

Marjan's Tooth

by Tom Maremaa

You are a Sufi when your heart is as soft and warm as wool.

~ A traditional Sufi saying

1. *Reaching Our Destination At Last*

The plane landed hard and we bounced up and down on the short runway, peeling rubber, engines roaring in reverse, until we finally came to a complete, screaming halt. My head lunged forward, then recoiled. Everybody bolted awake from the dead of night. We had reached our destination, as planned. I stood up, stretching my arms and legs, then grabbed my duffel bag from the overhead rack and threw it over my shoulder.

Leaving the plane on the way out, I saluted and thanked the captain for bringing us here safely; he smiled and wished us luck because, as he said, we were "sure to need it." When my feet touched the ground on the tarmac at Bagram I cannot begin to describe the feeling I had. It was as if God had spoken to me directly, whispering in the cold mountain air: "Son of Marjan, I welcome you." The feeling took hold and overcame my body, causing me to tremble and shake in my boots. I had come home, at last.

To the land of my ancestors. This is where my father, a warrior in the armies of the Northern Alliance, had conceived me, before his death at the hands of the Taliban; where my mother, a United Nations aide worker in her prime, had fled to Germany and given birth to me. She had named me Marjan, after my father and in honor of the great lion in the Kabul zoo who had suffered brutally because of the Taliban's pathological hatred and neglect of all animals. The feeling abated for a moment and, looking upward at the spectacle of the snow-capped mountains and valley beyond Bagram, I stopped in my tracks, unable to move. I thought of my father and mother and resolved, in whatever way I could, to honor their memories, fulfill the promise each had had for me. "This is about justice," I heard my

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father's distant voice, from another life, coiled in my ear. "Never forget that."

We were greeted by a phalanx of Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps soldiers, most in uniform, some not. A few bothered to salute while others threw their arms around us and gave us big hugs and pats on the back. Loaded up with duffel bags and other gear, we were a motley crew, all right: First Lieutenant Stinger and Colonel Bridgewater, gruff and bearded, wearing *pakol* hats like Massoud, and heavy black wool coats, breathing the cool mountain air; Dr. Mike (I can't tell you his last name), our Special Forces doctor with his medical bag of tricks strapped over his shoulder; the others in our crew whose names I also cannot reveal, except for Alexie Wild Horse, the Native American woman warrior and hunter who must be remembered. Most of us were, in one strange way or another, coming home to this adopted and dangerous land, many returning now for the third or fourth time, having begged and pleaded for another tour of duty, Stinger had said proudly. Colonel Bridgewater had been here a number of times before, he had told me, the first being some twenty years earlier when Special Forces were sent to fight the Soviets and supply the mujahedeen with the caches of weapons they needed, as well as ground tactical support. He certainly knew a thing or two about guerrilla warfare, to say the least.

At Bagram we were taken to a makeshift building and told to prepare for a debriefing. The sun was coming up slowly; early dawn in the land of my ancestors. Without doubt, our crew was feeling the effects of jet lag, having been delayed in Germany, then having crisscrossed the continent in the dead of night, but no man among us dared to show any visible signs when the commanding officer, wearing an Afghan kerchief around his neck and protruding Adam's apple, one of these striped *deshmals*, stepped in and went to the chalkboard. I still cannot remember his name but he knew everything about our mission, down to the last detail, with assignments committed to memory for each man. Four weeks of

hard work lay ahead of us until March 21st, the first day of spring, the beginning of the new year for Afghans, and every day had been precisely mapped out in a timeline that was as near to perfection as possible. The first week involved acclimation, the second meeting with tribal elders, the third moving by convoy into the mountains, and the fourth—the final assault in Operation Marjan's Tooth. Three days were to be spent in one village in the north, another three farther up the mountains, and the remaining days on our own, with minimal support and radio contact, until the fateful first day of spring arrived, and the exact position was determined for the air strikes to come.

The commanding officer, a small man with rosy cheeks and a black patch over one eye, pointed to the map on the board and delivered his message in a thunderous roar: “Men, listen up! You know why you're here. Let me tell you one thing, if you didn't know already. This is all for the love of God and country, for which there is no greater love.”

Our heads sunk in prayer and a deafening silence came over us. In my heart I knew, as I my father had whispered, this was as much about justice as it was about God and country. Massoud, the charismatic leader of the Northern Alliance, the man who was known as the lion of Panjshir, had lost his life to those who had subverted the word of God for their own diabolical ends, and the Afghan people had lost a leader they deserved after twenty years of war, a leader who would rebuild the country and restore its greatness. We would avenge his death.

The meeting adjourned in less than an hour. Each of us knew our assignments cold. We were ready for the hunt, as ready as we would ever be, I thought to myself.

“Be safe,” said the commanding officer, his eyes cold and detached, “but—if necessary—*be lethal.*”

2. To Defeat The Insurgency

Inside Bagram, I was taken to a place called Camp Vance, where only men and women who are part of Special Forces are allowed. The camp was named in honor after Gene Vance, a Special Forces sergeant who died in action in May, 2002.

I was introduced to Colonel James Hansen, the Army commander in charge of the Special Forces in Afghanistan. His job was to run the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force. He was wearing an Afghan *pakol* hat, camouflage pants and packing a Beretta while talking to a woman reporter from CNN, explaining the mission:

“Our job is to root the enemy out of Afghanistan's cities and villages,” he was saying. “Yet equally important, we must win the hearts and minds of the people who live in them. This is a classic counterinsurgency campaign. We go for surgical operations rather than bombing strikes and heavy fighting. Kicking in doors as we go after suspected terrorists isn't always the best use of our time and resources, although our men will do it when necessary, if we have to ferret out the remnants of al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters. We operate in 12-man teams called operational detachment alphas. At the same time, we work to become part of the community.

“We undertake seemingly small projects, such as rebuilding a crumbling wall at a school or building a playground. Officers are authorized to draw \$30,000 at a time for such work, which they say goes a long way toward building confidence with the Afghans.

“You have to respect the locals, respect their language and customs.”

He stopped for a moment and welcomed me: “Marjan, this is truly an honor. Like Colonel Bridgewater, I knew your father well. He was a good man, a noble man. I am sure you are every bit the man he was, and will serve your country well.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied with a sharp salute.

The CNN reporter looked at me and recoiled in fear, as my size and presence overwhelmed her. “Who is he?” she stuttered. “Where does he come from?”

"I am not at liberty to say," replied the Colonel. "And I must demand that you make no mention of him in your reporting on the war. Do I make myself clear?"

"Of course," said the woman reporter with a smile on her sunburned face. "But wait a minute. I think I know who he is. Yes."

"So you know?"

"The son of a general in Massoud's army. I interviewed the father before his death. The son looks exactly like him."

"No comment."

"With all do respect, sir, you must promise me that once the mission is complete I can have unfettered access to him. This is incredible. I mean, your having the son of Marjan, whose father fought alongside Massoud in the Northern Alliance, come to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban and al-Qaeda."

"What was I saying about winning hearts and minds? We understand this fully and have taken the necessary steps in preparing the son of Marjan for his mission," he said, trying somehow to change the subject. "Is that not right?"

"Understood, sir," I said, and then, as if to blow away the CNN reporter, I let out a fierce roar from the depths of my gut, "Yes, sir! That is correct, sir!" Which shook the walls of my commander's headquarters, making the CNN reporter run momentarily for cover. When she returned, he continued with the interview:

"Even after the Taliban, Afghanistan remains a traditional Islamic society. The religion encourages Muslim men to grow beards, and many U.S. commandos forsake shaving to fit in better. The practice is not popular at the Pentagon, where senior officers complain it violates the Army's strict grooming standards.

"Each alpha detachment has several interpreters, but the commandos work to learn the basics of Pashto and Dari, the most commonly spoken languages here. When invited, we attend weddings or banquets. When greeting the village elders, we put our right hand to our heart, a sign of respect. The strategy is straightforward. Create trust and information will follow.

“Much work remains to be done,” he shook his head as the CNN reporter scrambled with her camera crew to record his every word. “Many Taliban and al-Qaeda are hiding across the border in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Area, a region we don't have the authority to hunt in. The tribal area is a problem, we know that. But as the Afghan National Army grows it will be able to provide better border security. Of that, we're confident. Ultimately, we will defeat this insurgency.”

After the CNN reporter had left with her camera crew, he confided in me: “Pakistan is the real enemy. You know that, don't you? Waziristan is bad, lots of Talibs and al-Qaeda remnants regrouping. We've got to win the support of the warlords and provincial governors. They'll respect you when you're introduced to them, when you sit down for tea and opium and kebabs. You carry a lot of goodwill around with you, Marjan, owing to your father's heroic legacy, and that's something we're in short supply of right now. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, listening closely to the words of the commander.

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