

Soon, however, things changed. Arabo and Aramo fighters shoved thirty-eight captives, including several women and other noncombatants, into a ditch on the outskirts of the village. One of the captives in the ditch pulled the pin from a grenade concealed under a bandaged hand and tossed it, taking off the lower leg of one of his captors, a recent Patriotic Detachment recruit named Levon. The Arabo and Aramo fighters there had already been hankering to "avenge" the death of another comrade the day before, so as soon as the grenade had gone off they began stabbing and shooting their captives, until every last one was dead. Shram Edo, one of the five Patriotic Detachment "boys" from Ashdarak, had joined in too, dousing several wounded soldiers with gasoline and tossing a match to burn them alive. By the time Monte came across the ditch on the outskirts of town it was a butcher's scrap heap.

Monte had given strict orders that no captives were to be harmed. The veins on his neck stood out like braided hemp, and he hollered until he was hoarse, but the black-turbaned Arabo captain didn't even shrug as he turned away from the stammering nuisance and resumed loading booty.

The Arabo and Aramo detachments hauled off all the weapons captured that day—seventy-eight rifles plus thousands of rounds of ammunition—and they emptied the village warehouse, too, dragging out tons of bagged wheat to sell. After the looting, they set the village ablaze.

A total of fifty-three Azeris were killed in and around Karadaghlu during those two days, compared to three killed on the Armenian side, including a sixty-year-old villager in Haghorti who had been hit by a stray bullet.

As news spread that Karadaghlu had been "cleaned out," several delegates arrived from the village of Krasnyi Bazar, fifteen kilometers to the south. Two years earlier, local Azeris in OMON uniforms had stopped four Armenians from Krasnyi Bazar, including a woman, and burned them alive in their car. Now, their fellow villagers politely requested four of the Azeri captives for *madagh*—a blood sacrifice. It was written, after all: an eye for an eye. Monte scowled them down, and they left empty-handed.

More than fifty Azeri captives had been butchered at Karadaghlu. But it was not the butchery that damaged Monte's reputation among the Karabagh mountain people. On the contrary, vengeance ran deep in the mountains, and the loudest voices on both sides demanded blood.

for blood. What damaged Monte's reputation, rather, was the fact that the butchery at Karadaghlu had taken place *against his orders*. Kechel Sergei, who had been evacuated to a hospital with a bullet through the back, could not have cared less about Azeri casualties; what infuriated him were reports that Monte had not prevented Arabo Manvel from hauling off the Patriotic Detachment's split of the captured munitions. Karadaghlu only confirmed what Kechel and everyone else seemed to know: Avo, the new Headquarters Chief, was a weakling. The Martuni locals were lying to him and cheating him blind. In time, even Monte himself acknowledged as much: after Karadaghlu, a fighter asked him why he had taken "0-0" as his radio code. "I'm less than zero," he replied.

Monte realized that if he ever were to exercise authority in Martuni, he would have to gain that authority not by decree from Stepanakert, but on the battlefield. On February 22, he led a successful lightning attack against Azeri positions on the strategic heights of Vesalu. But a few days after the victory at Vesalu, he faced even more brazen insubordination, with even bloodier results than Karadaghlu: on February 26, he stood on a slope near Khojalu, the site of his first recon operation three weeks earlier, and surveyed a trail of bloody shawls strewn across the brown grass and snow. As soon as he had arrived at Khojalu in response to reports of fighting, he had begun piecing together the story of the massacre that had just wound down, perhaps only an hour before his arrival.

At about 11:00 p.m. the night before, some 2,000 Armenian fighters had advanced through the high grass on three sides of Khojalu, forcing the residents out through the open side to the east. By the morning of February 26, the refugees had made it to the eastern cusp of Mountainous Karabagh and had begun working their way downhill, toward safety in the Azeri city of Agdam, about six miles away. There, in the hills and within sight of safety, Mountainous Karabagh soldiers had chased them down. "They just shot and shot and shot," a refugee woman, Raisha Aslanova, testified to a Human Rights Watch investigator. The Arabo fighters had then unsheathed the knives they had carried on their hips for so long, and began stabbing.

Now, the only sound was the wind whistling through dry grass, a wind that was too early yet to blow away the stench of corpses. Monte had arrived in Martuni twenty-two days earlier, and since then he had staggered across two killing fields soaked with the fresh blood of captives and unarmed peasants. When it came to adult males, fighters on