

By Wayne Halm

Introduction

Mark Case sipped his coffee and smiled, he was in the field again - reporters should be in the field. For nearly a year he had sat in Kabul passing on military and official press releases - and hating ever minute of it. But now he was out searching for his own story, the way it should be.

People in Kabul told stories, near legends actually, of "The Roses of Jabar" and their clinic. Since he knew The Roses personally, Mark decided to begin his search there. Two days of bouncing over Afghan roads, one tense late night arrival, and he was here - the search was on and he was enjoying it.

Mark blew steam from his coffee and gazed out the window, immediately outside was a kind of courtyard - across it, the road - beyond that, the desert, and distantly, the mountains. All were muted shades of brown in the dull dawn light, the sun had yet to drive the night chill away and all was quiet

Even inside the chill lingered. He wrapped both hands around the warm coffee mug and studied the room.

Practical, functional, and sensible were words that jumped into this mind. The room, perhaps 12 by 12 was the kitchen and dining room for the clinic just down the hall. It was a mixture of Afghan and American held together by some down right clever southern engineering he thought.

The walls were Afghan brick, perhaps ten years old, perhaps a hundred, or perhaps a thousand - Afghan brick didn't change very much. In the bricks opposite the window was a noticeable pit. The kind made by a bullet, he judged. The walls were painted with a thick beige latex paint, effectively sealing the natural brick from the sanitized inside.

The ceiling was made of corrugated roofing tin. Odd to see it on the inside and it was not pretty, but he could see how it formed a practical dust proof, bug proof, and germ proof barrier. The seams at the walls were sealed with a thick bead of brilliant white caulk.

The floor looked to be painted cement, but he suspected it to be packed Afghan clay, almost as

hard. A coat of brown paint sensibly sealed it, patches of fresh paint resealed the worn spots.

Already a big stainless steel soup pot bubbled on the stove, it stirred his appetite. The propane stove, the sink, and the plumbing were also stainless steel and spotless.

The wooden table where he sat was an unusual shade of gray. Bleached, he decided, not by the sun but by a daily scrubbing with Clorox. He could faintly smell it.

Maybe not up to big city hospital standards, he thought, but not far short either. He was impressed.

Chapter One

Mark stood as Dr. Claire Barker entered the kitchen. She wore limp faded khaki pants and a matching shirt. Her flaming red hair was captured back in a pony tail but a few strands escaped to hang about her ears and face. Her pale face contrasted sharply with the red hair and highlighted the even paler scar on her right cheek.

"Morning Mark, you're up early", Claire said, "Coffee, let me get some coffee".

"It's pretty good. Who makes it?", Mark asked.

"Paul does. He's up before daylight and really gets most things done around here", Claire replied and sat across from him with her cup.

"Is this his handiwork?", Mark asked and gestured to the room.

"Yeah, all his. The rest of us pitched in when he needed somebody to hold the other end of something, but really he did it all. The UN rejecting his application to work with Barbie was the best thing that happened around here in a long time. Right now he has most of the village digging a new well or something - he feeds them lunch everyday from that pot. Sometimes I think the better diet does as much good as all of this", she said and waved to the clinic. "But what brings you here Mark?", she asked.

"The Roses of Jabar. It's a growing legend and I came to find out about it", he answered. "They call you the Red Rose and Julie the Little Rose. How did this rose thing get started?", he asked.

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A small, amused, and decidedly mischievous smile flashed onto Claire's face. "Maybe", she said pointing at her hair. When Mark was looking at her hair she added, "Or maybe", then stood and pulled down her pants to reveal a tattoo of a red rose on her buttock.

"Claire", was all Mark could manage to say. His face started turning pink.

Claire laughed, pulled up her pants and sat back down.

"I'm not going to ask if Julie has one of those too" he said. His blush was in full bloom.

"She doesn't - she has sharp thorns", Claire replied still clearly amused.

"Am I the only one in Afghanistan that didn't know about that tattoo?", Mark asked, the reporter was taking over again and the blush fading.

"Secrets are hard to keep around here and word travels fast. You'll see", Claire replied.

"Well things certainly are different here", Mark said.

"Oh? How so?", Claire asked acting innocent.

"For one thing women don't pull down their pants in public in Kabul. Then there's the red tape, everything has to be approved by a dozen people. Here you're your own boss. I counted, eleven of your twelve beds are occupied, Barbara can't even admit patients, most of the beds are reserved for emergencies. It's driving her up the wall", Mark said.

"Barbie always plays by the rules, even when she doesn't like them. There aren't many rules here, but I'm not sure she would like it any better. Here we both treat patients and defend them. Julie and I keep AK-47s in the clinic" Claire said.

"Wait! You and Julie have assault rifles?", Mark interrupted.

"We have to, three times raiding parties have come down out of the mountains, Tom and Khan drove them off each time but people were killed", Claire said.

"You mean you grab your rifle and run to the windows?", Mark asked.

"Exactly, no one has gotten close to the building yet, Khan's men are pretty ruthless, but it could happen", Claire responded.

Mark pointed to the pit in the wall and raised his eyebrow. "Well, once", Claire admitted, "But he only managed that one shot".

"I had no idea it was so dangerous. We don't hear any of this stuff in town. Damned. The kids, how are they handling it?", Mark asked.

"Paul and Julie? They're fine, Sweat, you'll meet him today, gave them some training, they are both crack shots now. They act like everything is normal. It's touching to see them walk down the street holding hands, with assault rifles slung over their shoulders. Their grandkids are going to hear some stories", Claire said.

"And you Claire? That scar wasn't there last time I saw you. Barbara and I worry about you", Mark said.

"Mark, out here life can be hard, cruel things do happen. Two months ago I treated a man who had been tortured by a Warlord, he used scorpions, the next month the Warlord was killed. The old, an eye for an eye, runs deep here. However I save eyes, so I'm not in much danger. Besides I've got Tom, Khan, and Sweat protecting me, I'm as safe as an army general. But tell me about Barbie, what's she been doing?", Claire responded.

Chapter Two

Rufus was driving the Duce-n-half and watching the countryside. Sweat was watching the countryside intently. They were headed east with the flat desert floor to the south and a ridge line to the north. Six miles from the C Company area, six more to Nabadar, twelve after that to Shelar, then twenty to Jabar. They would overnight in Jabar.

From over the ridge line a Blackhawk helicopter roared. It came down the hill and directly over them at 50 feet.

"What the hell is he doing?", Rufus asked.

"He's either trying to get killed or just stuck on stupid", Sweat answered.

Sweat turned and watched the helicopter sail out over the desert. He actually saw the smoke trail of the surface to air missile rise up and hit it. The pilot turned it north and flew ever lower as black smoke poured out of the crippled machine.

"Just stupid", Sweat growled. He pointed to the smoking helicopter. "Let's get out there boy", he said.

"Shit. What happened?", Rufus asked and turned the truck off the road.

"SAM got him. He's going down and the shooters will be after them. We've got to hurry", Sweat answered and pulled his M-16 across his lap with his left hand. He held on with his right.

The Blackhawk flew another two miles before hitting the ground in a rough but controlled landing. Dust and smoke clearly marked the site.

"Hurry", urged Sweat.

Rufus drove at nearly 50 miles per hour across the desert, pulling a cloud of dust visible for miles. The bone jarring, teeth rattling impacts with rocks, holes and stream beds would have stopped a lesser truck cold, but the Duce-n-half roared on.

"There", Sweat yelled to Rufus. He pointed at four men running away from the burning helicopter. The one in the lead was shorter and rounder - he stopped occasionally to urge the others on, the next was taller and carried a radio - he waved a pistol around carelessly, the last two, one limping, carried a wounded man between them.

Rufus locked the brakes and the truck skid to a halt. Sweat yelled, "Get in, get in, move, move, move". He began firing three round bursts back in a northwesterly direction. The gunfire added to the sense of urgency, within ten seconds the first two men were in the back of the truck.

The taller one, a Captain, stuck his head through the rear window. His eyes were wild, he waved the pistol recklessly and yelled, "Go, go, go". Sweat held up his hand to Rufus until the other three men were aboard, then calmly said, "Go".

The truck roared off to the east. For fifteen minutes it bounced through the desert before returning to the road. At the road Rufus yelled to Sweat, "Which way?"

"Jabar, and hurry we've got wounded", Sweat yelled back.

On the road the ride got smoother. The shorter rounder one, a General, stuck his head through the rear window, "Where are we going soldier?", he demanded of Sweat.

"Jabar sir. There are some doctors there and the bad guys are between us and C Company", Sweat replied.

"Private, Take us to Jabar, and hurry", the General ordered Rufus.

Chapter Three

Claire looked out the kitchen window when she heard Sweat's truck grind to a stop. She watched Sweat and Khan pull an unconscious man out of the back, rushed into the clinic, and held the door open.

"Put him over there on the exam table", she directed as they came in, "You, over there", she pointed out a chair for a limping man. "Julie, I need you", she yelled.

The General and Captain followed them in, Mark watched from the kitchen door.

"This will do", the General announced to the Captain. "Get my radio set up over there, and get these people out of here", he ordered indicating the patients in the beds.

"Sweat, get these two characters out of here", Claire said and turned to the exam table.

"I'm in charge here", the General roared. "Captain, get these people out of here and little miss, do what you can for that man until I can get some real doctors here", he yelled.

Claire stopped, turned, and stepped right up in the General's face. "You're not in charge of jack shit asshole, now get out", she yelled.

"Back off bitch - or die", the Captain screamed and pointed his pistol at Claire.

All eyes turned to the pistol.

"Of course I'm in charge. I've got the guns", the General calmly explained. "Now get ...", he started to yell but stopped.

The clank of an AK-47 bolt chambering a round is a cold and powerful sound - it chills the heart, it freezes the brain. Everyone in the room recognized it, and froze in place.

"The doctor said get out", Julie said coldly into the dead silence.

Slowly, very slowly, heads turned to see Julie aiming her AK-47 at the Captain's mid section. Sweat backed away from the Captain.

"You don't know what you're doing girl", the General growled.

"But I do know how to shoot this gun. So get out old man", Julie hissed. "Now", she yelled.

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"The radio will work better outside anyway", Sweat offered and pointed at the metal ceiling.

The General glanced from the rifle to the ceiling. "Good observation Corporal", he said. "Captain, get my radio set up outside", he ordered. "I'll deal with you two later", he warned Claire. He turned and stomped out the door followed by the Captain who was tracked precisely by the rifle.

A metallic click indicated that the rifle had been put on "safe". Khan released the breath he had been holding and looked at Julie, an amused smile grew on his face. "I will make sure they stay out Little Rose", he said. Khan slapped Sweat on the shoulder, nodded approval, and they went out.

"Definitely different here", Mark mumbled to himself and followed Sweat and Khan out the door.

"Come on Julie, we've got work to do", Claire said.

Chapter Four

Sweat walked back toward the truck. Rufus and the remaining rescued man were sitting on crates leaning back against the rear tires. "Got the truck tires between him and the desert - the boy's learning good", he thought.

"Did we break anything boy?", Sweat asked Rufus.

"Not on the truck, I ain't so sure about my butt", Rufus answered. "This is Mike Bach, he's the crew chief", he added.

"Glad to meet you Mike", Sweat said.

"Thanks, I was kind of glad to see you guys too. How are those pilots doing?", Mike asked.

"I don't know, but I think they'll make it, those docs are pretty good", Sweat answered then asked, "What were you guys doing flying so low?"

"Hell if I know. Those two showed up", Mike pointed toward the General and Captain. "They collared those pilots, dragged them over to my ship and said let's go find some ragheads. Shit, they wouldn't even wait for the gunner", Mike explained.

"Dumb, really dumb. Shooting at helicopters has been an Afghan past-time for thirty years" Sweat said and shook his head. "I'm going to check the guards, we'll overnite here, get some sleep. You did good boy", Sweat added to Rufus.

After Sweat walked away Mike asked Rufus, "Why do you let that guy call you boy?"

"Cause he's twice as old as I am and more than twice as smart", Rufus said.

"But still", Mike protested.

"Mike, you've been in country less than six weeks and most of that on the base. I've been here over ten months, all of it out here, every time I hear him call me boy, it means I'm still breathing. Sweat's the best, you do what he says - and maybe you keep breathing. And breathing is more important than names, right?" Rufus explained.

"Yeah, it is", Mike agreed.

"Come on, let's sleep in the back of the truck. If we're here over night we'll probably be pulling some guard duty", Rufus said.

Chapter Five

Sweat took half an hour inspecting the guard positions. Tom and Khan had a good security plan in place, no one was going to approach the clinic unseen, or today, unchallenged. He felt safe and decided to inform the General.

When he approached the General was studying a map, the Captain was talking on the radio, and Young Rashid was sitting by the clinic door - rifle in hand.

"Affirmative, hold one", the Captain said to the radio. "General, C Company is in pursuit of twenty plus armed ragheads - they are exchanging fire", the Captain told the General.

"Where are they?", the General demanded.

"The ragheads are retreating into Nabadar right now sir - C Company is about half a click behind", the Captain replied.

"Tell C Company to hold in place, I don't want any casualties", the General ordered and the Captain complied

"Sir, C Company says they can handle it", the Captain reported back to the General.

The General grabbed the radio mike and yelled, "God damned it, I'm in charge here, and you will hold in place". He threw the microphone back to the Captain and yelled, "Now get some air assets in there and flatten that damned village", the General ordered.

"No, no, you can't do that. Over twenty people live in that village", Sweat yelled.

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“Don’t tell me what I can’t do Corporal. If there is anyone in that village they are aiding the enemy, and that makes them legitimate targets”, the General roared.

“That’s bullshit and you know it”, Sweat yelled back at the General. The Captain stood and pulled out his pistol.

“Captain get him out of here. I’ll handle the radio myself and take care of him later ”, the General ordered.

“That way Corporal”, the Captain ordered and indicated the direction of the truck. Sweat stared at the General but didn’t move. “Move it Corporal, I’m having a bad day, I will shoot you”, the Captain yelled. Sweat still only stared at the General. “Move asshole”, the Captain screamed and hit Sweat on side the head with the pistol, then dragged the unconscious Sweat to the truck.

“Private, get out here”, the Captain yelled and pounded on the side of the truck.

Rufus climbed out and said, “Sir?”

“Guard this man”, the Captain ordered and pointed to the unconscious Sweat. Seeing the confusion on Rufus’s face he added, “Guard him or you will get the same”. The Captain then marched back to the General.

“What the hell?”, Rufus muttered and bent over to examine Sweat. “Mike, go get the doctor”, he said.

Chapter Six

Sweat opened his eyes and started thinking again. He was lying beside the truck and Claire was sitting beside him.

“Glad to see you’re back with us”, Claire said.

“What happened?”, Sweat asked.

“Rufus told me that idiot Captain hit you with something. I’ve bandaged the cut and you should be okay in a few minutes”, Claire explained.

“Where is the Boy? How long have I been out?”, Sweat asked.

“I sent Rufus to get Tom and you were unconscious for about five minutes. Just lay still for a few more minutes” Claire pleaded.

“No, I’ve got to stop him. He’s going to bomb Nabadar”, Sweat said.

“What? Who?”, Claire asked.

Her answer came from across the courtyard. “Yeah, direct hit”, the General cheered at the radio and smacked his fist into his palm. “Those assholes won’t be shooting at me again”, he yelled. “Beautiful sir, that was a thousand pounder. There won’t be any pieces left big enough for the vultures. How do you like American bombs? Die you bastards die”, the Captain cheered back. “Now finish them off, get those other planes in there, I want everyone of those scum dead, dead, dead”, the General yelled. “They are on the way sir. This will teach those ragheads who the masters are. Die assholes, die, die, die”, the Captain screamed.

“You sick murdering pieces of shit”, Claire screamed, jumped to her feet, and ran toward them.

“You can die too bitch”, the wild eyed Captain screamed and aimed his pistol at Claire.

“Hey”, Tom yelled. The Captain shifted his aim and fired. The quick aim was less than perfect, but the bullet hit Tom in the thigh and knocked him down. Immediately swinging back to Claire the Captain fired again. This aim was worse and the bullet missed entirely. He didn’t get a third shot.

Rashid’s AK-47 roared. He fired three rounds, the first struck the Captain in the stomach, the second in the chest, and the third in the forehead. He collapsed with all of the grace of any dead body,

Rashid shifted his aim to the General but Sweat yelled “Hold” and he didn’t pull the trigger. He didn’t lower the rifle either.

Chapter Seven

The sound of gunfire behind him startled Khan to the bone. At a dead run he headed toward it, weapon ready. Rounding the corner into the courtyard he took in the scene.

Rufus was running toward the clinic door carrying Tom, Claire leading the way. Rashid had the general face down on the ground with his rifle aimed at his head. The Captain was also face down but most of his head was missing. Sweat was trying to get to his feet.

“Don’t kill him”, Sweat yelled to Rashid.

Rashid only nodded.

“What happened?”, Khan asked and held Sweat by the arm to steady him.

Sweat, still unable to stand, sat on a crate and told him. Khan's face grew cold.

Chapter Eight

Tom lay naked on the exam table. Injections had dulled his pain but not yet his rage. Claire worked on his leg and Julie held him down.

"That asshole", he yelled. He tried to sit up but Julie pushed him back down. "What the hell is going on?", he demanded.

"Later Sweets", Claire said and continued her work. Tom struggled for another minute but the drug took hold, he got drowsy and lost interest.

"Julie, put together a kit and get Rufus to take you to Nabadar. Bring back the ones you need to. I'll get things ready here", Claire instructed.

"On my way", Julie responded.

Chapter Nine

"Sweat, I'm going to take Julie, Paul, and Mark to Nabadar, okay?", Rufus asked.

"Yeah, sure, hurry", Sweat said. "But Boy, when you get close start blowing the horn. Make damned sure that Jonesy sees you coming, and tell Jonesy to send a medivac chopper here", Sweat added.

"Rashid", Khan called, "Go with them. Nobody harms the Little Rose. You understand?"

"I understand", Rashid answered but then pointed at the General.

"I'll take care of him. And Rashid, when they start back, you go to the big cave and wait. I will meet you there later", Khan said.

In less than a minute the truck roared away.

Chapter Ten

Claire emptied six of her twelve beds by moving patients into the houses of the village. She didn't have to ask, word of what happened had spread, women simply came to get those that could be moved.

The clinic was ready. She stopped and looked out the window at Khan and the General. The General's hands were tied behind his back, he sat on a box and stared miserably at the Captain's body.

Abdul walked up bringing two men with him, one Claire had treated, she listened.

"Bencal, Pano, I have a mission for you", Khan said to the two men.

"Yes Khan", Bencal, the bigger one, replied.

Khan handed him the General's ID card. "This is the man who ordered the bombing of Nabadar", Khan said.

Bencal turned to the General and pulled his knife.

"No", Khan said, "Sweat has asked that we not kill him. His reasons are good".

Bencal turned back to Khan, obeying but not liking it.

"Bencal, Pano, go to the little cave, dig up the money there, use it to find this man's family, and kill them". Khan ordered. "I wish I could do more", he added.

"You scum! You savages!". The General yelled, "How dare you threaten my family? What kind of animals are you?"

"It will be done", Bencal said coldly. He looked at the General with unfeeling black eyes then turned and left.

"Call them back. You can't do this. My family had nothing to do with this", the General pleaded.

"Bencal and Pano had families too, General. They lived in Nabadar", Khan stated and walked away.

Chapter Eleven

Sweat sat at the kitchen table thinking hard. He looked up as Claire entered.

"Are you all right Claire?", he asked.

"I'm fine", she said but the shocked look on her face said differently.

"Claire, I've been thinking, we've ..." Sweat started to say but the sound of a gunshot cut him off. They both rushed to the window.

Khan was standing over the General, he held a pistol in his hand, but it was the radio, not the General, that was dead.

Khan said something to Abdul that they could not hear. Abdul pulled the General to his feet and marched him away. Khan headed for the clinic door.

Chapter Twelve

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Khan could see that they were waiting for him as he walked through the kitchen door.

"How is Tom?", Khan began.

"He's hurting, he'll be in bed for a few weeks, but he'll be okay", Claire answered.

"Khan, don't kill that General", Sweat begged.

"I want to, but I understand your reasons. I will not kill him - not today anyway", Khan replied then went on, "I will take him with me and dump him out down the road. I will not kill him, but he will not know that until the last minute".

"You're going somewhere?", Claire asked.

"Yes, I must leave. I will go into the mountains. I must fight the raiders, and now I must fight the Americans also. If I stay the Americans will bomb this place. I have come to say good-bye", Khan answered.

"I'm sorry Khan, I wish there were some other way", Sweat said.

"I wish that too. But this is not your fault Sweat. Tell Jonesy to keep his men west of Nabadar and I will not fight them. You and the Boy will have free passage where ever you want to go, but all others who come into this valley will be considered legitimate targets", Khan said.

Abdul came into the room, "The car is ready", he told Khan.

"Abdul now serves you Red Rose. He and seven men will stay and protect you", Khan told Claire. He then turned to Abdul and said, "Go get some of the rockets in case the helicopters return. Make sure that no harm comes to the roses".

"No harm shall come to them as long as I breath Khan", Abdul swore.

"Then good-bye my friends", Khan said and left.

Claire and Sweat watched through the window as Khan walked purposefully to the car. His son waited at the car door, still with a crutch Claire noted with regret. Khan kneeled, talked to the boy, pointed toward the clinic, and handed the boy his pistol.

"I think Khan just recruited you another guard", Sweat told Claire

Chapter Thirteen

The car didn't pull off of the road, it simply stopped in the road. The occupants were silent as the dust cloud overtook the car and sat waiting for it to clear. The four Afghans scanned

the countryside through the dust, the General stared at his feet.

Khan announced, "This will do. Get him out".

Two men pulled the General from the car and stood him beside the road. Khan got out, reached back in to get an AK-47, and stared at the General.

"Remove his bonds - and his clothes", Khan told them.

The General stood dejectedly and watched Khan as the men released his hands and yanked off his clothes. Khan watched with no emotion.

"Take the clothes and get back in", Khan ordered and the men obeyed.

Khan raised the rifle, the General lowered his head and closed his eyes. Khan said, "This is the fourth time today that Sweat has saved your life".

The General raised his head in confusion only to see Khan getting back in the car. As the door closed the car took off in a cloud of dust. The General was left standing naked in the desert.

Chapter Fourteen

At 9 pm the day in the clinic was coming to an end. A helicopter had come and picked up the aircrew and the Captain. There had been questions but Sweat handled them. Another helicopter had found the General. Julie had returned with four children, the only survivors of Nabadar, two with only cuts and bruises, one with a broken arm also, but the other had a large piece of shrapnel imbedded in his back - this took hours to get out. But now all that could be done had been done and the clinic was quite.

"I can watch them as I write up my notes. You two eat and get some sleep", Mark offered Claire and Julie.

"The job is yours", Claire said and walked toward the kitchen. She paused for a moment, watched Tom sleeping, then sighed and continued.

Julie opened her mouth to protest but Mark held up his hand and told her, "I'll call you if anything at all happens, you're just down the hall. Paul will be on guard duty for another hour, go eat, relax, get cleaned up. Everything is okay here".

Julie nodded and walked into the kitchen but almost immediately came back out and went to her room. Sweat came in and looked around, Mark pointed him to the kitchen.

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"Long day Claire?", Sweat asked.

Claire looked up from her chair and said, "Yeah, sure wish I had some whiskey right now".

"Well you have to give up something to live in paradise", Sweat replied and took a chair opposite her.

"Very funny", Claire said with a sad smile. Then the smile vanished and she asked, "Sweat, how do we stop this?"

"I'm not sure that we can. We just have to do all that we can everyday and hope that it makes a difference", Sweat said then added, "But you can do more now".

"I'm a doctor, and I already work from daylight into the night. What more can I do?", Claire asked.

"You can let Julie be the doctor and you can start leading your men", Sweat answered.

"My men?", Claire asked.

"Your men. Abdul is out there right now recruiting more, they are pledging their lives to your service. You are now Warlord of Jabar", Sweat said.

"Warlord?", Claire questioned.

"Warlord", Sweat stated, "There has to be one, it's the only government here. The bombers will be looking for Khan, he can't do it anymore". He pulled on the collar of his uniform, "It can't be me", he said. "The people respect you, you are a natural leader, and you know new and better ways. It has to be you Claire", he concluded.

"Warlord? Absolutely not.. I'm a doctor. I don't want to kill anyone", Claire protested.

"That is exactly why you must be the Warlord. You don't want to kill anyone. You will if you must - but you don't want to. That is why Khan is sending recruits, that is why mothers will send their sons. You can find a way out of this mess for them. It needs to be you Claire", Sweat said.

"Warlord? No, it will not work, I am a woman, the men will not accept me", Claire continued protesting.

"You are the Red Rose of Jabar, they respect that. Khan accepts you and so will they", Sweat replied.

"No, pick someone else - someone Afghan. I'm not qualified", Claire protested some more.

"Who would be better? Abdul? Old Rashid? Young Rashid? They only know the old ways, and they are all full of the old hatreds" Sweat said.

Claire looked past Sweat into the clinic, "I have a few hatreds of my own now", she said.

"You do, but you control them - and that is respected. You didn't kill the man who attacked Nabadar, you found a new way, you disgraced him. You sent him back defeated and naked", Sweat said.

"I didn't do that, you and Khan did", Claire said.

"Well, that's the way the story is being told", Sweat said.

"What story?", Claire asked.

"That one, and the one about you sending your guards to properly bury the dead in Nabadar. The Boy is driving them right now", Sweat answered.

"I didn't send anyone ... who?", Claire asked.

"Actually that was my idea, they can also gather up the weapons and ammunition", he admitted.

Claire stared at the wall for a long time, not seeing, just thinking. Sweat waited silently for her to work through the events and reach her decision.

"You bastards", she told the wall at one point, "Sneaking back stabbing bastards", at another, and finally, "Sweat, I could kill you, I should kill you". Then she turned to Sweat and added, "But I'm not".

"That's comforting to hear. And ...", Sweat said.

Claire cut him off, "But if you and Khan expect me to front for your schemes, you are fools", she warned.

"That's not what we expect", Sweat stated.

"Then what do you expect?", Claire asked.

"We expect you to start giving orders", Sweat replied.

"Get out of here Sweat. Get out while I still control my temper", she said shaking her head.

"See, you give orders so naturally. I'll see you next week my lord", Sweat said, smiled, and left.

The new Warlord of Jabar sat thinking for nearly an hour. Finally she got up to go to bed, "Good night Abdul", she said to the darkness out the

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window. There followed an awkward silence,
then, "Good night my lord", the darkness replied.

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