

Chapter 1

Kabul, Afghanistan, August 2021

“Why are they leaving?” asked the boy.

No answer.

The wind swirled across the mountain face, mimicking the helicopters below. Dawn had come to Kabul, but the sun had yet to climb above the peaks surrounding the city. The capital lay shadowed in the bottom of a granite bowl, embraced by the arms of the Hindu Kush. The mountains had many times witnessed the world’s greatest armies broken and retreating through their merciless passes. The chaos at the airport this morning was another fleeting moment in their history.

The boy repeated, “Why...”

Below him, the man sheltering behind the boulder sighed. He didn’t look up from the weapon he was cleaning. “They have forgotten why they came, so now they leave,” he answered wearily. His one good eye peered from a weathered face, scanning to ensure all the small pieces from the rifle still lay on the rock. His aging legs were stiff from their climb last night and he was in no mood for idle talk. This new weapon, an American rifle, which Hajji Khan had given him, was unfamiliar. A puzzle. As such, it was worthy of his complete attention. It would not do to lose a piece in the rocks of their hiding place. He preferred his old Kalashnikov—its few, well-worn parts, the smooth feel of its wooden stock against his cheek—but there was now unending American ammunition from the collapse of the army, so he had accepted the new weapon with gratitude. *So many pieces*, he mused. *The infidels like to make things complicated.*

“Why did they come?” the boy asked, looking down from his perch atop the boulder to watch the man in the black eye patch push a tiny pin into a shiny metal tube.

“We have forgotten too,” the man replied, gratified when the pin clicked into place, despite his lack of depth perception. The morning was already warm. A trickle of sweat ran between his shoulders. “Watch your position, donkey,” he snapped, noting the boy’s concentration wandering from the military airfield below. “We are to count aircraft and soldiers, not to chatter like women.”

The two had spent several hours the night before scrambling across the broken hillside to gain this position above the airport. From below their hideout was invisible. On neighboring hills, the Afghan National Army had abandoned its outposts the week before. Should a helicopter come near, a hollow at the base of the large boulder provided concealment. *This is a good position*, he convinced himself. *Unless we’re spotted*, he allowed his soldier’s fatalism to creep in, *in which case we’re dead*.

The boy shrugged, turning back to his task. He was careful to adjust the dark cloth atop his head, concealing his outline from enemies below who might be scanning the rocks. *It is impossible to count all of the small aircraft with the whirling blades*, he thought. *They come and go so quickly*. He was sure he had counted several of them twice already, as they buzzed angrily in circles about the airfield’s walls, trying to keep the desperate civilians back. The big gray planes were easy. They were slow and when they took off the earth shook.

Despite his admonishment to the boy, the man let his own thoughts drift, as he continued to reassemble the weapon. Why did they come? It was a good question. Why do they all come when the treasures of this land are blood and rock? The Americans came because those fools from Saudi Arabia destroyed their buildings. But the others from the north came in my father’s time as well, with their tanks and killer helicopters. Their armored vehicles still lay rusting at the end of the runway below, he observed. The remnants had been dumped there when the Shuravi¹ had declared victory before fleeing north.

The red jackets came in my father’s grandfather’s time, he recalled. Through Khyber. Then, it was horses, cannons, and swords. They thought we were weak. Savages. They learned this is death’s garden. The outcome is always the same—broken armies praying to escape—only the uniforms change. These latest ones from America came first

¹ Dari for Soviets or Soviet soldiers.

with bombs and then tried sweet words. They would teach us how to live better. How to be like them. They shook the earth and blackened the sky with their kindness. Not like the ones when my father was young. There were no sweet words then. Obey or die. Perhaps they were more honest, he considered. They told you they were going to kill you and did it. These, these new ones, promise you peace, then they kill you anyway.

His memories carried him back to his home—the last place he had been truly happy. He remembered his mother making their evening meal over the fire. When he pestered her about when the food would be done, she would smack him lightly with her wooden spoon. “Get out of my kitchen, Muhammad,” she teased with a twinkle in her eye, as she squatted by the fire in their back yard. She had seen a picture of a kitchen in a magazine once and had adopted the strange word. There was the joyful face of his younger brother, Tamir, the last time he had seen him. The night before the wedding. His brother had been so happy and nervous—his entire life still before him. “What do I do with a woman as beautiful as Hadiya?” he had asked his older brother, as they climbed the rocky slope outside their village in Ghazni province.

“If you do not know yet, I have failed as a brother,” Muhammad laughed, as they approached a grove of gnarled apricot trees clinging to the hillside. *These trees were old when my father was a boy*, the older brother reflected, *and soon my brother’s sons will play beneath them.*

Their gathering was a modest one. The evening cooled as several other pairs of young men climbed the worn path to the orchard. Their village was a collection of several dozen mud homes scattered along a now abandoned trade route. It had once held importance as a caravan resting place, but now, if a truck came through once a week, it was big news. Muhammad, the bridegroom Tamir, and six of their childhood friends, were joining together one last time before the wedding to choose a sheep for the feast, and to sneak a drink of fermented peach juice away from the eyes of their village elders.

Each of them had spent many hours of their childhood in the shade beneath these trees, watching the animals of the village, serving as guardians against wild dogs and thieves from other villages. Now they were men, about to take their place as leaders in the community. Only their friend, Khalid, still lacked facial hair, a fact about which the others mercilessly taunted him. “Perhaps we can trim some wool from

the ass of this sheep,” Muhammad teased him, “to glue to your face with honey.” Khalid replied with the obligatory obscene gesture that inspired laughter amongst the group who had spent their youth listening to Khalid and Muhammed bicker.

The distant buzz of a passing aircraft did not even cause them to raise their eyes. There was an area over which the Afghan air force’s new A-29 Tucano aircraft frequently passed en route to Taliban targets further south. It was mere background noise to their daily lives, unimportant to those carving out a subsistence life in the rocky foothills. The active fighting was currently many days away. The war had left them alone thus far to eke out an existence not different from generations past. *Insh’allah*.

Above their gathering, the Afghan air force pilot, Major Tamaki, was having a bad day. Assigned to respond to an enemy ground attack upon a “critical supply intersection,” he had found the position deserted. He surveyed the area, circling ever lower in the propeller driven aircraft. The Tucano was designed for operations in the thin air of the mountains and was a symbol of growing military credibility to Afghanistan’s enemies, both internal and external.

Today’s mission was not going well, however. There was no enemy. No friendly forces. A wall of sandbags sat along a dirt road cutting through an empty patch of desert scrub. The road was controlled by a boom barrier, next to an empty flagpole. A makeshift wood hut completed the outpost. Abandoned. *I’m burning hundreds of liters in fuel, for what?* the major asked himself. He gestured to his wingman flying in a second Tucano that their mission was a bust.

The major knew what had happened without having seen it. It was now a weekly occurrence. Two or three Taliban likely fired on the government checkpoint from the relative safety of the rocks. The outpost was probably manned by a half-dozen paramilitary police. The police transmitted to their higher headquarters that they were fighting against overwhelming odds and then ran... or drove if there was an officer present... down the road, abandoning their post and its contents. Within minutes, the building had been picked clean of food, water, weapons, medical supplies, and anything else valuable to the insurgents. *To cover their cowardice, it’s then relayed to my operations center that this junction is under a major enemy attack, and here I am, flying above...nothing.*

The Interior Ministry's paramilitary forces claimed to operate checkpoints on highly trafficked routes to interdict Taliban supplies, but in fact did so as a vast extortion network, demanding bribes from passing civilians. Despite receiving millions in aid dollars from the United States, the paramilitary forces had little interest in becoming effective regional militias, actively combatting the Taliban. Theirs was a money-making operation, and revenue did not improve through firefights with the Taliban. Any local unwise enough to travel along a road controlled by the Ministry of Interior could expect to be detained and threatened until they paid a "toll" that went directly into the pockets of the police. To avoid such expensive humiliation, the locals preferred side routes through rougher terrain controlled by the Taliban, which was both safer and cheaper.

Major Tamaki knew this history and was not surprised to find a peaceful scene upon arrival over the target area. He radioed negative enemy contact to the air operations center located at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul. As often occurred when one mission aborted, Major Tamaki was diverted to a secondary target—suspected enemy caves near the Pakistani border. The fledgling Afghan air force had four Tucano aircraft to cover a territory roughly the size of the East Coast of the U.S., so every flight hour was precious.

The top priority for the Afghan Ministry of Defense was to convince their American sponsors to provide more planes, so returning from any mission without positive results was not an option. *"Metrics"—that was the funny word that the Americans loved so much, Tamaki recalled. As long as numbers on a page claimed that something was true, the Americans believed it. Afghans know all numbers lie—only that which you can see and touch and taste is real. The Americans are so naïve in that way, Tamaki marveled, it is remarkable they are so powerful.*

The operations officer transmitted a set of target coordinates the major instantly knew made no sense, as they identified a valley several dozen kilometers inside Pakistan. *They'd blame me for that mistake, and later deny giving the bad coordinates.* Tamaki responded to operations, "Karzai Three, perhaps we should refrain from bombing Pakistan today? Over." There was radio silence, as he imagined the operations team scrambling to re-check their coordinates under the watchful eye of an American advisor.

A different voice soon came on the frequency to transmit new coordinates to Tamaki and his wingman. *That is Captain Noyan*, the pilot recognized. *He is Hazara²—a reliable man—not like those Tajiks³ running the squadron.* “Acknowledged. Will comply, over.” Tamaki responded. The new target was ten kilometers inside the Afghanistan border, along a smuggling route frequently used by the Taliban. *Near*, but not in Pakistan. He would have to fly a tight pattern to not violate the border and excite the Mirage fighters flown by their despised neighbor.

After several minutes at maximum air speed, Major Tamaki approached the new coordinates. At twelve hundred meters over an austere land of sharp ridge lines and plunging desert valleys, barren to the eye except for wild goats and scrub brush, Tamaki saw no caves. He had known he would not. If they existed, they would be well camouflaged. Faint foot trails, mere scratches on the earth, were the only evidence of human presence. The major knew the enemy was likely watching him from below, but the war had not dragged on for fifteen years by the Taliban being foolish enough to reveal themselves to overhead aircraft.

Standing orders from his squadron commander were for pilots to drop their bomb load before returning to base, even when they did not see enemy activity. Dropping bombs ensured positive reports back to Washington and kept the flow of money and supplies open: the Americans assumed a dropped bomb reflected success against the enemy. Enemy casualty figures were always suspect, if not outright fiction, but the dropping of a bomb was a quantifiable event the Americans could add to the situation reports as evidence of operational success. *Metrics.*

But the major had grown weary of such games. *Too many years and too much death have haunted my country to play these paper games*, he had decided. “We will not bring peace to our people by moving some rocks,” he had argued to his commander when told of the new order.

² The Hazara are a major tribe of central Afghanistan who are frequently a target of ethnic discrimination.

³ Tajiks are the second largest ethnic tribal group in Afghanistan, after the Pashtuns. Tribal favoritism and prejudice played a significant role in personnel advancement and inefficiency in the Afghan security forces.

“You will do as ordered, major,” the commander hissed, “or I will find someone whose loyalty is not in question.” *The man’s smugness was all the more galling, Tamaki thought, as he gained his command only by being a cousin of the defense minister.*

Shaking off the memory, the major ground his teeth, as he scanned the empty terrain. It’s impossible to make out any trace of a cave in this area. This is all a game because the Americans are watching today. I’m through killing goats, he resolved, before radioing “negative contact,” a second time to the operations center. There was no response for several moments. “Return to base,” came the clipped response. With the American Air Force officer present in the tower, operations could not order him to dump his bomb load.

“Returning to base,” Tamaki radioed his reply.

“The Shah won’t like it,” warned his wing man, invoking the derogatory name they used for the squadron leader over their private channel. Tamaki ignored the comment and increased speed to gain altitude, his aircraft carving a broad arc back toward Kabul. *He’s right. The colonel will no doubt call my dedication into question again, he thought bitterly. He hates me because my family is Hazara. Tamaki felt anger building in his gut. He doesn’t think I deserve to fly in his squadron. Let that fat fool fly these missions. He wouldn’t last a day. Minutes blurred as Tamaki stewed in the unfairness of his situation. He was cornered into either being a liar or sacked for being disloyal. His mood sank as he pondered, what will my family do if I lose my flight slot? We need the money.*

The clouds were turning orange and purple as the sun dipped toward the horizon. Nearby peaks were casting long shadows across the terrain as the countryside embraced the coming evening. The drone of his engine lulled the major into a trance, as he had little to do until he neared Kabul.

Tracer fire on a hill to his left, barely visible below his wing, brought Tamaki out of his reverie. Bright sparks stuttered across the blue-gray shadows of the ravines. *Had he imagined it? No.* A second weapon joined—no mistake—a reddish flash distinct near a small cluster of buildings stretching along a roadside.

In the ancient apricot grove below, Muhammad admonished his companions. “Do not waste your ammunition in celebratory fire yet,

my friends. He has to bag his prey before the hunt is over, and he is so ugly that she may well come to her senses before the deed is done.” The group cackled in appreciation at the insult, the skin of forbidden alcohol passing quickly between the men. Muhammad sat down at the base of his favorite tree. “Maybe she...” Muhammed began another joke, choking on the rough liquor, as Khalid let loose another burst of fire into the air.

The evening erupted into searing light and shattering blast as a high explosive bomb struck ten meters up the slope from the young men. Death was immediate, as brains liquified and steel splinters twisted joints apart, sculpting the remnants into unnatural heaps of burnt flesh. Only Muhammad, who fortune had placed against the far side of the ancient tree, was the unfortunate survivor. His tortured screams eventually brought the villagers out of the holes into which they fled when the bomb struck. His uncle found Muhammad pinned under a large branch with both arms and legs broken, his crushed left eye dangling from its socket. Burns, already swollen, covered his face and hands. A village elder stuffed a dirty rag into Muhammad’s mouth to muffle his screams, as several older men worked to lift the branch. Tamir and his friends were a dark smear across the face of the slope, indistinguishable one from another.

“Karzai Three” the Major transmitted, working to keep his voice devoid of emotion, “Tocano One reporting enemy contact.” He paused to slow his breathing from the adrenalin. “Direct hit on enemy ground formation seeking to infiltrate critical village intersection. Estimate twelve enemy KIA. Grid to follow...” *There will be no lecture from the colonel tonight, Tamaki smiled to himself, and the Americans will be pleased.*



“Look!” the boy’s excited voice snapped him out of his memories. The horror of the grove receded. Muhammad was back above the airfield. Somehow the American rifle had reassembled itself. “One of their helicopters has crashed at the edge of the airfield,” the boy exclaimed. “It’s on fire.” The faint sound of sirens echoed in confirmation.

“Good,” Muhammad whispered, quickly wiping his one good eye with a shaking hand before the boy could notice. “Let them all die.”