

DAN LEVELED A BRUTAL GAZE at Turbee as the gangly young mathematician wandered into the TTIC control room. Late, as usual. The story of the USS Cushing interdicting the Mankial Star had spread like a tumor through the Intelligence Community. A mighty American warship, more than 500 feet in length, had, on direct orders from the President, intercepted a private yacht in the Arabian Sea, and sent a boarding party onto the smaller vessel. A boarding party that had been invited to tea, and had then found no weapons — not so much as a slingshot. They had been shown by some deck hands where all the storage areas were. Yes, the yacht did have a cavernous hull, but nothing was found there. There appeared to be some false positives, but 4.5 tons of Semtex, well... where could you hide that?

“You know, Mr. Turbee, that was a huge embarrassment for TTIC,” Dan began. “The President himself gave the order, on information you provided. We came up empty-handed. There was zero. Nothing.”

Turbee responded quietly, staring at his feet. “I’m pretty sure, Dan, that the Semtex was there. They off-loaded it someplace. They must have.”

“That doesn’t help things, Turb,” grouched Dan. “The US Navy intercepted a private vessel in international waters, for no good reason. If the press were to get wind of this story, there would be hell to pay.”

“Dan, it was there. I can feel it.”

“Well feel with more intelligence, kid! You let me down. You let us all down. Now hunt down the crap. The rest of us are going to work on this nuclear thing. And clean up your goddamn workstation! It looks like a barrel of monkeys have been partying over there. You’re a disgrace.” Dan turned away from the youth to deal with other, more important issues.

“Hey Dan, lay off the kid, would you?” Lance said. “Maybe it was there. After all, the Mankial Star was going west, not east, when she was intercepted. In the satellite photographs, she was definitely heading east. Now—”

Dan interrupted him. “Lance, the goddamn Joint Chiefs, with the DDCI and the goddamn President, were on the goddamn line. You’ve got a death wish if you fuck up in front of them. A death wish. Don’t you dare defend him, not right now.”

Turbee began moving some of his cups and wrappers around, dismally

looking for a garbage can. Third Grade Science had been like this. Physical Ed in Eighth Grade had carried a similar sting. Girls in his senior year of high school — pretty much the same. Khasha came over to help.

“He’s a blowhard, Turb,” she said. “Just ignore him. I think it was the right call, and I think you’re right. The Mankial Star unloaded someplace. We just need to figure out where.”

“Khash, he’s the boss. And he’s right. I did mess it up in front of the President, and apparently a bunch of really important military people.”

“Turb, find out where she unloaded. Get the Keyhole and ORION feeds from the NSA, and go through them. Kingston will help. Maybe they unloaded somewhere off the coast of India. Maybe, somehow, they transferred it to another ship. Figure it out. I think we have some data about how fast that ship can go. You can plot the vectors as well as anyone else. Find it.”

After several minutes of cleaning and talking, Turbee finally gave a slight nod. “I’ll give it a whirl, Khasha. Thanks for helping,” he said, turning back to his computer.

THE UNITED STATES had developed, as part of its defense and Intelligence-gathering activities, 12 sets of satellites, designated by the letters “KH.” They became known as the “Keyhole” satellites. The KH-1 through KH-11 series were all widely publicized. A KH-12 series existed, but its particulars were tightly classified. There were rumors about a KH-13 series as well, but knowledge of its existence was available only to a very small group of individuals, which included the President, the Secretary of Defense, the Director of Intelligence, and the people at Edwards Air Force Base, who controlled the satellites.

What was even more classified was that a further iteration had been created, the KH-14, which was known only by the code name “ORION.”

The ORION weighed 32 tons, almost half of which was fuel, and had been assembled by the crews of many highly classified Space Shuttle missions. Only three existed — two above the Middle East, and a third above North Korea. The ORION’s were, in effect, giant telescopes similar to the Hubble, focused back on the earth’s surface instead of out towards space. They were able to focus down to a resolution of approximately half an inch. The information obtained by these three monsters was forwarded through the Milstar network of satellites, and was relayed from Edwards Air Force Base through dedicated fiber optic lines to, amongst other places, the NSA, where it was kept in the MP-Sid database.

The problem with the ORION's, of course, was that while they were the most advanced spy satellite ever created, there were still only three of them, and the Middle East was a very large place. Turbee reflected on the problem. The MP-Sid database of Keyhole satellite imagery was the largest database in existence on the planet. It put the databases of Amex, Wal-Mart, and the other giants of 21st-century commerce to shame. Even Blue Gene would spend decades of computing power searching for a needle in a universe of haystacks. Limiting parameters would be needed for this kind of search.

He had an approximate timeline for when the Mankial Star had left Socotra. He knew when and where the USS Cushing had intercepted the yacht. He knew the distance between Socotra and India. He toyed with this for a while. Then he recalled what one of the Navy people had said about the Mankial Star. "The biggest engines I have ever seen on a ship that small," he'd said. Turbee frowned to himself. Why would the yacht need such big engines? What would incredibly fast speed mean for a pleasure yacht? With a bit of noodling on the net he came up with a speed of 45 knots, maybe a bit more, based on the engines. If she was carrying Semtex, she would have wanted to unload as quickly as possible. She would have been going as fast as she could. With this information, Turbee developed a time/distance probability cone as to where the ship could have been at different times and coordinates. He fed the dimensions of the ship, as per the Naval Intelligence data, into his model. He then programmed, from scratch, a web-bot that could sort through the pixel maze, and, hopefully, with only a few hours worth of tera flops, locate the Mankial Star at various coordinates in the southern Arabian Sea. He sent the web-bot on its mission, and sat back. Time to order some Chinese food and see what was on the cartoon channel.

GENERALLY, there were three things that could cause Turbee to lose track of time. The first was computer or mathematical problem solving, the second was watching cartoons, and the third was playing video games. As the clock reached, and then passed, midnight, Turbee was doing all three. Waiting for a web-bot to return data was a lot like putting a loaf of bread in the oven and waiting for it to rise. There was a delicious anticipation to the process, but it took time, and to pass the time, he played his own re-coded version of Quake-4 against the endlessly multiprocessing Blue Gene. Lord Shatterer of Deathrot was constantly being decimated by Blue Gene, which was why Turbee preferred that sport to playing with the mostly moronic Internet crowd. In a way he felt that it helped both he and Blue Gene fret away the hours.

Turbee had a delightfully quirky sense of humor, although few ever saw it. Rather than a boring computer message flashing across the screen, saying something dull like “search results ready,” he had programmed a host of cartoon characters — Daffy Duck, Elmer Fudd, Homer Simpson, of course, and many others — to take part. They came dancing across all the 101 screens simultaneously, singing, in Mormon Tabernacle Choir fashion, that his web-bot search had yielded results. He had thought of playing this little ditty during the day, perhaps when some very important person or other was touring the facility. Dan would probably have an aneurysm, or break out in hives, but it would be fun.

Now he looked at the results, reorganized the data somewhat, and smiled when he realized that he would be able to show everyone, later that day, where the missing Semtex was. It was 3AM when he finally stole the three blocks homeward, to his small basement suite.

IT WAS EARLY AFTERNOON before Turbee was able to shake the cobwebs, re-emerge from his cave, and head back to the office. He always wore a pair of dark sunglasses, since bright sunlight brought on migraines. As he stumbled into the control room, he forgot to remove said glasses. To the buttoned-down crowd in the TTIC control room, it looked as though a Goth-band groupie had just come lurching in. Almost everyone there wore a suit and tie. A fair number wore military uniforms. Many would give a salute before a handshake, and none would dream of showing up to work any later than 7AM. All washed, and shaved, and ironed their clothes before they allowed themselves to be seen in public. Yet here was this peculiar creature, white as a ghost, painfully thin, dirty blond hair too long, unshaven, unwashed, un-ironed, generally unclean, and now sporting dark sunglasses, somehow sitting in their control room. It just was not done.

Dan was about to make an acerbic remark, but before he could say anything, Turbee took off his glasses. That made things even worse, since it showed the dark circles beneath his eyes. Dan muttered to the man next to him that this had to be what drugs looked like.

“Dan, I’ve found the Semtex. I know exactly where it is.”

“Yes, well, let’s see where it is this time,” Dan muttered sarcastically.

“OK. It was on the Mankial Star. I am positive. It got transferred.”

“Aw for Chrissakes—” began Dan.

“No, Dan. He’s a bit of a wunderkind,” said Rahlson. “He hears a different drummer. Maybe he’s figured something out. Let’s hear what he’s got.”

There was a short argument about that, involving several different members of the team. At the conclusion, Turbee was given the floor.

“OK. OK. Well it’s like this. OK.” It had been a hard few days, and he’d taken a lot of bad publicity within the agency. With all the attention suddenly focused on him again, Turbee’s thoughts started to spin out of control, becoming circular and repetitive, in the same way that his right forearm sometimes flexed uncontrollably. He panicked, and his mouth became dry. His lips turned to cardboard, and his tongue felt glued to the top of his mouth. Desperately looking around for something to help, he grabbed a cup of coffee from Rahlson’s desk, and drank half of it in a single swig. Rahlson knew that particular cup to be at least four hours old. He raised one eyebrow in amazement.

“OK. It’s like this. OK. You see, I took the... uhh... the Office of Intelligence of Navy stuff and I fed it to the web-bot and then—”

“Jesus, Turbee. Most of us are looking for lost nukes, and you’re over there blathering away about God knows what,” said Dan. “Get to the fucking point.”

“Dan,” said Rahlson sharply. “Hear him out.” He turned back to Turbee. “Go on, boy. Let’s hear what you’ve got.”

Turbee’s nerves settled somewhat. The panic subsided. “OK. I know the dimensions of the Mankial Star. I created a web-bot to go through the millions of pages of data left by the Keyhole satellites, and by the ORION’s—”

“How the hell did you know about ORION? No one knows about that,” shouted an Air Force Intelligence wonk from the other side of the room. “You got clearance for that, kid?”

“Don’t know what you mean about clearance, but when I was looking through the NRO image database, one of the streams of data was 128 bit, and couldn’t be parsed by the standard decryption algorithms that are commonly used at Fort Mead, so I hacked into a—”

“Nevermind, Turbee. Just go on,” Rahlson urged.

“OK. OK. So I found all of the images that we had of the Mankial Star from the various satellites, and I was able to put them together. When I had the first few positions of the Mankial Star, and, by the way, holy cow, you have no idea how fast that boat was going, but anyway, I was able to get to within a few miles of the spot where she turned around. Then I got lucky.” He paused for a few seconds and grabbed another slurp of cold coffee, this time from Khasha’s desk, to his left. “Real lucky. At the perimeter of one of the ORION shots we got the following three pictures. Have a look,” he said,

motioning to the 101's.

The first photograph showed the Mankial Star and a second, much larger ship, in close proximity; they were parallel to one another, but unconnected. The second photograph showed the same two ships connected by two fuzzy, but discernable, rails. The third photograph showed the two ships connected by the initial two rails and by what appeared to be third and fourth connecting devices of some sort.

Turbee continued. "The second, larger ship is the Haramosh Star — one of the older, smaller ships in the Karachi Star Line. She came from Karachi earlier that day. I ran her dimensions through the ONI database to find her name. I ran it through the Keyhole and ORION image database to determine that she had come from Karachi that day. I also did something else."

Turbee had an irritating habit. Someone had to ask, or he wouldn't, or maybe couldn't, go on, given his peculiar brain wiring. It had become a sly insider's joke at TTIC. Everyone waited for Dan to say it, just because his reaction was the most entertaining. The seconds ticked by.

"Oh fuck it, Hamilton. WHAT?" Dan finally snapped.

"Yes. OK. I took the time/space coordinates and fed them into the sub-system that powers the Atlas Screen. George showed me how to use it a week ago."

George cast his eyes skyward. Now they were all going to blame him for giving Turbee another huge computer, and the largest screen on the planet to play with.

"Look at the Atlas Screen people." Turbee fiddled with a few commands on the keyboard before him. "You should see two red lines. The first starts from Socotra, and heads east, towards the rendezvous point you're seeing on the 101's. It begins when the Mankial Star started to head in that direction. You'll see a second red line heading south from Karachi to the rendezvous point. That line traces the Haramosh Star's route. Watch what happens."

Turbee had found a way to control the house lights from his workstation, and now he brought them down a little, while increasing the luminescence of the Atlas Screen.

"The kid may be weird, but he does have a sense of theater, doesn't he?" Lance whispered to Rahlson.

The overall impact of the presentation was powerful. The two red lines slowly approached the rendezvous point, with the Mankial Star line moving at about twice the speed of the Haramosh Star line. When the ships reached their destination, a melodic "ping" was emitted by the system. After the

meeting, the Mankial Star reversed its direction, while the Haramosh Star continued southward along the Malahat Coast. Turbee allowed the simulation to cycle continuously as he raised the house lights.

“Dan, there is no doubt whatsoever that the Mankial Star was on a return voyage from the rendezvous when she was intercepted. You have photographic evidence of that rendezvous on the screens behind you. You have the routes of the ships on the screen before you. When the USS Cushing intercepted her, the Semtex had already been transferred to the Haramosh Star. In fact, there were some indications that trace amounts of Semtex were found in the hull of the Mankial Star, but they were attributed to false positives. The Semtex is on the Haramosh Star, right now.”

“Where is this ship heading?” asked Rahlson.

“I’ve checked that on the net. Shipping schedules are pretty much public information these days. She’s heading to Vancouver, Canada,” replied Turbee.

It didn’t take long for this particular piece of information to be passed up the chain. There were the usual phone calls, emails, and electronic messages of various sorts sent to various important people. After 15 minutes Dan had an announcement to make.

“The DDCI, the Deputy Director, and the Secretary of Defense are all in Washington, and are all on their way over here. They want to see the demonstration that you just gave us, Turbee. This is a moment of critical... Turbee?”

There was a bit of chuckling. Turbee was gone, like the ghost he sometimes appeared to be.