanted to go out for one more truckload, only you nixed it.”

“Yes.” Mac’s tone was dry. “As you can see, my words had great effect.”

“So, how many?” Driver’s lower jaw unhinged when Mac held up both hands. “Ten?”

“I’m afraid so.” To John: “This would mean taking ten boys in one vehicle.”

“Sit on laps?” As the men all swapped looks, Roni said, “Oh, for God’s sake, didn’t any of you ever go partying?”

“You did?” John was astonished. Somehow he’d never figured Roni as the party-girl type. “When?”

“High school. I wallowed in teenage angst and booze swiped from parents.”

“You’re lucky your car didn’t end up wrapped around a telephone pole.”

“This was in the mountains. We were more in danger of running off a cliff,” Roni said, her tone dry. “Except I was always the designated driver. So, not really. Anyway, my point is we select ten kids. Five can fit on the seats and five in their laps.”

“That would do it.” Flowers, again. “Then even if Shahida brings in ten more, we do have enough room to get everyone out.” He looked at John. “Good thinking out of the box, man. So, who goes?”

“I can do it,” Mac said and then when Driver started shaking his head, the other man scowled. “Why not?”

“You’re in charge,” Driver said. “I was going to say that you’re the only person Shahida might listen to, but I think the point’s moot.”

“Oh, I can do a bit of damage,” Mac said. “Later, though. We still need a driver.”

“I think you just nominated me,” Driver said.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“No way.” When Driver gave him a narrow-eyed look, John said, “And you know exactly why.” From the look Meek and Flowers shared, they did, too. He was relieved when Driver gave only a short nod in reply. He had no wish to embarrass the guy, but he’d be damned if he let Driver, strung-out on uppers, behind the wheel.

“I could do it,” Meeks offered.

“Not after driving all night, you won’t,” John said. “And not Flowers either. So, that leaves me.”

Roni, nettled: “I could do it.”

“No, you work faster than I do. If Flowers or Meeks could fill in all the extraneous paperwork, then all you’d have to do is write a couple sentences for a medical clearance and make recommendations. Same thing if Shahida shows up with more kids.”

“That’s something I can do,” Driver said before either of his men could reply. “They need to sleep and I’m too jacked.”

And then some. “See? When in doubt, delegate. So there,” John said to Mac. “Problem solved.” And more than one. If he took kids or beans or whatever anyone wanted to call them across that metaphorical river, they’d be on their way to the airport in plenty of time.

“Yes,” Mac said, his tone abstracted.

“Don’t fall all over yourself thanking me.”

“What?” Mac looked up then shook his head. “No, no, it’s a fine plan. It’s just that...” Mac turned a look at Driver. “We’ll be breaking protocol.”

John and Roni traded looks. “I’m sorry?” John said. “So?”

“Naw, I get it,” Flowers said.

“I don’t.”

“It means getting someone at the airport on the horn,” Driver said.

“Uh-huh.” He was still confused. “So?”

“So, they meet you halfway, man,” Flowers added.

“And? What?” He waited. “Don’t everyone talk at once.”

“Ah.” Roni’s face cleared. “Yeah, I hadn’t thought about that.”

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense,” John said.

“Mac will have to transmit a message,” Driver said. “Even scrambled, anyone who’s listening?—”

Might get curious. “How big is the risk?”

“Which one?” Mac asked. “Risk is rarely black or white. Risk usually can be broken down into stages and a series of questions. So, number one.” He held up a finger. “The risk that the message is heard? More than likely.” Another finger. “Second,

would the message be of interest? That depends upon who's listening, yes? And then the last." A third finger. "Will the message provoke a response?" Mac shook his head. "Unknowable, seeing as how we've never taken this risk before. We've not given anyone anything to see or hear."

"I think this is worth the risk, Mac," Driver said. "Otherwise, what will this have been for? We're talking only two transmissions. You call with a request, and they acknowledge."

"Three." They all looked at Roni. "You need to tell them where and when," she said.

"Still worth the risk," John said. "No more than two, three minutes on the air."

"My dear boy," Mac said—at which point John was nearly positive the man had spent time in England, "wars have been lost in less time. But I also don't see that we have much choice. Every moment we waste is one more we will never have again. All right." Clapping his hand, Mac gave a brusque nod. "I will contact my people back at the airport and coordinate a rendezvous. How soon can you gather the boys you'll take, Doctor?"

John opened his mouth to reply, but Flowers raised a hand. "I just thought of something. If you're driving and someone comes at you, how are you going to both shoot and drive?"

"He doesn't have to." When they all turned, Roni said, "You're forgetting one thing."

"What's that?" John asked.

"These boys," she said. "They were Shahida's army."

The hardest part of driving a Humvee full of kids was worrying about the boy with the silvery-blue eyes riding shotgun. Like, literally, riding with a shotgun. Well, Kalashnikov. Different flavor, same idea.

“Kazim is quite competent,” Mac said, as Flower and Meeks loaded and folded the other children into various configurations before settling on having the older and larger kids hold those who were younger and scrawnier on their laps. “He also speaks more than a bit of English. His father was a schoolteacher before he was killed. Again, fortunate, should the two of you come upon some emergency.”

“Uh-huh.” Honestly, if the proverbial brown stuff hit the fan, the kid might have to think for himself. There was also something almost familiar about the boy. What was it? He watched the kid checking out a rifle: safetying the Kalashnikov, inspecting the chamber, popping out the magazine, counting rounds. Peering through the weapon’s bore to make sure there was no debris or buildup. All the right moves which indicated the kid knew what he was doing.

But watching the kid was also a little eerie, like seeing himself as a boy. There was hunting. Lots of kids did that with their dads or uncles. But there was also war. There was the knowledge that people might very well be drawing a bead and squeezing a trigger with about as much thought as they might give to swatting a fly or turning out a light.

This kid was prepared to kill, a feeling with which he was quite familiar. He wondered, for the first time, what it had been like for Uncle Dare after all the dust

settled and everything said and done. Had Dare, alone in his cabin, looked back on all those months of his nephew's very peculiar tutelage and thought, What in God's name have I done?

"How old is he?" He avoided using the kid's name. Didn't want the kid to know they were talking about him. Although he had a sense Kazim knew precisely what was going on.

"Fifteen." Then, Mac had added, "Owned for five of those years. Liberated during the sixth."

John did the math. "He was taken when he was nine?"

"Oh, not taken. Bought, and for a very handsome price, or so I've been told. His unfortunate mother was left with many mouths to feed and little income. She could tutor, of course, but only girls and then even that modest income was taken from her."

"Taliban?"

"Only long after the fact. Once farmers there had their opium crops destroyed by coalition forces, no one had money to spare for education. So, what was she to do? Kazim's brothers weren't as," Mac searched for the right word, "pretty? Desirable? I only know of this second-hand, mind you, but from what I heard, the broker had himself quite a bidding war. The boy was well-proportioned, of course, but it was the color of his eyes, that otherworldly blue, which made him doubly attractive. Do you read much?"

The sudden shift caught him off-balance. "Uh, sure. Why?"

"Do you recall this very famous photograph of a young girl with?"

“Her eyes.” That was what made the boy seem so familiar. “I remember. National Geographic.”

Mac was nodding. “Sharbat Gula, yes. She was living in a Pakistani refugee camp and in school when that photo was taken. Very hard life she’s had, a bit like the boy. Her eyes were what captured the photographer. He had to take her picture; he had to pose her in what is, essentially, a glamour shot.”

“Get out.”

“No, seriously. Go back and look sometime if you don’t believe me. Study the fear in her eyes. Here’s this grown white man cajoling a ten-year-old girl, while her teachers do nothing to stop him. Well, the same goes for Kazim. The boy was beautiful and quite a catch. His owner’s friends wanted this gorgeous chai boy, too, and didn’t mind parting with some monetary recompense for the privilege of a few hours.”

Just the thought of the boy being passed around for sexual favors by a bunch of men made him ill. “How long has he been with Shahida?”

“A year. She’s his savior and he is devoted. Believe me, he’s not at all happy parting from her even for a few hours.”

That, he thought, might be a problem. “Is he going to be trouble?”

“You mean, will he turn the gun on you and rush back here?” Mac shrugged. “I doubt it.”

“Which is another way of saying maybe yes, maybe no.” He paused then added, “Heavy on the maybe no.”

“If the two of you were alone, perhaps. But there are the other boys, so he will follow

orders. An unfortunate byproduct from his upbringing, however, is that you'll find he's quite hardened. Not completely lacking in empathy, but he is efficient and quite..."

"Ruthless?"

"I was going to say dispassionate." Mac gave him a side-eye. "If there's a problem, he'll do what's necessary."

"Well," John said, "let's hope for all of our sakes, he doesn't have to."

As luck would have it, the three dusty and very hot hours it took to reach the rendezvous point flew by: John, pushing the vehicle as hard as he could while keeping an eye on the odometer; Kazim, watchful, his head on a perpetual swivel as he checked left, right, and then their rear in his side-view mirror. The two other boys sandwiched between them were still as statues. None of the seven boys in the rear seat chatted. In fact, lulled by the motion and steady drone of the engine, the majority slept. John spotted no other vehicles, though they did pass several villages and swaths of farmland he'd not seen on the outbound leg. The only people out there were at such a distance as to be mostly suggestions.

Right around the time his odometer showed that he was halfway to Kabul, Kazim suddenly straightened.

"What?" John's pulse tripped into double-time. He flicked a quick look at the boy, who was leaning forward now and squinting. "What is it?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“They are here.” Kazim’s voice cracked a bit, though his tone betrayed no alarm at all. “I see them.”

“Our rendezvous? Where?” He transferred his gaze back through the windscreen. “I don’t see?—”

But then he did: in the distance, a bright wink of sunlight bouncing off glass.

“Wow.” He eased off the gas. No point coming in hot and getting everybody all excited. “Good eyes, Kazim.”

“Yes.” The kid’s tone betrayed neither pleasure nor satisfaction. Just a statement of fact.

It occurred to him then that he hadn’t gotten any instructions about what to say or who to look for. On the other hand, roadblocks formed by a Humvee and a supply truck manned by personnel in the right uniforms armed to the proverbial teeth with weapons pointing their way could be said to be a give-away.

“Put your weapon down in the wheel well,” he said, as they slowed. “Tell the boys to raise their hands and then you do the same, so the soldiers see.”

He watched their speed as Kazim relayed his instructions. From the corner of an eye, he saw the flash of movement as the two boys in front put up their hands. A glance in the rear view showed that the kids in back had done the same.

Which left one kid, who definitely had not gotten the memo.

“Kazim,” he said, feathering the gas ever so slightly to keep them moving. Stopping too far away would be as bad as suddenly stomping on the gas. “Do what I say. Lower your weapon.”

“May be a trap.” The boy’s chin took on a stubborn jut. “I am no good if not ready to fight.”

Damn you, Mac. This was precisely what he’d been worried about. “I doubt it’s a trap. These men are waiting in the middle of the desert at precisely the right point.”

“Taliban listen all time.”

“You might have a point, but not this time. Unless the Taliban have a boatload of spare uniforms and equipment, these men are the right people at the right time.”

“Maybe first time for everything.”

He wasn’t going to get into a debate. “Let me spell this out to you. If you don’t put down your weapon, they will shoot and ask questions later.”

“I am very fast.”

“And I don’t doubt that, but I guarantee that you are not fast enough to pick off more than three before the fourth gets you.” He thought he probably could, but this was not the time to challenge the kid to an arm-wrestling contest. “What would you do if Shahida were the one giving the orders?”

A ripple of emotion through the boy’s face now. His lower lip quivered ever so slightly. “I do what Shahida says.”

“Well, Shahida wants you to get away and be safe. But if you don’t lower your

weapon, the men will fire. They are very good at their jobs, and they will hurt you. They might even kill you. Are you saying Shahida would want that? She wants you to live. So, do what I say.” He didn’t add or else. The kid was the one with the rifle, not him. Although he did think for a split second about how he could come at the kid and take his weapon. He thought he’d have more than a fair chance of grabbing the barrel, which was one of the downsides of a long gun in a tight space. “And jack out that round you’ve chambered, too.”

For a long, seemingly interminable few seconds, nothing happened. But then came the distinctive clack of the rifle’s action cycling and snick of the cartridge being ejected and a wink of sun against metal as the chambered round popped out. Catching the bullet with a practiced movement, Kazim placed the round on the dash and his weapon in the footwell before raising his hands.

Thank you, Lord. Not a moment too soon either. They were now fifty yards away from the roadblock. Killing the engine, John showed his hands and waited.

After about ten seconds, two men dismounted. One was tall, carried a jerry can, and seemed slim, although no one in full battle dress ever looked very skinny with all that gear. The second man was smaller and rounder. Not quite as squat as a fire plug but close. Both wore wraparounds. Fire Plug stayed a step ahead of Thin Man, which suggested that Fire Plug was in charge. From a distance, the soldiers’ uniforms looked British, not American.

Which was interesting. Maybe Mac comes by that hint of Brit honestly. No rank insignia either, not even on the men’s helmets. A decent idea: enemies picked off medics first and then the guy in command second, though John figured no one would get too bent if it went the other way round. A good sniper could tell who was in charge by observation alone. The guy in command was likely to be the one who did the most talking or gave hand signals to the others. Since the guys in command never seemed to change their tactics, he bet no one had ever broken it to them that

removing helmet insignia fooled absolutely no one.

“Captain Worthy?” Fire Plug said.

A formality. The polite thing to do, under the circumstances. But, honestly, how many American soldiers could there possibly be roaming around with a truckload of kids? Still, he lowered his hands and answered the guy’s question. “Yup.”

“Excellent.” Fire Plug beamed. He had very good teeth. “I’m Drummond.”

“Nice to meet you.” Hooked a thumb over a shoulder. “Got your beans right here.”

Drummond, baffled. “Beans.”

“It’s nothing. A private joke.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“Ah. I see,” Drummond said, in a tone which suggested he didn’t. “Well, let’s offload these boys and do so quickly, shall we? You have a long drive back and we have an equally long drive to the airport. If we’re lucky, we’ll hit the Russian Road just after sunset. The fewer eyes, the better. You have all their papers?”

“Right here.” He handed over a large envelope. “Everything’s signed. All you gotta do is slot the boys into transports.”

“We’ll see to it. Oh, yes, we have petrol here.” A nod to his subordinate. “A precaution so you are sure to make it back. Why don’t you stretch your legs while we refill your tank and get the boys situated?”

“Sounds like a good idea,” he said, clicking out of his shoulder harness. Although the idea felt more like an order. “I could use a breather.”

“Splendid.” Drummond paused then continued in that same mild tone, “But I’m afraid I have to insist the boy’s rifle stay with you.”

Oh, no. He already knew what he would see before he looked and when he did, he wasn’t disappointed. “Kazim, I told you to put the rifle down.”

“I’m not going.” Kazim kept his gaze pinned to a spot by his feet. The rifle was in his left hand, but the magazine still lay in the footwell. “I go back with you.”

“You can’t,” John said, squelching a sudden swell of panic. A hush had fallen in the back; the other boys were seemingly frozen in place. For his part, Drummond only studied the boy the way a lepidopterist turns a butterfly this way and that, trying to

decide if this might not be a new species no one has ever seen. Which was good; Drummond was keeping his cool. Perhaps that was because Thin Man had backed up a step and leveled his weapon. Would Thin Man shoot a kid? John decided he didn't want to find out. "You have to get on a transport, Kazim. That's what Shahida would want."

"No." Kazim's face was in profile, but John saw how the boy's lower lip trembled and twitched as he fought against emotion. "I go back."

"You can't?—"

"Everybody say what Kazim do!" The boy's words were a lash. His head jerked up and John could see emotions warring on his young features. "Parents say! Fouad say, Mir say, Shahida say!" he shouted, his voice suddenly cracking. He was so wound up, his command of English had slipped and now he pounded his chest with the balled fist not gripping his weapon. "When Kazim get to say?"

"A legitimate question," Drummond said, his tone still mild. "You don't want to get away from people who will only hurt you?"

Oh, escaping to another country is no guarantee. Plenty of people out there who don't mind being cruel. But John kept his mouth shut.

"Yes." Kazim's mouth quivered. Swallowing, he sat up straighter. "But John no safe going back alone."

"Why?" he asked, confused, at the same moment that Drummond nodded and said, "Ah, so that's it. This Shahida, what would she do? What would her orders be?"

"I ride to protect John and my friends." Now that he was calmer, his English was smoother, too. "John cannot drive and shoot same time."

“I’ll be fine,” John said.

“No.” Drummond raised a finger. “The boy has a point. I would loan you a man, but I have no authorization. Therefore, only two options remain.” To Kazim: “We could force you to comply, but I don’t wish to do so because then you might actually try to shoot someone and I’m afraid I can’t allow that. I would be very sorry to seriously hurt or even kill you, Kazim.”

“I am good?—”

“You are not that good.” Drummond cut the boy off. “Those men will fire before you can level a weapon. Please don’t doubt that for a second. I am equally certain that Shahida would be very upset if any of your friends here or even John were hurt in the process. Still, I admire your courage, and I think you have a very valid point.”

“What?” John goggled. “What are you saying?”

“You have a long drive back, Captain. You will arrive close to sunset. In my experience, that’s when the animals come out to play. A lone soldier in a vehicle is a very tempting target.”

You don’t get it. We barely have enough room as it is. The words were poised, on the tip of his tongue, and then he swallowed them back. Because Drummond wasn’t wrong. Neither was Kazim and, really, what was one more skinny kid?

“All right.” He looked at the boy. “But from here on out, you do what I say, understood?”

“Yes,” Kazim said, working to smother a smug grin. He failed, miserably. “I understand.”

Shahida is going to have your hide, kid. If she didn't take a piece out of him first.

"Splendid." Drummond made a let's roll motion with a forefinger. "Then let us get this proverbial show on the road."

After that, things happened quickly. While Thin Man filled the Humvee's tank, several of Drummond's men took charge of shepherding the boys into the back of the supply truck. Within fifteen minutes, the boys were safely stowed, the jerry can empty, and he and Kazim were back in their seats.

"Well." Drummond extended a hand. "Good luck, Captain. We will take care of these boys and pass the word to expect your convoy this evening. Do you know when you expect to shove off?"

"Assuming everything goes to plan, as soon as I get back. Even with there being some daylight left, I don't think anyone wants to cut things too close. If the last transport really is wheels' up by midnight, then figure we better get the kids onto those transports no later than thirty minutes before they close the cargo bay doors and do final checks."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

A thought did occur to him which he didn't voice: the cruelty in shutting down for the night without telling the thousands patiently waiting beyond the gates that no one would return in the morning.

"Well, then," Drummond said, consulting his watch, "I will leave you to it. Oh, and give my regards to Mac. Remind him, please, that he still owes me a bottle of Macallan '72."

"Okay." There had to be a story behind that one, not the least of which that the two men had worked together in the past. Which was...interesting. Whoever Mac was or whomever he worked for, the guy wasn't the usual flavor of CIA worker-bee. Although to be fair, John didn't know anyone in the CIA.

Unless Mac was something else altogether?

"Thanks for your help," he said, and stuck out a hand. As they shook, he asked, "So, tell me, Major, since when is the British military intelligence working with the CIA?"

By way of reply, Drummond gave him a bland look, though his mouth twitched into a fractional grin.

"Drive safely, Captain," he said. "And do buckle up."

5

The next two hours and fifty minutes were spectacularly uneventful. In fact, now that the present urgency was past, a deepening torpor crept through his body. The feeling

was similar to the letdown after a code or trauma case. A body could only be on high alert for so long. So, he shifted a lot in his seat, widened his eyes, wished the Humvee had a radio. Wished Kazim spoke better English or seemed more inclined to conversation. Which the boy didn't and wasn't. Every time he flicked a look, the kid was making like a Marine: alert, head on a swivel, the whole nine yards, except for those brief moments when their gazes locked and the boy gave a sharp nod, as if to sayon it, boss. Which was probably fine. After all, the kid wasn't going to see him after this evening and there wasn't a single conversational gambit which came to mind that was safe. He couldn't even joke around: Say, how about those Yankees?

Nothing for it, but to stay awake. But, man, I'd settle for a couple Red Bulls. Now he understood why Flowers had needed all that caffeine. Better jacked than bone-weary. Should've grabbed a thermos of coffee. Or something. The Humvee didn't have even a radio for distraction.

He was feeling a letdown, that was all, and wasn't that normal? After all, everything was pretty downhill after this. Their biggest hurdle would be getting past the Panjir Pump and into the base, but he thought that given the lack of problems leaving, slipping back with a passel of kids ought to be a cakewalk. Seriously, look, how quickly and efficiently Mac had gotten Drummond to the rendezvous. A guy like Mac would never leave anything to chance. Drummond, he sensed, would also make sure their way back in was smoothed. The guy would pass on the message that they were all due in at such and such a time and then that would make it to Mac's command.

Ah, but that did raise an interesting thought. Did Mac have a command? He must. Yeah, Mac was CIA. Unless he was a very special type of CIA?—

“John!”

“What?” More of an automatic exclamation than a true question. He was so startled, his heart catapulted into the back of his throat and his arms gave a convulsive jerk,

sending the Humvee into a swerve. In the next instant, he felt then heard the tires go from a relatively smooth surface to the jolt and grumble of rock and hardpack. Swearing, he brought the vehicle back onto the road, eased up on the gas then braked. “What?” Rounding on the boy, he inserted a hint of steel. “What the hell?—”

“Look!” Leaning forward, Kazim jabbed a finger to the right. “There!”

“What?” The huge orange ball of the setting sun hung off his left shoulder. Scanning the flatland to his right, he recognized the ruins of the village amidst dried-up irrigation ditches, all splashed the color of dried blood. “Where? I don’t see anything that doesn’t belong?—”

The boy cut him off. “Not there. Other way, look, here, here! On Kohe Koran!”

He recognized the name of the mountain Flowers had pointed out that morning. Squinting, he ran his gaze along the base and up-slope but saw nothing but folds and ridges and scrub. “I don’t understand,” he said, perplexed, fighting a new wave of exhaustion as the adrenaline spike of apprehension and surprise faded. “What am I supposed to be seeing?”

“You don’t see?” The boy sounded incredulous. “You don’t see wolves?”

Wolves? Right, hadn’t Flowers spotted a whole pack? The man had known what to look for; John didn’t and then Flowers said...

Oh, for pity’s sake. Reaching past the boy, he popped the glove box, pawed past the flare gun and spare cartridges, and dragged out the binos he’d used that morning. “Okay, okay, hold your horses,” he said, feathering the focus. As the view shifted from fuzz to sharp clarity, he counted six lanky forms trotting west, toward the setting sun. That tallied with what Flowers had said about the pack.

“Okay, I see them.” He lowered the binos. “So what?”

“They runaway.”

Run away? “I don’t understand.”

“They go wrongway. You no see that?”

“Well, yeah, I see them, but...”

The boy cut him off. “They going backhome. Why they do? Wolf come out night. Need eat. But they runback.”

“I—” he started then stopped. My God. Now that the boy had spelled it out, he realized Kazim was right. “You’re saying they’re running from something.”

“Yes, yes.” Although Kazim was anything but relieved. “Something make them run.”

Or someone. “Oh, no,” he said.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“Yes,” Kazim said. “Bad men coming.”

He thought Kazim was right. Worse, whoever was headed for the others was coming from a direction where they wouldn’t be seen. The cave entrance looked south and southwest. Unless Mac had posted someone out in the open to keep an eye on their blind side, they wouldn’t know anyone was coming until it was too late.

If someone’s coming, I have to warn the others. But he also needed to know what he was warning them against. Not only that, I have to figure out how. Because their radios would be off. Mac had been clear about that. So, how?

First things first. “Listen, I have to get us atop this next rise to see into the valley and east of the aqueduct. If something is coming, they need an idea of what that is.”

“Bad men.” The boy’s knuckles whitened as Kazim tightened his grip on his Kalashnikov. “Bad men come take us away. Come kill Shahida.”

God, I hope you’re wrong. He also hoped no one would see them just yet. Getting them atop the next rise meant they’d be silhouetted against the sky. There would likely be sun dazzle caused by light bouncing off the Humvee.

They also had another problem. Driver would undoubtedly have one of his men watching for their return. For all John knew, everyone was clustered at the entrance. So, they’d see the Humvee stop. Would they reach the wrong conclusion? Think that they were the enemy?

Can’t just sit here. Besides, time was running out. They needed to load the boys into

their vehicles and beat feet.

Dropping the Humvee into gear, he slowly rolled the vehicle to the top of the next rise. Once there, he stopped again and released a held breath. So far, so good. He spotted tire tracks to the right where they had all turned off the main road earlier than day. Raising the binos, he glassed the valley floor. The entrance to the defunct aqueduct jumped into focus and he saw now not two, but three boxy vehicles nosed toward the entrance.

So, Shahida's back. That was good news. There was movement at the entrance as a man stepped into the open. A split second later, he was joined by another tall, slimmer person. Driver and Mac. He was too far away to make out actual facial features; although he could tell from their posture that they were looking at one another. Driver seemed to be arguing. Neither had looked in their direction.

"You see?" Kazim prompted. "Bad men?"

"No." Another thought occurred to him then. If they did spot the Humvee, Driver and Mac might assume that they were hostiles. Otherwise, why wouldn't their vehicle simply keep coming? Even as he thought this, he spotted both blobs turn his way and then one rush back into the cavern.

Crap. He had no idea what kind of weapons Driver had stashed back there. With his luck, they'd lob an RPG or something. But wouldn't they check first? Maybe that's what Driver was doing: running back for binos. If he was, then Driver would have a bead on him. He might be able to use that to his advantage to warn them.

If there's even something to warn them about.

"You see?" Kazim said again. "You see the men coming?"

“I’m looking, I’m looking.” Got to make this quick. Aiming the binoculars northwest toward the cavern’s blind side, he squinted against glare bouncing off the mountain. For several agonizing seconds, he saw absolutely nothing. The wolves had vanished. Nothing else stirred, not even the hint of a breeze. Forcing himself to move slowly so as not to miss anything was agony, but he did so, trailing his gaze over scrub and rocks, brown scree and rubble, the deep folds carved from the mountain by centuries of runoff and wind, and then the startling swaths of green which marked the spring. A few white stalks of some plant swayed in the breeze. Had he seen those this morning? He couldn’t recall, but someone back at the airport once had pointed those out amongst the grasses and plants lining the perimeter of the airport. That soldier said they were...was that it? Wild licorice, that was it.

Wait a minute. He’d just seen something that set off a small ping of alarm. What was it? He glassed the same area on the blind side again, though more slowly, as he dredged up what he’d seen in the same area that morning. Burnt rock and khaki scrub and sun-bleached scree, the emerald-green of that literal oasis in the middle of all this desert. All that was the same. What was not the same were?—

Those patches of white. Plants which he thought were flowering licorice. They had not been there this morning. Even if they had been and were now only being stirred by a breeze, nothing else was moving. But these plants were.

Because they had legs.

6

Tunics. That was what he was seeing slowly approaching the base of the mountain but well around a bend and out of sight. The men must have come from the north, over and around the mountain, and now he picked out details. Pakools. Beards. Rifles slung over shoulders and spare magazines dangling from belts. Were these Taliban? Flowers had said this was last contested place in the whole country.

And we've got a passel of kids. He swept his gaze over the approaching men. Kids whom Shahida's made into her own little army?—

The thought stuttered and died as he spotted a tall man bringing up the rear. Along with a rifle, this bandit or Taliban or whatever he was carried a long green tube with a pointed end on a strap which he'd hooked over a shoulder.

An RPG launcher.

Oh, holy God. He must've spoken the words aloud because Kazim asked, "What you see?"

"Nothing good." Dropping back into the driver's seat, he said, "We got to go."

"Too far, John." Kazim clutched at his arm. "We no get there in time to help!"

The kid was right. The moment they barreled from the road onto the dirt, they'd be seen, and those fighters would realize the jig was up. A warning shot was no good, either. Too far away, for one thing. For another, any kind of weapons fire would be interpreted as hostile. The last thing he needed was his people deciding to target him and Kazim. What was left? How to let his people know there was trouble?—

Wait a minute. A spark of an idea. He'd just seen it, he'd pushed it aside, hadn't given it any thought. Reaching past Kazim, he popped the glove box, pawed around?—

And found the orange flare gun.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“John!” Kazim said. “What you do, John?”

“The only thing I can.” Swinging out of the cab, he raised the flare gun and took aim to the right, away from the mountain and toward the men’s blind side, hoping against hope that Driver and Mac were like everybody else. The flare would be visible for five seconds and in that time, they would look to the sky first and follow that flame as it fell before trying to figure out where it had come from. Wouldn’t they? Of course, the flare would probably make the bad guys move even faster. They would realize they’d been spotted, that the jig was up, and so what the hell, come down screaming and forget trying to sneak around.

Stop, stop! A command he’d heard in his head only once before: when he’d been fifteen and forced to do something he could never take back, that could never be undone. The only way then, as now, was to do what no one else could.

Shoot. His arm steadied, firmed. Shoot already, shoot!

“Cover your ears!” he shouted to the boy and squeezed the trigger.

7

The blast was tremendous: a huge, startling, almost theatrical bang as loud as a .50cal handgun. The recoil juddered into his arms as the flare rocketed for the sky with a high-pitched decrescendo whine. On the heels of that thought came the nauseating realization that he had no idea if a flare, designed for use on water or snow, stopped burning in mid-air or when it hit water. The last thing he needed was to start a brush fire out here. Within three or four seconds, however, the flare reached the apex of its

climb; the orange flame died, and then the flare, its supply of propellant gases exhausted, fell in its long arcing descent, trailing a ribbon of thick black smoke.

Please, please, please. No time to lose, no time to waste, no time to see if Driver and Mac or anyone down there was looking the right way. The sound had been so huge, they had to have been curious, and the flare was bright, the smoky trail stark against blue sky. Of course, the bad guys would've heard then seen the same thing. They had to know that they'd been seen. Which meant two things: either they'd gone to ground, or they were hurrying the hell up.

Which meant he had to get moving.

Yeah, but with what plan? All he could think was that Roni and Driver and all those kids needed this Humvee to stand a chance of getting away. Swinging back into the cab, he dropped the Humvee into drive and hammered the accelerator. The vehicle sprang forward with a roar, and then he was spinning the wheel, sending the Humvee hurtling from the road and onto hardpack. As they left the road, the vehicle hopped, went briefly airborne then dropped like a stone. On his right, Kazim cried out in surprise. Hedid, too, the yelp jumping from his tongue as his body levitated and strained against his shoulder harness. They came down with a violent, bone-shattering slam so hard John felt the impact shiver through his spine and arms and into his teeth. For a split second, his grip on the steering wheel slipped. The Humvee wallowed in response and tried to spin. As he wrestled with the wheel, he heard a dull thuck as something caromed off the window and then pinged off the roof overhead. For a brief, heart-stopping moment, he thought maybe the Humvee had taken a bullet through the windscreen. The vehicles were reinforced, but they weren't bulletproof and neither was the glass. Then something sailed past his ear. He caught a flash of blue and silver as the object bounced off the windscreen, flipped back, and landed in his lap.

That Flowers. Jumping a leg, he sent the crumpled can of Red Bull into the footwell

and concentrated on not crashing. The Humvee wallowed in ruts and loose earth, tried tipping. Debris pinged and ponged against the undercarriage. Wrestling the vehicle back to the true, he white-knuckled the steering wheel, got them pointed in the right direction then floored the accelerator.

There was a tremendous lurch, a feeling that someone had stiff-armed his chest and pressed him into his seat as they sped over the flats, slaloming left and then right as he fought the uneven surface. Plumes of red dust boiled behind them. The view out of his windscreen was fuzzy, lurching in and out of focus. He briefly wondered about the tires. A blowout would be catastrophic.

So will getting shot. He couldn't just barrel up to the cavern. Snatching a quick look toward the mountain, he spotted maybe a dozen men scurrying down funnels and culverts and wrinkles in the landscape.

"Get the radio!" he shouted above the engine noise. "Kazim, grab the Harris, turn it on!" The radio was already keyed to the correct frequency. He had to hope that someone would be listening. Mac knows about the flare, he's got to be calling for help. Except, unless they flew, reinforcements would never get here in time. They would have to beat back these men themselves and hope like hell they could outrun them. "Can't take my hands off the wheel, so you'll have to hold it so I can talk, okay?"

"Here, here." Straightening both legs, the boy braced himself against the footwell and then thrust the Harris at him. "On! Talk, talk."

Please, Driver, please be listening. "Driver! Mac!" he bawled into the mouthpiece. "You've got fighters coming down the mountain from the north. To your left, your blind side, behind you, behind you, behind you!"

"Look!" The boy pointed. "Someone coming out from the cave."

Squinting through the windscreen, he caught a brief flash of a face as someone peered out and then around the corner, and then one of Driver's men wheeled around, rifle in hand, staying low and pivoting to face the cave's blind side. From the way the man moved, he thought this might be Meeks but couldn't be sure.

But this answered the question. His warning had been heard. Mac would've turned on the radio after the?—

A crackle from the Harris, but with all the bouncing he couldn't catch what had been said. He also couldn't stop and now he had a decision to make. He could either rocket for the cave itself, take up a defensive position, and get in the fight.

Or....

He jumped his gaze to the right. The bandits had gathered at the base of the mountain and were clustered behind boulders amid tangles of scrub and brush.

An idea coalesced in his brain. Would this work? Whatever you're going to do, do it fast. "Kazim," he shouted over the engine roar, "in the glove box, there are more cartridges for the flare gun. Not bullets. They're short." How many had Flowers said he kept? Two? Three? He couldn't remember. With luck, he might need only one. Of course, if he got himself shot... "Get them out then take the flare gun, put in a cartridge then give it to me!"

Out of the tail of an eye, he saw the kid pawing around the glove box, pulling something out. Then he stopped looking because there was that last, short rise coming up before the final descent toward the aqueduct. Instead of slowing, he took it at speed, the Humvee roaring up the incline then soaring skyward as they topped the rise, and he thought of that beautiful last scene, Thelma and Louise holding hands as they rocketed into the void?—

And then the Humvee came down, striking the earth hard. Gritting his teeth, he waited for the tires to blow or an axle to break, for the vehicle to flip, but then he was spinning the wheel to the right and away from the cavern, moving roughly parallel to the mountain's base. People there now, but the Humvee was going so fast, they were only so many smears. Although he did think he spotted Mac, a radio at his mouth, and then Flowers, a kid on his back, another two tucked under either arm like footballs, making for a vehicle.

Roni, where's Roni? Probably with the kids, maybe all gathered at the entrance, trying to decide if they should fight, if they had to chance at running. But then he stopped wondering because he was concentrating on the future, what he could do, if he could do it and just how much distance he had to put between him and the mountain.

No base of any mountain is ever made of straight lines. Mountains are curved, their bases' jagged with sharp angles and debris because, by definition, they have been forced up by tectonic forces powerful enough to shatter through layers of compressed earth and rock. The aqueduct's entrance nestled in the center of an arc sculpted over the centuries first by water and then human hands. But the arc was also lopsided; standing at the cave's entrance, the right was flatter, more linear while the left was like one half of a pair of parentheses.

Accelerating, John skirted the mountain's left flank, and then they were on a straight, streaking along the mountain's base. Ahead, he spotted the bandits at about the same time as they saw him because, all of a sudden, a dozen rifles were pointing his way.

"Kazim, down!" A shout, punctuated by the pock and spang and thunk of bullets smashing against the Humvee. Hunching over the steering wheel, he got low and small, only the top of his head—sans helmet, because who'd have thought he needed one—and forehead and eyes and, in the nick of time, too. There was a sharper crack, nothing as glassy as the sound of a baseball shattering a window but something more like hitting an egg against the lip of a mixing bowl. A split second later, a sudden

irregular starburst of smashed glass appeared at a point where his face had been only moments before.

Please, God, make this work. He wanted to add something about God maybe stopping those guys from thinking about using an RPG but didn't because he didn't want to jinx it. Buzzing down the window with an elbow, he transferred the flare gun from his right hand to his left and, while he was at it, sent up a brief of thanks to his uncle for making him learn how to shoot with either hand because you just never could tell.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

God, he hoped that Roni and the others were using the distraction he was causing to get the kids loaded, maybe even start heading for the road. He'd only have one shot at this. Those guys, whoever they were, would never let him try this trick twice.

Peering over the dash, flare gun in his left hand, he watched that shock of scrub and brush and the men bunched just above grow larger and larger and larger...

Now. Steadying the steering wheel with his right hand, he thrust his left through the open driver's side window. Watched as the Humvee gobbled up distance, and the men and those boulders grew larger and larger as he closed in.

And then, when he was maybe fifty yards away, he spun the wheel with his right—and squeezed the trigger with his left.

Again, the same bang, the same jolt shuddering down his arm. He had no idea if what he'd tried had worked because he was too busy steering. No point ending up pancaked against the mountain or a boulder. The Humvee caromed in a tight skid, the rear swinging out as he bolted upright and stiff-armed the wheel. He felt the rear of the Humvee try to outrun the front, but then the moment was past, and he was arcing back toward the aqueduct.

"Look!" Kazim was staring out the passenger side window. "Look!"

Glancing at his rear view, he spotted the orange and umber flames of a brush fire, which looked to be spreading fast and...

Were those flames running?

“They on fire!” Kazim crowed.

“It’s all that hair, especially their beards.” Hair went up almost instantly and from there, the flames had only spread, turning several men into literal pillars of flame: tunic, shirt, everything ablaze. “If they’re smart, the ones who are left will push them into that spring.”

But he bet the ones who hadn’t gone up in a blaze of glory might not care. From the lack of explosions, the guy with the RPG launcher had escaped. Which was too bad because that didn’t give them a lot of time.

As he accelerated away, Kazim said, “That was like the song, John.”

“Song?”

“Yes. Goodness, golly.” Kazim showed his teeth in a wide grin. “Great balls of fire.”

8

Back at their cave hideout now. Stomping on the brake so suddenly that he thought this was precisely why he kept insisting to Roni to sit in the back of an airplane: Seriously, the only thing holding your head to your neck are a bunch of muscles and ligaments. Read any report of a crash and you see a lot of headless passengers.

And Roni, Roni, Roni, where was she? He didn’t see either her or Driver, though he spotted Meeks, rifle slung on his back, climbing down from a rocky perch.

Unbuckling, he muscled open the driver’s side door and pushed out of the Humvee as Flowers and then Mac, radio in hand, rushed up. “That was an excellent ploy,” Mac said in his best near-Cambridge accent. “Bought us some time for countermeasures.”

“Countermeasures?” he said at the same instant that Flowers, face streaked with sweat and muddy rivulets of red dust, pounded him on the back. “Man, that was beautiful,” Flowers shouted. “Boof!” Miming a mushroom cloud with his hands, Flowers let go of another laugh that sounded just the near side of slightly manic. “Talk about going up in smoke!” Reaching past John, Flowers clapped a hand to Kazim’s right shoulder and gave the kid a shake. “You did good, kid, you did real good!”

Hmmm. He’d once seen a barn cat stalking a mouse. As the cat slithered along in slow-motion, its pupils had dilated until only a suggestion of iris remained. That cat had nothing on Flowers. Remembering Driver’s jitteriness of that morning, John thought that Flowers must’ve popped a couple of the same uppers. Which, given that the man had driven all night and, assuming they got away, was now going to put in another six hours was understandable, though maybe not very helpful. If Flowers got any higher, they’d have to tie a string around his foot to keep him from drifting away.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” he said. “They’ve got an RPG launcher and they’re going to regroup pretty fast.” And be madder than a nest of hornets. He’d bought them maybe fifteen minutes, tops. “How we doing here?”

“Now that we’ve got one more Humvee, better,” Meeks said. “Otherwise, we’d be tying boys to the hood.”

“How many did Shahida bring back? And where’s Driver, where’s Roni?”

“On their way,” Mac said at the same moment that Flowers said, “Those new kids are in bad shape, man. Soon as you shot that first flare, with that big bang? They bolted back inside.”

“How many?”

“Ten, as we imagined,” Mac said. “Although one of which we seem to have lost.”

“What? How do you lose a kid?”

“Hey,” Meeks said, offended, “they’re small, they’re fast and there are a lot of honking tunnels in there.”

“Shahida and Driver are back with Roni now, trying to coax the boy to come out. But,” Mac said, sounding just the tiniest bit smug, “this may not be such an emergency soon. Help should arrive in a very few moments.”

“How do you figure?” But he didn’t stop to wait for an answer. “Kazim, stay here. Be right back.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“Coming with you, man. You’ll never find your way on your own.” Snapping on a flashlight, Flowers used the beam to point the way. There was no one in the chamber John had used that morning. That room was also a blind alley with no access to any other part of the complex except into Roni’s room with its three apertures.

“Like a quiz show,” John said. “Is it behind door number one, number two, or number three?”

“I got an excellent sense of direction,” Flowers said as they stepped into another large chamber with two more openings, one at ten and the other at three.

“Ah, and here I thought you were half-bat.” As Flowers went for the entrance at three, John asked, “You know for certain they’re down that way?”

“Have to be. One on the left is a dead end.”

As he followed Flowers, John felt more than saw the space opening overhead. Craning his head back, he couldn’t see more than ten feet or so. “How far to the top?”

“About a hundred feet.” Aiming his light, Flowers speared the darkness. “Way it curves? We’re in the main trunk of the old aqueduct now. See that hole up there?”

The aperture in the rocky ceiling was almost perfectly round and reminded John of an empty light socket. “That one of those maintenance wells?”

“Yup. Come on.” Flowers jerked his head. “Let’s pick up the pace.”

They jogged for the next ten or so seconds in silence, their echoing footfalls clapping against the rock and on loose bits of stone which squealed a protest. Then, as John's knees began to ache, he said, "Is it my imagination or are we—" His right foot hit a patch of scree and he did a pratfall, coming down on his rear end so hard he felt the impact blaze a hot trail up his spine.

"You okay?" Bracing himself, Flowers hauled him back on his feet. "You hurt?"

"Just my dignity," he lied. He was pretty sure he'd have one hell of a bruise come morning. "Are we going downhill?"

"Yeah. Sorry, man, I should've warned you. Anyway, there's a fork up ahead and the tunnel levels out for a bit."

"Only a bit?"

"What can I say? You going to be okay to walk?"

"Yeah, yeah." He shooed Flowers on ahead and after a few steps, the pain was only a dull ache. "Weird that we're headed downhill," he said. The incline was steep enough that he was leaning back and braking with each step. Slip now, and he'd probably skid a good ten, twenty feet. "Instead of straight, I mean."

"Oh, I think whoever carved this out did it for a good reason."

"How you figure?"

"Stop a second and listen, you'll understand."

He did and in the stillness heard that same faint rushing noise as before. Except...He craned his head back to stare at the ceiling. "No. Above us?"

“Yup. Limestone’s porous. That’s why so many caves are limestone, right? Actually, this whole place reminds me of my dad,” Flowers said as they started walking again. “He worked construction, and people would get leaks in the damned places. Like there’s water coming out of a light fixture on one end of a house and the leak’s from a pipe all the way at the other end. He said water follows the path of least resistance. Same principle here.”

Two minutes later, they were at the fork. John said, “I could say something smart-alecky like when you reach a fork in the road, take it, but I won’t.”

“Except you just did.” Holding up a hand, Flowers cocked his head. “Hush.”

“You don’t know where they are?”

“I get a little turned around sometimes.”

“You’re telling me this now?”

“Hey,” Flowers rapped, “it’s been kind of stressful day, all right?”

“Easy,” he said. But uppers was what he thought. People got pretty irritable on the way back down. “You got an extra light, I can go right, and you go left.”

“We shouldn’t separate. We don’t know the exact layout and I do not want to explain to anyone how I lost your ass,” Flowers said, though he dug out another flashlight. “Just give me two seconds, okay?”

“Sure.” Slotting the flashlight into a pocket, he waited. Now that they weren’t moving, he was starting to shiver. Colder down here. Probably from the millions of gallons coursing just alongside these caverns. His ears picked up a faint but crisp pat. And then, a few seconds on to his right, another spat as a fat droplet broke

against a stone. Terrific. “May I make an observation?”

“What?”

“Look, we know that people who get lost tend to walk in circles, right?”

“Yeah.” Flowers jerked his head in a nod. “So? We’re not walking in circles.”

“Hear me out. Let’s put ourselves in this kid’s place? If you were a panicky kid and you come to this fork...”

He watched Flowers play his flashlight over the two tunnels. “One’s straighter than the other. The right one’s kinda kinked. So, you’re saying he probably went into the tunnel where he could just bullet through without having to slow down or turn.”

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

“Well, we’re at the fork in the road,” Flowers said. “So, take it.”

“Sure.” He waved an arm. “Lead on, McDuff.”

“Naw, you got it backwards, Doc. Everyone says that. But the quote is ‘Layon, MacDuff.’ ”

“Oh.” He was impressed. “What’s that mean?”

“It’s what Macbeth says right before their big duel at the end. What Macbeth’s saying is, okay, MacDuff, you wanna fight, let’s fight. So, they do,” Flowers said and stepped into the lefthand tunnel. “And then Macduff turns Macbeth into shish kabob.”

After about thirty feet, the tunnel's sides narrowed to a straw just wide enough for them to go single file. The roof also lowered. The only saving grace was the path wasn't quite as steep on the downhill.

But, man, between this and then the uphill before the fork, climbing back is going to be a nightmare. Bent nearly double, gaze screwed to the slippery surface beneath his feet, John duckwalked along as quickly as he could through puddles. The air tasted of wet metal and as he scurried through the passage, drops of water splatted onto his head and back. How far back could they possibly be? On the heels of that thought, another: Maybe we took the wrong?—

“Unh!” The breath left his lungs in a rush as he slammed into Flowers and then they both clattered onto the stone floor. Flowers lost his grip on his flashlight which pinwheeled through the air for a short distance before banging against one side of the tunnel and coming down with a small splash in a puddle.

“Sorry!” The water was almost icy. Rolling onto his hands and knees, he struggled to his feet. “You okay? Why did you stop?”

“I’m fine, just take it easy, man.” Worming forward, Flowers retrieved his light then stayed in a crouch. “I thought I heard something.”

They both listened. For a few seconds, John heard nothing over a mosquito whine in his ears and then he caught a snippet of someone talking. The tone, high-pitched and shaky, sounded young. On its heels a moment later, he heard a basso rumble that he thought might be Driver followed a moment later by the unmistakable lilt of Roni’s voice.

Oh. His heart swelled with emotion. “Let’s go, come on, move, move!”

A few moments later, the tunnel widened, the ceiling soared away, and they trotted

the rest of the way and into a space that reminded John much more of a true cave rather than the ones which had been carved by fighters who'd need a base of operations and a place to hide. The floor was studded with thick thumb-shaped stalagmites formed over the centuries by the steady drip of calcite-rich water onto the cavern's floor. Above these spears of thinner, white stalactites hung from the ceiling. Some were khaki-colored, but others were white as snow and reminded John of the icicles which frilled the gutters and roof of Ken's Wisconsin home after a hard freeze. The air was cold enough here for their breath to fog and from somewhere close, though, he caught the chuckle of water over stone. The whole place smelled wet. John also had the sense that the chamber was much larger, its true extent hidden by dense, inky darkness.

Driver was closest to the entrance. He turned, flipped his flashlight beam up to their faces and said, "Flowers, I thought I told you to get the kids and get out?—"

"Get that thing out of our faces," John snarled, holding a hand up to shield his eyes. When Driver complied, he blinked against stars and said, "Flowers volunteered. Besides, Driver, you're forgetting. You need a shooter in each vehicle. So, what's the story here?" Across the cavern, he spotted Roni, Musa, and Shahida clustered together. "What's going on?"

"I see the problem." Flowers pointed his flashlight at the wall above the women. "There, on that ledge."

Oh, no. Tucked into a fissure an easy twenty feet long cut into the wall and maybe as many feet off the floor was a young boy. As Flowers's light hit him, the boy's dark eyes sparkled. The kid looked terrified. "How he'd get there? What is he, stuck?"

"No." As Shahida spoke, she knuckled away a tear trickling from a cheek. "Buri run. Scared of noise. Family killed by bomb."

“PTSD.” Roni’s face was streaky with dust. “We were headed for the Humvees when he heard your flare...no, don’t,” she said when John opened his mouth to reply. “It’s no one’s fault. I was going to give him a little sedative to get him through the flight. I should’ve done it sooner because as soon as the flare came down, he grabbed a flashlight and bolted.”

“Slipped right past me. I almost had him.” Driver sighed, and for the first time, John saw how drawn and haggard the man was. “I was too slow,” Driver said. “We were lucky we heard him, but we can’t get him to come down and I’m too big to fit into the crack there.”

“But I’m not. I got this.” Pocketing his flashlight, Flowers jammed a toe into the rock face and stretched a hand. “Soon as I’m down, let’s beat feet before help gets here.”

There was that word, again. “You know, that’s what Mac said,” John began at the same time Driver blurted, “Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack, man,” Flowers said, without looking away from the rock face.

“Damn that Mac.” Cursing, Driver snatched a Harris from his belt, keyed the radio, got a burp of static.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“What?” John asked.

Driver didn’t answer. Instead, he shouted into the Harris’s mouthpiece, “Mac, what thehellare you doing? You gotta wait, man, you gotta?—”

“You doing all right?” Turning, he looked down at Roni, who’d eased to his side. “No trouble?” she asked.

Her proximity made his chest tight. There was a smudge on her right cheek he ached to thumb away and her lips which he longed to taste. “None. Although it was interesting.”

“How?” But then she shook her head. “Tell me when we get back.”

He liked how that sounded. Together, they watched as Flowers made his way along the cavern’s sloping wall. For a small man, he was very strong and quick, spidering up the wall in smooth, efficient movements. “That’s amazing,” he said.

“Even more amazing if he can get that boy down.”

Behind them, Driver was still shouting into the radio. “No, Mac, youcan’t?—”

Roni darted a look at Driver. “Do you know what he’s upset about?”

He shook his head. “Not a?—”

“Oh.” Shahida put a trembling hand to her mouth. “Look, look!”

Flowers had reached the fissure. In response, the boy tried making himself even smaller. Although thin enough to worm his way in, Flowers stayed where he was and instead kept up a steady patter. They were too far away to hear what Flowers said, but John could tell the boy was listening.

But he's got to hurry. How long had it been since he and Flowers ducked into the caves? Five minutes? Ten? He flicked a look at his watch. They still had plenty of time to make it back to Kabul Airport, but only if they left in the next twenty or thirty minutes. There was no point in shaving this too close.

"Oh!" Shahida's eyes brimmed. "They coming, Buri coming!"

The boy slithered toward Flowers, who'd climbed a bit higher until his shoulders were a little above the opening. Murmuring encouragement, Flowers waited as the boy clambered onto Flowers' back where he clung like a baby monkey.

"Thank God," Roni breathed.

John grinned. "You can say that a?—"

Something, somewhere, thumped.

Radio still at his mouth, Driver froze. Everyone did.

What was that? John looked right and then left. The sound had been dull but percussive, like a balloon popped underwater. Or like thunder.

And then the earth beneath John's feet...trembled.

"No, no!" Cursing, Driver spun on his heel. "Everyone out, get out now!"

“What?” Roni asked. “Why?”

“I don’t have time to explain. Just clear out!” Then his radio burped, and Driver was bawling, “Mac, damn you, stop! Can you hear me? Mac, we felt that! We felt?—”

Another dull percussive thump, and this time, John staggered as the ground twitched. Vibrations shimmied up his legs and he caught a sound like the pattering of rice on tin as a thin shower of debris rained down from the ceiling. On its heels came a thin, high cry and John looked back. Still twenty feet from the floor, Flowers clung by a single hand and one foot.

“Shahida!” Flowers’ voice was thin and strained. “Musa, grab him, I’m going to lose him!”

What sparked the kid off? As Shahida and Musa rushed to help, John remembered what Roni had said about the boy having PTSD because his entire village had been leveled by bombs.

And then he remembered something.

Mac both arranged the transfer with Drummond and said help was not far away. He used his Harris. Even though everyone stayed off the air, so no one could pinpoint their location.

“Oh, holy God,” he said.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:52 am

“What?” Roni touched his chest. “John?”

“Mac.” This was why Driver had gone ballistic. “Mac called for help, and the only help that could’ve gotten here this far and this fast are?”

“Oh.” Roni’s eyes went wide with horror. “Missiles.”

9

“Run!” Driver bawled. Grabbing Shahida by an arm, he slung her around with enough force to make her stagger. “Musa, get her out of here!”

“Come on. This way!” Scooping up the boy, Flowers scurried across the cavern then stooped, let the boy down, prodding him into the tunnel and then pushing Shahida to follow. “Go, keep him moving. You, too, Musa, get going, go as fast as you can. Remember, at the fork, go right and then another right to get you headed back towards the exit.”

“Same goes for you two,” Driver said to Roni and John. “Follow Flowers.”

“Not without you.” Balling her fists, Roni stood her ground. “Put the radio away. Forget Mac. You can yell at him when we’re out.”

“We’re not going to get out if I can’t get him to stop another drone strike. I’m coming, I promise, I’ll be right behind you, but I got to do this.” Driver rounded on John. “Worthy, get her out here.”

“Come on. He knows what he’s doing.” John wasn’t exactly sure about that, but staying didn’t seem the smartest thing to do either. Hooking a hand around Roni’s waist, John pulled her around and then gave her a push. To his relief, Roni obeyed and hurried to the tunnel. As he stooped to follow her inside, another tremor shivered through the walls and rock and into his knees. A shower of debris, bits of rock and dirt, salted his back. Uh-oh. Craning a look over a shoulder, he spied Driver across the room and back on his radio.

“Driver!” he bawled. “For God’s sake, come on!”

Then, spinning on the balls of his feet, he lunged into the tunnel. Ahead, he heard the others splashing and sloshing through puddles. He couldn’t see Roni, but Shahida’s flashlight was a wavering, bouncing beam spearing the darkness in an erratic sawtooth pattern that reminded John of the terminal spasms of a dying heart.

No one’s going to die. He’d forgotten about the grade. He was already panting, his breath rasping in and out of a throat full of razors. His knees were wet, and as his hand came down in a puddle, wetting him to the elbow, he looked, saw water sheet over the back of his hand as the stream hurried downhill and thought, Wait a minute...

But then he sensed the tunnel widening, the ceiling lifting, and the thought evaporated. Struggling to his feet, he spotted Roni’s silhouette in Shahida’s flashlight, and then a second beam came on as Roni swung to spotlight him. “Where’s Driver?”

“He’s right behind me,” he lied. Shahida’s light had already faded. “You need to follow Shahida. Keep going. We’ll both be only a few seconds behind.”

“Are you sure?” She kept the light pinned on him a beat longer. “You didn’t leave him, did you?”

The accusation in her voice stung, but he was saved from a reply as the earth shivered

again, violently enough to make the water in the tunnel and underfoot slosh as if someone was trying to walk with a basin filled almost to overflowing. “Please, Roni, go now. It’s going to take you twice as long to get back as it did to get here.” He felt a stream of water surge against his boots, part, and then cascade past. “Love, please.” And then he forced out the words he didn’t want to say. “I will make sure Driver gets out. Just get going, okay?”

A wordless beat slipped by. With the light on him instead of her, he didn’t know what emotion she felt. She might be relieved; she might be thankful.

She might pick Driver. The pang in his heart was so painful he tasted salt in the back of his throat. I could be waiting here to save the man who stole her from me.

All suppositions. All maybes. Except for the one sure and certain thing, which he said now.

“I promise, Roni, I won’t leave until he gets here.” When she didn’t speak, he said, again, “I promise.”

A beat. “All right,” she said. “You just better.”

Then she turned and left him, alone, in the dark.

10

Thirty seconds. The blackness was so complete he couldn’t see his hand in front of his nose. Fumbling for his flashlight, he nearly dropped it. Careful. He forced himself to slow down, to think about each movement. Lose his light now and he’d never find it. Gripping the body in his right hand, he thumbed the flashlight to life. A lance of bright yellow light speared the darkness.

Okay, you're okay. He struggled to control his breathing. He had to stay calm. But was thirty seconds too long? The thought nagged. Aiming his light, he played the beam over sheets of water chuckling over the irregular cut of the walls. What had been solitary puddles spotting the floor here and there was now a churning, muddy, ankle-deep and very cold stream.

Only that morning but which seemed ages ago, Flowers had told him about the water, stoppered up in this aqueduct by a Soviet missile strike, tunneling through limestone and earth to a new, very healthy flow. Thousands of gallons of water coursed through a neighboring conduit to bubble up as a spring less than two football fields away before diving back underground.

Because, you know, you drill into stone, adjacent rock cracks, gets weaker, Flowers said. Water keeps these tunnels nice and cool, though.

Except, now, something had upset that very delicate balance.

Mac wouldn't target his own tunnel system. Drone strikes were highly accurate and used for precision kills to minimize damage, something as important in the current scenario as on a city block or marketplace. In fact, now that he thought about it, way back at Benning a DCC instructor had shown footage of drones rocketing into caves and taking down a whole mountain.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

Except those guys, the ones I hit with the flare, they were out in the open, practically alongside?—

“Alongsideus.” His voice sounded almost startling to his own ears. They were coming down to the left of the aqueduct, and there wasn’t just one strike. “They were right on top of?—”

The earth shuddered. A sharp crack splintered the darkness. A moment later, a rock the size of his fist whistled past his ear to land with a huge splash by his feet.

Close. He didn’t have a helmet. Get clocked by a big honking rock and even if the thing didn’t split his skull outright, he might be knocked out long enough to drown. Wouldn’t take long either. Already halfway up his boots, the water seemed to be coming faster, following the path of least of resistance, and lapped at the laces, trickled in through the eyeholes, around the tongue. He heard the water gurgle as the stream hit his ankles and gushed past.

Come on, Driver. Turtling his shoulders around his ears, he flung his left arm over his head for protection. Water sheeted down the sides of the tunnel, the sound punctuated by the splash of debris—and still, he waited, the seconds seeming to stretch like taffy, even though the animal portion of his brain screamed for him to run, to save himself. Come on, Driver, come on. Every muscle in his body was tensed, ready to run, but he forced himself to stay fast. He checked his watch, not because it told him anything but for something to do. He was startled to see that almost fifteen minutes had slipped by. We have to hurry if we’re going to make it back to Kabul in time. What should he do? Leave? He’d never be able to face himself in the mirror much less Roni.

Then, he picked up a new sound: a furious splashing coming from the tunnel and getting closer.

Oh, thank God. He aimed his light into the tunnel. "Driver?"

"Who else?" Hand shielding his eyes, Driver flinched. "Get that out of my eyes."

"Sorry." In more ways than one, too. Now that he was aiming his light that way, he saw that water was gushing into the tunnel's mouth like spillage down a sluice. Flow's definitely picking up. The air was even colder than before.

"Why..." Driver hugged himself. He was so drenched, his clothes clung. "The hell?" Driver's hands shook as he swiped water from his eyes. "Why are you still here, Worthy?"

"Because you're coming down from all those uppers, that's why. No, save it," he said as Driver opened his mouth. "That M.D. after my name isn't just for show. Besides, I outrank you. So, stow it, soldier. Did you get through to Mac?" When Driver jerked his head in a shaky negative, he said, "No?"

"No, I didn't. Now can we get out of here?"

"Come on." Hooking a hand around Driver's right arm, he tugged and got them both moving. But not fast enough. Driver was shaking from both his drugs tailing off and the cold. Slogging and sloshing uphill through ankle-deep water was tiring them both out, too. His boots were bricks tied to his ankles. Should he jettison them? No, the incline was going to get worse before it got better. Bare feet weren't an option on rocks and even less so in icy water.

As they labored upslope, he chewed over what Driver had said about Mac. Not getting through was bad but maybe not disastrous. Mac would see the water, of

course, he would...and then he thought, Oh, no.

“Why’d you stop?”

“What?” He hadn’t realized. “Sorry. Come on, that T-junction’s not far,” he said, though he wasn’t sure if he said that to encourage Driver or himself. Driver was trembling hard enough for him to feel the vibrations shiver into his own elbow. Terrific. Talk about really bad timing for a crash. He tightened his grip on the other man. “Listen, I know you’re coming down. There’s no shame in that, you popped uppers because you had to, I get that. I’ll give you something for the crash once we’re out. Right now, though, you have to keep moving.” He debated a half second then said, “Listen, I think we’re in big trouble here.”

“N-no k-kidding.” Driver’s breath came in sobs as he pulled air in then pushed it out. “You’re j-just now realizing that?”

He pushed past the remark. “Driver, we’re going uphill, right?”

“Yeah.” Another gulp of air and then Driver said, “So?”

“So, until the others get out, Mac isn’t going to know there’s a problem. Least resistance, man. The water’s flowing?—”

“Downhill.” Driver cursed. “Once we get to the junction, I’m going to try again.”

“No, you’re not. I haven’t felt anything shake for the last few minutes. I don’t think Mac’s going to call in any more strikes. So top priority is to get out now.” Before the water gets any higher. Hand still clamped to Driver’s wrist, he kept them both in a shuffling trot, their boots clapping water with a rhythmic splash-splash-splash. “Once we get back to where we saw the kids, I think we’ll be fine. Let’s just keep moving.”

Not long now, he chanted in time to their struggling footfalls, not long now. But he saw nothing ahead, no wink of light—and that was when he had a horrible thought. Oh, crap. Had he gone the wrong way? Had he missed the turn? No, no, how could he? Unless he was misremembering the tunnel's layout. The tunnel forked, right? Or did it split into three? No, no, the junction was just further ahead than he remembered, that was all. Besides, Driver knew these tunnels a little better and he hadn't said anything. Although if the man was coming down, would he notice?

The water surged around them, up to John's knees before breaking into fans that wet his crotch. God, how much further? He tried to concentrate on each step. Tripping now on this incline and losing his footing, especially with the flow's swiftness, might mean being tumbled backwards and swept downstream.

"Hey." Driver's breath smoked in the chill. "Look. Straight ahead."

Beyond the halo of his light, John spotted a faraway glow. Was that coming from the entrance? Had they gone far enough to have already reached the fork? No, wait, that couldn't be right. They still had to negotiate a tunnel back to the chamber Roni had used that morning to check out the kids and that had been at some distance from the entrance.

Which meant the corridor should be dark.

He felt a sinking in his gut. "Oh, no."

"What? No, man, this is good," Driver asked, as they hooked right and staggered against the current into the feeder corridor. "It means the others got word to Mac and he sent?—"

"Where have you been?" Huddled on a lip of rock about a foot above the rushing water, Roni stepped down to land with a splash. "Are you all right?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“Why are you still here?” John tried to squelch the irritation in his tone and failed, miserably. He didn’t know whether to clasp her in his arms or give her a good shaking. “I told you to get out.”

“Last I checked, you’re not my mother.” Her light swung from John to Driver and then back again. “What took you so long? Did you get through to Mac?”

Driver started to reply, but John cut him off. “Doesn’t matter. Let’s—”

The rock beneath his feet gave a sudden, sharp jolt. The sensation was like being on a subway stopped so abruptly that people fall into one another. Water swirled and churned up to their knees. The rocky floor twitched again and trembled.

“Do you feel that?” Roni’s voice was tight. “Was it another missile?”

“Can’t be.” Could it? Would Mac call in another drone strike? No, not now, there was no need. Flowers and Shahida would have made it out and told Mac what was happening.

Another spastic jerk as the earth flinched—and did not stop. The tunnel rumbled and the rock under their feet trembled like a cornered animal wounded too badly to escape.

We’re going to die in here. “Go!” he shouted as rocky debris and rubble jumped from the sides, catapulting into the murky rush of water swirling and tugging and snatching at their feet, their legs, trying to upend and pull them back the way they’d come. Claspng Roni’s left arm, he hauled her around and gave her a push. “Move!”

Then, behind them, where men had hammered and drilled and tortured the earth—there came a deep, guttural rumble.

And then, a roar.

“Run!” John bellowed. “Run!”

11

Roni let go of a shriek. “John!”

“Come on, come on!” Hauling her to his chest, he tried shielding her as the torrent came for them, advancing in an icy rush. Water was gushing over rock walls that squealed and screamed and fractured with bony cracks right and left. The torrent hammered the rock floor and John knew that the flow wouldn’t stop, not until the amount of water coming in from the neighboring aqueduct equaled that going out.

Because water is a force of nature and nature abhors a vacuum.

“Listen to me!” Clipping his light to his vest, he bawled into Roni’s ear as bone-chilling water swirled around their thighs and grabbed at their legs. His feet were already numb. “We’re on a slope in the old aqueduct but once we get out of here and back to where we saw the kids, it levels out. But we have to stay above the water! The current’s too strong; we’ll get tripped up and then—” He didn’t have to finish that thought. Get tripped up and swept back downhill, and that would be the end. But climbing would be hard. Water this cold would drain them of their strength much faster.

“I understand, but how?” Her face was contorted in a rictus of terror. “What if the water fills up the tunnel?”

“It won’t! Worthy’s right.” Panting, Driver searched the wall, scouring the rock right and left with his flashlight. “There’s a lot of water, but all we have to do is stay above it.”

“Oh, is that all?” Roni’s voice was tight with barely controlled hysteria.

“Take it easy. Here.” Driver sloshed to where Roni had perched to wait for them. “All we have to do is what you did. Stay above the water and we’ll be fine.”

“It’s one little shelf.” Roni couldn’t keep the despair from her voice. “We won’t all fit. The water’s only going to keep rising.”

“It can’t. The water will flow where there’s the least resistance and that’s back the way we came. Besides, we’re not staying to find out. The rock’s got a lot of divots here where the guys who used the old wells to get down here and keep the aqueduct clear. There are shelves all along here. Come on.” Clipping his flashlight to his vest, Driver butted the toe of his right boot into a vertical cut and heaved. Water sheeted from his waist and legs. Reaching with his left hand, Driver snagged a rocky spur and pulled himself up another half foot. “Follow me, come on!”

“Go. Driver’s right.” He remembered what Flowers had said just, what? An hour and change ago? “We just stay above the flow, so we don’t get tripped up.” He didn’t want to think about what might happen if one of them did. Fall back into the water and while a person probably wouldn’t drown, the current might pull him further back into the tunnels they’d just left. Even now, water swirled and tugged around his thighs. “I’m right behind you, honey.”

“Youbetterbe.” Roni’s tone was fierce, the cords taut in her neck. Later, John would think that if this had been a movie, the director would’ve cued the heroine to knot the hero’s shirt in her fists and pull him into a desperate kiss. But this was reality, and Roni only jabbed a finger into his chest. “Rightbehind me!”

Don't worry about that. Hauling up his right leg was like pulling against concrete. Water sheeted over stone as he butted the toe of his boot into the cut Roni had just used. Grunting, he strained against the suck and the pull of the current. The water gave, though grudgingly. His muscles screamed with effort, but then he was moving, above the water level now, monkeying up the wall in what felt like slow motion. The water's roar was relentless, a bellow. Waves hammered and broke against stone, sending up arcing jets.

What if Roni's right? Wedging the toe of his left boot into the rock, he stretched to the right, grappling for a handhold. There was a bark of pain as jagged rock sliced his palm, but he muscled that aside and kept moving. As a kid he'd been to an indoor wall, the kind where they tied a couple ropes around your waist so if and when you slipped, you didn't break your neck. One of the instructors, a younger guy with ropes of muscle in his arms and thighs as big around as tree trunks, said he should always maintain three points of contact. Whatever combination works. You forget that just once and you're not roped?

"Kiss your ass good-bye," he muttered now. What if the water just keeps rising? No, that wouldn't happen, would it? Water would keep flowing downhill and whatever flowed alongside would peter out as the levels reached steady?—

The thought dropped out as something let out a high-pitched, grinding squeal followed by a sudden, loud, brittle crack. The sound was like that of a dried branch broken over a knee. He snatched a look over a shoulder in time to see the wall on the opposite side of their tunnel and about fifty feet from where they'd just exited split in two. Chunks of rotten, pitted rock hurtled through the air. Turning aside, he cringed, turtling his neck into hunched shoulders, while his hands clawed and dug in and held on. Something whizzed past his left ear and smashed stone while the largest rocks plunged down, smacking the water and sending up watery coronets that sheeted over his body and doused him head to toe.

Close. Shaking his head to clear water from his eyes, he blinked then froze a moment at a new sound: a liquid fizz. Turning, he saw that where the rock had given way, a new watery jet spewed. It was like something from a movie about a submarine that's gone below crush depth. First, the bolts went and then water blasted through cracks and chinks and seams strained to the breaking point from the pressure.

That's what is happening here. Limestone was porous, brittle, and there'd been just enough quaking and shaking for the stone to shift and cracks to widen as the walls buckled under the relentless pressure. But maybe that break's enough to relieve the?—

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

The thought hitched and skidding to a halt, and then he simply froze, right where he was, unable to truly process what he saw: an enormous pile of rubble spilling across the tunnel from left to right and reaching almost to the ceiling.

No. His heart shuddered against a pulse of fresh fear coursing through his veins. The water kept coming, the flow smashing against rubble—and did not push through. Dammed by rock and debris, the water fizzing through this sudden, new fissure was backing up and rising. Even as he stared, he saw the water eddy and swirl, the slower current created by the barrier colliding with that jet spewing from the cleft left by the blow-out—and begin to spin.

“Worthy!” He tore his gaze away from the gathering whirlpool and looked up. Driver hung a good twenty feet above and to John’s left. To his right, Roni’s light winked as she spidered her way to the other man.

“Move!” Driver shouted. “Come on!”

He nearly followed. His left hand reached for a rill of stone, and then he stopped. “That’s the wrong way!” he shouted, though his voice was lost even to himself in the water’s churn and bellow. Why was Driver heading back? The man was heading downhill. “It’s the wrong way, you’re going deeper. Driver, it’s the wrong way!”

Driver either didn’t hear or was determined to ignore him and only continued to crab his way left and up.

But Roni paused. Craning over her right shoulder, she peered down. She’d followed Driver’s example and clipped her flashlight to her vest so that light both sprayed over

the rock and illuminated her features: the white oval of her face, its features drawn tight with fear. Although he couldn't hear her over the water's roar, he read his name on her lips.

"Roni! Honey!" He shook his head in a vehement negative and this time, he took his left hand away from the rock. "No, wrong way!" he shouted, slashing the air with an emphatic swipe of his hand. "That's the wrong?—"

With no warning at all, the cavern seemed to swell and then shudder and shake as if they were noisome fleas on the back of some gigantic creature determined to throw them off. A surge of terror scrambled into his throat, and he slapped rock with his left hand and dug his fingers into stone with all strength. He might even have cried out, but if he had, the sound was lost in another enormous squeal and then a hard crack and the thin geyser of a new and harder jet suddenly became a torrent as the opposite wall burst. Water, frigid and foaming, roared out on a hail of debris which cascaded into the whirling pool below. The cavern shuddered and bucked?—

And John lost his grip.

He was aware of falling, of peeling away from rock and plummeting backward into a maelstrom of water and stone. If he had a last glimpse of Roni's face, he never could remember. What he did recall was the moment his body smacked the water hard enough to force all the air from his lungs in a sickening whoosh—and then a cold so intense it burned, and then the moment right after that when his body acted on instinct and his mouth opened for a breath of air that wasn't there at the same instant his throat filled with frigid water—and then closed down tight so he couldn't, wouldn't drown.

Instead, he suffocated.

JOHN: PRESENT TENSE

After dropping off Davila and Harvey in Khorog, they'd driven to Tajikistan's Zorkul Nature Reserve, which bordered the Wakhan National Park in Afghanistan. There, they'd hidden the van in a slit cave near Concord Peak and a quarter mile from a little-used trailhead, grabbed their gear, and headed south. By the end of that first day, they were over the border and hugging the mountains, heading east.

The passes were narrow and very high: a necessary evil, Driver said, to avoid being spotted in a landscape where it seemed that nothing moved except the snow. But avoid being spotted by whom? If the only people out here were nomads in their winter encampments? Really, who cared?

But this wasn't his mission. Oh, he still had all that money Ustinov had given him and Davila. Thankfully, he'd remembered the bags were rigged and could only be opened with their thumbprints. Anyone trying to get in any other way...say, a knife...well, that person would be in for a nasty surprise. Before they made that run to the hospital in Khorog, he'd had Davila open his bag and also disable the incendiary device which, Ustinov claimed, functioned as a last resort: a way of making sure no bad guy got his paws on all that cash. He didn't know if the money would be useful, but it seemed stupid to leave it behind.

Just what Driver's mission was or how John figured into his plans other than as both medic and hired gun, the other man wasn't saying. John didn't think this was because Driver didn't trust him because, seriously, just who was John going to tell? No, call it a bizarre sixth-sense, but John thought Driver wasn't saying because he needed John's help and if he did cough up the mission plan, John might tell him what he could do with himself.

For the time being, he did what he was told. The scenery really was spectacular, though after a while, the novelty of those wild, high, snow-covered peaks vanished, principally because John was busy trying to breathe and walk at the same time.

One incongruous bit, though, never quite faded into the background. Peer over the edge of a pass and waaay down there, a long narrow, almost ruler-straight stripe that was sometimes white, sometimes black, ran down the valley's middle and stretched both right and left as far as the eye could see.

It was all very weird. Beautiful, but eerie. The mountains hemming the valley were something primordial: stark, corrugated behemoths of snow and ice and windswept rock seemingly as ancient as the Earth. If not for the road, a person could believe that no one and nothing had ever set foot here before now.

They were, for all intents and purposes, completely alone.

Until the third day.

2

They were threading their way on a narrow filament of a mountain trail high above the valley's northern edge. The Corridor, Driver said, was higher in the east than the west. This translated to an altitude in the valley of about thirteen thousand feet. Sticking to mountain passes instead of the valley floor put them at an even greater altitude. For the first two days, all John did was pop diuretics, drink water, pee, put one foot in front of the other, and pray his brains didn't leak out of his ears. By the third day, he was better, but he still mostly watched his feet and tried not to look at his watch.

So, it was a real surprise when, near the end of that day, he blinked up from what felt like a cold-induced coma just in time not to send Driver, who had his binos out,

hurtling off the path.

“Whoa,” Driver said, catching his elbow. “Watch out for that first step, there. It’s a doozy.”

“Yeah, yeah. What’s wrong?” Well, that’s what he wanted to say only his lips wouldn’t cooperate and everything came out mushy, like he was talking through a mouthful of oatmeal: Wash shrong?

“I don’t know. It’s just...” Driver squinted then pointed due east. “Wouldn’t have seen them if the sun wasn’t behind us.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

Them? That woke him up. Since ditching the van, they'd seen no one at all. He shaded his eyes. "Sheersly?" Cupping a gloved hand to his mouth, he exhaled, warmed his lips, and tried again. "Seriously? Where?" Tossing a look over the mountains directly ahead, he thought he saw a few specks that might be people. "Heading down into the valley?"

"No, that's what's weird...Wait." Driver cursed. "Just lost...oh, nope, now I got them. They went around a flank is all. Get your binos out. You'll see movement."

"Got 'em." Squinting, he feathered the focus until the specks resolved into a caravan of four yaks, their backs piled high with bundles, and two men, one at the front and one at the rear. All he could make out clearly were the men's long winter coats and ushankas. The hats conjured up images of Dr. Zhivago, cold Kremlin winters, and, paradoxically, a fair number of Wisconsin hunters who, John thought, might burn theirs if anyone pointed out that the Russians dreamt up the design first.

"Okay. So, it's a couple of guys and their yaks." He thought a moment then added, "Actually, kind of a lot of yaks. Nomads, right?"

"Yeah, Kyrgyz." Driver glassed the men again. "And it's damned unusual is what I'm saying. Not only the number of yaks, but that these guys are on the move at all. It's the wrong time of year."

"Oh." He still didn't see the problem. "So?"

"So, they don't overwinter in the mountains. They don't go into the mountains at all, if they can help it. They spend the winter in the valley, sometimes in yurts, sometimes

in houses. They'll move if they have to, but that's rare. And the one thing they really don't do is go higher."

"Well," John said, "maybe they have to go higher before they can go lower." He remembered Scout trips like that: just when he thought the end might be coming up, the trail surprised him by taking a sharp corkscrew up a slope.

"Possibly," Driver said.

"You don't sound convinced."

"Because I'm not. Where would they be going? There's nothing north of here but mountains and then you're in Tajikistan. East and you're on the shore of Lake Chaqmaqtin before you hit China. It's a mystery." Driver was glassing the valley now. "Yeah, make that a mystery and a half. Take a look roundabout ten o'clock to the left of the mountains across the river."

"Okay," he said, glassed the foothills. "What am I looking...ah."

"You see them?"

"Yup." He played with the focus, and the valley pulled together into a virtually featureless expanse: a pancake-flat swath of land, bisected by the sinuous white coils of a river, frozen solid. Inching his view from the river and then further south toward the foothills, John spotted both a cluster of low stone houses grouped around a larger, rectangular structure and then several flashes of red. When he sharpened the focus, the red flashes resolved into tiny figures in long swirling tunics and headdresses. As he watched, another figure, also in red but with a tall white headdress, labored out of the large rectangle with what might be two buckets, one in each hand, and something around the waist. He squinted. "Is that a baby?"

“Probably. The ones in red are unmarried girls,” Driver said. “Married women wear a white headdress. But that’s not what I’m driving at. You see the problem?”

“Obviously not. If it’s that the guys with the yaks are headed away from the village, so what? Maybe they’re going to another clan or whatever.”

“Up? They’re going to climb up out of the valley where everyone lives in winter so they can climb down again, instead of just hoofing a straight line?”

“Okay, okay.” The cold made him cranky. Stamping his feet, he hugged himself. “Since I’m clearly not seeing it, why don’t you just tell me so we can get moving again?”

“It’s where that clan’s chosen to camp,” Driver said. “In winter, they move into the foothills to catch most of the light.”

“Which those people have. So?”

“Those guys with the yaks? They’re going in the wrong direction. They’re heading east but on the north side of the valley.”

“Meaning? Maybe it’s like a broken clock.” At Driver’s blank look: “Right twice a day?”

“Remind me never to tell you anything ever again,” Driver said, stowing his binoculars.

“Bet you won’t be able to help yourself.” When Driver didn’t reply, he said, “Okay, I’m sorry. Really, I am. Tell me why this bothers you.”

“Pretty obvious. You don’t think it’s a little weird that those men are headed, with a

ton of supplies,intothe mountains? There's nothing butmoremountains that way. Think about how long it's taken us to make it this far."

"Well, it would've been faster if we'd just gone down into the valley."

Driver made a dismissive gesture. "Then think about how many people or settlements we've seen on the way." He paused. "That would be virtually zero, in case you lost count."

He finally saw what Driver was, well,drivingat. "Begging the question."

"Exactly." Driver nodded. "Just where are those guys going?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“Listen,” Driver said, cupping his hands around a mug of steaming broth, “I gotta ask about something that’s been on my mind since the hot spring.”

“Yeah?” They were done for the day, and John was doing what he normally did: slowly defrosting in front of their tent heater. If at all possible, he would’ve hugged the thing. By day’s end, he was always stunned a little stupid from cold and fatigue not to mention high altitude hiking with a heavy pack. The tent would never be cozy, but thanks to their military-grade portable heater, they wouldn’t freeze either. Driver figured they had enough fuel for a full week of travel before they ran dry. He hadn’t said what they’d do if, after a week, they still needed a heater, but details.

“What’s on your mind?” But his mouth was still numb and so this came out as gobbledygook: Washunermine?

“Same thing you asked when you first saw me. You hit that water, man. I saw you go under.” Driver blew steam from his mug and sipped. “So, how come you’re not dead?”

“Lush.” Luck

“Got to be more than just that.”

“Reflex.” Reflush.

“What do you mean?” When he didn’t reply, Driver said, “Hey, don’t just stare at your mug. The sooner you get something hot in your stomach, the better you’ll feel. We also might have a mutually intelligible conversation.”

Sound medical advice. But when he tried raising his mug, his hands shook so hard that liquid sloshed over the rim. He couldn't even work up the energy to curse.

"Hey, it's okay. It happens. Here." Driver slid a hand under the mug to hold it steady. "Take it slow. A sip at a time."

He did, and as the liquid traced a warm finger down the center of his chest, the tension bled from his shoulders and his shuddering eased.

"Better?" Without waiting for a reply, Driver refilled John's mug with more broth. "Keep drinking. Plenty more where that came from."

He was on his third mug when Driver said, "Okay, no more room service. Now tell me how come you're alive."

"I told you. Reflex," he said, his tongue now cooperating at producing recognizable words. "When water hits the back of your throat, your windpipe snaps shut. It happens all the time when you swallow, right? You can't both swallow and breathe at the same time. So that reflex is doubly strong when water is cold."

"You mean all those people who fall through thin ice into a lake actually suffocate instead of drowning?"

"A fair number. Most adults can't be resuscitated. Some can, though, mostly because in very cold water, your metabolism slows way down, and blood is shunted to your brain and heart. The reflex is really strong in children. That's why we always went all out for any kid who'd fallen through the ice and brought in clinically dead."

"Hunh. Well, that explains why CPR worked for you." Driver let a beat pass. "Seeing as how you're a kid."

“Oh, ha-ha.”

“What do you actually remember?”

Roni’s face as I fell into that whirlpool. “Hitting the water. The cold.” He let a beat slip. “Figuring I was a dead man.”

“But then you weren’t.”

“But then I wasn’t. Next thing I know, I’m in the ICU at Ramstein, connected to a ventilator and more IV lines than can possibly be good for a person. Dunno how I got there.”

“Flowers.” At his look of surprise, Driver continued, “Mac told me. He ordered everyone to clear out, but he and Flowers waited. Then, maybe thirty, forty minutes after everyone else is gone, you wash out on a big wave and Flowers CPR’ed your ass.”

“Why did Mac wait?” Then he remembered Driver frantically shouting into his Harris. “He heard you?”

Driver nodded. “I don’t know why I didn’t get his reply. Then, when neither Roni nor I appeared, Mac decided you were the only survivor and left. Drove like a bat out of hell. You stopped breathing a couple times before the medical transport Mac called for met them halfway. The chopper had a couple PJs onboard.”

“Hunh.” The American Air Force’s pararescue personnel were normally used in special operations. Given that Mac organized off-the-books missions, however, having the PJs along for the ride made sense. “Helps to know people in high places, I guess.”

“Yup. Mac said the PJs shocked your heart twice before they got back to Kabul.”

“Well, that would explain why I woke up thinking I’d been kicked in the chest by a pissed-off horse. No one at Ramstein would give me a straight story.”

“It’s possible they didn’t know. Remember, Mac is a spook.”

Present tense. Meaning Driver was still in touch? “Do you know what happened? Why the wall collapsed?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“Uh-huh.” Emptying a packet of instant broth into a mug, Driver added hot water and stirred. “Back at the aqueduct, right after you hit the water, part of the wall leading to the next chamber collapsed. Later, I found out that while you torched most of those fighters with that flare, one still managed to squirt off an RPG. Lucky for Mac, the guy had rotten aim. Meeks took care of the stragglers before they could fire another.”

“An RPG took out of the wall?”

“More like the first domino. You just happened to be on the right side of the cave-in. When water came gushing out of the cave’s mouth, you were along for the ride. Washed up like a beached fish is what Flowers said.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask about Flowers and Meeks. Instead, he asked, “Your turn. Last I saw of you and Roni, you guys were headed in the wrong direction. You were going back the way we’d come.”

“Mmm.” Driver sipped broth. “Remember what I said way back at the airport about the way these aqueducts were constructed?”

“Along a series of wells, yeah.” Then something Flowers mentioned floated up from memory: rungs driven into rock. “Son of a gun. You went into an old well shaft.”

“Dumb luck. I spotted the shaft when I was climbing up the wall. That’s why I was going one way while you went the other. I ducked in right before the same collapse that sent you out on wave of displaced water. I was just lucky this well wasn’t plugged too bad. Had to use my knife to dig to the surface. Took forever. When I finally broke through, the stars were out.”

“And after you were out?”

“Still had my radio, so I got Mac on the horn. By then, he was back in Kabul.”

“But the boys we rescued got out.”

“But the boys we rescued got out on that last plane.” Driver sipped more broth.

“You’re dancing around what you really want to know.”

“What do I really want to know?”

“Now who’s playing stupid?” An undercurrent of something close to anger in Driver’s tone now. “Did it ever occur to you that maybe I feel guilty, too? She was with me, after all. You were already...” He made a vague gesture.

“Dead? Out of the picture?” And isn’t that what you really wanted?

“Yes, I thought you were dead.”

“Were you happy?”

“Go screw yourself.” Although there was little heat in his voice. With the telling, Driver sounded as wrung out as John felt. “I called for her to follow. This was literally, like, ten seconds, before the wall collapsed. The last I saw, Roni was moving up to where I was.”

“So, you were already in the shaft.” Why did that sound like an accusation? “You must’ve made like Spiderman to make it that fast.”

“It was luck,” Driver said, flatly. “Get as pissy as you want, if that makes you feel better. But the wall broke open and you fell. I watched you go under. You didn’t

come back up, so forgive me for assuming you croaked. Which you sort of did.”

He couldn't argue that. “What then?”

“I told you, Worthy. I called for her to follow. She looked up, she saw me and started to move. I climbed into the shaft, hooked an arm around one rung—one!” Driver held up a finger. “Okay? I didn't keep climbing and I wasn't where she couldn't see me. I was half-in and half-out, and I waited. But then the rest of the wall came down. I didn't see her fall, but she must have because when I looked for her, she wasn't there. All right? I waited to see if she would surface, but she didn't. Hate me all you want, Worthy, but I did the best I could.”

Hatred seemed pointless now. “After the wall came down, why didn't you go out the way we'd come in?”

“Couldn't. I was cut off. Remember I said you got washed out? The wall created a barrier that kept the water on my side.”

He thought about that. “So, Roni got washed backwards?”

“As near as I can figure. I think she got sucked back down into the tunnels.”

A reasonable hypothesis, if grisly. “And after Mac came back for you?”

“It was middle of the night before they picked me up. We made it back to the airport about noon. The last transport was gone. There were still people waiting in line to get out of the country, but no one had told those poor people there wouldn't be any more transports.”

“So as not to spark a panic.”

Driver nodded. “Our people were already breaking down operations. Anyway, a medic checked me over and then we all got on a transport.”

“And left.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“Yes, Worthy. I kicked the sand from my boots and put Afghanistan in my rear view.” Driver’s mouth quirked in a sardonic grimace. “Until now.”

4

Hours later.

Gasping, John jerked awake, his mind tearing itself away from yet another drunken spiral of a nightmare that vanished as soon as his eyes opened. Where was he? He couldn’t move. His heart was a knot of muscle, a fist battering his ribs as he struggled to suck in air, get his breathing under control. God, he was suffocating. No, no, drowning again: falling into that freezing whirlpool, everything was swirling, and he was dying all over again...

“Take it easy.” A voice, close by, on his left. “It’s the altitude. Messes with your sleep, gives you nightmares. You’re hyperventilating. Cup your hands around your nose and mouth and slow your breathing down.”

“Yeah.” For crying out loud, he knew this. Doesn’t make waking up from that nightmare any better. Working his hands out of his sleeping bag, he pulled in a wheezing lungful, held it a moment before releasing a raspy exhalation. Again. He breathed in and then out, in and then out, every exhalation eerily mirroring the moan of the wind beyond their tent.

“Sorry.” He sounded as strangled as a condemned man whose executioner has just tightened the noose, but he was calmer now. Talking about his brush with death must’ve triggered that particular nightmare. Maybe they should’ve stayed awake

longer, talked about other things and let that particular horror recede.

Because there had been something mentioned, a detail his unconscious had noticed enough for him to pause, try to remember what it was he'd heard. Except the harder he tried, the faster that something slipped away in a minnow's quicksilver flash.

"Worthy?"

"I'm here." His hands were chilled. Sliding them back into the depths of his sleeping bag, he rasped another apology. "Sorry I woke you."

"Not a problem," Driver said. "I don't sleep well at altitude either. I get these headaches."

"We should take a diuretic." He swallowed then grimaced. His mouth tasted like the inside of an old shoe. "Got some more in my pack. Want one?"

"So, I can pee like a racehorse?" A rustle, a soft snick, and then a narrow beam of white light speared the gloom. "Yeah, bring it on. We got to get up soon anyway."

Grateful for the light and an excuse to get ahold of himself, he levered his body, still cocooned in his sleeping bag, to a sit. Even when he'd been in the Scouts, he hated sleeping bags. Whenever he zipped in, he always felt like one of those Egyptian mummies. Reaching for his pack, he said, "What time is it?"

"About five-thirty...thanks." Pulling a water bottle from the depths of his sleeping bag, Driver popped the pill John offered, took a long pull, then offered his bottle. "You should hydrate, too. It'll help with the nightmares."

"Yeah." He forced himself not to gulp. When he came up for air, he said, "If we're awake...I got a coupla questions." In truth, he had three, but one step by one step.

“Seriously?” Driver capped then stowed his bottle. “Just because I said it was almost time to get up doesn’t mean I don’t want a few more minutes of shut-eye. Can you make it quick?”

“Probably not.”

“Have you ever considered that, sometimes, honesty isn’t the best policy?”

“Spoken like a spook.” As he said the words, something fluttered at the back of his mind. That something his animal brain noticed. What was it?

“All right.” Sighing, Driver squirmed around until he could lie on his side to face him. “Go for it.”

“Mac came back for you, right?” When Driver nodded, he asked, “But no one went back for Roni?”

“Why would they?” Driver yawned and his breath coalesced in a great smoking cloud. “She and I were both on the wrong side when the wall collapsed. I guess we could’ve gone back and slipped in through that old well, but with all that water, what would have been the point?”

“Except I’m here to retrieve her remains, which might mean she got herself out.” When Driver shook his head, he said, “Why the hell not?”

“I told you, Worthy. All that damn water swept her backwards. She never surfaced.”

“But that doesn’t preclude two things. Eventually, the water levels would’ve reached steady state, right? Roni kept in shape. She was athletic. So, she could’ve swum or treaded water or hooked onto the wall before she was swept too far into the caves.”

“Not blind as a bat she wouldn’t.”

“She had her flashlight. It was on.” His last glimpse of her: that white oval as she looked down and then over to where he’d been. “I remember her face.”

“So, you’re saying she might have worked her way back to where I dug myself out?”

“Is it impossible?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“No, but it’s also not probable. Worthy, you’re alive because that water was freezing. How long do you think she’d have lasted?”

Not long. It was a question that didn’t require an answer, and he felt that sudden, nascent hope flowering in his chest wilt. “Then the only other possibility is her body was found by the same group that sent its guys to smoke us in the first place.”

In the murky silver light of dawn, he saw Driver’s face fold in a frown. “And kept as a bargaining chip?”

“I seem to recall that the tactic has moved governments before.”

Driver’s head moved in a slow nod. “I can see that. The only way that would work, of course, was if they had some way to both prove and spread the news.”

“Exactly. Our military would be anxious to avoid bad publicity. Except the guys who attacked us would have to suspect or know that someone hadn’t made it out. If that’s true, that would indicate surveillance for a prolonged period.”

Driver’s nose wrinkled as if something smelled bad. “I dunno, Worthy. Those guys who raided us that day didn’t seem the patient type.”

“Ah, but you see, that fits neatly into my second hypothesis.”

“Which is?”

“That they were trying to delay us. For argument’s sake, let’s say that they saw or

knew I was leaving with some of the boys.”

Driver was quiet. Then he said, “What you’re saying is that they either picked up Mac’s chatter or had eyes on us for a while.”

“Or on one particular person.”

“Who was?”

“Driver, who was the one person who’d probably pissed off a lot of people?”

“Excluding present company and our government?” Driver paused. “Shahida.”

“Precisely.”

“You think they were after her?”

“I think that’s what this whole thing was about. Driver, I spent a lot of time beating up on myself, thinking that it was because Mac broke radio silence to get in touch with Drummond to meet me and those kids halfway which started the ball rolling. That whoever was after us homed in on Mac’s communications. Except I got back too soon and spoiled everything by sending up that flare. After that, they didn’t have much choice but to attack outright.”

“They could’ve withdrawn.”

“I don’t think that was an option. My guess is they’d gotten word back to more of their people and hoped that help was on the way. Leaving them only one course of action, really.”

“To delay us.”

“Exactly. They had rifles and that RPG launcher. If they played it right, they could’ve kept us there for quite a while. They had to know we wouldn’t risk the boys.”

“Then how do you explain the RPG?”

“Nerves? Crappy aim? Actually,” he said, “thatdiddelay Flowers, Mac, and Meeks.”

“Who then wasted them.”

“But think, Driver. Someone somehow got ahold of Roni’s body. So, I think they were trying to keep you from leaving until their guys could get there and come at you from behind. Just do a flanking maneuver. You guys would’ve been pinned, and Mac would’ve given up rather than risk the boys’ lives. They may have been fighters under Shahida’s command, but with no weapons, they were just a bunch of kids.”

He watched Driver think about that. “Okay, I’ll give you that. But how did anyone get ahold of Roni’s body? The way out was blocked.”

“There had to be another entrance into those caves you guys didn’t know about. Think about it. Think about all those artifacts Flowers showed me. The carvings on the walls.”

“Indicating the caves had been in use before.”

“Precisely. You said that Roni got sucked back the way we came, right? Only that way wasblockedbecause of a cave-in.”

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“So, they knew another way in?” Driver was quiet a moment then nodded. “Okay, I’ll give you that. Either they found Roni alive and then she died, or they killed her, or they found her body. Same diff, really. Dead would be easier for them. Bag the body and split.”

Driver’s detachment, his tone of just the facts, stung. On the other hand, did he get emotional when talking about a patient who didn’t make it? Did his lack of a display of emotion make a patient’s death any less of a blow? He couldn’t do his job if he wasn’t master of himself.

“We’re agreed that what I just said might be true?” When Driver nodded, he said, “Therefore, if they’ve cut a deal to return Roni’s remains, that has to mean whoever’s had her is getting something in return.”

Driver studied him for a long moment. “Where are you going with this, Worthy?”

“I think I just got there.”

“What you’re really asking is why now? Is that it?”

“Precisely. Driver, it’s been two years and change since Roni was MIA. Why release her remains now? What’s different now, in the Wakhan, than two years ago?”

Silence. Then: “The road.”

“Exactly. The road is done, except the Taliban can’t use it because China won’t open the border. Which doesn’t make a lot of sense if Ustinov is right, and Chinese

engineers have been exploring ways to ramp up mining.”

“But Ustinov is a Russian spook.”

“Whom Patterson and with whomever he’s collaborating on this mission trusted enough to act as a go-between.”

“The Ruski helping us? You’re assuming that’s the case because Ustinov’s a spook and Mac was a spook, that somehow equals them working on the same side.”

Again, that tickle at the back of his brain, a sense he was missing something. He said, “Maybe Ustinov’s a double agent. Or a triple?”

“You’ve been watching too many spy movies.”

That pissed him off. “Listen, you were a Raider. You worked for JSOC once upon a time. You worked with Mac. Tell me there haven’t been some questionable calls that have no basis in morality but every basis in practicality. Wouldn’t be the first time Russia aligned itself with us. Wouldn’t be the first time we got in bed with some pretty ruthless people.”

“Believe it or not, Worthy, I read books. So, yeah, I know Stalin and Roosevelt made like besties even while the Soviets slaughtered Poles and Ukrainians. But that was during a really big war. That’s not happening right now.”

“There are all kinds of wars, Driver. Not every war involves a gun.”

“Fine, Professor, so explain how you can seriously believe the Russians are helping us or that our interests align? Ustinov is the one who set you up with Parviz.”

“I think Parviz was acting on his own. I don’t think Ustinov was involved.”

“You got proof of that?”

“No, except someone above our pay grades must trust him because he was our contact in Dushanbe. Driver, it’s not hard to imagine there aren’t factions in Russia right now who aren’t really happy with the guy in charge.” He paused then added, “Even if that’s not true, Russia might want to buddy up if there’s a common enemy.”

“Which, in your calculus, would be China.”

He nodded. “Especially since Afghanistan kicked both the Russians and us out.”

“Leaving only China as a major player in the region.”

“Precisely.”

“Then why doesn’t China open the border?” Driver asked.

“Dunno. There might be too much instability in Afghanistan for China to risk allowing in the Taliban. The Wakhan borders Xinjiang Province.”

“So?”

“Do you know who lives there?”

“No, Worthy, but it’s clear you do. Why don’t you just tell me?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“The Uyghurs.” Then, when the silence stretched, he added, “They’re Muslim. I mean, in case you didn’t know.”

“I knew,” Driver said but with an abstracted air as if he were truly mulling over a new idea. “You’re suggesting China’s worried about what happens internally if they open a border along a province that is heavily Muslim with a neighboring, very strict Muslim enclave.”

“Filled with people the Chinese have been sending to re-education camps because the claim is that the Uyghurs are terrorists in the making. Wouldn’t you be worried about cross-fertilization of proven Muslim terrorists and extremists?”

“Let me see if I’ve got this straight,” Driver said. “You’re suggesting that the Taliban want to use Roni’s remains as a bargaining chip with China? A quid pro quo: we give you the American if you open the border?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. The beauty of the plan, of course, is that this is something China could use as leverage or even just bad publicity, especially because next year, 2024, is an election year. Think about who’s running. Think about who’s in the White House now and on top of that, how chaotic the pullout from Afghanistan was.”

“Chaos? Worthy, it was a nightmare.”

Truer words, my friend. Announcing when America would leave had been the first mistake made by a different president. The subsequent withdrawal, under the next president’s watch, had been mismanaged, which was kinder and gentler than shit

show. “You honestly think our government wouldn’t make a deal to get Roni’s remains on the down-low?”

“To avoid embarrassment?”

“Exactly. The current administration hasn’t rolled back tariffs on the Chinese from the last administration. No matter who comes into the White House, tariffs on Chinese goods are here to stay and bound to get worse. But if China gets Roni’s remains?—”

“And broadcast that as a way of making sure tariffs don’t get worse?—”

“Or uses the fact that an American was left behind and that influences the election,” he said, “then China’s calling the shots.”

“I could imagine the current administration being kind of anxious to avoid that.”

“Driver, I don’t think it’s a coincidence that you and I, from two different teams, just happen to be in roughly the same place at the same time. Think about it. What are the odds? We’re both off-the-books. We’re both deniable.”

“If things go sideways.”

“Which they have for Davila and me.”

“You’re saying you’re a redundancy?” Driver shook his head. “I don’t know if I see it that way, Worthy. Our missions aren’t the same.”

“Maybe not to begin with, but I’m suggesting that Davila and I would eventually have met up with you and your guys. All of this, you and me with our history, I’m not a big believer in coincidence. Somehow, somewhere our missions intersect and...”

Driver waited a beat. “And?”

“And I think it’s time for you to tell who we’re here for. You need me as a wingman, I’m good with that, but I’d like to know where my pilot’s flying. Because as far as I can tell, there are only two things you or any clandestine unit with your skillset does, Driver. You either kill people or you rescue them. So, which is it?”

“Would you believe,” Driver said, “a little bit of both?”

5

“How much do you know about what went down?” Driver asked.

“Before or after I drowned?”

“Don’t get cute. I meant, after. How much did anyone tell you? Did you get a debrief?”

He shook his head. “Like I said, all your dad and I got back were crickets.”

“Remember I said Flowers and Mac made it to Kabul with ten kids?”

He nodded. “With Meeks driving another and Shahida and Musa, that makes three vehicles, right?”

“Yeah. Shahida and Musa left first. Meeks hung around for a good half hour, forty-five minutes until Mac told him to beat it.”

“You’re saying everyone had a good head start on Flowers and Mac.”

“Yeah. Then you wash out; they do CPR, and you start breathing, right? That puts

them, conservatively, an hour to an hour and a quarter behind Meeks who is trailing Shahida by anywhere from a half hour to an hour, depending upon how much Musa's flooring it. Even after they finally get going, Mac and Flowers are put even further behind everyone else because they stop to allow the PJs to get you onto a transport."

“Okay. But where are you going with this?”

Driver raised a finger. “Hear me out. Flowers and Mac make it back in enough time to get the kids they were carrying onto a transport. Meeks meets up with them, sohiskids are accounted for. That means a total of thirty kids, give or take, when you factor in the load you gave Drummond. But thatstillleaves ten boys unaccounted for, right? Because Shahida came back with a bunch of boys while you were on the road to Drummond.”

“Which means there should’ve been upwards offortykids.”

“Instead of thirty, right.” Driver nodded. “When Mac figures that out, they go looking for Shahida and Musa.”

“And?”

“And they don’t find them.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“You need me to draw a picture? Worthy, they weren’t there. None of Mac’s contacts reported seeing them or the kids they were bringing in.”

He felt his lower jaw unhinge. “They didn’t make it in time?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then what are you saying?” But, in the next breath, the light bulb went off. “Oh, my God. They didn’t make it at all?”

Driver touched off an imaginary round with thumb and forefinger, like a kid playing at war. “Bingo.”

“What happened?” But his mind was racing now. This is my fault, this is on me, if Mac hadn’t waited, if he and Flowers had just left, if they hadn’t waited to see if we would make it...Roni would be just as dead, but so would he. All those kids would still be alive if not for him. “Did they ever find them?”

“Not long after the PJs left with you, Mac got an SOS from Shahida that they were under attack. Mac was too far behind to help and Meeks too far ahead. The PJs didn’t see anything either, but they might have taken a different route, I don’t know.”

“But, how? How did anyone know to even look for her on the road? Driver, I shot a damned flare at those guys. I killed a couple, and you said Meeks took care of the last two. I’ll grant you that others might have found Roni’s body later, but there were no other Taliban around when Mac left, right?”

“Worthy, did it ever occur to you to wonder how the fighters who targeted the aqueduct got there to begin with or knew where to go? No? Well, take a wild guess. Wait, I’ll help you.” Driver held up a thumb. “Who routinely disappeared and then reappeared?” An index finger to join the thumb. “Who kept bringing more and more kids in?” Another finger. “Who was Mac arguing with when you and Flowers showed up? Who forced Mac to break his own rules about radio silence and risk letting you go halfway with a vehicle full of kids to meet up with Drummond because that was the only way to accommodate yet another load of boys? Don’t misunderstand me. I was just as anxious to get those kids out of there as anyone else. But who made that doubly difficult?”

“Shahida.”

“Got it on the first try. And who said you aren’t a bright boy?”

That ticked him off. “I understand that being an asshole seems to come naturally but try not to live up to your reputation.”

“An asshole? Worthy, has it ever occurred to you, at all,” Driver said, his voice low and quiet and more than a little deadly, “that there are days I want to blow my brains out? Because I am just as much at fault, if not more so. If I’d had my shit together, if I hadn’t popped so many uppers, I might have been able to get that kid, Buri, and we’d have been out of there. We lost time because of me. I’m the reason that you died, man. I’m the reason Roni died. She could’ve been out and safe, but she waited for us.”

Hadn’t he gone through the same calculus? If only this, if only that, if only Driver hadn’t popped those pills, if only he hadn’t needed to go back for Driver, if only Roni had kept going...

“I can’t tell you what to think, but you keep that up, you’ll drive yourself crazy,” he said. “Trust me. Been there, done that, drunk the Kool-Aid. Before I checked myself into treatment, I got to admit that there were a lot of days when I wondered what gunmetal might taste like.”

They fell silent for a few moments and then Driver sighed. “And they say time heals all wounds.”

“They don’t heal,” John said. “They just don’t hurt as much so long as you don’t pick at the scabs.”

As they were sipping morning coffee.

“What do people think happened with Shahida?” he asked. “That she was followed when she came back with that last group of boys? It would explain why the bad guys knew where we were.”

“Best guess. Meeks kept an eye out for Shahida and Mac but didn’t think much about not seeing her because there was a lot going on. Getting those kids situated and out on those last few transports was a logistical nightmare. Besides, he couldn’t have known she and Mac didn’t leave at the same time.”

“And Mac didn’t see anything out of the ordinary after the PJs took me?”

“You mean, did he notice blood spatter, bullet-riddled bodies, and a smoking, overturned vehicle? No. Best guess is whoever took Shahida’s boys forced Musa off the road. By the time Mac realized she hadn’t made it, it was too late.”

“Because the trip took six hours one-way.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“Yes. Although he did go out again, obviously, to come get me. By then, he’d asked for a drone flyover, too.”

“And?”

“And the drone spotted tracks heading northeast.”

“And?”

“And nothing.”

He was dumbstruck. “Nothing? That doesn’t make sense. If they were hijacked or attacked, they’d have put up a fight. You’d find some trace.”

“You’re assuming they did put up a fight. Would you? Do you really think that, knowing they were outgunned and outmanned, Shahida would risk getting those boys killed?”

“No.” Anything Shahida had done was born out of desperation to help her boys escape. “Then what? Let’s say they were hijacked. Let’s say the hijackers had some sense that a search would be mounted that very night. A vehicle driven off-road leaves tracks. Even stopped, an engine emits enough residual thermal energy for at least a couple hours. That should’ve been picked up on infrared.”

“Actually, no, and you were doing so well, too.”

He bristled. “Don’t get cute.”

“I’m not. I’m pointing out assumptions. A drone is not magic. A drone is not from Krypton, so as they say,ixnay on the x-ray. A drone can pick up only what is either above-ground or so close to an entrance...say, to a cave or the windows of an abandoned building...that residual thermal radiation can be picked up.”

“So, they just flat-out vanished?”

“No. Mac thinks they were just very well-hidden that first night. He pressed for another search two or three days later. That’s when the drone found what was left of the Humvee along the last passable road in the Badakhshan Province.”

“Wow. That far north?” Then the proverbial penny dropped. “Wait a minute, the Wakhan is?—”

“Technically in Badakhshan Province. Correct. I wondered when you’d figure it out. When a team of our people got to the vehicle, all they found was some blood on the driver’s side.”

“Meaning Musa was hit?”

Driver nodded. “But only if he was driving by then. We know she wasn’t driving because DNA says the blood came from a male.”

“But no bodies?”

“Nope, nada, zip. Gone. We figure that if Musa was hit or already dead, they took him along, just in case he was worth anything.”

“That’s pretty cold.”

“I don’t make up the facts.”

“How would they know where to attack?” And then John thought: Radio. He said, very carefully, “Mac called for a medevac team.”

“Yes, he did.”

“For me.” When Driver nodded, he said, “Which means he had to explain why.”

“Yup.” Driver made a keep rolling motion with a forefinger. “You’re doing really well.”

“Mac probably relayed details about what happened.” Details that might very well have included the fact that Shahida and Musa and Meeks and all those boys were enroute to Kabul.

“Yes.” As if reading John’s mind, Driver said, “Don’t blame yourself, man. This isn’t your fault.”

“No?”

“No. Mac did what he did. He had to be specific about what the problem was and what was needed. Even with encoded communications, that’s a lot of chatter and all that chatter means?—”

“Means anyone listening could triangulate on a position. Which was then used to target the others.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“That’s right. We’re not the only ones with eyes in the sky. Best guess is Mac said too much, but he’s only human and some bad shit was going down. We figure they didn’t bother with Mac and Flowers because an armed chopper was on the way. To be honest, I’m surprised whoever was listening in didn’t try to take the chopper down. But I don’t think killing more Americans was on the agenda. Might explain why they didn’t bother Meeks or his kids.” Driver paused. “They were gunning for Shahida, Worthy. She was the one with a target on her back.”

My God. All those poor boys... “How would they know to listen?”

“To our comms?” Driver aimed a forefinger. “You, when your meet with Drummond was arranged.” He paused. “Before you start beating yourself up about this, remember: the entire caravan was three shooters short. I wasn’t there and neither were you or Roni.”

“I’m not sure that makes me feel a whole lot better. All those kids died.”

“Ah.” Driver cocked his head. “Did it ever occur to you they might not have?”

“What?” A jolt of surprise. “No, I just assumed.”

“Which makes an ass out of you and me. But think about it. Those kids were property, which Shahida stole.” He paused. “Mac is the only guy who thinks they were all taken prisoner and are still alive. He just can’t convince the higher-ups.”

“Prisoners for what? To fight?”

“Doubt it. No one’s fighting the Taliban.”

“Then, what? Let the kids go back to their old lives?”

“Passed around for pervs? It’s not impossible, but I wouldn’t put my money on that, not with what Mac has figured out over time. What happened has stuck in Mac’s craw. The way he’s pored over maps, worked out travel times and coordinated with the intel on the ground that he’s gotten, he’s convinced he’ll find them all. The boys, Shahida. Even Musa.”

He opened his mouth, closed it again, then asked, very carefully, “Why are you using the present tense? When you’re talking about Mac and...” He pulled in a quick breath. “Oh, my God. Your mission. Are you here to?—”

But he never did finish that thought.

Because, from somewhere outside, came the sharp, crisp snap of weapons fire.

And then, a half later, just as they’d finished hastily packing up, Driver’s satellite beacon began to shrill.

POYA: THE SECRET ANNEX

1

As always, before doing anything in these early morning hours, Poya listened. Safer that way. His sleeping area was cordoned off by a woolen shyrdak suspended from the yurt’s ceiling. In turn, the shyrdak was anchored to the many layers of wool and felt that made up the yurt’s floor. When he’d first seen it, Poya thought pup tent. Minus one side, of course. Which meant that anyone could poke a head around the shyrdak’s edge. That made the arrangement dangerous if he got careless and forgot to listen to

make sure no one else was up yet.

The hour was very early. True dawn wouldn't happen for another hour and a half. From experience he knew neither Amu nor Amu's mother-in-law, Bas, would stir until then. But as Baba once said, Assume makes an ass out of you and me. Then, at Poya's baffled expression, Baba added, It's a much better joke in English.

Now, he heard only the familiar crackle of banked coals in the pot-bellied oven in the yurt's center and the faint boom of the bad-e Wakhans slamming against the dwelling's felt-covered reed walls. Between windy gusts, he picked out Amu's soft, steady sleep-breathing punctuated by Bas's deeply nasal snores. Amu's mother-in-law spent a lot of her time snoring. When she was awake, Bas smoked her pipe. When her pipe was done, she fell into a deep sleep. When Bas woke, she repeated the process with maybe a break for a meal or to wash.

And why did Bas dream her life away? That one was easy. All seven of Bas's children were dead. That included her youngest daughter, married to Amu, who'd died in childbirth.

That happened in 2021, an awful year. Not only had the Americans abandoned the country, the winter which followed was brutal and bitter. People starved. Or froze to death. That happened to five of Amu's six children, including the ten-month-old baby boy whose birth killed Amu's wife.

The only child of Amu's to survive was a sixth child, a son.

Who, it seemed, was missing.

2

Picking up languages had never been hard. Baba used movies and turned learning into

a game. Poya might first watch a film dubbed in Pashto before progressing to subtitles, and finally to the film in its original language. Most often this was English, but they also watched films in French and German. Russian.

At the time, Poya assumed all this was just for fun. Now, he understood what Baba had been doing: teaching Poya the art of disguise. The art of eavesdropping and blending in. Of being easily forgettable. Of holding oneself still and being so ordinary that everyone else nattered on with no more thought for you than they'd spare for, say, a tablecloth. Or servant.

In other words, Baba taught Poya how to spy.

With Amu's people, he played stupid. He made mistakes on purpose. A trick, this: people gossiped more if they thought you were an idiot. When the other men in the clan gathered in Amu's yurt to drink tea and chew balls of hardqurut, Poya fixed his expression into a studied neutral. Even when the men made comments about the boy, he didn't look up and never turned around. Instead, he would stare into the middle distance and tongue his own ball of salty, dried yak cheese from one cheek to the other—and listen.

Which was how he learned about Amu's lost son, Hamzad.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

Hamzad wasn't dead. He hadn't gone to live with another family in a distant clan. Hamzad was simply gone. Poof.

Thing was...so were all the boys Hamzad's age. Although there were plenty of girls and younger boys in the camp, there were no teenaged boys at all.

And why was that?

The only clue was a comment made about a month after his arrival by a flat-faced, surly clansman named Mur: So, Amu, you want to bring down more bad luck? Two years now, they've let us be. But how long do you think before this one goes the way of Hamzad?

From the corner of an eye, Poya saw everyone else stiffen. Heads turned his way, but Poya only poured more tea into Mur's cup and kept his own face as still as stone. Amu never did answer and eventually someone broke the silence with concerns about supplies and the coming winter.

But that exchange stuck with him, and not only because of the boy's name. Hamzad meant spirit or jinn. For the devout, a hamzad was a jinn assigned to a person at birth and so followed that person around. Even though Amu wasn't religious, perhaps he looked at Poya as Hamzad's, well, spiritual successor?

The other thing which bothered him: just how were they? The people which Mur said had left the clan alone for the last two years?

And what would happen if they noticed him?

Now, Poya eased from the woolen cocoon he'd made of his blankets. On the roof of the world, a person never stripped down to nothing at night or, really, any time. For Poya, this turned out to be a blessing, although privacy was relative. So, he dressed quickly, wrapping himself up with practiced ease before slipping into straight-legged pants, thick wool socks, a cloth shirt, and, finally, a deep blue wool sweater decorated with red borders and white lotus flowers.

Once done, he checked the phone's charge. Eighty-five percent. Not bad, given the subzero temperatures in these parts. During the coldest months, there were virtually no days with enough sunlight to make solar panels practical, which tended to ice up anyway. Everyone in the valley used car batteries to power DVD players, televisions, radios. Electric razors. Like all the other men in his clan, Amu had a cellphone on which he stored music because there was no service way out here. Every couple of nights, Poya would stay awake until Amu began to snore and then slip out to plug in his own cell. He didn't think that, if discovered, Amu would take the phone away, but why take the chance?

Dropping his mother's phone into a pocket, Poya coiled the cord, slipped that into the wool-stuffed sack he used for a pillow before fishing out two more items: his mother's small mirrored compact and the tiny case where he kept his eyes.

When Poya was seven, Baba had presented him with his first pair. Everything about you is a disguise, Poya, Baba said. That includes your eyes. That first day Poya cried them out because slipping them in was hard and a little scary, but Baba made him learn.

We will keep at this until you learn. Baba had handed him a kerchief. Now, blow your nose and we will do this again by feel and then you will do this in front of a mirror, which is trickier because everything is reversed. But you must learn. This is non-

negotiable.

Baba had been right, too. The eyes made a big difference, but they were only the finishing touch. Once fully disguised, he had wandered, freely, through Kabul's streets. No one then had suspected what he was.

His problem now was what he was becoming.

4

Ducking out from under his shyrdak, Poya stood, motionless, the better to look and listen.

A feeble early morning glow washed the interior with grainy, milky light. With no windows, the yurt's only source of natural illumination came from whatever leaked around the stove's chimney which vented through a hole in the ceiling. If the chimney was the center of a clock and the door was twelve, then his shyrdak was six. Amu was at three and Bas at nine, because the left side of every yurt belonged to the women in a family.

Skirting the stove, he padded on stockinged feet toward the door, his footfalls making only the slightest hushingsounds on more patterned, deep red shyrdaks laid atop a bottom layer of thick felt. The same kind of long rugs covered the yurt's canvas walls. Stacks of trunks and suitcases, doing double-duty as both insulation and furniture, were pushed against the yurt's walls.

Crossing to the door, he carefully lowered himself onto a very large, very old trunk, but the thing still protested with a small, creakingsqueee. Wincing at the noise, he froze. Amu's breathing didn't change, but Bas's snores hitched for a brief second. The old woman snuffled, grunted. A beat passed and then another...and then her snores started up again.

You're worrying for nothing. He worked his feet into the boots. Even if they wake up, they won't try to stop you going for water. It's what you do every morning.

What he didn't want was for them to question why he left so early, almost two hours before anyone else stirred.

Pulling a flashlight from a neat array of tools spread upon a steamer trunk, he slipped that into a carry-sling which hung from his belt on his left hip. Then, lifting his wool coat from a nail, he shoved his arms into the sleeves, buttoned up, then squared a Russian-style fur-lined hat on his head. After snapping the ear flaps together under his chin, he wound a long scarf over his mouth. As he did, his gaze slid, as it invariably did, to Amu's Kalashnikov, which hung to the left of the door.

He ached to take the rifle. In fact, about three weeks ago, Amu had asked, almost casually, if Poya would like to learn how to shoot. Of course, Poya agreed. Amu was pleasantly surprised at how quickly Poya learned how to handle the weapon.

You have very good aim, boy, Amu said. A steady hand.

Poya only smiled. No need to tell Amu that this wasn't, as the Americans would say, his first rodeo. Baba had trained him well: When you've run out of options, Poya, you need to be able to pull that trigger.

He hadn't needed to, yet. There was, however, a first time for everything.

He knew Amu wouldn't mind if he took the weapon. The clan's mountain spring was over two miles away. Predators occasionally made their way down-mountain. For a hungry leopard or wolf pack, a child on his or her own made for good eating. But if Amu woke and found Poya and the rifle gone hours earlier than the other children set off, Poya would be asked questions he didn't want to answer. No point taking chances unless he absolutely must.

When the time came, though, and he had to run, Amu's rifle was coming with him. He felt a little bad about that. Yes, Amu had bought him, but the man wasn't an awful person. He cared for his mother; he worried about the clan. The fact that he'd taken Poya out to shoot suggested he wanted Poya to learn how to behave.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

The thing was, Poya knew that would change. When it did, Amu's largesse would evaporate. Poya would be lucky if Amu didn't shoot him outright.

You are Poya Durrani. He slid a weighty claw hammer he hoped he would never have to use into his right coat pocket. You are Poya. Remember that.

Then he slipped on cat's feet from the yurt, and into the cold.

5

The sky was the color of dirty milk. A gust of icy wind smashed his body and blasted over his face. Despite all his layers and preparation, Poya drew in a quick, involuntary inhale through his scarf then winced as frigid air, sharp as an icepick, stabbed his lungs. The pain was so intense, his mind blanked for a moment. Driven by wind, fine icy snow stung the exposed skin around his eyes and hissed over the yurt's fabric cover.

Blinking against sudden tears, he bent and went to work on a knot securing a loose coil of heavy rope to a peg pounded deep into the ground. Disentangling the rope from its peg, he unraveled the coil along which four empty seven-liter plastic water jugs were strung like charms on necklace. The jugs banged and bumped with hollow thumps as he slung the rope around his neck and shoulders. Once filled with water from a spring at the easternmost tip of Lake Chaqmaqin, each jug would weigh around fifteen pounds.

The walk to the spring was long and even colder than it had to be because Amu's winter camp nestled in the foothills north of the lake and about two kilometers from a

steep road which wound its way into the mountains bordering Tajikistan.

That road was strange. The fact of its being there at all was odd. Poya understood why the Taliban was laying down a road to China. But this road, which was wide enough to accommodate a large truck, was one of a kind. There were no other roads nearby. When Poya asked where the road went or who lived up there, all he got back from Amu was a blank stare and then a warning to stay away.

Which made Poya wonder. If whatever was up was so dangerous, why didn't Amu move his clan further away? There weren't a lot of Kyrgyz in the Wakhan. Maybe a thousand, tops, in the whole valley. Clans lived far apart from one another for all kinds of reasons, most of them related to the availability of good land for grazing. The nearest clan was a two hour walk to southwest. As far as Poya knew, all the other clans wintered on the south side of the Little Pamir, the better to capture the sun's warmth in the broad, U-shaped valley. With so few people in the pamir, there was plenty of room to spread out

Except Amu's clan stayed north of the lake. Which didn't make a lot of sense. Then, again, Poya wasn't the boss.

Usually children went together for water, not just for company but of necessity. In winter, the lake froze as did the river to their west. The way was slippery and treacherous. Even if a fall didn't kill, the cold just might. Only he wasn't going for water. Not just yet anyway. The jugs were part of his disguise, as essential as his eyes. If anyone were out and about this early and questioned him, he had a convenient excuse.

Skirting the yurt, he labored uphill, eyelids thinned to slits, body bent almost double as he battled the wind. Then, instead of heading east toward the frozen lake, he turned north, staggering upslope along a narrow cut. Chipped from rock and worn down from the hooves of generations of yaks and donkeys, the path was slick with new

snow atop compacted ice, and he placed each step with exaggerated care. A fall here would be disastrous. No one would hear him scream for help. He would freeze to death before anyone realized he was missing.

Hooking right, he clambered over a tumble of snowy boulders, following the small landmarks he'd left for himself. With no trees at this altitude, he'd had to be inventive: a stack of rocks here, a tiny triangle of stones there. Once he was well around the mountain's flank, the valley disappeared, the westerly wind died, and the way grew easier. His heart thumped from the exertion and his scalp prickled with perspiration, but the hard work felt good, his limbs looser and suppler. Removing the rope and its jugs from around his neck, he crammed the coils into a nook. He'd retrieve them on his way back.

He knew an hour was gone when he came upon a small stone pyramid glazed with crusty ice and fresh snow snuggled against the mountain at a wide U-shaped bend. Another fifteen minutes, and he would leave this trail for a smaller thread of a path and reach his destination—his own private hideaway—five minutes later. He could've double-checked against his mother's cell but, after so many trips to his hideaway, didn't need to. Besides, he was afraid he might drop and smash the phone, and then what? In a naïve, almost childish portion of his mind, he nursed a fantasy: one day, that phone would ring, and he would answer?—

Stop it. Don't be stupid. Dragging his Russian-style fur cap from his head, he arched sweat from his forehead. There's no cell service here. She doesn't know where you are. Besides, she'll never?—

From somewhere came a faint, sharp crack.

What? Startled, he flinched. His hat tumbled to the snow; his heart slammed his ribs. Casting a wild look over a shoulder, he looked behind and then turned an almost complete circle. There was nothing, though, but snow and rocks and ice.

But I heard that. He knew all the vagaries of ice now: how the cracks and groans and squeals could sound like someone dying or a mouse struggling against the jaws of a cat.

Or like this sound. He listened so hard his ears rang. Like the sound a?—

Another crack.

Cringing, he dropped to all fours. Don't hear me, don't see me! He waited, both hands clapped over his mouth, trembling with cold and a deeper, icier bite of fear

Because he knew this sound. Anyone who'd lived Kabul's last days knew.

A third crisp report, and his body flinched. The urge to jump to his feet and run as fast as he could back down the path was strong. Tears burned the backs of his eyes.

No, you can't cry. He bore down, clamping back on his fear, the desire to weep. Lose an eye now, here, and he'd never find it.

Whoever is out here, they're far away. To his east, he thought. Sounds carried in the cold, that was all. There were no one here, no one just around a bend, waiting with a weapon.

You're all right. He gulped air, his breaths coming short and sharp. You'll be okay. Nothing's going to?—

A fourth shot and then a fifth in rapid succession, a short double tap: bap-bap!

Then...nothing...nothing...

Were they done? Had they, whoever they were, killed?—

BOOM.

Page 58

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“Ah!” He clapped a hand over his mouth. Shh, shh, quiet, quiet! That blast had been enormous, huge, a bellow of thunder rolling down the slope.

Another BOOM. The sound was enormous, the echoes rolling through the mountains like thunderclaps. This wasn't a rocket or a bomb. He knew what those were like. This was something plucked from an old American western, a film with Clint Eastwood sighting down the long barrel of a shot?—

Another great BOOM.

Then...pause.

Pause.

Nothing.

It's over. You're okay. His limbs loosened. Sagging back against a boulder, he worked at slowing his breathing. Who was shooting, and at what? Maybe a leopard? No, that made no sense. There had been two distinct sounds, which meant two different weapons and he could say, with absolute certainty, that no one was having it out with a snow leopard packing a shotgun.

The sequence made no sense either. While both came from the east, the shots were in different directions. The earlier, crisper, but more distant shots...those were rifles. Probably a Kalashnikov. He wasn't a weapons expert, but he'd certainly heard enough rifle fire in his life to know that particular sound when he heard it.

And what were the odds of two hunters coming at a leopard from opposite directions? Close to zero because, well, there were close to zero people in the whole valley.

Which meant that this had been an exchange of gunfire between opponents: the sharp snaps of the rifle first, the shotgun booms second. Of the two, whoever had that shotgun was also closer.

Maybe I should go back. Just turn around, hoof it to the spring, fill his jugs...no, no, fill only two, that would be best. Made for a better story, too: I got up early and went to fetch water, but then someone started shooting and I got scared and I ran before I could finish and...He might still face questions about why he hadn't waited for the other children, but probably not. Better to beg forgiveness.

He rose, carefully, cautiously. He listened hard, but other than the wind and the soft hiss of snow over ice, nothing else stirred. Turning, he picked his way as fast as he could back the way he had trail. After a few moments, though, his pace slowed and when he came to large hummock of snow-covered rock and the marker which pointed the way to the valley, he stopped.

Wait. Think. If he went back now, he was throwing away precious time he would never regain. There weren't many hours out of any given day when he was truly on his own. It was still early; he had time. Plus...he listened so hard his eyes rang. Nothing to hear. He knew from experience that if anyone was up, he would know. Animals bleated. Men shouted. But there was only the groan of the wind.

No one was up. No one was shooting anymore either.

Should he take the chance? Well, why not? He was nearly there. How many pleasures did he really have in this place? He could tick them all off on one hand and still have five fingers.

So, Poya turned and traced his steps. A little time stolen was better than no time at all.

There was a movie he'd once seen, the one with Indiana Jones and his dad—and there was this line Poya and Baba would often throw at one another when someone did something incredibly dumb. Which, in about fifteen minutes, Poya would discover also applied to him.

Because he chose poorly.

6

After another ten minutes trudging uphill, Poya hooked left along a narrow switchback. This kinked around an enormous outcropping of rock. The wind died, almost instantly, to a thin whisper. The air was also a touch warmer here and held an odd scent. A stink, really, of boiled egg yolks.

He followed his nose until he spied a rocky point jutting from the mountain like the business end of a giant's axe. The smell was even stronger here, riding on faint, gray steamy wisps emanating from a narrow cleft in the rock. There was a temperature gradient, too, that reminded him of frigid winter days in Kabul, when he could feel a cushion of cold air spilling over a windowsill in an invisible waterfall. It was the same here: warm air bathing his face and chest while denser, more frigid air swirled around his ankles. Today, there wasn't any snow or ice at the entrance. Normally, there was. Not a lot, usually just a dusting. But today the rock was clear.

Pausing at the cleft, he listened. Habit, really. In all the weeks he'd been coming here, he'd heard nothing and seen no animals. The only sound reaching him now was a faint hiss.

Still. Slipping the hammer from his belt, he hefted that in his right hand and took up his flashlight in his left. Better safe than sorry.

Thumbing on his light, he followed the beam into the darkness.

After a few feet, the cave's ceiling rose, and he could walk without stooping. The air was noticeably warmer and more humid. The smell of boiled egg was stronger, too. The only sounds were the crunch of his footsteps, that soft hiss, and a very faint, watery burble.

Out of habit, he fanned his flashlight's beam right and left, checking the now-familiar nooks and crannies. The rock was covered with primitive figures, some chiseled into the stone and others painted with splashes of red and black and white, though the red was faded and the blacks beginning to grey. Some images were large, hairy horned animals, which he thought were meant to be yaks. Other smaller, four-legged creatures with pointed ears and mouths bristling with spiky teeth were likely to be wolves. Snow leopards were easy; those spots were dead giveaways.

To the right of these, an ancient artist had painted a line of stick-figure people, armed with bows, sending a barrage of arrows arcing toward a huge horned creature with long fangs and hairy arms and spiky claws for hands. So, a bear, maybe? Or a demon? A malevolent jinn?

A few inches below this was a handprint. Once red, the print now was a dull copper. A signature, Poya thought, of someone long ago. The first time he'd seen it, he'd spread his own hand over the print, being careful not to touch the painted rock. The match wasn't perfect, but it was close enough.

A long time ago, some prehistoric kid had used this place the same way Poya did now: as a hiding place where he could be himself.

Rounding the next bend, he stepped into an enormous room. The ceiling soared away, broadening into a craggy dome. At its center, a nearly perfect circular opening glowed like a milky white eye. To his left, a low arch led to another large room and

more branching tunnels which he hadn't explored. To his right, a narrow stream of steaming water dribbled over the lip of a white travertine limestone terrace, burbled across the cavern's floor, and trickled into a rock pool about the size of a small tub. This emptied, slowly, through a much smaller channel which disappeared beneath a flat expanse of sparkling gray and white rock along the righthand wall.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

Above the slab was a very wide, flat shelf of flowstone frilled along its edge with a spiky beard of white calcite. The shelf was high enough that someone would have to look very hard to see all the way to the back. This made the shelf an excellent hiding place for the odds and ends he'd stolen over these last few months: a folding knife, a waterskin, a spare set of clothes. A small compass he'd discovered in one of Bas's many trunks. A box of matches and a tin can he could use to carry a few embers as he made his way toward, well...wherever.

In his blacker moods, he knew the stash was pitiful. Stealing made him feel a little better, but only momentarily. He needed real supplies: a store of yak dung to burn, food, water. A weapon and ammo, too. A person would have to, as the Americans wouldsay, get his head examined if he ran into the wilderness without a rifle. He might steal Amu's, but that would probably backfire, ha-ha. Amu might not care as much ifheran, but if he took the rifle, Amu would come after him. So, best to leave the rifle behind.

He had the passports his father had arranged, too: not only for Afghanistan but one for India, another for Pakistan, a third for Tajikistan. Even one for America.

But he still had a huge problem.

Even if I get ahold of a rifle, where do I go?Stepping onto the large slab, Poya reached into the shelf and pulled out a rough towel and a washcloth folded around a coarse lump of sheep's milk soap.Where would a kid like me be safe?

Baba would probably sayAmerica, but since Baba's handler had failed to materialize, that was off the table. Which meant that he was—as the Americans would

say—royally screwed.

Okay, so I can't escape just yet. Placing his toiletries on the flowstone slab, he slid out a plastic, zip-top bag with exaggerated care. But that doesn't mean my mind can't.

Because what the bag contained was treasure.

What the bag protected was hope.

What the bag held was a book.

7

Kabul: April 2023.

"Let's play a game," the man said. "We've got a long drive. It'll help pass the time until we get to Herat."

"Okay," Poya said. That reply seemed the safest. Baba had introduced the man as Mr. White. That, Poya knew, was not the man's real name because this man was the same American Poya had seen when he'd hidden on the landing and spied on his father. At that time, his father had called this American by a different name, too.

Today, the American had a new name: Mr. White. The name didn't suit him at all. White was bland. White was the absence of color. This Mr. White seemed to have stepped out of one of Baba's movies. Something made by Tarantino... Dog-something. Or was it Dogs Something? Or Something Dogs? Poya couldn't recall.

Even if this man wasn't as dangerous as Harvey Keitel, this Mr. White still felt dangerous. Although Mami and Baba would never have allowed Mr. White to be alone with Poya if the man was dangerous, right? Or let Mr. White drive a truck

with five of Mami's girls hidden in the back.? Or tell Mr. Whitewhyall of Mami's students were dressed like Poya in trousers, salwarkameezes, and shemaghs pulled up over their noses to hide their faces and bulky pakools into which they tucked long coils of hair? The students had little choice, though. None of them were allowed to go anywhere without amahram. Driving five hours out to a farm owned and operated by a farmer who also had to hide that she was a woman...well, that was inviting trouble.

So, if these students want to see the farm, the only option was for all ten to be like Poya. Well, all except for his eyes, which he kept hidden behind tinted glasses in a style that his mother said John Lennon used to wear. Which was flattering, in a way; Poya liked Lennon's music. But he thought it might be bad luck to look a little like a dead man.

"What kind of game?" Poya asked.

"Well, not math. I'm not good at it, though I hear you are," Mr. White said. "I hear you're good at many things. Languages, for example. Your father said you're fluent in four? Or was it five?"

Poya hedged. "Most people know Dari and Pashto."

"True. Although the same can't be said for Persian Farsi or Arabic or English."

"Uh-huh." His father always reminded him to be careful. No one should know how much you know, how smart you are. Intelligent people become targets. So, why had Baba said anything? Again, he prevaricated. "Farsi isn't that different from Dari."

"True, but English and Arabic are a stretch. What other languages do you know? Your father mentioned a few."

There didn't seem to be any way around this. "German." No point in, as the saying

went, showing one's entire hand. "And French."

"Persian?"

"Yes."

"Spanish?"

"Mmm." Mr. White seemed to know the answers already, so Poya let the information go in drips. That was, Baba said, always best, mostly because nearly everyone who asked about you didn't really care because most people was much more interested in themselves.

"I see." Mr. White was silent a moment. "I think you left out Russian. And what is it?" The man thought a moment. "Right, Greek. Latin, too, if I'm not mistaken."

"Oh. Well." What had Baba told this man? "Yes."

“I hear you can read them, too.”

Since this wasn't a question, Poya said nothing.

“That's actually quite amazing,” Mr. White said.

Again, not a question. Poya stayed mum. The silence lengthened, filled only with the hum of tires on asphalt and the rise and fall of girls' voices drifting up from the back cargo bay.

Mr. White flicked a quick sidelong glance. “If you don't mind my asking, how did you learn all those languages?”

“I like to read. Baba has many movies.”

“And television shows from other countries, I'll bet.”

Another non-question. Poya waited.

“And this is how you learned? From movies and television? Books?”

“Yes.” Poya waited, but Mr. White didn't ask another question, which was a relief.

This Mr. White was quite the puzzle. He was American, that much was clear, although with a hint of some other accent. Not Downton Abbey- British, but close. He didn't quite dress like an American either, at least not the tourists and journalists who'd come to Kabul in the Before Times. Instead of jeans and a tee, Mr. White wore

traditional men's dress: a salwar kameez, as well as a beige and black shemagh looped around his neck. A lumpy dark brown pakool perched atop his head, though the cap was flattened, stained, and a little threadbare as if he'd used it for a pillow or to cushion his bottom on a rock. There was dirt in the creases of his neck. He and his clothes were dusty and stained with sweat, as if he had gone a long time in the high desert without a bath.

In a way... Poya could feel his brain inching up to the realization... didn't Baba's clothes sometimes smell exactly like this after he came back from one of his trips?

If that's true, maybe Mr. White and Baba spend a lot of time together in the same place.

That could explain how they knew one another. But why were they friends?

"What game did you want to play?" Poya asked. Although he wondered if, perhaps, they were already playing at some game whose rules he'd yet to discover.

"A thinking game," Mr. White said. "If you were stranded on a desert island, what three books would you bring?"

For a split second, Poya wondered if Mr. White had read *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The book had never been translated into Pashto or Farsi. This was odd considering that the book was all about what happened to two Afghan women during the civil war after the Communists left. On the other hand, maybe that was exactly why an Afghan couldn't read the book if he or she didn't know English. No point in dissing men or giving women uppity ideas, after all.

Anyway, the father in *Sunshad* had a very large library, just like Baba. Bad things predictably happened to the family because this was, after all, about Afghanistan. Literally the hour before the Taliban swept into Kabul in 1996, the father in the story

told his daughter about a game where a person listed the five books he would most want to take. Poya didn't quite recall if this was for a desert island or whether the girl ever picked any books. He thought not because, a few pages later, a rocket hit the house reducing it to rubble and the library to cinders and made the girl an orphan. Oh, and pregnant, too, though the girl didn't know that yet.

Poya asked, "Do the books have to be in English?"

"For simplicity's sake, yes. Unlike you, I'm not a polyglot."

That made the choice a little easier, but only because German used so many words to describe what English could in one or two. "If the books are short, can I bring four instead of three?"

"You drive a hard bargain." He thought about it and nodded. "Deal. But they must all be relatively short. Say, less than two hundred pages."

It was the best he could hope for. "Fahrenheit 451, Anne Frank." He thought. "A Wrinkle in Time." Sifting through his remaining options he said, "The first edition of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone."

To his credit, Mr. White didn't laugh. "First edition, eh? That was specific. I thought those Harry Potter books are enormous."

"Not all. The first edition is only twenty pages over the limit."

"Okay, brownie points for knowing that. Now," he said, "tell me why you chose those particular books."

"I like 451," Poya said, "because I sometimes do the same thing."

“Do what?”

“Memorize books.”

“Why?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“Because here, in Afghanistan, everything good has to be secret. Like this.” Poya stirred the air with a hand. “Like going to Herat. Like Mami when she teaches.” All Mami’s botany classes were held in secret and, literally, below ground in a bomb shelter next to the beehive in their backyard. “In Afghanistan, you never know when someone will say, oh, you can’t read that, that’s forbidden.”

“Interesting. Did you know that451has been banned in the United States at times and for different reasons? Still is banned today in some states.”

“Really?” He blinked in shock. Didn’t Americans know how lucky they were to have the freedom to read what they chose? “Why?”

“Various reasons. Some people don’t like the cursing or want kids to read that scene in451where the Christian Bible’s burned. I would say,” Mr. White added, dryly, “the people promoting the bans fail to see the irony.”

“Well, if someone burns a Qur’an in Afghanistan, they’re lucky if they only go to prison.”

“Do you think that’s a good thing?”

He had to be careful here. Just because Baba knew this man didn’t mean Mr. White knew that Poya’s parents were unbelievers. “A book’s only words on paper. It’s people who decide how to act or what they believe.”

“Well put.” Mr. White slid Poya a side-eye. “How old are you again? Thirteen?”

“Twelve.” He folded his arms over his chest, realizing only a second or two later how automatically defensive he’d become. Suspicious-looking to an observer, too. Just like 451, the Thought Police were everywhere. He settled for clasping his hands between his thighs. “Why?”

“Because you think like an older person. I suppose that’s because of all the reading you’ve done.”

Poya didn’t know what to say to that. Best to be quiet. Another of Baba’s mantras: When you are quiet, the other person rushes to fill the gap. People do not tolerate silence well.

The silence stretched, and Mr. White finally said, “What about Anne Frank?”

“She lived through what sometimes happens in Afghanistan. She had to hide, the way women here do. I know it’s not the same. Women aren’t loaded into trains and taken away to be killed. But women are imprisoned in Afghanistan all the time. That is what aburqais. They say it is to prevent men from becoming excited, but it is really to keep women hidden away so men can think they’re in charge and no one hears what wuh...they,” he said, recovering quickly, “have to say. Like my mother’s students. Like my mother.”

“But?”

“But Anne is brave. She has hope. That is what my parents say we have to hold onto.”

Mr. White was nodding. “And Harry Potter?”

This was easy. “Because Harry Potter only looks ordinary. It’s why I also like Wrinkle.”

“You mean, because Harry and Meg are special under the skin.” Mr. White’s mouth quirked in a half-grin. “I detect a theme there.”

“Except they’re still different stories. Meg knows she can’t fit in, but she has her family. Harry has to always pretend when he’s around regular people.”

“I see,” Mr. White said. “Why do you think he has to hide in plain sight like that?”

“People are afraid when you’re not like them. You can be a little bit different, but not too much.”

“You have an idea why not?”

To this day, he didn’t know why he thought Mr. White was an adult one could trust. True, Baba trusted Mr. White, but that wasn’t the reason. This man talked to Poya as if he had a brain and things to say.

“Because if you’re too different, people squash you. If you do not obey the rules everyone thinks you should follow, they will kill you,” Poya said, “one way or another.”

Only much later would Poya realize something very strange.

He hadn’t noticed at the time because he was so used to Baba’s games. The way his father would switch a movie from one language to another, for example, or insist he learn how to read subtitles in various languages. This was, his father said, to speed up his brain so he would never have to truly think about how to say something. The words would just be there—the way they had been once he and Mr. White got talking about books. The shift had been automatic and, like a child in a multilingual household, he’d automatically switched languages without noticing.

For the last ten or fifteen minutes of their conversation, they'd spoken...in Russian.

8

Now.

The book inside the bag was thin. He'd managed to smuggle out seventeen in all, thanks to special pockets Mami had sewn into his trousers, kameez tunic, and thick sheepskin chapancoat before they fled. As with the game he'd played with Mr. White, all the books were short. Too many pages was a deal-breaker.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

He'd taken the books he listed for Mr. White and thirteen others he'd not read yet. Novels like *The Giver*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Catcher in the Rye*. These were all in English. If ever he was caught with a book, chances were good he could lie about the plot. Not many could read English, much less speak it. Out here, well, no one could even read. That included Amu.

He was re-reading Anne Frank, probably because, like him, she was trapped and had to hide what and who she was. Of course, things ended badly for her and her family.

But I'm different. The times are different. Well, in some ways. If he stayed in Afghanistan, he would be condemned by what he was just as Anne had been.

He checked his mother's cellphone. Only six-thirty. Plenty of time. In fact, maybe he'd read a bit before his bath. Just a page or two. Tucking the cell back into a pocket, he sat on his favorite part of the flowstone: a natural, butt-sized depression about half a foot from the wall. Being this close to the stream, the wall was also pleasantly warm, and he'd often imagined that the long-ago artist who'd left that handprint might have chosen this very spot to sit and dream.

He found where he'd left off: Anne's diary entry on October 20th, 1942. That was the day a carpenter nearly discovered where Anne and her family were hiding. He could practically taste her fear. He knew what it was like to hide, to always take such care not to slip up. He wasn't hiding the way Anne had been but close enough. The same men who'd probably caught up to Mami would be just as happy to kill him.

Or they just might do something else that was, in its way, even worse. There were rumors about men and boys in Sarhad: men who bought, borrowed, or paired young

beautiful boys with men old enough to be their grandfathers. The prospect made Poya light-headed and sick with fear. Given his body, even bigger problems waited in a future that wasn't as distant now as it had been only five years ago.

On second thought, maybe he would bathe. Skip the book for a day. He didn't need to read about near-misses.

He slipped the paperback into its plastic baggy and zippered that shut. Wriggling his left foot and then his right from their boots, he peeled away his socks then stood to shuck his coat. Pulling the hammer and then his flashlight from their slings, he placed those on his coat and then went to work on his belt. Hooking his thumbs under the waistband of his trousers, he shoved these down to his feet. Slipping out of his vest, he gathered his tunic in both hands to pull over his head?—

Just as, from the darkness to his left, something moaned.

9

He froze, still half-in, half-out of his tunic. Sudden gooseflesh pebbled his naked flesh. The fine hairs along the back of his neck stiffened. His tongue seemed to shrivel to a piece of old shoe leather while his pulse throbbed.

Someone here. A person? Animals, especially big ones, could moan like that. He listened hard over his banging heart but heard nothing. Because it had been nothing? What made a sound like that? Had there been tracks? Had he seen any blood or bits of hair? No, no, he hadn't. Really, he should throw on his clothes and run. On the other hand?—

The moan came again.

Oh. Fear made him shrink into himself, try to grow small. Slowly, carefully, he

smoothed his tunic down over his body and reached for his pants. He had to get out of here, he had to run. But, as he slipped his trousers out from under his belt, the steel claw of his hammer scraped rock like something from a horror movie:screeee.

Oh!Still crouched, he stopped moving for a second.Be quiet, be quiet!

Another moan.

His heart banged. He should leave, right now! He could run, couldn't he? There'd been a movie Baba had about an American Eskimo who ran, naked, across the ice andhelived.

That was a movie.This was real life. Moving the hammer to one side, he stood, got one leg into his trousers and then the other. He got his socks on and then his boots. Buckling his belt, he picked up the hammer in one hand and the flashlight in the other.

Now, back out. Go slow.Once he was around the bend, he would turn and?—

That moan, low and guttural, came again.

And he paused. He stayed where he was even as his brain screamed that he was an idiot, he needed to run, to get out!

Except...that sound was a little off. Camels lowed like that. So did cattle. But, again, the absence of tracks?—

He pulled in a sudden gasp.No tracks.But no snow or ice at the entrance either. Hadn't he just noticed that? Yes, but he'dassumedthat the spring's heat had somehow kept the cave's entry clear.

Except that had never happened before.

Say, an animal decided the cave was a good place to die. He knew from all his reading that animals often intuited when death was near. They frequently stole away to someplace quiet where they could die in peace. So, this might be an animal, wounded and dying or just old and drying. He could buy that.

What he could not buy was that any animal would know to sweep away its tracks.

Another long moan.

There was enough natural light from the opening overhead for him to see a clear path. Stepping carefully, he eased his way along the stream, passed its mouth, and then slid to the extreme left of the entrance into that next chamber. Pressing back against the rock, he listened. Nothing.

Although he now detected a bizarre mélange of odors that did not belong.

One, so thick and potent that Poya's eyes watered was unmistakable. Anyone who had ever visited an outhouse or, come to think of it, a public toilet recognized the stink was of stale urine and old feces.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

His father had been a doctor. So, Poya knew quite a lot. When people or animals were near death, their bowels went, their bladder emptied. Whatever was in there was probably on the brink and crawled in here to die. Maybe best, then, to come back later and take the corpse far away, let the leopards or wolves eat their?—

Another low groan.

The other smell was meaty and fusty. The odor reminded him of Eid al-Adha, the Festival of Sacrifice, when goats were slaughtered and the meat offered to everyone in the village. The herdsman for whom he'd worked in Sarhad had shown him how to soothe the animal then turn it to face Mecca, bring it down on its left flank then make a quick, clean cut with his sharpest blade through the carotid arteries, windpipe, and jugular veins so the blood gushed out. In this way, the herdsman said, the animal died quickly, and its meat would be halal.

Poya never forgot that peculiar stink of wet copper, and he smelled it now, which meant that, in the next room, something was bleeding or had bled?—

“Ahhh.”The exhalation was breathy and long. “My God...”

Oh!Poya had to clap a hand to his mouth to catch the cry that wanted to leap from his tongue. A person, there was a person in the next room! Man, woman? Poya couldn't tell. But those shots. He remembered the crisp, brittle snaps cracking the early morning air, the booms of return fire—and now here was this person who had crawled somewhere dark the way an animal did when it felt the press of death.

His mind raced. What should he do? Try to help? No, that was stupid. If this person

was really badly hurt, what could he do? But if he ran to get help, then what? How would he explain being up here in the first place?

Did that even matter when a life hung in the balance?

Yes. A small voice from a back corner of his mind. Of course, it matters. You're on your own. There's no one to help you. If you go in there, you won't be able to undo that.

Which was true. If he went for help, he would lose this place forever and with it, any plan to escape. The end result would be that, eventually, Amu would discover his secret and then?—

And then, as whoever was in that next room let go of another moan, Poya realized he had a third option.

He could kill whoever was in there. Do that, and his secret was safe.

But with what? There was the folding knife he'd stolen, but the blade was small, and he would have to stab this person many, many times. Unless he cut an artery, this person wouldn't die fast.

Which left his hammer. Yes, better to bash in the man's head. It would be bloody. The man in there would suffer. But caving in his skull would be faster. Once the man was dead, Poya would drag the body far from the cave and let the leopards and wolves do their work. Destroy the evidence.

What would Mami or Baba have said or done? The same? Or would they have tried to help? What kind of person would he become if he killed this person?

Conscience is a luxury you do not have. That small voice, again. Do what you must.

Time for you to become what you pretend you are.

Cocking his arm, readying himself to swing that hammer with all the force of his fear, Poya wheeled around the edge of the cavern's mouth and flicked on his light.

10

His flashlight's beam pierced the darkness.

Haloed in a wash of silvery light, a woman slumped, cross-legged, against a boulder. At first, she seemed not to notice the light at all. Her head hung. Her hair, matted with grime, fell in a thick curtain and hid her face. She was bundled in a tatty man's sheepskin coat and an ill-fitting assemblage of odds and ends, as if snatched at random and from whatever was lying around. Even her boots were different colors: one brown, one black.

There was also something very wrong with her. Her arms weren't still. They moved in restless, herky-jerky movements. Her fingers, painted a dull copper with tacky blood, twitched, clenched into fists, then spasmed opened again. Every now and again, her head wrenched itself over to one side and then the other and so violently her hair swished and swayed to one side and the bones of her neck crackled.

A man was draped in her lap. He wasn't moving, although Poya saw his chest struggle up and then collapse. So, he was breathing. His head was flung back far enough that the knob of his Adam's apple stood out, but the curtain of the woman's hair and the welter of shadows in the poor light hid his features from view. If the splotch on the man's coat and puddle of congealing blood on the stone floor were any indication, at least one of those shots from that morning had found its mark.

They both smelled very bad, as if they'd taken a tumble into a sewage ditch. Unlike the woman, however, the man wasn't twitching or moving. But...Poya

squinted...therewassomething resting in his right hand: a small device, boxy and black and with a short antenna. A phone? Poya didn't know. But the other weird thing: there was somethingfamiliarabout him.

As if I know him.

“Hello?” The word came out as a whisper. Swallowing back a lump of fear, Poya shuffled a step closer. “Hello,” he said, more loudly, “can you?—”

“Ah!”Gasping, the woman reared back. Her left arm flew to shield her eyes and her features went taut, her lips skinning back from her teeth in a ferocious snarl. She fumbled for something lying on the stone next to her right thigh, but her hands wouldn't cooperate. The fingers splayed and kinked, and her right elbow jack-knifed. Something clattered on stone.“Gaah!”

“No, no, it's okay!” Poya shifted the flashlight away from her distorted features. What was wrong with this woman? Maybe she was afraid of his hammer? Slipping that under his belt, he patted the air with his free hand. “I'm sorry. Don't be afraid, I won't?—”

“Bwah!”Her panicked eyes were wide as full moons and she was twitching all over, her neck writhing and jaws working. Spit foamed on her lips. As she jerked and churned, the man on her lap flopped and groaned.

“Gah!”she spluttered.“Ung!”

What was she saying? He couldn't handle this on his own. He would have to go to Amu and confess. If he was lucky, Amu might only beat him later.

Because if I go, if I get help, I'll lose this place.

But there was a life at stake. Two lives, assuming the man didn't die before he got back.

"It'll be okay," he said, backing up as the woman pawed at the stone. What was she doing? He didn't want to turn his back on her. "I'm going, but I'll be back. I'm going to get?—"

The rest fizzled on his tongue—and not only because she had managed to raise what lay by her side. Nor was it only because he was staring at the business end of a short, black, double-barreled shotgun.

He stopped talking because now he had a very clear view of the man's face.

"Mr. White?" Poya said. "Mr.White?"

11

"Tell us again." Amu's stolid, square face was void of expression. He gestured at the other four men, the oldest in the clan, who were seated with him in a rough semi-circle like judges in a tribunal. "We want to understand. How is it you know that man? This Mr. White?"

"I already told you." Poya felt as limp as a used rag. The day was slipping toward twilight. These last many hours had been spent rushing back to camp, shaking Amu awake, explaining what he'd found, then leading Amu and seven of his clan into the

mountains for a rescue. This had gone slowly because they'd also had to bring yaks to carry out both the man and woman. Although the yaks were sure-footed, the way was narrow and full of twists and turns.

Trying to get the woman to come with them without shooting anyone also had been a problem. Not only was she still twitching and jerking and twisting, she didn't seem to understand the clan's language.

On the other hand, that shotgun spoke volumes, however wobbly her aim. In response, the men raised their rifles, and for a split second, Poya thought this really end in a hail of gunfire, like an American western.

Stop! He'd stepped in front of the men, only vaguely aware of Amu yelling for him to get out of the way, to stay back. Crouching, he held out a waterskin: an offering. Don't you remember me? I was just here. Granted, he had also backed out fast to avoid being shot full of holes. Here. He proffered the waterskin. Are you thirsty?

His words seemed to mean nothing, but her eyes bugged at the sight of the waterskin. Face twitching, she opened her restless, writhing mouth and for a split second, he got a look at her tongue which jumped and twitched and seemed more like a flaccid pink bag of worms than a tongue. The thought did occur to him that, really, if she wasn't rabid, she was very sick.

She got, maybe, a swallow down, choked, swallowed again—and then she fainted.

So, finding her was a problem, and now he had a much bigger one because he'd spoken to her...in English.

"How do you know this language?" Amu asked now.

"I lived in Kabul." That should be answer enough. Kabul was a big city. "My parents

spoke it. I learned from them.”

“And how did you know that she would understand you?”

“Because of Mr. White.” Who was, even now, being clucked over by Bas and several other women in another yurt. Poya had no idea how bad the man’s gunshot wound was, although when the men had gathered him up from the floor, Poya had gotten a good look at Mr. White’s coat, which was sticky with congealing blood. So maybe the bullet had gone straight through? That might be good. He’d read somewhere that through-and-throughs weren’t as bad. But, face it, no bullet wound was good. There were some that were just less awful than others.

“He’s American?”

“I think so.” Although he might also be British; he remembered Mr. White’s odd accent. “Anyway, I told you. We met in the spring before the Americans left.”

“You met a man in Kabul and now he is here? You hear shots and then these people suddenly appear?”

“I don’t know what you mean or want me to say. They didn’t appear. I found them. I’m as surprised as you are.”

“Then how do you explain it?”

“I can’t.”

“But you thought that since she was with him, that woman would know English?”

“Yes.” Although he probably shouldn’t have made that assumption. He and Mr. White had spoken to one another in Russian, after all. But he didn’t think the woman

was Russian. Her accent was wrong, and Mr. White had carried himself like an American.

“And that was the first and last time you saw this Mr. White? That spring?”

“Yes,” he lied, without hesitation. He’d spent so much of his life as a liar, this wasn’t as hard as it might be for some. In fact, lying was so much easier than telling the truth.

Amu’s dark eyes narrowed. “Yet he is nowhere, where you are. How is that a coincidence?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“Because it is.” There was coincidence, of course. But something like this? Gunshots rupturing a winter morning, his discovery of the people who’d been doing the shooting and one being a man he knew?

Wait, could it be that Mami had succeeded, after all? Baba told Mami to go to Sarhad because that was where his American friend said for them to hide. Poya knew that American had to be Mr. White. There was just no other explanation. Granted, it had taken Mr. White a really, really long time to get here, but maybe this was a case of better late than never?

So, did that mean his mother had found Mr. White? Had discovered he’d been sold and told Mr. White where to find Poya?

How likely is that? Not very, he thought. Coincidences did happen.

There were also two undeniable facts. One: the woman. Who was she? Someone Mr. White had recruited to help? An odd choice, especially for a country like Afghanistan. A man would’ve been the more logical and better choice. Call it chauvinism, but that was the truth.

And two: the shots had come from the mountains to the northeast. He didn’t know anything about those mountains except that there was a wide road winding into them on its way to wherever.

Given the distant gunfire and the fact that Mr. White was really hurt—and the woman was sick or drugged or something—the only logical conclusion was that Mr. White had been shot on a mission. He might even have been on a mission to rescue this

woman.

The only thing he could be absolutely certain about, though, was that Mr. White was not here to rescue him.

“You expect us to believe that this is a coincidence, boy? A man who carries this?” Amu held up the black, boxy device which had been cradled in Mr. White’s hand. “An American with such a phone?”

“It’s not a phone. Even if it was, he wasn’t calling me.”

“Then who is he calling? This, how did you call it?”

“SOS.” No point in hiding that he could read as well as speak English. Amu had figured that out as soon as he got an eyeful of the books and made Poya read out the titles.

“Yes SOS.” Amu wagged the phone. “Clearly this is meant for someone.”

“I don’t know who.” Although once Poya understood what Mr. White was clutching, he’d quickly volunteered his mother’s cell. He could not afford for Amu to search him. If Amu did insist he strip, Poya was as good as dead.

In spite of his fear, he was also curious. Who was Mr. White calling? Maybe they would find out sooner rather than later. Amu had not deactivated the SOS and Poya was certainly not going to show him what to do. Although turning off the SOS was trivial, in all the excitement, the fact that the SOS was still being broadcast had been overlooked.

And if truth be told? Poya wanted to keep it that way. Because Mr. White’s friends were more likely than not on their way. The thought touched off a small flare of hope

which he instantly tried to quash. Not only was there no telling how far away Mr. White's friends were, they had no reason to help him.

"Well?" Amu said. "Was he calling you?"

"Me? No, I just said?—"

Amu cut him off with a savage swipe of a hand. "Is that how he knew where to find you? To take you away from here?"

"No."

"But you don't deny you were preparing to leave."

"No." How many times were they going to go over this same ground? There was nothing else he could say since, along with his books, Amu had found the odds and ends Poya had collected for an escape.

"You can't leave. I own you," Amu said. "I bought you."

Since those were statements that didn't require a response, Poya said nothing. Better that way. Would Amu beat him? Probably. He didn't think Amu would turn him out. Poya had cost what the Americans would call a pretty penny. One didn't throw away an investment.

"I buy you, I save you, and this is how you repay me?" Amu's mouth worked as if he wanted to spit. "By plotting an escape? By gathering supplies so you could run?" Pawing at the pile of Poya's things, he held up the passports. "With these?"

The way Amu brandished the passports reminded Poya of a movie where a character showed off an inside straight, which Americans called a gutshot. His father had

explained: It means that the draw is very risky and likely to fail. Appropriate, too, given where Mr. White had taken a bullet.

“What would you like me to say?” The words sprang from his tongue before he realized what he was doing. “Yes, I have different passports. Yes, I was planning to run away. Yes, I know this man, but I don’t know why he’s here.”

This was what he got for doing the right thing. He should have kept his mouth shut about Mr. White. He should’ve backed out, left that woman alone, let Mr. White die. Let them both die. However bad things were now, what would happen if Mr. White did wake and recognize Poya? If he was weak and disoriented, Mr. White might... wait, what could Mr. White say?

He might say what he knows. Baba might have told him about me.

This was how people got found out. In movies and plays and books, people said things when they were sick and weak that they’d never say if they were feeling well or had all their wits about them.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

Although he wondered now, too, if the friends Mr. White was calling had heard. Were they close? On their way to rescue him?

Because I could talk to them. Amu wouldn't understand a word, but they would understand me. I would tell them about Baba and Mr. White and what I know.

There was something else he could tell the Americans. If he told them what he was...if he proved it...they would take him away from all this. Surely, his having saved Mr. White and that woman was worth something.

"He was my father's friend," he said to Amu. "I only saw him the one time." Another lie, but what was one more now?

An older clansman named Kur stirred. "And that's all?"

"Yes." His cheeks heated, his body trying to betray him yet again, but he swallowed, gave himself a moment to steady. "Why don't you ask the woman who was with him? She would know why they're here."

A short silence, filled only by the continual slap of wind against the yurt and, from somewhere further away, a shrill exclamation and short babble. Children, maybe. A few of the men turned quizzical looks in the direction of the sounds and then to one another, but otherwise no one moved.

"Conveniently," Kur said, seeming neither to hear the noise or, if he did, to care. "Or perhaps not so very conveniently, you seem to be the only person who can speak to her."

He wanted to ask what relevance that had to anything going on but held his tongue.

“You don’t think that’s unusual?”

Hadn’t they just gone over this? “People speak many languages in Kabul. That’s not a crime.”

“But he has been shot and so perhaps they were committing a crime.”

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“Why do you think your Mr. White and this woman are here?”

“I have no idea.”

Kur opened his mouth to continue, but Amu cut in. “This is getting us nowhere. Let me deal with him. He’s mine, after all.”

Don’t do it. But he couldn’t help the sudden surge of rage. He had lost so much, been through so much. When would he get a say? When would he be in charge of his own life?

“What are you accusing me of?” he asked Amu. “Do you think I’m the reason he’s here? Think again. I found them. The gunshots were from the mountains, not here.”

“And you don’t think that’s important?” Amu ground out. “You don’t think that they might have imagined you were there?”

“What?” He was confused. “There? Where is there?”

Kur spoke. “The mine, of course.”

What? Poya opened his mouth, closed it, then said, "What mine?"

"The one east and north," Kur said, "in the mountains. Where you heard those shots. That is where the mine is. So, did you come from there?"

"Me? In a mine?" He shook his head. "No."

"Didn't you escape? Didn't you run and make your way to Sarhad?"

Kur was spouting gibberish. "No," he said, "I don't know anything about a mine. I've never been in those mountains."

"Then how do you explain this man?"

"I can't. It's a coincidence."

Kur's mouth set in a grim line. "Quite a coincidence."

"Even so, that's what it is. I don't know about any mine. Why are you accusing me?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“Because you are a boy,” Kur said. “Because you have no family.”

“I had a family.” His eyes stung, and he thought, Don’t. Don’t let them make you cry. “I had a mother and a father. My father is dead. My mother is probably dead. She left me to fend for myself. I don’t know these people. Why are you accusing me of bringing them here? Or being the reason? I met him once.” Though seen him twice, but details. “I had no idea that he was here in the valley?—”

“Don’t lie!” Amu’s shout was a thunderclap, and Poya jumped. “I’m not a fool!” Amu bellowed. “None of us are fools!”

“Keep shouting at the boy and we’ll get nowhere,” Kur said.

“He’s mine to deal with, Kur,” Amu ground out. “You are older, but that doesn’t make you wiser. Don’t tell me how to deal with my own property.”

“Please.” Poya raised both hands. “I never said you?—”

“But you plot!” Amu’s face, already ruddy from years of cold and sun, purpled. Surging to his feet, he backhanded the pathetic little stack of Poya’s books, swatting them aside with a curse. “You steal!”

“Don’t!” The word leapt from Poya’s mouth. Not my books. He itched to gather them up, keep them safe. “Please, just...ask me whatever you want to ask me. Only don’t?—”

“Only don’t what?” Fist balled, Amu was on him so quickly that Poya’s feet tangled

and then he was on the ground, turtled on his back as Amu reared over him. “Youplan.Youlie!” Flecks of spittle speckled Amu’s lips. His face was choked with blood. Even his eyes reddened. “You have passports, you have supplies, you are getting ready to run and thenheshows up and you askwhy?”

“I’m sorry.” He held up both hands to ward him off. “I’m sorry. Yes, you bought me, and yes, I was going to run away, but it’s not what you think. I didn’t call Mr. White. I don’t know why he’s here.” He cringed as Amu drew back a fist. “Please don’t...”

“Now, thengetup!” Bending, Amu grabbed a fistful of Poya’s tunic and jerked him to his feet. Poya was light and no match for this man. “Tellme!” Amu roared. “Are you from the mine?Areyou? Sent to spy on us? So, they will know when we have boys old enough for them to take?”

What?“I d-don’t know.” The words were herky-jerky, jumping out of his mouth while Amu shook him so hard Poya’s head wagged back and forth on the slender stalk of his neck. “P-please!” Clamping both hands around Amu’s wrist, he tried pulling the man’s hand from his tunic. “I don’t know what you mean!”

“Liar!” Amu bellowed?—

There was a blur, something rocketing for his face so fast that Poya had no time to react, and then Amu’s fist slammed into his left jaw. Poya’s head snapped to the right and he lurched back, only vaguely aware of the sound of something tearing. Then, hewas on the ground, face-first, a queer high whine in his ears and blood in his mouth.

Tears blurred his vision.That ripping sound...Amu tore my tunic.Now, panicked as well as in pain, Poya wormed his right hand under his chest. His fingers found the rent in his top, but it wasn’t very wide and revealed nothing. Which was about the only good thing he could say about this mess. Amu was still shouting, though through

the ring in his ears, he couldn't make out the words.

I should have run. Tears of pain and fear squeezed from the corners of his eyes and ran down his cheeks to mingle with blood and snot and spit. From somewhere beyond the yurt, he caught that faint gabble of voices again, but that might only be a hallucination wrung out of his scrambled brains. I should have found a way to take that woman's gun and take my chances?—

“Andso,” Amu boomed. “I ask youagain.” Squatting on his haunches, Amu knotted a fist in Poya's hair and wrenched Poya's head back. “Who?” Amu was so close, the man's spit sprayed his cheeks. “Who are you working?—”

And then Amu screamed.

The sound was high, sharp, almost girlish. Releasing Poya, Amu tried to stand and scramble back at the same moment. He ended up coming down hard on his bottom and then the man was scuttling back on hands and feet in a queer, crablike movement until he'd reached the other men. They were all standing now, too, or trying to, their eyes wide with shock, their mouths hanging open.

“What are you?” All Amu's bluster and rage had evaporated. He pointed with a trembling finger. “Whatareyou?”

12

One day, he took a wrong turn.

Late leaving school, he decided to take a shortcut through a bazaar. The day was sweltering, and he worked up a sweat as he dodged pedestrians and scooters and wove his way around street vendors. At a busy crossroads four blocks from his house, a car had caromed into a trio of bicyclists. The street was blocked so he went left

instead of right. Everything was still all right until he spotted a clutch of older boys loitering at the corner.

He slowed. He didn't know these boys, but one look at their thick, flat faces and he knew he was in trouble. He pivoted, but not fast enough.

A shout. "Hey, kid, where you going?"

Run. That's what his brain screamed. So, he turned and then, for whatever reason, the dark glasses he habitually wore slipped. More than likely this happened because he was sweating so much. He slowed, knowing he couldn't afford to be without his glasses, but the delay meant they were on him in a heartbeat. down his sweaty nose. Slowing, he fumbled his glasses, trying to ram them back onto the bridge of his nose, but by then, they were on him, and he was done for.

"Oooh!" Snatching the sunglasses from Poya's grasp, a large, raw-boned boy held them up for the others to see. "Hey, aren't these nice? Designer glasses, like a movie star."

"Please." Keeping his left eye closed, Poya snatched a quick look. To his dismay, the older boy slipped the glasses on, though he had to force the temples wider apart. For his thick skull. Still squinting through his right eye, he ducked his head, trying to keep his face averted so none of these boys got a good look. "May I please have my glasses back?"

"I don't know." The boy's voice seemed to reach him from a great distance, but that might also be because his heart was booming. "How much are they worth to you?"

"Worth?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“Yes.” The boy rubbed his fingers together under Poya’s nose. “Money, stupid.”

“I don’t carry money,” he said, still staring at the ground. The boy’s feet were grimy and there dark rimes of dirt under his ragged toenails. He wondered how long since this boy had seen a bath or bar of soap? Possibly never. “But I can get some.”

“Uh-huh.” The boy’s tone was lazy. “So why do you wear these? They don’t seem all that special. Something wrong with your eyes?”

“Me?” His heart shriveled. He should turn, he should try to run. Eyes still downcast, he backed up a step but blundered into another boy who tripped him. Poya went down, hitting the sidewalk with a thump.

“Please.” Flailing, he got himself on all fours. It was important that they not see, not know! “Just keep them,” he said and was horrified to hear himself blubbering like a baby. “You can have them, you can?—”

“Ah, look, Rashid,” said one of the boys. “You made him cry.”

“Hey, don’t cry. What’s the matter, baby-boy? No mommy to help? Don’t cry.” Clamping a hand around Poya’s right arm, the leader named Rashid yanked him to his feet. “No one likes a cry?—”

That was when all the boys got a good look. Even Rashid goggled then snatched his hand away as if Poya’s flesh was on fire.

“Whatareyou?” Then, cursing, Rashid threw Poya’s special glasses onto the

pavement. stomped them to bits under his sandaled foot. “Naji!Unclean!” he shouted, stomping the glasses to bits under his sandaled foot. “What, is your mother aspai,a dog who gave herself to a mongrel?” Rashid spat. “I bet you reach around and lick your ass and get a good lump of shit. No wonder you hide!”

They were all backing away now, and then Rashid picked up a stone and then two other boys followed his lead and then Poya was running for all he was worth, tearing through the streets as the boys came after, hurling rocks and shouting that he was a dog, a freak, a demon?—

His parentsnever sent him to school again. He had private tutors. As with Mullah Afsari, no tutor saw his true face because he always wore his glasses indoors. Thereafter, he would slip out only at dusk, still disguised and with his glasses. Things were easier in the dark anyway. Once it was full night, he could take off his glasses and keep to the shadows. In a way, he was a bit like a vampire, a creature of the night, but at least he was free.

Once he discovered hisfather’ssecret place—that special room behind Baba’s study—he understood that his father was a man of many faces, with his wigs and fake moustaches and beards and eyeglasses. Even Baba’s eyes could be altered by different colored lenses and several pairs of each. Thankfully,his father never needed prescription glasses or else Poya could never had pilfered Baba’s treasure trove of colored contact lenses. When his mother saw what he had done, she hadn’t questioned him, though he read the resignation in her features. Still, they both knew this was safest. This also meant that he wouldn’t have to wear tinted glasses during the daylight hours.

His secret was safe. No one was the wiser until the morning a truck flung grit, and old Zahid got a look at his naked left eye.

He had been safe. Until now.

“Whatareyou?” Rearing back, Amu put up a hand as if to ward off a blow. Eyes wide and mouths agape, all the men were on their feet. “What devilmadeyou?” Amu shouted.

What could he say? Dizzy, head still clamoring with pain, he made it to his knees. His ears pricked to an odd gabble, as if there were many voices all wanting to be heard at the same time and he couldn’t tell if that was because his brain was still reeling, or the women had heard Amu’s shouts and were even now running to see what all the fuss was about.

Come, everyone, see the little demon-boy. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth and his tongue tasted of rust. It would be a miracle if he wasn’t sick all over the yurt’s rugs. Would they all join in to kill him?

“I’m just a boy.” Even now, he was still having to lie, but what was he supposed to do? They had discovered one very bad secret. He couldn’t afford them discovering the other. Pleading, he held out his hands. “Please, I’ll go, just let me collect my books and I’ll?—”

Everything he was about to say, to promise that he would do dried upon his tongue as the yurt filled with the rasping sound of metal against leather as the men drew their knives. The blades were long, like machetes, and glittery even in the yurt’s dim light.

Of course. He had seen enough movies. Peasants killed monsters all the time. If they’d had pitchforks, they’d use those, too. The knives would finish him. They would hack him to pieces. What would they do with his body? Burn all the bits to ash, probably. Maybe even leave this place and go where demons didn’t walk. They might not be religious, but a monster like him was a very bad omen. What he was beneath this shell of his clothing was probably worse.

Over the roar in his ears, that odd gabble, which he’d only half-heard above the drum

of the wind, suddenly surged. Even the men heard it now, and they all turned just as the yurt's door banged open.

Two soldiers, weapons drawn, swept in a gush of frigid air. Behind them, the clan's women clamored like startled hens.

The soldier on the left was tall and muscular with a scruff of beard and dark, intense eyes. Poya thought he could've stepped out of a movie about American Marines.

The soldier on the right was different. Poya thought he was also an American but probably not a Marine. He wasn't quite as muscular and there was something about the way he carried himself which nudged a memory out of hiding: his father cupping a cool hand to Poya's feverish forehead and murmuring, there, there, you will be well. No one is sick forever.

But this was not quite true. Some sicknesses—some stigmata—did last forever.

Just look at him.

JOHN: THE SKINNY

1

Once the clan's leader, Amu, understood that they would take the two from the cave with them, the guy had been only too happy to turn over their care. That included giving them the run of this yurt, which was a lucky thing considering that the place was starting to look like an emergency room, and smell like one, too. Especially that outhouse-stink, although the kid, Poya, had said the reek had been much worse before the clanswomen had washed them both down.

John had already given the man a quick once-over, long enough to start an IV and

know that tending to him would take more time. In some ways, though, the woman was no less urgent. She wasn't going to die, but if they wanted answers, John had to do something to calm her down.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

She lay on a pallet near the yurt's pot-bellied stove. Amu's people had tied her down to keep her from thrashing around and taken off her boots for good measure, just in case she got free to give anyone a good kick. A blessing on both counts, actually. The last thing he wanted was to get his bell rung with a swift kick to the head. Although he'd noticed something else about the skin just above her socks, an odd, discolored mottling of the flesh that gave him pause. He would have to check that later.

She wasn't sleeping. But she sure was restless: finger taps, fidgets, head rolls from one side to the other. Every so often, her tongue would dart from her mouth and worm over her lips.

"Hey, can you hear me?" he said. "Are you awake?"

At the sound of his voice, her eyes snapped open. They were dark but somehow fogged as if she either couldn't focus or was confused. Her eyes were moving, too, in short, fast herky-jerky movements from side to side.

Oh, boy. "Hi," he said, putting on a smile, "you remember me? John Worthy?"

Her mouth opened and for a split second, he thought she might speak. But then her face twisted, her lips skinned back from her teeth, and she snarled.

Behind him, John heard Driver swear. "Easy, Driver." He craned over a shoulder. "We'll take care of her."

"Yeah? You know what's wrong? Did they..." Driver raked a hand as shaky as his voice through his hair. "What did they do to her?"

“I think they tried to sedate her, only it backfired. Easy,” he said, again. “Take a breath. Look, I need a hand, okay? This is a quick fix, but I need help. You going to be all right?”

“Yeah.” Pulling in a breath, Driver backhanded a line of sweat from his upper lip. “Yeah, just tell me what to do.”

“I need to hold her left arm really still so I can find a vein.”

“You got it.” But, as Driver clamped down, the woman gave a strangled growl and showed her teeth. “Stop, it’s me.” Driver’s voice was stricken. “Don’t you recognize me? You’ll be okay, we’re going to help you.”

“That’s right. Listen to Driver,” John said, said, quickly looping a rubber tourniquet just below the woman’s left elbow. After a few seconds, a blue worm of a vein plumped along her forearm. At least she’s not dehydrated. He supposed he should be thankful for small miracles. “Okay,” he said, swabbing her skin with alcohol then popping the cap from the business end of an IV needle, “little stick now.”

In reply, the woman frothed and struggled. Heaving against her restraints, she snapped, her teeth coming together with an audible click a few inches from John’s ear. He pulled back in the nick of time as Driver planted his free hand on her forehead and shoved her back.

“They really messed her up,” Driver said.

“Just hold her still.” In another two seconds, John had pierced the skin, get a nice flash of blood back in the hub, then slid the Teflon cannula into the vein. “Okay, we’re in.” After attached the IV, he started up the flow of saline into the woman’s vein, watched for a second to make sure he hadn’t blown the vein, then tore off pieces of tape. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask Driver to see if there wasn’t some kind

of pole they could use to get the IV above her heart, when the boy, who'd been sitting atop a stack of luggage, jumped down, then pushed a large trunk across the yurt.

"Here," the boy said. "You can use this for the IV."

"Thanks, that'll work great." He saw that the boy's eyes were now both brown. "You okay?"

"Yeah, you're not going to be sick or anything, are you, kid?" Driver asked.

"My name is not Kid," the boy said, calmly. "My name is Poya, and my father was a doctor. I am fine."

One smart kid. Pawing through the med-pack Harvey had turned over, John found what he was looking for. Kid must have a stash of lenses. Smart thinking, too. So long as the boy kept that left eye covered, no one would be the wiser. How he'd come to have that stash was, well, an interesting question. If the boy's father was a doctor, he might be able to get ahold of colored lenses, of course. There was a story there for sure but one that would have to wait.

"Okay." Selecting three prefilled syringes, he said, "If I'm right, this will do the trick."

"Yeah?" Driver asked as John pushed the syringes' contents, one after the other, through a stopcock in the IV catheter. "How fast does that stuff?—"

All of a sudden, the woman let out a long sigh and stopped moving. Her limbs relaxed; her face slackened. Her lids slid shut and a few seconds later, she let go of a soft snore.

"That fast," John said.

“Wow,” Driver said. “Whatisthat?”

“Benztropine.” He capped the empty syringe. “With a smidge of antihistamine and a nip of valium to put her out. I might have to slip her another cocktail, but if this is an acute reaction, the symptoms won’t return. She’ll sleep it off.” He looked at his watch. “Give it an hour or two and then maybe we can get something coherent out of her. Figure out this mess.”

“Do you know what they gave her?”

“Pumped her full of an antipsychotic. Haldol would be my guess. Easy to find, common as dirt. It would make her sleepy and might knock her out, but she’d certainly be more pliable. Not quite a truth serum, but a good sedative for most and you don’t build up a tolerance. You can use it again and again, which I think they’ve done. See here?” He showed Driver the crook of her left arm. “That bruise? And look at the back of her left hand, all those smaller bruises.”

“Needle sticks.” Driver’s features darkened. “They shot her up.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

He nodded. “Quite a few times. Haldol’s injectable. Works faster that way, but you normally give it intramuscularly not through a vein. If I had to guess and knowing her, they wanted to really sedate then question her or maybe just get her to shut up. Their problem is the med made her nuts. Paradoxical effect. No way to predict who will have one either. I’ve known young recruits, eighteen, nineteen, who pop a benzo and then go nuts and start throwing furniture through the window. Same thing here.”

“So, instead of sedating her, they got her wired?” When he nodded, Driver asked, “That’s why she was twisting around like that? Sticking out her tongue and grunting and stuff?”

“Sort of. Those movements are a dystonia. It’s a side-effect. It happens sometimes. Easy to fix but you gotta know what it is first. She’d have been tough to handle.” He didn’t add that she was lucky her captors hadn’t put a bullet through her head. “Driver, do you know why she’s here?”

“No.”

He hooked a thumb toward the shyrdak. “What about him?” When Driver shook his head again, he pressed. “Seriously? You said you’d been sent to retrieve two people.”

“I was,” Driver said. “But not these two. Neither should be here. Whatever’s going on, I’ve been kept out of that loop. Unless...”

“What?”

Driver’s tongue skimmed his lower lip. “Unless they decided to mount their own

operation independent of, you know..." He made a vague gesture. "Channels. Me. Remember, I've been put in the corner for bad behavior. So, they might have."

"Because..." He waited. "You'll notice I left that nice ellipsis there for you to fill. Why would Shahida and Mac be here?"

"Because of whom I was sent to retrieve," Driver said. "Meeks and Flowers."

2

There was no asking Mac what happened either.

"You going to be able to do much for him here?" Having masked and gloved, Driver had helped roll Mac onto his left side so John could get a look at the exit wound. "Or am I calling for an evac, like, yesterday?"

"Yesterday," John said, a little abstracted. The exit wound was an ugly mess of macerated flesh and muscle. The good news was that the blood coming now wasn't clotted or pulsatile but thin and bright red, more ooze than something from active bleeders. Mac still smelled a bit like the outhouse he must've tumbled into, but that was the least of his problems.

"Let him down now." As Driver carefully lowered the unconscious man onto a large sterile pad spread on the pallet, John stripped out of his gloves, turned off his flashlight, and said, "Here's what I think. Given where we are and the sound of those shots this morning, the wound's more likely than not from an AK. Near as I can tell without inserting a probe, this is a right flank, through-and-through. But he's still lost a fair amount of blood. "What he needs is an exploratory laparotomy and cleanout in an OR and then, like Davila, IV antibiotics. Unlike Davila, he probably needs a transfusion and then a stay in an ICU. All that translates to evacuation in my land. The question is, can you arrange an evac?"

“In the middle of the night?”

“Well, look, if it makes it easier, just have them drop a body bag. That way you can call for help tomorrow. Or next week. Or whenever the hell it suits you. The body will keep on ice—and don’t.” John raised a finger. “Don’t even think about telling me to shove it. If you guys did a night drop, you can do a night pick-up. And don’t you think it’s about time you read me in? You said you were called to extract Meeks and Flowers, but then why is Mac here? There is absolutely no way this is a coincidence that either of them just happen to be in the neighborhood.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Driver ran a hand through his hair. “Look, I agree. It can’t be a coincidence. But I honestly don’t know why she’s here. Him...I have an idea.”

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense.”

Driver opened his mouth to reply, but then the boy, Poya, called, “Doctor John, she is waking up.”

“Whoa.” John checked his watch. “She chewed through that pretty fast. On the other hand, with all those old tracks, she got shot up a lot. Probably built up a tolerance.”

“Will she be coherent?” Driver asked.

“Only one way to find out.” John pushed to his feet. “Make that call. Then let’s hope we get some answers.”

“Got the medics, but seven hours until a pickup,” Driver said, pocketing his satellite phone.

“That long?” John shook his head. “I’m good, but I’m not a Houdini.”

Driver glowered. "I don't know what else you want me to do. Remember, this is unsanctioned. My superiors didn't know they'd be here either. Speaking of which..." He rounded on the woman, who was sitting and sipping from a mug of hot broth John had whipped up. "You mind explaining now?"

"Easy, man," John said, but the woman interrupted. "I can speak for self. Mac help me go into mountains for my boys."

"Your boys." Driver's jaw set. "After all this time?"

"Yes, after all thistime," Shahida shot back. "I need go to mine."

"Mine," John echoed. Thought:Ustinov."This wouldn't happen to be a lithium mine, would it?"

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“Yes.” She frowned. “How you know this?”

“I got the skinny from a helpful Russian.”

“The guy who met you and Davila at the airport?”

John nodded. “Apparently, lithium is the new gold in these parts and why the Taliban are hot to get that road finished.”

Driver, still frowning: “But why were you interested, Shahida? Why was Mac?”

“Or Meeks and Flowers.” When Driver glanced his way, John said, “You can’t honestly believe they aren’t all here for the same reason, and I bet it’s not for the lithium.”

“I no care about rocks.” Shahida’s upper lip curled. “I come for my boys.”

“Your boys?” John echoed at the same moment that Driver said, “Wait, the kids you brought at the last second? The ones you and Musa were driving back before you up and vanished? Why would the boys be here?”

The woman opened her mouth, but the boy, Poya, beat her to it. “Boys are small. They fit into places men can’t. It’s why there are no boys here.”

“You’re here,” Driver said.

John opened his mouth then as quickly shut it. Having already examined the boy, in

private, he knew exactly why Poya was still here. There were things that could be fixed or which would heal. The gash in his mouth from that slap wasn't serious. The problem with his left eye...okay, he could see how that would freak out just about anyone, but surgery might help quite a bit. As for the rest...Poya was entitled to keep that secret for as long as possible.

Especially here. Until we finish this. Then we figure something out.

So, aloud, John said, "I think he meant the older boys. Isn't that right, Poya?"

Their gazes locked, and John saw in that instant that Poya understood: John would keep his secret.

"Yes." The tension bled from the kid's features. "Thank you. That is what I meant."

"So?" Driver looked perplexed. "Why is that important?"

"Because the math doesn't work," Poya said. "The other children are all young."

"Math?"

"Yes. I noticed this right away when I got here. It's why I'm here. Amu has a son named Hamzad. I think he's..." The boy pointed heavenward. "There. At the mine."

"And were you before you came here?" John asked.

"Sarhad. I went there with my mother to meet..." Poya paused, his head moving almost imperceptibly toward the shyrdak.

Oh, my God. John felt a sudden flash of intuition. Poya knows who he is.

“My mother said she was going to get help.” A pause. “I don’t know what happened. She never came back.” Poya let go of a long breath, the way a parent might tell a child to get rid of the bad. “But that is not the important thing now. The mine is.”

“This is what I try telling them,” Shahida said.

“Yes,” Poya said. “The math doesn’t lie.”

“What do you mean, math?” Driver asked.

“There are eight families in Amu’s clan. Twenty-one are adults,” Poya said. “Sixteen are couples who can still have children.”

“So?”

“No, he’s right,” John said. “Poya’s talking probabilities and averages.”

Poya nodded. “The clan has thirteen children. But only two are boys and they are young, under ten years old. The math is wrong. People marry young here, and they have children right away. Usually as many as they can. Four, five, six. Amu had five. His mother-in-law, Bas, had seven. Many mothers die and children die, too. That is what happened to Amu’s wife and most of their children are dead. Bas had three boys and four girls, but they are all dead now, too.” Poya gave them all an expectant look. “But do you see it? The problem?”

Driver frowned. "About what?"

"Math," John said. "Bas had seven kids, in a three-four split. So, roughly fifty percent. Nature's not perfect and in small enough numbers, you're going to get some skew. But roughly half the kids here ought to be boys and the other half, girls. But if only two are boys..."

"I get it," Driver said. "If there are only a couple of boys here, where are the rest?"

"Poya just told us." John looked to Shahida. "Right?"

"Yes, my boys are where Land Mac and Meeks and Flowers go to rescue them." Shahida straightened. "My boys are in the mine."

3

The story was close to what Driver said everyone believed. Musa's Humvee was forced off the road. Unfortunately for them all, none of the boys were skilled fighters. All were young and recently rescued from their owners.

"Musa and I do best we can," Shahida said. "But they are too many and we give up fast."

"You didn't want any of the boys to get killed in the crossfire," John said.

"Yes. Musa already got hurt. I make one call for help, but I never know if Mac hear."

“He did,” Driver said. “But by the time he could muster up a flyover, you had disappeared.”

“That’s what he say, but...” She lifted a shoulder and let it fall. “Taliban take over, drive us to cave but leave Humvee there. Then we walk. Maybe two, three days.”

“Staying in the mountains?” When she nodded, Driver said, “Smart. That way, the men who took you hostage could get out of sight if there was a flyover. It also explains why the trail petered out. What then?”

“Then we go to place where they have big truck. They put us in, and we drive to end of road.”

“To Sarhad.” When they all turned a look, Poya said, “Trucks came through the village a lot.”

“All with boys?” John asked.

“Not in the beginning. The trucks started the spring after Kabul fell. At first, all the passengers were men. Afghan Army, I think. But then the trucks started bringing boys.” A shadow of some memory darkened his features. “There was always someone there to meet them and give the driver money.”

“Big black horse, yaqut in gold necklace?” When Poya nodded, Shahida’s mouth twisted in a sour grimace. “That is Sarbaz. He was Taliban, but now he commander in mine.”

“After he paid for the boys, his men would make them get out and walk,” Poya said. “But I don’t remember you.”

“I think we in early group. We no walk. They put us on yaks. Maybe want to get us

out of sight faster, too, just in case Mac get good eye in sky.”

“Mac would do that,” Driver said. “So, they hustled you to the mine?”

She nodded. “Musa no work good at first, even though doctor take out bullet.”

“Was he the one who shot you full of antipsychotic?” John asked.

“She. Woman from Kabul.”

“I might have seen her,” Poya said. “The women were easy to spot because they were veiled. I thought from her clothes that at least one looked like a soldier.”

“She do what Sarbaz say in beginning, this doctor, but she...erhm... complain. All time telling Sarbaz want her to look after mens but not give her good medicines. Mens get hurt, but Sarbaz no give her medicines and mens...their cuts, they get...how you say?”

“Infected?” John said.

“Yes, but no medicines to make them better. Mens die and two of my boys.” Shahida’s eyes shimmered. “Get bad cuts from tools and she no have right medicines.”

“I’m sorry,” John said. “Truly.”

Shahida gave a short nod. Knuckling away a tear, she cleared her throat. “Sarbaz say is okay because there always more mens, always more boys to take their place. Then, one day doctor complain too much and Sarbaz shoot her.”

“He killed your only doctor?”

Shahida nodded. “I think he want excuse to shoot her. She had big mouth, all time yap, yap, yap, like little dog, complain, complain. But when she is killed, he do what she say. Let boys start coming outside to sit in sun, breathe good air. They say new doctor, Sarbaz like more, listen to. Or maybe Sarbaz just like.”

“Another woman?” Driver asked.

Shahida nodded. “But I no see her. Sarbaz guard her. Old womens, aunties come feed, they say he want to take her. You know, like mens do with womens. But he saves her for to use.”

“Saves her for...?” John frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Worthy,” Driver said, “use your imagination.” To Shahida: “Go on. What happened? Mac got into the mine and that’s how he snatched you?”

She shook her head. “Tunnels are very dark. Need night vision to see good. Taliban like to punish by putting you in dark, so you no can go anywhere.” Gathering up her right trouser leg, she pushed down a sock and angled her foot to reveal a darker and shinier band of calloused skin. “Chain you up. I was lucky,” she said, pulling up her sock. “When Mac come for me, I was outside and no chained.

“How long after you were captured did he come for you?” John asked.

Shahida held up three fingers. “Three months. Then Mac and his team come get me.”

“Histeam,” Driver repeated, but John cut in. “What happened, Shahida? How’d you get out?”

“First time, I go for water. Long hike to spring but always two guards. Next thing I know, I hear bodies fall. I look back and they are down.” Shahida drew a line across her throat. “Cut so they no scream and it all be quiet. Thenheis there with team again, and we are running.”

“Wait, what do you mean, the first time?” John asked. “Seriously? You camebackto the mine after you got out?”

She nodded. “Mac and his team and me. To try get my boys and Musa.”

“There’s that word again,” Driver said. “Team.Just who, exactly, was on this team?”

“I...you did not know?” Shahida put a hand to her lips, swallowed then said, “I wonder why you not there. But now I understand Mac did not tell you.”

Driver’s voice shook. “Did you ask?”

So, that’s what happened.This explained why Driver had a new team and hadn’t known aboutthisoperation. But there was something else Shahida had just said that jarred. “Why would they take away your team, Driver?”

Driver’s mouth worked as if he were tasting something foul. “Error in judgment. If you want to get technical.”

“Error in...” John echoed—and then he got it. “My God, you told them. After you dug yourself out and Mac picked you up, you told him what happened, why I went back for you.”

“Yeah.” Driver’s gaze fell to his hands. “Kinda dug my own grave. I think Mac could forgive Flowers because he could still function. But me, nope. Plus, there was, shall we say, some history between my guys and Shahida here and...” Driver seemed to think better of what he’d been about to say and amended. “Let’s just say there were other considerations.”

Considerations. He thought back to the story Flowers shared on that long drive to the defunct aqueduct: About two years ago, we were given this little no-nothing of a mission to this little no-nothing village to burn the hell out of their poppy fields.

The mission where Driver and his men decided to take matters into their own hands. The mission that resulted in them being booted out of the Raiders.

And straight into Mac’s lap.

This also meant that Shahida had a lot of power. If not for Shahida to supply a cover story, Driver and his team would’ve ended up in a military prison for life. She could still ruin them, if she chose.

Which explained Mac’s power over Driver and his men. Yes, there were plenty of clandestine operations done by soldiers who were nothing but squeaky-clean.

But there were yet other soldiers—men like Driver and Flowers and Meeks—who had done something morally right but lawfully wrong. Mac and his kind lived for the Drivers of the world, because people with dark secrets were easier to control.

“Shahida, you said this was the second time.” John spread his hands. “What happened?”

“Things fall apart.” Shahida shook his head. “We not even get close.”

“Meaning?” he asked, but Driver cut in. “I know what she means. I know exactly what happened. Shahida and Mac went back with Meeks and Flowers to try and get Musa and her kids. Only they didn’t. In fact, I bet only Mac made it out that time.” Driver rounded on Shahida. “Then Mac came back to try and get you all out.”

“By himself?” John asked.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“It would be the only way,” Driver said then amended, “knowing Mac. He’d blame himself. Convince the higher-upsthat it would be easier to go solo. Not as many moving parts to worry about.”

Or he might have had help for at least part of the adventure. John thought back to Ustinov, how helpful he’d been. Procuring weapons, those rigged money bags which had so tempted Parviz.

“How’d he manage getting you out this time?”

“I make map from here.” Shahida tapped her temple. “As much as I know because this time, we all have to go into mine. I tell to Mac, and he have all on paper and thenheput in his head because we got night vision, you know?”

“And then?”

“Map was bad.” Shahida’s eyes seemed to shutter. “Mine tunnels are changed.”

“They would,” John said. “If you got out in early 2022. A lot of time between now and then for them to extend the mine.”

“And why the hell go in winter?” Driver asked.

“Not as many men.” When they all turned, Poya continued, “The mine stops because it’s too cold. They don’t run the generators much at all. Sarbaz usually goes away in winter, too.”

“We got candles. Sarbaz want save money so sends all the men away. Only boys still there.” Shahida paused. “Sarbaz, too. I no know why he there now.”

“You don’t?” Driver hacked a harsh laugh. “You’re the reason. You came back, you got caught, and the guy wants to know what you know. You worked with a frigging spook, Shahida. That’s why he let his guys shoot you up like that.”

“Me?” Shahida shook her head. “But I no know nothing much.”

That, John thought, was a lot of bull. “So, Mac and his guys come to get you and then? Were you as jacked up?”

She shook her head. “Sarbaz make mens give me shot make me better, not so...” She waved her arms. “Flappy-flappy. I go sleep. I wake up when Mac come. I start having big...” She flapped a hand. “Shakes.”

“Did they give you the shot in an IV or your arm?” When Shahida pointed to her upper arm, John said, “Well, that explains why. You need a good IV dose to come out of it. What then?”

“Mine bigger now. Longer than before. Shahida’s gaze ticked from him to Driver and then away. “I stay with Mac, but we do not find my boys where they used to be.”

“Because they’re further back in the mine by now. The lithium would’ve played out where they were.”

“Mmm.” Shahida’s shoulders rose then fell. “Mac lose Meeks and Flowers on radio. He give me weapon, say go back out because I not so good and still...” She wagged both arms. “Twitchy. Then I hear shooting, and Mac come running back. He not have his helmet anymore. He said got knocked off in fight and night vision get smashed. So, he kill guard, take his helmet and go look for boys and find Flowers and Meeks.”

Her eyebrows pulled into a frown. "I think he take wrong turn. He get into fight. I hear big shouting and then I hear more guards, and he comes back, and he has..." She made a face. "Big shit. Bad smell."

"What happened?" John asked.

Shahida shrugged and spread her hands at the same time. "He say small person he have to knock out hit him with pail of...you know." She made a blatting sound.

"Talk about a shit show," Driver said.

Shahida ignored him. "Guards come, and he run. I think maybe he found one of my boys."

"One of your kids hit him with a piss bucket?" John asked.

"Maybe? Sarbaz do that. Separate boys who talk back and put on chain and make them sit in dark cave until they sorry and do what he say. Mac never get chance to tell me because then we are running out. We get some away, but he is shot. Guards chase andthen I shoot." Another shrug. "Then I find cave where is warm and I drag him inside. And then we wait," Shahida said. "We wait to die."

4

After a long silence.

"Okay," John said. "Given that Mac tried again andthatwent sidewaysandthe mine system is more complex than before, where does that leave us?"

"I no leave my boys," Shahida said.

“As you have said,” Driver observed. “Many times.”

Shahida opened her mouth, but John cut her off. “Enough. You guys duke it out later. Right now, we have a problem. Mac’s out of it. Shahida’s out of it. You got a chopper coming, but no reinforcements. Meanwhile, Meeks and Flowers are still up there.” They might also be dead, but as with Roni...wherever she was...John wouldn’t leave them behind.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

This just snowballs. His head was pounding. Between lack of sleep, the altitude and the stress, he was running on fumes. How could they possibly get everyone out of that mine?

Maybe we can't, and then no one ever gives me a chance to bring Roni back.

"Yes." Shahida's voice was watery. "Whatever we do, I no leave my boys there. I go back with or without help."

"Yeah, that's a great plan." Driver, surly. "A suicide run."

"You have better idea?"

"No," Driver said, "but I kinda don't think ending up dead will help."

Ending up dead...A sudden spark of inspiration flared. "Wait a minute," he said. "I've got an idea."

Everyone, even Poya, turned. "What?" Driver asked.

"What you just said. About ending up dead."

Driver and Shahida looked at one another, and then Driver said to John, "Are you volunteering?"

"No, but if they want a corpse," John said, "let's give them one."

PAWNS

1

Their arrival wasn't a surprise. They made sure it wouldn't be. No point in being gunned down until Amu delivered his terms.

There were two ways up from the camp. One was the wide road used by truck. Even walking, the time to the mine would have been cut by half.

There was another way: a narrow path hacked from stone. Taking that would gobble up most of the day. Which, naturally, is the path John proposed they take: the path of most resistance. Because appearances mattered. They shouldn't look to be in any particular hurry. Twilight, John said, was their friend.

Sarbaz's men knew they were coming. The mine's entrance was not at the summit, but several hundred feet below at a staging area large enough for trucks to rumble in empty and rumble out full. Anyone standing guard at the mine would have a pretty clear view of them for most of their journey.

That was important, too.

The path was sinuous, slow and steep. Given the westerly wind, the trip up was also brutally cold because there were no true breaks, no way to get part of the mountain between you and that wind. Instead, the path went up and up and up, with switchbacks that went back and forth and back and forth as if stitched into the mountain in broad loops. There was only one switchback where a person could really pause to rest and get out of the wind. More than midway to the mine, the path was partially obstructed by a rock fall. No one at the mine had ever bothered to clear the fall, possibly because the drop from there into the valley was nearly vertical, with no ledges or anything would stop a fall. Slip there, and it was a long way down. There

also was no way to avoid the rockfall either, which probably accounted for why the rockfall remained where it was.

Still, it was a good place to stop. Just not for too long.

They didn't go unarmed. That would be stupid. Worse, not taking rifles would probably raise Sarbaz's antennae. But Amu's rifle was in a pannier strapped to the yak's flank and Kur carried his in sling on his back.

Amu also made sure that spare unito which he'd tied a strip of white cloth was visible at all times. Surrender had the same meaning in any language. An interesting word, too, Poya thought. A person might surrender and withdraw from a fight. But a person could also be surrendered, the way a chess player might sacrifice a pawn to guard a king or gain an advantage. A person could be pawned off, sacrificed in much the same way: this for that. Pawns were useful only insofar as their deaths served a greater purpose.

Shahida was a pawn. So was the lumpy man-sized bundle, stained with rust-colored splotches, lashed to the yak's flanks.

And now, so was he.

2

"A trade?" Amused, Sarbaz tilted his head to one side and then the other, like a dog trying to make sense of what its master was saying. The man's dark gaze flicked from Poya to Shahida, slouched on the yak. Her hands were bound. Another rope was looped around her waist, tethering her to the animal's back so she wouldn't fall. Or jump down and run away.

"You're a brave man, Amu, I'll give you that," Sarbaz said, "but I don't know why

you think I'd be interesting in bargaining with you. I could kill you and your clansmen right now."

This was true enough. They had strength in numbers, after all. Four guards against Amu and Kur. Only Kur had leveled his rifle. Amu's AK was in its scabbard which was yoked to the one yak they'd brought and out of reach. Kur's rifle was steady enough, but Poya didn't think he could take out four men before they took him out.

Even if Kur was that fast, Sarbaz had a very large, very black pistol in a paddle-holster. Poya knew the make, too: a Glock. He even knew why Sarbaz might like that style of handgun because Baba had a good collection of American movies featuring police. A Glock, Baba once explained, had no safety, which was why somany police liked them. Keep a round chambered, then point and shoot.

Poya hoped no one was twitchy or, as the Americans would say, trigger-happy. That's all they needed: people to start firing. There was no place to really run and hide here except into the mine, and he wasn't doing that. Chances were excellent, therefore, he'd get caught in the crossfire and they would all die for nothing.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“You’re nobody, Amu. There’s nothing to stop me from killing you and wounding your man here. Oh, I’d take good care of him. We have a very fine doctor, who knows how to follow orders. Saves me the expense of a bullet. Anyway, your man will be healed in no time and then I’ll put him to work. You, on the other hand, will be found for the wolves or leopards...whoever gets to you first. So, let me put this into language you will understand. I don’t trade, Amu. I never trade. I take—and if I want to take this boy...” Resting the heel of his right hand on his Glock, Sarbaz flicked a finger at Poya. “I will.”

This is a mistake. This is never going to work. Swathed in his coat and hat and a bulky scarf which he’d wrapped around his nose and mouth, Poya kept his head down, staring up at Sarbaz through his lashes. His bunched fists knotted, and he gritted his teeth against a sudden lance of pain the coarse rope slipped beneath his mittens and cut his wrists. Stop, stop, you’re just going to make it worse. But he was scared out of his wits.

Because I told you, John Worthy. I told you. Except John wouldn’t listen.

Oh, John had apologized. Said, as he was tying Poya’s hands together, that he was so sorry things had come to this but offering him up was the only way to get his and Driver’s two friends out of the mine. To do that, John explained, they had to give Sarbaz something he would really want—and then just one more thing to sweeten the deal.

That, John said, was Poya.

I’m sorry. John cupped one of Poya’s cheeks in a hand. I’m sorry, honey, but you need

to be brave. As brave as you've been since Kabul. I wish there was another way, but there isn't. We don't have a choice.

Right. That was such a lie. Adults always had choices, but not he. What was he supposed to do? Go shrieking away into the snow? Adults were all alike, too. They were always sorry, so sorry, but they didn't mind using kids like him.

Well, Poya was sick of adults who claimed he had no say, no choice. First, his parents who'd made Poya into what he was and then Mami telling him he had to stay while she went away, and then Ibrahim with his doleful eyes who'd seen the thing that had made Zahid curse him and spit and now frightened Amu so badly. Adults always looked for any excuse to get rid of Poya.

Even that American doctor, that John Worthy.

But...Poya let John tie his hands. What was he going to say? No? Find somebody else? There was no one else. Everyone knew it. He'd known what they would do as soon as Driver had looked his way and said, What about we sweeten the deal with a trade?

He was the sweet. He was the only one, too. There were no other boys old enough whom Sarbaz would want.

So Poya sat still while John made his complicated loop and tie. Even when John cinched the rope and a bit of the tender skin of Poya's left wrist had gotten caught and cut, Poya hadn't squeaked or jerked. He only gritted his teeth. John wouldn't have been the wiser if he'd not seen a smear of Poya's blood.

Oh, I'm sorry. Here, let me see. There wasn't much blood, but John fussed, his head down, his mouth close to Poya's ear.

So Poya could not possibly miss what John said next.

“I’m giving you more than just this boy.” Amu’s tone was as flat and void of emotion as his face. The wind only whistled past this hollow, and the tiny flag of surrender tied to the willow pole he still gripped snapped to life in tiny, abortive spasms, like a bird trying to fly with a broken wing. “I will give you the woman, too.” He inclined his head toward the blood-stained bundle the yak carried. “And that.”

“Mmm.” Like Poya and Amu, Sarbaz was well bundled against the cold. Only his face, bearded and wolfish, showed and he worried the beard now, combing it with the cracked fingers of his right hand. The gold ring with its magical curse was dull in the last of the day’s light, the metal more like lead. “What makes you think I want either?”

“Two reasons. One is the medicine you gave that woman. I know you did. There are needle marks. She also babbled for hours.”

“So?”

“So, you wanted information. The other reason is you wasted bullets chasing them. We all heard the shots in the valley. You don’t shoot at people you want to keep alive.”

Sarbaz hmed again as his fingers tangled in his beard. “How did you come on them?”

“I didn’t.” Amu tipped his head at Poya. “He did, and that’s another reason I want to trade. I bought him. I gave him a home, and he repays me by lying, stealing, sneaking off.”

“Thinking to run away? And that’s how he found them?”

“Well, he found the woman. The man wasn’t far away. Most of his face is gone.” Amu moved his shoulders in an indifferent shrug. “No surprise. Leopards and wolves always go for the soft parts first. Lips, nose?—”

A scream, loud enough to make them all flinched. Even the yak lifted its head.

“Let me go!” she raged, struggling against the ropes bound around her wrists. One around her waist tethered her to the yak. “Let me go or I’ll kill all of you! I’ll dance on your graves Khuday darla da spo marg rawali!” Foam flecked Shahida’s lips. She looked like the dogs she hoped would tear Sarbaz apart. “Jaaru she!”

Sarbaz raised both eyebrows. “She must’ve had some mother. Mine was always slinging curses like that at my sisters. I can see why you’d want to be rid of her. I could order another injection. That would slow her down. On the other hand, she might be good in bed, Amu,” Sarbaz said. “Give you more children.”

“Dogs!” Shahida spat and twisted. “Gudree shai!”

“Shut up, woman,” Sarbaz said.

“No!” Shahida let loose a huge goblet of spit. It didn’t get far before the wind snatched and carried it away. “You want me to shut up, you will have to cut out my tongue!”

“Don’t tempt me,” Sarbaz said.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“She talks too much. Besides, why would I want more?” Amu’s features were flat and expressionless. “You would only steal them.”

“Only if they’re boys,” Sarbaz said easily. “And only after a certain age, when they are stronger.”

Although the light was bad, Poya saw the muscles in Amu’s jaw twitch and jump. “I do not want her.” He tilted his head toward the woman. “So, I give her and the dead one to you. I will give the money they had on them as well.”

“Money?” Sarbaz’s eyebrows arched. “They had money.”

“A lot.” Then, Amu added, “Don’t shoot me. I’m going to show you one of the packs.” Turning, he pulled a large black case from a pannier. Unzipping the case, he held the edges apart so Sarbaz could see inside. “Money. Lots of it. American dollars, too, not Afghani.”

“If you don’t mind.” Sarbaz gestured to one of his men, who trotted over, relieved Amu of the bag, then trotted back. “All hundreds.” He pulled out what look to Poya like one of those bricks they showed in movies. “How much?”

“I don’t know.” Amu shrugged. “All I know are sheep. I am offering all this. I don’t care what you do with her or the body or the others, all I ask is for my son. You give me Hamzad, I give you all...”

“Flowers!” Straining, Shahida shrilled, “Meeks, Meeks! Where are you?”

“Khwla banda ka!” Cursing, Sarbaz covered the distance to Shahida in two strides then backhanded her across her mouth so hard her head whipped round. “Will you close your mouth? I can’t even hear myself think.”

“Gashti ka bacha!” Screeching, Shahida reared back then flung a wad of bloody spittle. This time, her aim was perfect and caught Sarbaz on a cheek. “Harami!”

Livid, Sarbaz drew his hand back for another slap then checked himself, turned on his heel, and jerked his head at one of his men. “Go,” he grated. “Go and fetch the doctor. Bring more of that medicine. Oh, and bring candles. The light’s getting bad.” Then as the man turned to go, he added, “And fetch the other two Americans.” To Amu: “A precaution. Better to have them verify the identity of this one.”

“If you want. He’s probably worth more than all those American dollars. Besides, how many different dead Americans do you think there can be?” Amu asked.

“Oh,” Sarbaz said, mopping Shahida’s spittle with a sleeve, though a goblet still clung to his beard, like a squashed rust-colored tarantula. “I have learned to take nothing on faith, especially when it comes to Americans.”

John hadn’t been this cold since he was a fifteen-year-old kid, scared to death, his mouth dry as a desert and his heart knocking so hard that his pulse pounded like a timpani. Breaking into the school’s gun safe had been easy, given that he was the team’s junior varsity captain. It was the getting into position, slipping down the school’s dark basement corridors, listening to the chaos overhead.

He heard everything, too. Even muted, a scream was still a scream—and a gunshot still a gunshot.

The journey up the path had been not only frosty but uncomfortable because he’d had to ride behind Shahida so no one watching might spot him. This meant hours spent

bouncing up and down on the bony rear end of a yak and hoping his muscles wouldn't seize up when it was time to move.

Hisonlysolace: the certain knowledge that Driver would probably end up just as sore, if not more so.

Slipping off the yak's behind when the small caravan reached that rockfall had been a relief, but he'd had no time to work out the kinks. Instead, he'd ducked behind the rocks and waited, gritting his teeth against the pins and needles and pain as his muscles twitched and cramped and the feeling returned. His back, he thought, might never be the same.

Of course, if they all ended up dead, his back would be the least of his problems.

What they were all banking on was Sarbaz's guards attention remaining focused on the caravan. So, he had waited, motionless, eating a bit of snow every now and again as Dare had taught him so as to remain about as invisible as a sniper could be under the circumstances. He was relatively warm, though, having slipped into white sheepskin trousers, shirt, hat and coat. His balaclava was black, but he'd wound white cloth over his face. Top it off with a pair of sheepskin mittens, and he was virtually invisible.

The two bugaboos had been his binoculars and his rifle. At the Dushanbe Airport—and given everything that had happened in between now felt like centuries ago—Ustinov provided him with an Mk22. A great rifle...if you'd like brown. Against all this snow, the weapon would be easily spotted against a white background. Which mean he'd had to improvise. A lucky thing, actually, that he'd appropriated Harvey's kit, because there were several rolls of white surgical tape. Amu's people had plenty more white cloth, too, which he tore into strips and then taped to his weapons muzzle. He did the same to his binoculars and decided it would have to do because there was no other choice.

When he finally did move, the day was sliding into twilight which made the going a hundred times more difficult. He went as quickly as he could, climbing an alternative path to a higher ridge, praying that, as the day waned, he wouldn't misjudge and put his foot down on thin air. They hadn't thought about that enough and the going was slow. Chipped from rock by centuries of Markhor goats, as narrow as a straw in places, the trail was narrow and discontinuous. Goats being goats, the animals could leap across breaks and gaps or onto boulders. He couldn't, which meant slithering around, trying to find a detour that would get him into position ahead of Amu's arrival. He would need time to set up, time to settle down.

Time to plan his shots.

He had managed, barely, making it to a shallow saddle where he set up and waited. So far, luck was with him and his view was good. He'd actually counted on that because, thanks to him finally ending up as John Worthy from Wisconsin and within spitting distance of the Rust Belt, he knew a lot about mines: how what was being mined and where determined how the mine was constructed.

Sarbaz's was a drift mine operation. In other words, the mine had a horizontal entry, one into which people could simply walk instead of descending down a vertical shaft. There could be any number of tunnels in there, but this mine was exactly like the aqueduct: a single, very wide entrance. Again, standard because there would have to be a large staging area for men and equipment.

The one thing he had not factored in quite as well, though, was the time of day. As in, no light when it counted.

You're an idiot. Sheltered beneath a white sheepskin, John watched the show through his binos: the men leveling their rifles, Shahida's hysterics. Poya, hanging back behind Amu—and he studied that strip of white cloth Amu had tied to a willow pole very, very carefully. The way it snapped. The way it curved. The moments when it

went limp.

The white flag had been his idea. With no spotter, there was no other way to truly judge the wind, how it might swirl and eddy in that space. The staging area in front of the mine also faced east, which meant that by this time of day, the entrance was sheltered and the shadows growing thick. Everything gathered there wore clothes that were brown or green or black. In fact, the light was growing so dim, John was surprised no one had a flashlight or a torch or even a candle. Although Amu said that in winter, the mine was down to a skeleton crew, he'd assumed there would be generators. Maybe this was Sarbaz's idea of economy? He wished now that he'd thought to ask for a night vision rifle scope, but if wishes were fishes...

Nothing at that staging area stood out, except that flag. Still, he had a good idea of where people were in relationship to one another. If the staging area was a bandshell or half a clock, then the entrance was at ten, two of Sarbaz's men were at eleven and two at one, with Sarbaz at noon. Or midnight, if he was lucky. Amu and Kur, that yak with Shahida and the body lashed to it were bunched together at about four, which is where the trail emptied into the staging area.

So far, so good.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

His rifle was always set up on its bipod legs, and now, he lowered his binos with exaggerated care, mindful that a stray flash in the gathering darkness might draw attention he didn't want, and they couldn't afford. Then, he dropped into a squat alongside and then stretched out onto his stomach and embraced the rifle. He did this gently, the way Dare had taught and, as an adult, the way John might a lover. He breathed in, then out, then in again and out again, and then Dare's voice, from long ago, floated through his mind.

You got to be ice, son. To do this job, you got to be stone.

I am ice, he thought now. His left hand rested on the barrel beneath the scope, his right alongside the trigger. The rifle's stock was cold against his right cheek. I am stone.

He moved his head to bring his right eye in line with his scope. At once, what he had viewed through his binoculars leapt into view, only closer than before because the scope was more powerful. If he'd wanted, he could've drilled in, so he looked at only a piece of a person: an eye, an ear. But he needed to be able to see a bit more, where people were placed, the distance between them, and so had dialed back to give himself a better view. When it came time, he would have to quickly change settings.

Which he knew he could do. He had, after all, done this before.

Just not here.

The plan was simple: get a visual on Flowers and Meeks, take out Sarbaz and his men, pop-pop-pop, one right after the other. Doable, but he would have to be very fast, dial

in, make his shots, and then pray that any more of Sarbaz's people who might come running could be taken care of by Amu and?—

His thought broke off as he spotted light and then movement and then realized that the light was moving. The man who'd disappeared into the mine emerged first. He held a candle which seemed strange, but then John remembered what Amu had said about the mine not using generators in winter because there weren't as many men and so no need for as much power. Setting his candle on a rocky shelf about shoulder height, the guy took up position again to Sarbaz's left.

More flickers now as three people moved into view. Two moved stiffly and their hands were bound.

Flowers and Meeks. At least they were still alive. Both men's hands were tied behind their backs. There was a dark splotch on Meek's left shoulder and more blood on his left sleeve. Flowers limped behind, and one whole side of his face was swollen, the eye blacked shut, as if someone had clocked him a good one. A rifle butt, maybe. John watched as their guard crowded them both up against a far wall.

Two last people emerged. One had a rifle. The other, shorter and slimmer, carried a candle and had a pack slung over a shoulder. The mine's doctor? A reasonable guess and a woman, given what looked like a veil. Well, good. That meant Shahida had sold it. Distracting everyone with the need to shut Shahida up was part of the plan, too.

She's a good actress, I'll give her that. Create a distraction, a disturbance, get Sarbaz and his men to let down their guard just for a few seconds. And then it's showtime. He pulled in an even breath and let it out and then breathed in again, stilling and centering himself as the mine's doctor turned to speak to Sarbaz. Just a few more?—

And then whatever track his mind had been on simply ran out.

No. A black, icy rose of horror unfurled in his chest. No, it can't be.

But it could be—and it was.

She once saw a play, *Curse of the Starving Class*, by Sam Shepard. She'd been young, maybe nineteen, and didn't remember much of the storyline. But she did remember this one scene in the third act.

There had been some quarrel; she couldn't remember what, but this was Shepard. People were always arguing. Anyway, third act, the son walked through the kitchen. That wasn't so amazing.

But what did grab everyone's attention in that theater? That kid was naked as a jay and blood dripped from his hands. That son didn't run across the stage either but took his time.

So, that was just downright shocking. She'd never seen a nude person on stage and certainly not a man. But then, in the play, the mother, who had been asleep at the table, opened her eyes and said, *Nothing surprises me anymore*.

Truer words, she thought now. Truer words.

She heard a woman shouting when she was still halfway from the entrance. All she could think was, *oh brother*. She knew what Sarbaz would want. When it came to mouthy women, Sarbaz always the same thing: to shut them up.

She flat-out refused. She'd known there was some poor woman his men was pumping full of crap. Maybe she should've been there to supervise. But she thought that would be a little like a doctor participating in an execution. Back in the States, doctors refused. The AMA refused. Doctors didn't kill people.

And I won't drug them either.

Stepping across the entrance's threshold and into the staging area, she blinked against wind-driven shards of icy snow. For a second, she simply inhaled. Fresh air was fresh air even if it was so cold, it made her chest hurt.

Now that she was out, she took in the situation at a glance—and just wasn't surprised. Because this was the way her luck was running. Honestly, her life had devolved into that old joke: just when you thought things couldn't get any darker, they went pitch-black.

Flowers and Meeks, both of them wounded and needing her help, told her about Shahida. Mac and Driver, she'd not even seen. The shooting was over by the time she realized that the person coming into her cave wasn't trying to kill her and, in all probability, she'd just given him a bath of her own piss and poo.

I was so sure that would work, too. In the few seconds before she'd brought that heavy pail of her own shit and piss whizzing through the darkness, she'd allowed herself that bright, brief flare of hope. Because whoever had stumbled into her dark little cave at the back of the mine hadn't bothered to seat his NVGs properly and he'd clicked off his red flashlight...but not before he had shown her exactly where he was. So, she had swung that pail with all her might, thinking of what she would do as soon as he was down and she got his weapon and set herself free because this was her chance, this was her best shot.

She took it. She won, too. Sort of.

The guy must have hearing like a bat or just be very experienced. Whatever the case, she'd caught him on the helmet and then before she'd even recovered her balance, a hand had her by the throat and a fist whistled for her face and then it had been lights out. Or maybe it had been his rifle butt that hit. She didn't know. Her jaw was still

sore.

Later, though, when she was tending to Flowers, he said she'd probably tried taking out Mac.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

Whom, she figured, was now dead. Sarbaz said as much.

Nothing surprised her anymore.

“I told you, Sarbaz,” she said now. She hadn’t known about Shahida until later, when she was tending to Meeks. Meeks had not been quite so lucky as Flowers, who’d come off with only a black eye and a bad headache. She was reasonably sure the bullet had fractured Meeks’ humerus as it blasted through his arm, and now he was running a fever—and that was on her, too. “I told you that shooting her up was only going to make her worse coming down.”

Talking to him this way would probably earn her a smack, but maybe that was okay. Maybe he’d pull that Glock as he had her predecessor, but she doubted that. Until he was lucky enough to find another medic, she was it. But he might just lether have it—and that would be okay because Flowers and Meeks and Shahida and Mac...all this was her fault.

Because they’d not known about her. Flowers told her as much. He and the others had been recruited to grab Shahida’s boys.

Man, Flowers said, we didn’t even know you were alive.

Flowers didn’t know what had happened to Driver. John was a different story and, if he’d survived the chopper flight to Kabul, should be alive. Maybe. Flowers only had the story up to the moment the PJs ferried John away.

She hoped John was alive. Somewhere.

Otherwise, wow, she'd messed things up for everyone, clocking Mac the way she did. So, fine, let Sarbaz knock her silly.

"You can't go around shooting people up with antipsychotics" she said. "You're not a doctor. Your guards aren't doctors, but even a doctor is not stupid enough to believe that, eventually, this doesn't come back to bite you in the ass."

"Never mind what you told me." Sarbaz's English was excellent. Even before she'd mastered Pashto, they'd never had trouble communicating. Sarbaz's fists spoke loud and clear. Theirs was a language any idiot could understand. "Can you do something for her now?"

"Yes, of course, I can."

"Good. Then do it." Sarbaz's attention shifted to the boy. "You want a trade, Amu? We can arrange that once these men have identified the dead American, but I want to see what I'm getting."

Dead? She struggled against a wave of emotion and something close to recrimination. The dead American must be Mac, with whom Meeks and Flowers said they were working now. Driver had been reassigned, given another team. At least Driver had gotten out of this mess.

A man, barking a command: "What are you waiting for?" Blinking away from her thoughts, she saw Sarbaz, who now stood over the boy because, of course, Sarbaz never missed an opportunity to add to his workforce. The poor kid seemed to have drawn in on himself, tried to make himself smaller. "Give her the shot!" Sarbaz bellowed.

"I'm working on it." At least her voice was firm. Eyes burning, she blinked back tears. Of course, this wasn't on her. Stop beating up on yourself. No one had known

she was alive. Flowers and Meeks both said so.

“Well, work faster.” Already dismissing her, Sarbaz turned back. “You know, Amu, I think I’ve seen this boy somewhere before. He’s not one of your clan. He looks nothing like your people?—”

She tuned Sarbaz out. Focus. She had no idea where the man had gotten the bright idea of using antipsychotics to make people pliable and tractable. She’d only figured out what he was doing when one of the older boys went berserk and another had an acute dystonia. After that, she nagged about keeping the appropriate antidotes around. Maybe she couldn’t stop him, but she could at least try to reverse some of the damage he did.

Turning aside, she knelt, placed her candle on a flat boulder, eased her medic’s pack from her shoulder, unzipped it, and started rummaging amongst her vials and syringes. Finding what she wanted, she pulled off her gloves with her teeth, then held the vial to the light, eyed the amount of fluid left, and said, to no one in particular, “Your guys need to go on a supply run. I’ll need more meds, alcohol swabs, and Meeks needs antibiotics.” Meeks needed much more than that, as did many of the boys who were broken down from hard labor, bad food, the cold, a lack of vitamins. Freedom would be nice, too, but if wishes were fishes. She would do the best she could, but she could only do so much.

“Yes, yes.” Sarbaz might just as well have added, you stupid cow. “Just shut that woman up, will you? Unless you think you would like to be the reason I put a bullet through her skull.” Then, to the clansman again: “How did you come by him again?”

“Sarhad,” the clansman, Amu, said. “I bought him for?—”

Of course, he bought the kid. The men were still talking, but she tuned the rest out. Tearing open an alcohol swab, she wiped the vial’s top. Buying children for various

reasons seemed to be par for the course in Afghanistan. Holding the vial near the candle so she could see when she'd drawn up enough fluid, she jabbed in the needle?—

And then two things happened almost simultaneously.

First, there was a small, crisp sound that was the sound of hoar ice shattering on a cold winter's morning.

And then her candle snuffed out.

For a stupefied moment, she felt only the smallest twinge of mingled surprise and puzzlement. What was that? Then her brain, so sluggish from years of being ground down and so hopeless that it was a wonder she was alive at all, churned and a memory bubbled up.

From the time when she and John had gone to Emery's place to do a little shooting.

Emery wouldn't let them pay for the ammo or stick around to clean the weapons. "You two kids head on out, get yourselves something to eat. You know the barbecue place down south of Marshall? You go down there, say hi to Sophie and that I sent you." He showed another wink of gold in a broad grin. "She'll give me half-price next time I walk in."

The barbecue restaurant was exactly where Earl said it would be. The parking lot was full when they arrived. Pickups, mostly, nosed to the porch of a one-story, red-roofed ranch-style house. After they ordered, they took their food out to one of the picnic tables set opposite a rust-red wooden fence which screened the open-pit barbecue from the parking lot.

They were alone. The air was fragrant with the scent of wood smoke, charbroiled fat,

and slow-roasted ribs. The only sounds were the faint lilt of bluegrass from inside the restaurant, the low murmur of voices from the restaurant, the occasional passing car, and the chirp of crickets.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

John was just forking in potato salad when she said, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.” He swallowed, followed with a swig of beer, and said, “What’s on your mind?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. Your shooting.” She’d ordered a jumbo pulled pork sandwich and now she took a huge bite, chewed, swallowed then used her tongue to skim red sauce from her lips. “The Annie Oakley.”

“Uh-huh.” He busied himself with pulling the leg from half a barbecued chicken. “What about it?”

“John,” she said. “You did it. A single shot at that candle, at night, and at three hundred and fifty yards, and you snuffed it right out. How? And don’t tell me it was luck or that you watched me and figured out all my mistakes.”

“Well, I did.”

“Yeah, yeah.” There was a smear of barbecue sauce at the right corner of his mouth, and she had to fight to keep herself from reaching over and kissing his lips clean. “But that’s not why you made it and don’t tell me it’s talent. A real shooter taught you how to do that.”

His gaze fell to his plate, and he stopped talking. He was quiet for so long she was on the verge of apologizing when he said, “I can’t tell you. Maybe, someday. But not now.”

“Oh. Okay.” She felt stupid. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. You didn’t do anything wrong. Hey,” he said and then covered one of her hands with his, “seriously, this is about me, not you.”

“Isn’t that what all guys say?” She meant for that to sound flip. It came out snide. “I’m sorry. That was mean.”

“It’s fine,” he said again. “But it’d be good if we kept old Annie between the two of us.”

“What about Emery?” At his look, she said, “Joke. Who’s he going to tell?”

“Good. She’ll be our secret and who knows?” He picked up his chicken leg. “Maybe someday, I’ll do it for you again.”

“Are you kidding?” She took another bite of her sandwich and said, around barbecued pork, “Someday, buster, you’re going to teach me.”

And now...

In the three seconds it took for that flash of memory, she also realized that there had been no gust of wind back here.

And yet, the candle was out.

And the wick is gone. Then her gaze ticked to the encrusted snow and ice sheeting the

wall immediately behind.

Where she spied a tiny hole.

Oh, my God. In an instant, her sluggish brain threw off years of deadening despair and did the calculus, did the math. She saw the placement of all the players, the guards. Shahida was still shouting, hurling insults, and now Sarbaz, clearly irritated by something the woman had said, had straightened, his right hand still firmly clamped on the boy's shoulder. He also had something black tucked in the crook of his left elbow. Was that a bag? She thought so. A similar bag rested by his feet.

There were five of the enemy to take down: Sarbaz and his four guards. Granted, there were several more in the mine itself, but they were well back, in a chamber where the boys bedded down for the night. Chances were they hadn't heard a thing—and wouldn't until it was too late.

Which left these five. She saw them all like pieces on a board and thought of how she would do it: who she'd take first and second and third and fourth.

The fifth would be hardest because, by then, that target would have time to react. But if she could get him away from the boy beforehand...

"Down! Meeks, Flowers, down!" Lunging, she hip-checked Sarbaz, bulling him aside. The man let out a startled exclamation, but by then she had thrown her arms around the boy and brought him down hard onto icy rock at the same moment that there was another sound.

This was not glassy at all because the slug was not driving into layers of snow and ice at hypersonic speeds but hollow and wet, something she imagined happen if you took a ripe cantaloupe and threw it from a second-floor window onto concrete. A second later, a shower of gore rained down as the skull of the guard standing closest

exploded in a shower of brains and blood.

Even as that man was dropping, there was another hollowpuh, another geyser of blood and gore, and then a third, and now a fourth in rapid sequence. Blood slopped onto rock and melted into snow.

Four men down, all of them guards. Leaving Sarbaz, the fifth man, in play. Where was he?

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

Still splayed over the boy, she turned her head, craned over her left shoulder. Flowers and Meeks had hit the deck. She was in time to see Shahida suddenly yank her hands straight up. Her ropes fell away and then Shahida was moving, swinging off the yak's back and snatching Amu's rifle from its scabbard. At the same moment, the bundle over the yak's flanks heaved; the skins fell away; and then a man rolled out. The yak snorted as Driver landed in a crouch. Pulling a shotgun from a back scabbard, he scuttled to the two clansmen crouched in a protective huddle.

But where was Sarbaz? Had he already?—

She felt a sudden pain in her scalp and then Sarbaz, snarling, his head turtled between his shoulders and weapon drawn, was hauling her up, dragging her off the boy by her hair. She didn't weigh much anymore, and in another second, he'd heaved her aside as easily as if she were nothing more than a child's discarded rag doll. Off-balance, she flailed, tried catching herself, failed, and tripped over Flowers, still prone on the rock. Crying out, she got an arm up and came down hard on her shoulder and in a mucky mess of brains and blood next to a dead guard—and there was the man's rifle lying right there in front of her. Snatching the weapon, she twisted into a sit and spun to bring herself around to where she knew Sarbaz still stood.

And froze.

“Don't!” Crouching, a fist knotted in the boy's hair, Sarbaz was crabbing backward, using the boy as a shield. The muzzle of his pistol was jammed against the boy's right ear. “Don't!”

For a breathless moment, no one moved.

He saw Roni drop and even though he couldn't hear her shout, Flowers was going to ground and so was Meeks, and then he stopped watching them and instead drew his beads and squeezed off his shots.

Four shots in three seconds. Not bad. In fact, excellent...but the fifth was the hardest and he knew it and now Sarbaz had the boy.

Damn.

He could kill Sarbaz. He was also the only one who might because as good as Roni was, even she needed to aim. Same with Shahida and Driver. There was no way any of them would get Sarbaz sighted in quickly enough for an accurate shot.

He had an advantage over them all but couldn't take the shot either. He bet Sarbaz knew that.

The problem was simple biology. Ask any shooter. For that matter, ask any farmer who's ever butchered a pig or goose or cow. Nearly every animal twitches when it dies because all muscles, as they die from lack of oxygen, become hyperexcitable. This means they fire at random intervals. Some muscles twitch for a very long time. It's not called running around like a headless chicken for nothing, because that's what headless chickens can and often do.

The same happens with people. Not all the time but often. Drop somebody with a shot—and the chances are excellent that the guy with the muzzle of his weapon pressed into a kid's ear? Well, that trigger finger just might twitch. Which defeats the purpose of dropping the guy to begin with.

He had no crystal ball. But John had thought ahead. He'd planned contingencies.

Which was why he'd given Amu the two money bags which Ustinov said was

tamper-resistant and fitted with an incendiary. Davila's was already unzipped, the better for Sarbaz to see all that cash. Amu had done his job, too. Both money bags were on the ground now, very close to Sarbaz's feet.

And another contingency: tying Poya's wrists with a quick-release knot. Then he'd said, "Listen, very carefully. This is important, Poya. You can't let Sarbaz see your face until the last possible second. Then, if something happens, if the shooting stops, but Sarbaz is still standing..."

In the twominutes before the shooting started.

"And how did you come by him again?" Sarbaz asked.

"Sarhad," Amu said. "I bought him for twenty good sheep."

John.Ears burning with shame, Poya kept his eyes on the ground. His vision blurred and he blinked against tears.John, John, do something. Where are you?

"Did you now?" Sarbaz snapped his fingers in front of Poya's nose. "Look at me, boy."

Should he? No, best not to. John said not to do what Sarbaz said, at least not right away. John said distraction was best and nothing made someone more distracted than anger. On the other hand, if Sarbaz got a look at his face, his ghost eye, would he remember? Maybe Sarbaz wouldn't see. It was already too dim in here, too dark for Sarbaz to see his eye clearly. It might still be all right?—

"What, are you deaf as well as stupid? Look at me!" Two fingers clamped onto his chin and then Poya's head was wrenched up by the man's grip. There was a second's silence and enough light for Poya to see Sarbaz's dark eyes thin to slits and then his face cleared.

His eyes were out, so his ghost eye was clearly visible. Unlike Amu, Sarbaz didn't scream either because, of course?—

“I know you,” Sarbaz said. “You're the boy who ran, the one Zahid spat on. The boy whose mother ran away.” Then, Sarbaz crouched and whispered into Poya's ear, “And do you know something else, boy? I had your mother.”

At first and for only a split second, Poya had no idea what Sarbaz meant. Then, the knowledge flooded him with a surge of heat and rage and grief.

“Yes.” Sarbaz's breath was hot and stank of rotted meat and decay. “I had her and do you know why? Because she was going to Kabul while I was coming to Sarhad, and there she was, trudging down the road, a woman without a mahram, and so I knew that taking her, enjoying her, and then putting her out of this life would be doing the work of the?—”

That was when the woman-doctor had shouted something and barreled into Sarbaz, knocking him aside and bearing Poya to the ground. He had lain there, barely hearing the hollow explosions of men's skulls because of the blood roaring in his ears.

Mami, Mami, Mami. No wonder she had never returned. This man had taken Mami and her honor and then her life.

Now this same man, this devil, this evil man had him, was going to use him, would kill him...

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

And then that was when Poya remembered what John had said, what John had done when tying Poya's hands.

I'm going to tie you the same way I will tie Shahida. All you have to do is jerk your hands apart and the rope will away. She has a rifle, but I want you to have this. He'd shown Poya a slim cylinder with a tiny catch and how to flick the catch with a thumb, so a sharp, thin blade sprang out and locked into place. That belonged to a boy who needed to protect himself. I will try very hard to kill Sarbaz if I can, but if something happens and I can't, don't be afraid to use this. Because then we have one more trick?—

If Amu did what John told him to do: make sure to give Sarbaz both black bags.

Now, as Sarbaz shouted, his grief swelled his chest and then burst in a hot, roaring cry of rage and anguish and grief and despair. He jerked his hands apart, and he was moving even as the ropes fell away: flicking the catch with his right thumb and driving his fist backward, point first, as hard as he could into Sarbaz's right thigh.

Sarbaz screamed; The gun jerked up and away, and then Poya was falling as, at the same moment, he heard Driver bellow: "Cover your eyes!"

Sprawled on cold stone, Poya flung his arms over his eyes—as the two bags exploded.

Still on her rear, still with a bead on Sarbaz, Roni heard Driver's bellow, didn't have even a split second to think but did what he said and squeezed her eyes shut. There was a very loud bang, the sound of a car's backfire, and then the smell of molten

plastic and then something else that reminded her of the times she and her friends took strands of their hair and held them over a candle.

She opened her eyes.

“Ah!” Sarbaz was reeling, clawing at his face with his free hand. The hilt of a small knife or stiletto was buried in Sarbaz’s right thigh and already a crimson rose was blooming. But that was not why Sarbaz was screaming.

His beard was on fire. His beard was, in fact, already ash, the fire having eaten its way all the way up his face to touch off his hair and his fur-lined hair and now streamers were spreading over his fur coat and the crackling flames, which even the cold could not put out, grew brighter and higher .

“Ahhh!” Roaring with pain, Sarbaz wheeled and spun like a dervish. “Ahh?—”

Roni shot him in the mouth.

EPILOGUE

POYA: THE FREEDOM TO BE

“This is different, I know, but I’m curious. What was it like?” he asked as Poya crossed to a pair of north-facing windows. “Your room in Kabul?”

Poya had to think. It was nearly summer now in the United States. So much time had passed since fleeing Kabul. The past was less and less like a movie with a continuous thread of sound and color and narrative, and more like a series of snapshots: brief explosive images that flared white and hot as a burst light bulb and only for a second. Close your eyes against that light as Poya had done when John Worthy shot those money bags, and all that was left were the after-images imprinted on the backs of

your lids, void of detail and gone within moments.

“I remember my mother’s garden,” Poya said, finally, not turning around, worried that memory would hurt and then he would know because emotions did that. Slid into the eyes, flickered across one’s face. Maybe a lucky thing that the doctors said Poya should wear dark glasses until sunlight didn’t cut tears. “My room was on the second floor down the hall from Baba’s study. My windows looked out onto Mami’s garden. I loved that garden and the beehive, too, the one under a flowering almond. My mother called the bees her ‘little girls’ because, well, they all are, except the drones.” Poya paused. “Maybe I loved it more because of Mami. She spent so much time there, brought her students there for classes. She let me sit in back and listen. I guess you’d call it a kind of secret garden. My room always smelled so nice.”

“That reminds me,” he said. “On one of my visits to your father, he had a very beautiful pink rose in a bud vase. The smell was amazing.”

“Probably autumn damask. They were my favorite. My grandmother planted those bushes, so they were very old. They can live for twenty years if you take good care of them. In spring and before it got too hot in summer, I would leave my windows open so they could perfume my room,” Poya said, and then let go of a small laugh.

“What?” he asked. “Something funny?”

“No, something I’d forgotten I knew until just now.” His house hugged a high cliff over the water and this room, a converted attic space, was on the third floor. So Poya had a very good view: all bright blue sky and water, so much water spreading along the northern horizon though dotted here and there with islands. These were odd, too, not the way an island was described, say, in Robinson Crusoe or Island of the Blue Dolphins. Those islands had beaches and a lot of sand. These didn’t. Sculpted from deep red sandstone and basalt, these islands were deeply green with pines and balsam firs and slender ash. Rising from the big lake...no, Great Lake, Lake Superior, the

islands seemed to have existed since the beginning of time. “Something about home.”

“What do you remember?”

“Baba.” Poya concentrated, but not too hard. The harder a person grabbed at a memory, the faster it tore apart. “From a time when I was little.”

“And?”

“And one morning...I think I was five, maybe six...Baba came in very early. I remember waking up when he sat on my bed. I opened my mouth to say something, but he whispered that I should be very quiet.” I want to show you something many people never see, Baba had said, but hush, we mustn’t wake your mother. “We went outside into the garden and tiptoed into a bed of poppies, so it must’ve been February because that’s when poppies bloom. Anyway, I remember him crouching by one. The blossom was...mauve, yes. A very beautiful color. Because it was so early, there was all this dew, these perfect little drops, like diamonds on the petals.”

“Was that what he wanted to see?”

“No. He said I should look inside the flower.” Poya put a hand to a cheek. Baba hadn’t shaved yet and his whiskers scratched when he whispered in her ear. “He said I would see something most people never do.”

“And what was that?”

“A honeybee.” Even now, years later, Poya still could conjure the image of that bee—a little girl, her mother would’ve said—speckled with yellow pollen. “It wasn’t moving at all. I thought it was dead and started to cry.”

“But it wasn’t?”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“No.” Baba’s voice: There, there, dry your eyes. “The bee was only sleeping. I didn’t believe my father, but then he blew on it, very gently. All of a sudden, the bee moved. It straightened out its legs and its antennae wiggled and then off it buzzed.” Poya pause. “I guess that was about as close to a real-life fairy tale as I ever got. That garden, my parents.”

He was quiet a moment. “I’m sorry about your father. Your mother, too.”

“I know you are.”

“He was a good man, a good friend. I didn’t know your mother as well, but I visited your father several times, you know. Many times, just to talk.”

“Yes.” Poya debated a moment then said, “I remember when you once did.”

“You do?”

“Yes.” Poya told him about the night on the landing. “You looked right at me, but I kept very, very still. I remember closing my eyes and thinking, don’t see me, don’t see me.”

“It must’ve worked. I didn’t. So,” he said, his tone changing ever so slightly, “you knew about your dad. Of course, you had to because...” In the window, Poya saw his reflection touch a finger to an eye. “You were smart to hide the color, that extra pupil.”

“Yes. My parents’ idea and then when we had to leave, I knew I would need more.

I'd already been in my father's secret room. It was actually very easy to find."

"Oh?" He cocked his head. "Why? And what made you think to look?"

Poya held up two fingers. "One was when he told me to never go in. That didn't make sense. It wasn't like he was a mad scientist or something. I was curious. Then, the evening you left, you asked my father how some person would recognize him. That's when Baba said he would be the one with the black glasses and blonde hair and as if he hadn't worked out in a while. Then it was just a question of where he might keep his disguises."

"Which made you think of the study? Just because you weren't allowed in?"

"No, I had to think about it awhile. One afternoon, though, I was in the garden, and I noticed how my father's study didn't line up with the house. The wall at the end was too thick and so I wondered if there was another room there." Poya shrugged. "Basic geometry. One afternoon when no one was around, I went into his study and walked around a little bit, knocked on walls. Then I noticed this book on the shelf that I thought might either have a key inside or, you know, hide some mechanism."

"Oh? What was special about the book?"

"It was the only book whose spine wasn't broken."

"Meaning it hadn't been read."

"Yes, but it had been moved. I knew because you could see that the dust around it had been disturbed. So, then I pulled the book out a bit. There was this loud click, and then a whole section of the wall slid to one side." Just like one of Baba's movies.

"What was the book?"

“The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.”

“Two halves of the same person.” He nodded. “Appropriate.”

“Yes.” One look at faces and noses and wigs and, best of all, those small cases of eyes of many colors...Poya knew Baba was a master at hiding who he truly was. “I recognized you again, you know. When you drove us to the farm.”

“I wondered why you were so comfortable,” he said. “You didn’t clam up. Most kids do, with strangers.”

“Don’t feel bad. Adults are like that. They miss what’s right in front of their nose all the time simply because they don’t expect to see anything.” Poya paused. “Or are taught not to see. Like girls, women. Why do you think men in Afghanistan don’t want to hear a woman’s voice? Why do you think some men reduce a woman’s view of the world only to the rectangle that a burqa allows?”

After a small silence, he said, “You don’t have to do that here. No strings attached either. I promised your father I would look after you and your mother, and I keep my promises.”

Well, Poya thought, better late than never. “I know.”

“But it bears repeating. You are my ward, and this is your home now.” He spread his hands to take in the room. “This is your space. You will go to school, you will make friends. Someone might break your heart. It will feel like the end of the world, but it won’t be. When that happens, I hope you’ll tell me.”

“Afghanistan already broke my heart.” Now, Poya did turn. “My world already ended once.” Twice, counting Mami. “If I lived through that, I will live through anything. But you know what I worry about? Other kids my age. I’m only fourteen, but I

feel...old. As if all the things an American teenager worries about are just so trivial. Even the way I talk and think, I just don't see how I'm going to fit in." Poya paused. "Or I even want to. I feel...separate. Apart."

"Give it time. For now, let yourself settle in. Give yourself the freedom to simply be." He paused at the door, his hand on the knob. "Look, you need to know that I won't force you into anything. I mean, into my line of work, your dad's. Driver's, for that matter, or the work his men do."

"The work they do for you?"

He shook his head. "No, with me. We're a team. I'm not saying you wouldn't be a valuable asset. You have unique talents. Being a polyglot is only one. You're smart, you're brave. If you do decide that you want to follow in your father's footsteps or mine, well, I won't stop you." He paused. "But I won't encourage that either. You are fourteen and you deserve a chance to grow into yourself. You are my ward, not a weapon and not a tool."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“You mean, I can’t be Dick Grayson?”

“That’s my cue to say I’m not Bruce Wayne, but not only am I not independently wealthy, I’m simply not made that way. I’m serious,” he said. “The only thing I want for you is to grow into whomever and whatever you choose. Here, you have the freedom to be.”

Poya’s eyes suddenly stung. Don’t cry. What kind of tears would they be, though? Sadness? Relief? Maybe a bit of both. “I know that.”

“But you don’t believe it yet, which is understandable. Years of thinking a certain way are tough to break. So, it bears repeating. You are free. You never have to hide what and who you are ever again. Remember that.” Turning, Mac said, “Dinner at seven. It’s a nice day. What do you say, we grill some burgers and eat on the porch and watch the sunset?”

For a few moments after the doors clicked shut, Poya didn’t move but held very still and waited, ears pricked, barely breathing. Habit, really. Another doctor, one who only listened as Poya talked, said that some habits die hard and others never.

Maybe that doctor was right: not every day was a minefield. But that time hadn’t yet come and now all Poya made out was the stair’s creaks and complaints as Mac walked down from this third-floor attic space to the ground and then, faintly, the housekeeper’s voice raised in a question followed the softer burr of Mac’s response.

Poya stood in the middle of the room for a long moment, eyes roaming from the windows to the bed to the bookshelves, all of them empty save for the seventeen

books Poya had managed to salvage from Kabul. Plucking Anne's diary from the shelf made the collection look even more pathetic. Then, again, a collection, like a person, had to begin with something and start somewhere.

Crossing the room, Poya pulled open a closet door. There was a mirror there, full-length, and Poya studied the image captured in the glass: the dark glasses over the eyes, the hair captured under a cap, the oval face.

Slipping off the glasses, Poya studied the eyes. The colors would never change. The right eye would always be brown. The left would always be a ghost eye, so pale as to be almost white.

The one difference: the ghost eye had only one pupil now instead of three.

Polycoria. A fancy name that meant many pupils. One could have many true pupils, meaning that they could open or close the way a single pupil could, or many false pupils, which were simply holes in the iris.

Poya's were true. Baba once said it was a lucky thing Poya's eyesight was unaffected. The condition could be fixed with surgery...just not in Afghanistan.

Having a ghost eye with now only a single pupil was a relief. The doctor said losing the glasses was up to Poya: no medical reason to keep them, but it's your call.

So much was Poya's choice now and that was...thrilling. Scary, too.

Folding the earpieces, Poya slid the dark glasses into a pocket. Without the protection of those glasses, that mirror-image was eerie. A little scary, too, because there was more to see than met the eye, even one fit for a ghost.

Like Dorothy. When Baba showed the movie, he said they made Garland, who was

sixteen at the time, wear ace wraps around her chest to flatten her out and hide her bulges, her curves. Baba said Garland cried because it hurt so much to hide what she was becoming.

Poya knew just how that felt.

But this is for the best, Baba had said as Mami cut a shock of Poya's red hair, which was no less startling than that strange ghost eye. This way, you will be a bacha posh. No one need ever know. But one day we will escape to America before long and when we do...

"You can be yourself," Poya whispered, "because you will be free."

Then Poya pulled off the cap and shook out coils of rich red hair as ruddy as a maple leaf in autumn—and became herself.

This is the story of your life. So, begin yourself. Start somewhere.

And then Mina opened Anne's diary and began to read.

JOHN: A LEAP OF FAITH

They left Phakding early, around nine. Their hike in Nepal that day was only six, seven miles, but the last three-quarters of a mile to Namche Bazaar was supposed to be a real killer: straight uphill, no nice level turnouts where you could look at the view and catch your breath. One guy they met in Phakding said they could count on two hours of steady uphill easy before they hit the valley: Nothing but up and more up and they got some steps that are real killers. Even if you do get to see Everest for a couple two, three minutes, those stairs? Do them and then tell me if they aren't the worst experience of your life.

He was tempted to say that, no, he really had experienced far, far worse and killed several people along the way but kept his mouth shut.

The day was clear, which he thought was a good omen. An hour out, he figured the guy was exaggerating. The way was downright pleasant, a nice ramble through thick forests of pine and rhododendron studded with pink blooms. The river kept them company along the way, gurgling and chuckling over rocks, churning itself the color of milk. There were several suspension bridges along the way, but they'd been relatively tame affairs: not very high, not very long, all of them bedecked with colorful prayer flags tied to either side. He'd been reassured of the bridges' sturdiness by the constant stream of yaks, burdened with sacks and bulging panniers, clopping along. (Yak caravans always had the right of way. He didn't know if this was written down anywhere, but the yaks were wide and their burdens even wider. So, best to let them just have the bridge for as long as it took. But, boy, you had to watch your step. He hadn't seen so much yak poop since Amu's camp.)

About two hours out, he spotted a perfect rhododendron blossom on the ground which he plucked up then slid over Roni's right ear. When they kissed, her lips tasted of sweat and salt, and he thought, Yeah, just do it. Take the leap. Don't second-guess. The time's right.

So, all in all, the day had been good so far. He was jacked up, filled with good intentions and love for his fellow man, hopeful about the future, feeling just great because the world was his oyster, baby...

And then they got to the Hillary Bridge.

"Wow," he said. "That's...that's, you know, that's pretty high."

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

“Five hundred feet above the river,” she said. “More or less.”

“Uh-huh.” Thankfully, they were at the rear of a large group of backpackers, all of whom seemed to be together and, like them, waiting for a yak caravan to make its way from the opposite side of the gorge. Yaks were a mixed bag. The nice thing about yaks was they were slow. This was also the bad thing about yaks because he had too much time to think of all the thousands of things that could go wrong. On the other hand, all those people would have to cross ahead of them and if no one plunged to his death?—

“You know what I think?” she said. “The wait’s the killer.”

“No, I’d say it would be that last step. You know, the one you take before your Wile E. Coyote moment.”

“Well, we have to cross if we want to get to the other side, John.”

“Wait, are you calling me a chicken?” he asked. “Me?”

“Well, if the shoe fits...” She let go of a small bwrawk-bwrawk. “Do chickens even wear shoes?”

“Oh, ha-ha.” He studied the continual snap of seemingly trillions of multicolored prayer flags tied to the chain-link on either side of the bridge. The surface seemed sturdy, no gaps, all nicely bolted together. Although the thing did kinda bob and sway, and his mind kept jumping to the second Indiana Jones movie, which had been meh, not the best. But I’m pretty sure that’s the one where the suspension bridge

snaps. Because didn't they all? By definition? A suspension bridge was like a gun. You knew that thing was gonna go off in the third act.

"It might be awhile." Roni touched his arm. "Can we...do you mind if we sit down for a little while? If that's okay? I feel kind of funny all of a sudden."

"Sure." Concerned, he lead the way to small outcropping of rock away from the bridge. "Are you not feeling well?" he asked as they sat. "What's wrong? Is it the altitude?"

"No." Crossing her arms, Roni hugged herself. "I think it's the bridge."

"Are you worried? Look, honey, I was just joking, it's just me?—"

"No." Her eyes were suddenly shimmery. "It's me. All of a sudden, I'm looking at the bridge and then I'm thinking this is like crossing from one side of my life to the next. And don't make some crack about metaphors."

"Me? Joke about something like that?" It had been on the tip of his tongue. "Never."

"Liar." Her mouth wobbled into a grin that quickly slid away. "We've got this time now, but we can't travel forever. We're not independently wealthy or anything. We need to stop moving eventually. The thing is, I don't know where I belong or if I can go back. To the Army, I mean. They'll take me. That much was clear when I got checked out in Ramstein."

"Are you really just saying you don't know if you can go home again?" He'd wondered how the Army would stage-manage that. The official word was that no one had been left behind. If Roni did return, it would have to be on the down-low. Roni might even get the same coaching he'd gotten when he was fifteen and his name was...

Oh, by God.

“Hey?” She touched his arm. “Are you all right? You look like you just got the shock of your life.”

“Me? No.” Of course, he had, because just now the pieces to a puzzle he’d not even realized he’d been working had snapped into place. “Go on,” he said. “I’m sorry. You were talking about going back to the States and picking up the pieces.”

“Uh-huh. Thing is,” Roni said, nibbling at her lower lip, “I’m not sure I can. I don’t know if I want to go back home and stay there.”

“Whoa, whoa.” He cupped her cheek with a hand. “Honey, I think you’re taking this in leaps and bounds instead of baby steps. No one’s forcing you to do anything.” She wasn’t ready anyway; not someone who had nightmares more often than not, who needed the lights on and to be held until the shakes went away. That person just wasn’t ready. “Unless your parents are pushing you?”

“No.” Her lips moved into a wobbly smile. “I mean, they’re relieved, they’re happy, but I don’t belong at home anymore. I also don’t see, though, how I can just pick up after so long and put on that uniform again. I’m not scared,” she added, quickly. “That’s not it. After that mine, after Sarbaz...I think I can pretty much live through anything. It’s not fear.”

He could buy that. When he was fifteen, he thought he’d die, but life continued and time passed. He had learned to put that past in a box and then the box on a high shelf in a dark closet at the back of his mind.

“Everything takes time,” he said, though he wasn’t sure if he wasn’t also talking about himself.

“What about you?” she asked.

“Me, put on the uniform again? I’m out of the Army, remember? They wouldn’t have me back even if I wanted in.” Actually, he doubted that, if only because of Mac, who seemed have the power to do a great many things. Look at Driver and his men, and the secret Flowers had told him on the way to the aqueduct. As before, he wondered if Roni knew what the men had done. Perhaps, but this was not his secret to tell, and so he packed that up, too, and slotted it in that closet and turned the key.

Driver’s secret, like his past, was a story for another day.

“Before all this started, I had plans,” he said. “I was going to build a cabin in the mountains, start up a little practice, ride horses and, you know, sit in front of a nice fire at night.”

Just like Dare. He wondered if his uncle was still alive. If, maybe, after all this time, he could return to Texas to see him. Probably not. Stan would have a cow.

Although Mac knew about his past. That crack about living a lie. Yet Mac had kept John’s secret. Was that a signal of some sort? A sly way of saying, I know who you are, I know what you’ve been and so if I come calling...

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

Which made him wonder about where the others were now and what they were up to. Mac had been whisked away by the medevac Driver had called before they set off for Sarbaz's mine. As luck would have it, the mine's staging area also made for a makeshift helipad and so the choppers had come in, one after the other. A couple for Shahida and all those orphans still left at the mine going in one direction. Driver, Meeks, and Flowers, leaving in another. There had been no extended goodbyes, just handshakes, hugs, thumps on the back, and then their helo was rising and John had to swallow back a lump.

And, damn, if he hadn't thought Wait, I don't want to ever see your ugly mugs again.

But then they were gone, leaving Amu with his son and the clan's other boys, and John and Roni with Poya: a kid with secrets and, in that way, so very much like John. The last he'd seen, the kid was being ushered into a medical transport. When John had objected, Poya's escort said, only, Sir, Mac's awake and he will tear me a new one if I don't bring this kid back. At ease, Captain. We got this.

That escort had addressed him by his rank. As if John was still in the fight.

Was he? Was this Mac's way of hinting he could be, again, if he chose?

"Why are you smiling?"

"What? Oh." He waved a dismissive hand. "Nothing." He craned his head over a shoulder for a quick peek. The last yak was just stepping off the bridge. This seemed to be the signal for the backpackers to start surging forward like shoppers at a Wal-Mart on Black Friday. Maybe they'd just hang here for a few more minutes, let that

gaggle get across.

“So, do you want that now?” Roni asked. “That nice fire at night in the mountains?”

“It’s got its appeal, but I don’t know. I mean, it is possible to build a fire anywhere. Just so long as I share that fire with you, I almost don’t care.”

Which was his cue, he thought.

“Come on now.” Getting down on a knee, he carefully tweezed out the top tissue from a packet in a side pocket. “Here, blow your nose before you get your snot all over the place. Don’t worry, the tissue’s not used or anything.”

“Thanks.” Letting go of a watery laugh, she unfolded the tissue. “That is probably the most romantic thing you’ve ever?”

She stopped.

He waited, and then when she didn’t say anything more, he thought, Oh, crap. “I...you know, we were in Phakding, and I saw a bazaar and I remembered, you know, your sister...what you said about her fiancé proposing on top of a mountain and then I saw that and the color, it’s like your eyes, and so I thought?”

“Yes.” She slipped the gold band onto her left finger then turned her hand, so the rosette of emeralds caught the sun and glowed a deep rich green. “Yes, John.”

Oh, God, thank you, thank you for this. Every bit of him ached to kiss her, to hold her, and shouldn’t there be a swell of movie-music, schmalzy violins? Tonight, when we rest. We have plenty of time. Pushing to his feet, he held out a hand. “Then, come on, hon. Let’s get going.”

There was no crowd at the bridge now. The last of the group before them was just stepping off on the opposite side of the valley. No yaks, in sight either.

The Dudhkoshi River churned five hundred feet. The valley seemed impossibly wide, an expanse that, like life, they had to cross if they were to keep on keeping on. A leap of a faith, perhaps, but her hand was in his, his heart was in her keeping, and that beat Indiana Jones by a mile.

Okay, almost. Because what he wouldn't give for a fedora.

"Before we cross, can I ask you a question?" she asked.

"Sure," he said. "Shoot."

"Do you remember what Mac said way back in Kabul, when we were going to go AWOL, and you asked what we were supposed to tell Command?"

"Yes." He was glad they were both wearing sunglasses. "He said we should lie."

"He said more than that. He said lying should be something at which you excelled because you'd had years of experience." She let a moment go by. "John, what did he mean?"

Mac knew, of course. Then, again, so did Ustinov. The hints Ustinov dropped hadn't clicked until just now, when he'd been thinking about himself as a fifteen-year-old boy.

The Russian had planted the hints in the first few minutes when he'd handed John and Davila their passports and papers. When he'd told John—whose alias was Mr. Child—how very much he'd liked *Die Trying*. His favorite novel by Mr. King—Davila's alias—was *Desperation*.

The code was so easy, a blind person could see it with a cane. *Die Trying* featured a woman with guts and brains, a real fighter—who was being held captive.

A woman like Roni. In that book, too, John thought the lead character had taken an impossible shot. Just like John.

But the clincher? The lead character in *Desperation*, the true hero, was a boy of faith. A boy who beat the monsters. A boy who did what was right—and still lost everything.

That boy's name had been John's, too, once upon a time.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 1:53 am

So, Ustinov and Mac knew who he was. They knew his story. Which meant they just might come knocking?—

And then, his phone rang.

They both jumped.

His phone rang, again. Well, burbled out his ringtone.

“Darth Vader?” Roni said. “You have the Darth Vader march as a ringtone?”

“Hey, in my experience, no one calls just to shoot the breeze.” Although talk about saved by the bell. Would he ever tell Roni about who he’d been and what he’d done? Maybe not for a while. Maybe not ever.

Backing away from the bridge, he fished his cell from a pocket. Unlike Afghanistan, Nepal had excellent cell service. He stared at the number, didn’t recognize it, shrugged, then slid the little answer arrow to the right and put the phone to his ear. “Hello?”

Static crackled, as if the phone was clearing its throat—and then there was a voice he knew.

“Hello, Mr. Child. So good of you to take my call. I wonder,” Ustinov said, “how are your teeth?”