

Tom
Clancy



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of the
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For Colonel and Mrs. F. Carter Cobb

. . . Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O, no! it is an ever-fixèd mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken; . . .
Sonnet 116
William Shakespeare

[T]he operations of spies, saboteurs and secret agents are generally regarded as outside the scope of national and international law. They are therefore anathema to all accepted standards of conduct. Nevertheless history shows that no nation will shrink from such activities if they further its vital interests.

—Field Marshal Viscount
Montgomery of Alamein

The difference between a good man and a bad one is the choice of cause.

—William James

Prologue:

Threats—Old, New, and Timeless

THEY called him the Archer. It was an honorable title, though his countrymen had cast aside their reflex bows over a century before, as soon as they had learned about firearms. In part, the name reflected the timeless nature of the struggle. The first of the Western invaders—for that was how they thought of them—had been Alexander the Great, and more had followed since. Ultimately, all had failed. The Afghan tribesmen held their Islamic faith as the reason for their resistance, but the obstinate courage of these men was as much a part of their racial heritage as their dark pitiless eyes.

The Archer was a young man, and an old one. On those occasions that he had both the desire and opportunity to bathe in a mountain stream, anyone could see the youthful muscles on his thirty-year-old body. They were the smooth muscles of one for whom a thousand-foot climb over bare rock was as unremarkable a part of life as a stroll to the mailbox.

It was his eyes that were old. The Afghans are a handsome people whose forthright features and fair skin suffer quickly from wind and sun and dust, too often making them older than their years. For the Archer, the damage had not been done by wind. A teacher of mathematics until three years before, a college graduate in a country where most deemed it enough to be able to read the holy Koran, he'd married young, as was the custom in his land, and fathered two children. But his wife and daughter were dead, killed by rockets fired from a Sukhoi-24 attack-fighter. His son was gone. Kidnapped.

After the Soviets had flattened the village of his wife's family with air power, their ground troops had come, killing the remaining adults and sweeping up all the orphans for shipment to the Soviet Union, where they would be educated and trained in other modern ways. All because his wife had wanted her mother to see the grandchildren before she died, the Archer remembered, all because a Soviet patrol had been fired upon a few kilometers

from the village. On the day he'd learned this—a week after it had actually happened—the teacher of algebra and geometry had neatly stacked the books on his desk and walked out of the small town of Ghazni into the hills. A week later he'd returned to the town after dark with three other men and proved that he was worthy of his heritage by killing three Soviet soldiers and taking their arms. He still carried that first Kalashnikov.

But that was not why he was known as the Archer. The chief of his little band of *mudjaheddin*—the name meant "Freedom Fighter"—was a perceptive leader who did not look down upon the new arrival who'd spent his youth in classrooms, learning foreign ways. Nor did he hold the young man's initial lack of faith against him. When the teacher joined the group, he'd had only the most cursory knowledge of Islam and the headman remembered the bitter tears falling like rain from the young man's eyes as their imam had counseled him in Allah's will. Within a month he'd become the most ruthless—and most effective—man in the band, clearly an expression of God's own plan. And it was he whom the leader had chosen to travel to Pakistan, where he could use his knowledge of science and numbers to learn the use of surface-to-air missiles. The first SAMs with which the quiet, serious man from *Amerikastan* had equipped the *mudjaheddin* had been the Soviets' own SA-7, known by the Russians as *strela*, "arrow." The first "man-portable" SAM, it was not overly effective unless used with great skill. Only a few had such skill. Among them the arithmetic teacher was the best, as for his successes with the Russian "arrows," the men in the group took to calling him the Archer.

He waited with a new missile at the moment, the American one called Stinger, but all of the surface-to-air missiles in the group—indeed, throughout the whole area—were merely creak arrows now: tools for the Archer. He lay on the knife-edge of a ridge, a hundred meters below the summit of the hill from which he could survey the length of a glacial valley. Beside him was his spotter, Abdul. The name appropriately meant "servant," since the teenager carried two additional missiles for his launcher and, more importantly, had the eyes of a falcon. They were burning eyes. He was an orphan.

The Archer's eyes searched the mountainous terrain, especially the ridgelines, with an expression that reflected a millennium of combat. A serious man, the Archer. Though friendly enough, he was rarely seen to smile; he showed no interest in a new bride, not even to join his lonely grief

to that of a newly made widow. His life had room for but a single passion.

"There," Abdul said quietly, pointing.

"I see it."

The battle on the valley floor—one of several that day— had been under way for thirty minutes, about the proper time for the Soviet soldiers to get support from their helicopter base twenty kilometers over the next line of mountains. The sun glinted briefly off the Mi-24's glass-covered nose, enough for them to see it, ten miles off, skirting over the ridgeline. Farther overhead, and well beyond his reach, circled a single Antonov-26 twin-engine transport. It was filled with observation equipment and radios to coordinate the ground and air action. But the Archer's eyes followed only the Mi-24, a Hind attack helicopter loaded with rockets and cannon shells that even now was getting information from the circling command aircraft.

The Stinger had come as a rude surprise to the Russians, and their air tactics were changing on a daily basis as they struggled to come to terms with the new threat. The valley was deep, but more narrow than the rule. For the pilot to hit the Archer's fellow guerrillas, he had to come straight down the rocky avenue. He'd stay high, at least a thousand meters over the rocky floor for fear that a Stinger team might be down there with the riflemen. The Archer watched the helicopter zigzag in flight as the pilot surveyed the land and chose his path. As expected, the pilot approached from leeward so that the wind would delay the sound of his rotor for the few extra seconds that might be crucial. The radio in the circling transport would be tuned to the frequencies known to be used by the *mudjaheddin* so that the Russians could detect a warning of its approach, and also an indication where the missile team might be. Abdul did indeed carry a radio, switched off and tucked in the folds of his clothing.

Slowly, the Archer raised the launcher and trained its two-element sight on the approaching helicopter. His thumb went sideways and down on the activation switch, and he nestled his cheekbone on the conductance bar. He was instantly rewarded with the warbling screech of the launcher's seeker unit. The pilot had made his assessment, and his decision. He came down the far side of the valley, just beyond missile range, for his first firing run. The Hind's nose was down, and the gunner, sitting in his seat in front of and slightly below the pilot, was training his sights on the area where the fighters were. Smoke appeared on the valley floor. The Soviets used mortar shells to indicate where their tormentors were, and the helicopter altered course

slightly. It was almost time. Flames shot out of the helicopter's rocket pods, and the first salvo of ordnance streaked downward.

Then another smoke trail came *up*. The helicopter lurched left as the smoke raced into the sky, well clear of the Hind, but still a positive indication of danger ahead; or so the pilot thought. The Archer's hands tightened on the launcher. The helicopter was sideslipping right at him now, expanding around the inner ring of the sight. It was now in range. The Archer punched the forward button with his left thumb, "uncaging"; the missile and giving the infrared seeker-head on the Stinger its first look at the heat radiating from the Mi-24's turboshaft engines. The sound carried through his cheekbone into his ear changed. The missile was now tracking the target. The Hind's pilot decided to hit the area from which the "missile" had been launched at him, bringing the aircraft farther left, and turning slightly. Unwittingly, he turned his jet exhaust,, almost right at the Archer as he warily surveyed the rocks I from which the rocket had come.

The missile screamed its readiness at the Archer now, but still he was patient. He put his mind into that of his target, and judged that the pilot would come closer still before his helicopter had the shot he wanted at the hated Afghans. And so he did. When the Hind was only a thousand meters off, the Archer took a deep breath, superelevated his sight, and whispered a brief prayer of vengeance. The trigger was pulled almost of its own accord.

The launcher bucked in his hands as the Stinger looped slightly upward before dropping down to home on its target. The Archer's eyes were sharp enough to see it despite the almost invisible smoke trail it left behind. The missile deployed its maneuvering fins, and these moved a few fractions of a millimeter in obedience to the orders generated by its computer brain—a microchip the size of a postage stamp. Aloft in the circling An-26, an observer saw a tiny puff of dust and began to reach for a microphone to relay a warning, but his hand had barely touched the plastic instrument before the missile struck.

The missile ran directly into one of the helicopter's engines and exploded. The helicopter was crippled instantly. The driveshaft for the tail rotor was cut, and the Hind began spinning violently to the left while the pilot tried to autorotate the aircraft down, frantically looking for a flat place while his gunner radioed a shrill call for rescue. The pilot brought the engine to idle, unloading his collective to control torque, locked his eyes on a flat space the size of a tennis court, then cut his switches and activated the onboard

extinguishing system. Like most fliers he feared fire above all things, though he would learn the error soon enough.

The Archer watched the Mi-24 hit nose-down on a rocky ledge five hundred feet below his perch. Surprisingly, it didn't burn as the aircraft came apart. The helicopter cartwheeled viciously, the tail whipping forward and over the nose before it came to rest on its side. The Archer raced down the hill with Abdul right behind. It took five minutes.

The pilot fought with his straps as he hung upside down. He was in pain, but he knew that only the living felt pain. The new model helicopter had had improved safety systems built in. Between those and his own skill he'd survived the crash. Not his gunner, he noticed briefly. The man in front hung motionless, his neck broken, his hands limply reaching for the ground. The pilot had no time for that. His seat was bent, and the chopper's canopy had shattered, its metal frame now a prison for the flyer. The emergency release latch was jammed, the explosive release bolts unwilling to fire. He took his pistol from the shoulder holster and started blasting at the metal framework, one piece at a time. He wondered if the An-26 had gotten the emergency call. Wondered if the rescue helicopter at his base was on the way. His rescue radio was in a pants pocket, and he'd activate it as soon as he got away from his broken bird. The pilot cut his hands to ribbons as he prised the metal away, giving himself a clear path out. He thanked his luck again that he was not ending his life in a pillar of greasy smoke as he released his straps and climbed out of the aircraft to the rocky ground.

His left leg was broken. The jagged end of a white bone stuck clear of his flight suit; though he was too deeply in shock to feel it, the sight of the injury horrified him. He holstered his empty pistol and grabbed a loose piece of metal to serve as a cane. He had to get away. He hobbled to the far end of the ledge and saw a path. It was three kilometers to friendly forces. He was about to start down when he heard something and turned. Hope changed to horror in an instant, and the pilot realized that a fiery death would have been a blessing.

The Archer blessed Allah's name as he withdrew his knife from its sheath.

There couldn't be much left of her, Ryan thought. The hull was mainly intact—at least superficially—but you could see the rough surgery made by the welders as clearly as the stitches made on Frankenstein's monster. An apt-enough comparison, he thought silently. Man had made these things, but they