

YARIM-DHAR was even more desolate than Zighan. It was located in the northern part of the vast Darfur wilderness, where the waves of desert sand met thousands of square miles of grassland. Sharp-edged sandstone pinnacles in shades of ochre and vermilion, some rising more than 1,000 feet above the plain, punctuated the limitless sand. Here the Sahel, desolate and remote, was separated from southern and eastern Sudan by the ancient basalt of the 10,000-foot Jebel Marra massif. This was an area ruled by tribes of nomadic Bedouin warlords with ever-changing loyalties. Each sought ultimate dominion over the surreal landscape, cut off from the rest of the world. Some of these ruthless groups were at the heart of the ethnic cleansing of non-Arabic peoples in northwest Darfur. The terrain, the climate, and the desolation were all similar to Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and the lawless Northern Frontier areas of Pakistan itself.

Richard viewed the lands below him with growing anxiety as the Night Hawk traveled ever further from its Mediterranean carrier base. It was no longer pure desert, but bleakness and oppressive heat still radiated from the rocky grassland below him. When they found the airport, it was really nothing more than a dirt strip adjacent to a rundown terminal, no larger than a couple of Atco trailers put side by side, and a small fuel depot. One ancient Jeep was parked beside the terminal. Waves of heat were rippling from the small structures.

“OK, Clinton,” said Payton over the Com-Link. “Let’s set them down near the fuel depot.” There was an edge to his voice. Sudan north of Khartoum was lawless, in a continual state of anarchy, and subject to brutal, pitiless civil war. It wasn’t the kind of place he wanted to hang out.

“You betcha Major,” responded Clinton. Both Night Hawks landed simultaneously, coming down in swishing vortices of sand. “Heads up, people. Safeties off and weapons ready. We have no idea what’s here,” he ordered his crew. “We don’t want another Somalia.”

“There’s only one Jeep,” observed one of the other men. “I don’t think it’ll be too bad. Can’t be more than one or two people here.”

“It only takes one to kill you,” said McMurray. “Least that’s what they teach you in the Army.”

"I'm going inside the terminal to see if a DC-3 came through here in the last few hours," said Richard, opening the door of the helicopter and climbing out.

"Don't think you're leaving me here," McMurray snapped. Stressful situations tended to make him even sharper than usual. "Someone has to make sure this damn thing goes right." He jumped out of the chopper and followed Richard toward the terminal.

"Clinton, gather a couple of the guys, we're going with them," ordered Payton. "See what we can do about getting fuel. We're on empty here. Thompson, get on the radio and let home base know we're here and we're looking for fuel. Tell them it's quiet, so far."

Unbeknownst to Payton, a swarthy man inside the terminal had just made a short call of his own on his Sat-phone. "Two helicopters," he said. "Maybe ten soldiers. Americans. Send the trucks."

What that man didn't know, in turn, was that the NSA had received a directive from the DDCI, just hours before, ordering them to monitor everything monitor-able in southern Libya and northwestern Darfur. The NSA most definitely had that capability. Headquartered in Fort Mead, Maryland, the several thousand employees of the NSA worked within the second-largest building in the world (the Pentagon being the largest). If the NSA was ordered to monitor a specific region, it was all but done.

The problem with using a Thuraya Satellite telephone in the middle of a wasteland is that there are only a few such telephones within a thousand square-mile area. For this reason, the NSA's mission was a very different proposition than monitoring the Islands of Indonesia, where there were almost 200,000 such devices, and millions of cell phones. With the warning that the agency had received, they had no problem picking up the call from the airstrip to the little village of Yarim-Dhar, about ten miles distant. One of the translators yelled at his supervisor the moment it happened. "It's a set-up! They're going to be attacked!"

The supervisor immediately relayed that to the executive director of his section, who relayed it to the DDCI's office. The message went across to the Pentagon, and to the Theodore Roosevelt Battle Group in the Mediterranean. From there it was linked to the AWAC-2 aircraft circling high above the Mediterranean, and to Thompson, who was still on the Com-Link in the second Night Hawk.

The end result was that four FA-18/E Super Hornets were immediately scrambled from the deck of the Theodore Roosevelt, while, miles away, two

dozen Darfur warriors raced towards seven trucks in the village of Yarim-Dhar, with heavy machine guns in tow. The trucks were about ten miles from the airport, and were moving at 50 miles per hour, the maximum speed permitted by the rough terrain. The Hornets maxed out at Mach 1.7, but had some 700 miles to go. Clearance across Libya was approved almost immediately, once General Minyar was briefed on the situation. No one really cared about clearance in northwest Darfur.

At that moment, Thompson was yelling to the Major and his small group, who were halfway to the main terminal. Richard and McMurray had already entered the building. "Major, take cover! It's an ambush!"

Two heads appeared on the roof of the terminal building. The so-called warriors had taken an inside ladder to the roof of the terminal after the choppers landed. Each had an RPG launcher. They fired simultaneously, each aiming for a helicopter.

YOUSSEFF COMPLETED his long, lonely journey to Jalalabad, slept for a few hours, and had his pilots fly him over the mountains into Pakistan, to an almost identical hangar, with identical offices and suites, at Islamabad International. It was there that he reconnected with Marak, just after dark. He did not ask Marak what had become of the unfortunate Zak, nor did he care to know. It was, thankfully, an operational detail that he, as CEO, did not need to trouble himself with. Yousseff had never had the stomach for death or torture, and was glad to leave that aspect of the business up to Marak. His role was master and planner. Now he made a number of telephone calls, all on a pre-paid cell phone that Marak had brought with him. Various aspects of the mission were discussed and revised.

As he hung up, he turned to Marak. "Can you have Vijay and Mahari here tomorrow morning?" he asked.

"That will not be a problem," Marak replied. "First light."

"Then I should call Omar in Karachi, and Kumar in Los Angeles," said Yousseff. "We can't give them all of the information, but they need to know some aspects of the plan. Especially Kumar."

IT WAS LATE in the evening, Pacific Standard Time, when Kumar's personal cell phone rang. He flipped it open. "Hanaman here," he answered. Kumar had been born in Pakistan, where he'd first met Yousseff. With some passport trickery, he had moved to Long Beach, California, where he'd been living for more than a decade now. There he had built a thriving company

that manufactured and sold small commercial submarines to the military and private enterprises.

“It’s me, Yousseff. How are you Kumar?”

A broad smile crept over Kumar’s face. “It is good to hear your voice, Yousseff. It’s been too long. All is fine here. What do you need?”

Yousseff never wasted much time on pleasantries. Over the years, he had found that it was best to deal with the details first, and take time for pleasure second. “I need you to build something for me, Kumar. Something very unique, very unusual. It will take all of your immense talent.”

Kumar’s eyebrows rose, nearing his curly black hairline in surprise. “Oh?”

“But,” continued Yousseff, “I know that you, in that plant of yours, can build anything. It will be difficult, but not impossible. We will email the plans to you shortly. Encrypted, of course, but you know the code. I will call you again in a day or two.”

“Sure, Youss,” came Kumar’s voice, with an edge of uncertainty. “Email what you have. I’ll look at it. Then I can let you know if it’s possible or not.”

“One more thing, Kumar. I have a telephone number for you. Do you still have the simulator for the PWS-14 in the plant?”

“Yes, I do. I’ve actually spent some time in it myself. It can be quite entertaining.”

“There are two young men at this telephone number. Their names are Javeed and Massoud. They are staying at the South LA Mosque. Take them in. Put them up in the suite you have behind your office. And get them to log hours on the simulator.”

“Sure, Yousseff. Are you going to tell me what any of this is about?” asked Kumar.

“I do not want to lay out all the details here and now. Once you start building the device, and training Massoud and Javeed, I will call again. I will be in Los Angeles in about two weeks, and we can connect then. I look forward to seeing you.”

“Likewise,” said Kumar, puzzled. He hung up the phone.

YOUSSEFF TURNED OFF his phone and stared at it for a moment. Kumar was a good friend, and he didn’t like keeping him the dark. Neither did he enjoy getting the younger man involved in something that would be dangerous and perhaps fatal. But he had no choice. This was a gamble he had

made on the behalf of all his employees and friends. As long as everything went well, they would have no reason to second-guess him for his decision.

As long as everything went well. He sighed and shook his head. He wasn't used to that stipulation. But he'd been put in a position he wasn't used to, and was taking part in something he'd never before considered. It was bringing on questions that made him nervous. Questions that might cost him his life, and many important friendships.

Trying not to consider that, he picked up his phone again and punched a second series of numbers. A warm female voice answered. "Executive offices of Karachi Star Line. How may I help you?"

"Please advise Omar that the first mate of the Janeeta is on the line," said Yousseff.

"Mr. Jhananda is meeting with the Executive Planning Committee, and is not available at the moment," the secretary replied somewhat sharply.

"Just interrupt him for a moment," said Yousseff, persuasively. "He will want to take this call."

The wait was less than 10 seconds. "Youss," said Omar. "Good to hear your voice. I just heard from Vince, and he told me you might call."

"Yes. How soon can the Haramosh Star be ready for travel?"

"She is ready now, Yousseff," answered Omar. "We put extra crews on overnight and she was put into the water earlier today."

"Wonderful. And is the submersible with her, in the pod?"

"Yes, Yousseff, we did that too. Everything is ready to go."

"Go back to your meeting, old friend," said Yousseff. "I will be in Karachi tonight. I'll call you from the plane. Perhaps we can have dinner together before I move on."

"It will be a pleasure. Goodbye." Omar's phone clicked and the line went dead.

Yousseff leaned back and closed his eyes. With only two telephone calls and those bare directions, a lot of iron had been put in motion. They were growing closer and closer to the point of no return.

AT TTIC, Dan was feeling rather less successful. In fact, he was in a black mood. He was furious over the mapping calamity. "Do something useful for a change," he had snapped at a hapless Hamilton Turbee after the boondoggle, forgetting for a moment who had solved the Madrid terrorist attacks. "See if you can turn some of that dazzling intellect of yours into something other than video games and Simpson re-reruns. Get into that pile

of information about the Semtex robbery, and see if you can figure out who did it. The rest of us are going to look at this nuclear threat to our harbors. Now get cracking, Turb, or you're out of here."

Turbee turned a bright crimson. "Yes sir," he said softly. Turbee was not accustomed to TTIC's military psyche, or its "law and order" and "chain of command" biases. He could barely handle the loose structure of a university post-grad department. Once again he thought about walking out, but then he thought of big Blue Gene, and realized that leaving was unthinkable. He also had some friends here, and for Turbee, with his social handicaps, friends were few and far between. So he straightened up, and initiated a series of database correlation and search routines. "OK, let's make it a little treasure hunt," he murmured. While Blue Gene was running the routines, he scanned through the initial Intelligence reports about the heist.

"Heckler and Koch PSG-1's? What are those?" he asked Rahlson. A search team from the 184th Ordnance had recovered a number of bullets from the assault scene, and had used their expertise to establish the type of weapons used in the attack.

"A rapid-fire, highly accurate sniper rifle," Rahlson said. "Very rare. Expensive."

"Who makes them?" asked Turbee.

Rahlson turned his head to one side and was about to tell Turbee how monumentally stupid he thought the kid was when he remembered their differing backgrounds, and Turbee's utter lack of experience with anything even remotely associated with firearms. "Why, Heckler and Koch, of course."

"How do you spell that, sir?"

This time Rahlson actually bit his tongue. But then he thought he saw Turbee's lower lip trembling, and thought about the effort it must be taking for the youngster to control himself in this situation. Oh Jesus Christ, he swore silently. He spelled it out. Turbee dutifully entered the letters into a little batch file he had created, and dispatched an armada of web-bots onto the Internet.

RICHARD WAS INSIDE the tiny terminal, one step ahead of McMurray, when he heard one and then the other helicopter explode. He felt the pressure and heat from each shock wave. Focusing his attention inside the terminal, he saw the Bedouin behind the small counter reach into his desert robes and bring up an AK-47. Richard was not famous for his marksmanship, but he did practice from time to time. His 9mm Glock had been in his hands

as he entered the terminal, and now he fired twice before the clerk could pull the trigger. Both bullets found their mark, and the man went down. A third shot finished it.

Richard bolted outside just in time to hear the sharp cracks of three rifle shots, and, almost simultaneously, another massive thud as a third RPG hit the fuel dump, causing further explosions in the area where Payton and his men had taken cover. It was a horrific scene. Thompson had been inside the second chopper when it was hit, and was killed instantly. Three of the men had been grievously wounded by the force of the explosion, and two more had died immediately in the fuel dump explosion. There seemed to be bodies everywhere, and they were all American. All men that Richard had talked to only to moments before.

The two attackers on the terminal roof had been killed by return fire, but that was small consolation. The Americans were without helicopters, without communication, without medicine, and probably without water, in the burning heat of the northern Sahel.

Clinton and Payton were looking after two of the soldiers who had been burned in the explosion. The third wounded man had already succumbed to his injuries. That meant that a total of four were already dead. Two were wounded and possibly dying. There were only four of them left to fight. Two Navy. One Army. One CIA. Things were not looking good.

“Payton, I’m going to see if there’s any water or first aid inside the terminal. Why don’t you move these two fellows inside.” Richard had seen his share of battle, but mostly from the sky. He knew about battlefield injuries, and had trained for this, but close up, the carnage and the moans of the two wounded men were horrific. He was fighting the impulse to vomit.

Payton yelled for Clinton to assist him, and they carried the two burned soldiers towards the terminal. As he was about to cross the doorstep, Payton saw dust clouds along the southern horizon.

“We’re not done with these guys yet, Richard!” he yelled.

Richard followed his gaze and saw the growing dust trails. He knew what they meant. “How long do you think?” he asked.

“Ten minutes. Fifteen tops.”

“Any place here where we can mount any kind of defense?” asked Richard.

“Doubt it,” Payton replied. He had just lost four of his men, and two more were badly injured. Although he was highly trained, he felt himself to be on the verge of shock. Reinforcements were coming, but for the wrong

side. "If we stay in the terminal, they'll just lob another dozen RPG's in there until we're Kentucky Fried Chicken. Or pick us off when we come running out. I think we're done."

At that point Richard realized that he still had his Sat-phone. "Maybe we can buy some time," he suggested. "Let's see if I can get through to the Theodore Roosevelt on this." He dialed Baxter, and got through on the first ring.

"Robert, we've been attacked. Four of our guys are dead, two wounded. And the locals have reinforcements coming," he said. "Can you put me through to the Teddy Roosevelt?"

"Jesus," replied Baxter. "I can switch the call. But I'm going to stay on the line." He immediately connected the call to the bridge of the huge carrier, and from there to Captain Dick Sebatier, commander of the four Super Hornets already screaming towards Yarim-Dhar at 1,300 miles per hour. "Richard, you're on," he shouted, to start the call.

Richard took a deep breath. "This is Richard Lawrence, CIA. We've been attacked at the Yarim-Dhar airstrip. We have four dead and two wounded. There are four of us left to fight. The bad guys are sending reinforcements in trucks. It looks like they're about 15 minutes away."

"We're stepping on the gas, up here, Richard. We have four Super Hornets, but we're 20 minutes out. Maybe a titch more. We're maxed out at Mach 1.7. You guys have got to hang on." This came from the commander of the planes.

Richard turned to his colleagues. "The Super Hornets are on their way. Twenty minutes, they said. Maybe a bit more."

"Dammit, Richard," said Payton. "Those trucks are only 15 minutes away. We're deep in the glue here. I don't think we're going to make it that long."

Richard wasn't so ready to throw in the towel. He didn't know if they were going to be able to get out of this, but giving up and accepting a fiery death in the middle of the desert wasn't high on his list of life priorities. "Maybe we can buy another five minutes or so. I have a plan," he said slowly, still thinking. He laid it out, and it was quickly critiqued and improved by the others. Then they set about putting it into motion.

While the situation was unfolding in Darfur, Baxter patched the DDCI into the telephone link. With the clicking of a few more keys on Admiral Jackson's phone, the President's office was connected as well. One more ring and the call was picked up; within a matter of seconds, the President himself

was given the telephone. It was still early morning in Washington, and he was reviewing the PDB with his senior staff. Thanks to the switching capabilities of the military, Richard's Sat-phone call now had the attention of the President, his Chief of Staff, the DDCI, Baxter, the bridge of the Theodore Roosevelt, and Captain Sebatier. All were listening with growing trepidation, powerless to do anything but wait.

As the seconds ticked on, Admiral Jackson outlined the situation for the President. "We've already encroached on Sudan's airspace with the two Night Hawks, sir. And we are now moments away from doing the same with the Super Hornets. We should call the Sudanese ambassador and brief him on this."

"Fuck Sudan," answered the President. "Those guys have been sending terrorists our way for more than a decade now. This was al-Qaeda's home turf for years. If they want to take on our F-18's, they're welcome to. It's about time it was a fair fight, I'd say."

"What should the press release say, sir?" asked Jane van Buren, his principal press secretary. "The world doesn't know about the missing Semtex yet. They'll wonder what a bunch of Navy boys are doing in the middle of the Sahara. There are no ships out there."

"Let's think about that later. In the meantime, I'm not going to deprive any of our boys of the protection they deserve. Have the Super Hornets go full tilt. Hang in there, Lawrence, my boy," said the President. "Hang in there."

THE SEVEN VEHICLES slid to a stop in front of the terminal. To one side, the wreckage of the two helicopters still burned. The fuel dump had been completely obliterated. The dust clouds kicked up by the trucks mingled with the smoke of the dying fires in and around the helicopters. The only sound was that of the desert wind, and the crackling of a few flames from one of the destroyed Night Hawks. Nothing moved for a full 30 seconds. Then the leader barked a sharp command, and crews from four of the vehicles disembarked and entered the terminal.

Richard, McMurray, Clinton, and Payton lay buried under the sand in a small dip approximately 100 feet in front of the terminal. Their four dead comrades were prominently displayed in the vicinity of the ruined helicopters; a chore they had all had found repugnant, but necessary. The two wounded men were even further behind them, also hidden by sand, a chore that had been even more disturbing.

Richard had clambered up the little ladder inside the terminal and found

that, as he had suspected, there was one RPG left — the accurate return fire provided by Payton and Clinton had prevented its launching. There was also one barrel of fuel that had not exploded, having been knocked away from the conflagration by the force of the explosion. McMurray, with his vast experience in explosives, had instructed the men on just how it was to be positioned. And then they had waited.

Now Payton initiated the silent count. Richard held his breath. This would be the moment of truth. On cue, the four rose as one. McMurray fired the RPG through an open window in the terminal. At the same instant, three rifles cracked. All three of the terrorist gunners fell, their bodies sprawling across the large-caliber machine guns mounted on the truck decks. Richard, whose bullet was meant for the driver, noticed sourly that he was the only one who had missed and hit the wrong man.

The terminal exploded when the RPG hit, propelling a number of bodies outward, one going spectacularly through the terminal wall. The quiet scene turned instantly into pandemonium. All the available AK-47's started firing in their direction. Richard knew that they had to capitalize on the element of surprise, or all would be lost. Three more of the Bedouin warriors were quickly taken down, but McMurray was nicked by return fire. That left three of them still able to fight. Three against a good seven or eight, with no cover, and no room to maneuver.

The leader barked a series of orders.

“What’s he saying?” asked Payton.

“He told them to get behind the trucks! He says there’s only a couple of us and they can pick us off easy! Wish I could tell you that he was saying ‘run,’ but that’d be a lie!” yelled Richard. He had to shout to be heard above the noise of the burning wreckage, gunfire, and explosions. Adding stress to an already bad situation. He turned to McMurray. “How’re you doing, Sergeant?” he asked the wounded man.

“Took a shot in my right arm. Just a flesh wound, but it’s my shooting arm. I can’t help you guys right now,” answered McMurray.

“Great. Three of us, and Richard, dammit kid, you need more training,” groaned Payton. All of them were envisioning scenes of American soldiers being dragged through East African village streets.

Richard saw that the leader was loading another RPG into his launcher. The Thuraya telephone was still with him, and still on.

“What the hell is going on?” asked Big Jack.

“We surprised them. We fired an RPG into a gas drum in the terminal just

as the bastards were entering it. We've killed or disabled about half of them. The rest are regrouping. They're getting behind their trucks. I can see at least one RPG launcher from here. They've got the high ground now. Where the fuck are those planes?" snapped Richard.

"We're two minutes away," said Sebatier over the communications link. "Look, we've got all kinds of armaments here. We've got Sidewinders. We've got AMRAAM's, we've got Vulcan Canon. But how far are you from the enemy?"

"About 70 or 80 feet," said Richard, quickly realizing the problem Sebatier and the other pilots were facing.

"This is not going to work. If we fire anything, you guys are at risk. We're a minute away, but if we let go with missiles, if we fire anything, we'll take you out with the bad guys," said Sebatier. "You'll be nailed by friendly fire."

"Here's what we do," said Richard, "and we've got to do it fast. You're coming up behind the terminal. The bandits are in front of the terminal and we're on the other side of them. The four of you will make one hell of a racket if you go over the terminal at Mach 1.7. How low can you fly?"

"Well, it ain't responsible flying, but the landscape is pretty flat. We can get down to 50 feet or so," Sebatier answered.

"Do it," said Richard, as he watched the leader of the Bedouin group casually attach a grenade to the end of his RPG launcher. "For God's sake, do it now! Go max speed! Do it now!"

Richard quickly explained what was going on to Payton, Clinton, and McMurray. "Cover your ears, boys. In less than 20 seconds we're getting four Super Hornets low and at Mach 1.7. The bandits here will tip over with the sound and surprise of it, and then we go for them. The trick will be to cover your ears, and then pick up your rifles the instant the sonic boom passes over us. They'll be temporarily deafened and confused. They won't hear our rifle shots."

Major Payton saw them first. Four dots on the horizon, coming up behind the smoldering terminal. The terrorist leader was still smirking, slowly bringing his RPG launcher level with the ground. He obviously thought he had them where he wanted them, and was looking forward to the imminent carnage.

"About ten seconds, guys," Payton said, watching the robed warrior casually poke around the corner of one of the Jeeps with his fully loaded RPG launcher. "Nine, eight..."

At that instant, Richard, even with his less-than-perfect vision, saw them. The four Super Hornets were growing dots low on the horizon, behind the terminal, moving at an incredible rate of speed. On the ground, the Arab leader of the group was serenely taking aim, smiling. He was the picture of arrogance, smirking with perceived victory, and utterly oblivious to the four F-18's bearing down in the sky behind him.

Suddenly an ear-splitting roar shattered the still desert air. Payton, McMurray, Clinton, and Richard had their guns down and fingers tightly stuck in their ears when the Super Hornets screamed by. They were less than 50 feet above the desert sands — a high-risk maneuver allowed only because of the desperate situation. They were so low that a long wake of sand kicked up from the desert floor as they flew over. The sonic boom that followed was so powerful that what was left of the burning terminal shuddered and collapsed. The Darfur warriors were completely unprepared for the incredible scream of eight General Electric F414 engines, each one generating more than 40,000 pounds of thrust. They dropped their weapons. One panicked and ran. The leader looked instantly upward, which exposed his face to the full force of the sonic blast. Payton and his men were ready. All took aim and fired, and then fired again. The ear-shattering force of the sonic boom had temporarily robbed the desert bandits of their hearing, as planned, and they did not hear the rifle shots. They saw their friends falling dead, struck by unheard and unknown weapons, and were frozen in place. Within ten seconds it was over. All the enemy warriors were dead.

“Did you get that, Mr. President?” asked Richard. “That’s what our fly-boys sound like at Mach 1.7.” He relayed what had occurred to those listening to the call, holding the phone so that the rest of his crew could listen in.

Captain Sebatier came back on the line. “Two more Night Hawks are on their way. They should be at the airstrip to pick you up in 15 minutes.”

“Thanks, guys. We’ve got wounded to look after,” said Payton. “By the way, Captain, that was one hell of a fly move. You should try that over the Potomac sometime.”

“Hell, let’s do it over the Hudson or LA. That was a blast,” replied Sebatier.

With that, the battle of Yarim-Dhar was over. The rush of victory abated as Richard saw the four dead, and the two wounded. They won, all right. Some victory, though. He could already feel the omnipresent headache increasing.