

THE CORRIDOR

(A ZOMBIE NOVELLA)

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INTRODUCTION

ON MAY 11, 2007 A POWERFUL BLAST LEVELED A REMOTE valley in north-eastern Afghanistan. The blast radius and intensity were the equivalent of a small nuclear device, destroying an area roughly the size of a small city. The incident barely registered on the international media circuit.

The Afghan government and ISAF issued a joint statement saying that a meteoroid fragment had disintegrated in the skies over an isolated valley in the Badakhshan province, setting off “minor fireworks”. There was “no loss of life or property” since the area was completely uninhabited the statement claimed. Officially, that was the end of the matter.

Of course, the Internet was rife with conspiracy theories and speculations, but none of them even came close to approaching the truth.

Until late 2007, I worked as a Human Rights Officer for the United Nations in Peshawar, Pakistan. What you are about to read are edited transcripts from the audio-log of a private security contractor named Alan Baker, combined with an eyewitness account of the only known survivor of the incident — a young Pashtun girl named Maha Gul Afridi.

As you will discover, the ISAF statement was a blatant lie, designed to cover up an atrocity that surpasses the boundaries of conventional war crimes and human rights violations.

I have been firmly told that the recordings and eyewitness testimony are an elaborate hoax meant to derail the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. However, based on the information and evidence that I collected, I am convinced otherwise.

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Not surprisingly, I have paid a heavy price for my conviction and persistence in this matter. My once promising career has been completely destroyed and I stand accused of criminal charges for corruption and mismanagement of funds.

While it is impossible to reclaim my old life, I can still salvage some semblance of normalcy by recanting my allegations and agreeing to certain terms. As tempting as that thought can sometimes be, I made a promise to a courageous young woman... a promise that I intend to keep.

**-ALAN BAKER'S AUDIO LOG,
TRANSCRIPT 1 BEGINS: MAY 8, 2007-**



IF YOU LOOK AT THE MAP OF AFGHANISTAN, YOU WILL notice a tiny wedge of land, much like a crooked finger, sticking out from the north-east corner of the country. This is the Wakhan Corridor. Bordered by Tajikistan on the north, China on the east, and Pakistan on the south, this cartographic abnormality does not make much sense. One is left wondering about the sanity of the men who drew up the boundaries, especially when you consider the otherwise cohesive form of the country.

Officially, the Wakhan Corridor is part of the Badakhshan province. In reality, it lacks any real form of governance and the tiny population leads an autonomous, albeit difficult existence. Most of the inhabitants are ethnic Wakhis with a

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minority of Pashtuns in the mix however, the Pashtu language is widely understood.

The terrain is rugged and harsh, with a series of densely forested hills and valleys. There are hardly any paved roads and travelling is mostly done on foot or on horseback, where possible.

Electricity and running water are unheard of. Essentially, the people of this region continue to live the way their ancestors did centuries ago.

The area lacks any valuable natural resources or strategic importance, which is why none of the surrounding countries ever tried to swallow it up. The corridor stretches for about 200 miles and has an estimated population of 10,000. The residents mainly survive by herding livestock and growing a small number of crops on terraced farms carved out on hillsides.

It's amazing how much you can learn about virtually any place through the Internet, not that any of this information is particularly important to our objective.

We are currently staying at a 'guest house' in Sost, a small town in north-western Pakistan. A guest house is the local equivalent of a motel. This particular one was built back in the late 1800s by the British and it's surprisingly well-kept. In a town this small, we were lucky to find anything half-decent. Then again, none of us are really the Ritz-Carlton type.

I can see the Hindu Kush from the porch outside my room, rising like giant walls of granite from the earth and towering in the brilliant blue skies above. They are strangely beautiful and intimidating at the same time.

Our unit is made up of six people, all ex-military. We're trying to keep a low profile until our contact finalizes arrangements for us to slip across the border into Afghanistan. But even with native clothes and scruffy beards, it's hard not to get noticed, especially since I'm the only one who speaks the local language.

We've been in Sost for two days now, much longer than expected and I can tell everyone is getting restless. Colonel Sher Jan, our Pakistani contact visits every evening and assures us that things are under control. He claims that it's just taking a little longer than expected to negotiate bribes with local officials to ensure a smooth ride for us to the Afghan border.

We have little choice but to wait. While this part of Pakistan is not particularly dangerous in terms of Taliban or Al Qaeda presence, it's still closely monitored by Pakistani intelligence because of the proximity to the border. Six foreigners without the required travel documents would not sit well with Pakistani authorities, particularly the army, which mostly controls security in this region.

Colonel Sher Jan works for the ISI, Pakistan's notorious spy-agency. Our reason for being here is based on his information. He's a hardened operative who has been in the game since the late days of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. His regional network is widespread and his contacts with western intelligence agencies go way back.

Based on his track record, he's a pretty trustworthy guy, but these days it's hard to completely trust an ISI-man, considering many of them openly sympathize with certain Taliban elements.

Still, given the information he provided, it was impossible to pass up this opportunity. If all goes well, each one of us and the small defense company that we work for could end up with pretty hefty rewards.

Officially, men like us are called private security contractors. We've stirred up quite a few controversies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and back home in the States. Many people argue that we are nothing more than highly paid mercenaries, hired to do what the military cannot or will not do.

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Personally, I think we are just regular guys — some with families — trying to make a living. Sure we get paid a lot and we can sometimes get trigger happy, but considering the hostile environments we operate in, some might say it's understandable.

I've never kept a journal or log before, and I'm sure the suits back at corporate wouldn't be too happy about one of their grunts keeping any type of record about an operation. Once you're out in the field though, the suits and their rules really don't matter — everything is flexible.

Of course, my teammates noticed my little project and our unit leader had a brief chat with me about it. If I recall correctly, his exact words were, "I don't have a problem with you playing captain fucking Kirk, just as long as it doesn't get in the way of what we're here to do."

He's a good man, Major Walsh, former Army Special Forces from what I've heard. This is my first time working with him and he has a reputation of running a tight ship. The rest of these guys are ex-Marines, except for Ben Cohn, a former Israeli commando and the only foreign guy on our crew. That makes me the only infantry man in this unit and also the guy with the least combat experience. Then again, I was mainly selected for this job because of my language skills.

I don't know why I'm spending time recording my thoughts. Maybe I can get a book deal out of this one day. Hell, there's nothing wrong with a little day dreaming. Speaking of deals, I should probably talk about why we are here, in the middle of nowhere, in the first place.

Two weeks ago, I got pulled off a deployment in Afghanistan and found myself on a plane to Washington, DC. I was in a conference room at our corporate office the next morning, awkwardly sitting around a mahogany table with five other men who were just as clueless as me.