

HARD RAIN.

By David Rollins

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Prologue.

1991.

Southern Iraq, Highway 80, February 26.

Amjad, Raaghib and Daleel watched the Mercedes speed by in the last rays of the afternoon sun. A refrigerator was strapped to its roof, the power cord whipping around in the dusty slipstream like an angry viper.

‘I like those cars,’ said Daleel from the back seat, at age twenty the oldest of the soldiers. ‘They’re fast and comfortable. With a car like that, you could drive all the way from Kuwait City to Baghdad in a single day and not feel like you’d driven at all.’

‘We could have had one of those - there were many for the taking,’ Amjad replied, swerving around a rock on the road as the vehicle ahead of them had just done, before resuming his search of the airwaves, hunting for rock music. ‘Kuwait was a Mercedes-Benz parking lot. But this Range Rover was a more sensible choice. We wanted space, remember?’

‘Amjad’s right about the car,’ said Raaghib, trying on one of the pairs of looted sunglasses from the rack nestled between his knees. ‘Just look at all the treasures we’ve managed to squeeze into it. With all this jewellery and perfume, our mothers and sisters will think they’re in heaven. We can set up a shop – make money, get rich and fat like the Kuwaitis. Yes, this car was a good choice. And if the traffic slows down and we have to leave the road, it’ll eat up the desert sand like an American tank.’

Amjad shivered at the mere mention of American armour. From the shelter of a slit trench, he’d witnessed slack-jawed and terrified as a few Abrams M1A1s had annihilated twenty-eight Iraqi T-72 main battle tanks in a matter of minutes.

A sign flashed by in the wash from their headlight beams, indicating the turn-off to Basra a kilometre ahead.

‘I think Saddam was a fool to taunt the Americans,’ he blurted.

‘I’d keep that to yourself, Amjad.’ Raaghib taunted. ‘There’s still plenty of room in Abu Ghraib.’

‘He’s not the only person to say it,’ Daleel commented. ‘But look at all the cars behind and in front of us – all the way to the horizon in

both directions. Every one is full of spoils. The army is coming home rich. Iraq cannot fail to prosper from this.'

Raaghib felt that a change of subject was in order. 'I found pictures of Madonna. She has incredible pointed breasts. You should see them.'

'That woman is a whore,' Amjad commented, forcing aside the memories of battle. 'Not worthy of Iraqi semen. Though I'd still like to see these pictures.'

'So you can hide with them at night and spread your worthy Iraqi semen all over them?' Raaghib scoffed. 'I don't think so.' He pressed a button. The window slid down and he enjoyed a blast of warm desert air on his face. He looked up through the opening and noted that the stars were invisible, hidden by the haze of drifting oil fires. He hit the button till the window rose halfway, and sat back in his seat. They were making good time. The army was moving well on this beautiful road, speeding home to barracks at Basra. The attack on Kuwait had been brief – a blink of an eye compared to his father's war with Iran. But the Americans were a different kind of foe. They fought with weapons fired from the other side of the world. Or with secret, invisible planes that couldn't be shot down. Or with helicopters and other aircraft that turned tanks into flaming torches. Even the American soldiers he had seen looked more like robots than human beings. Perhaps Amjad was right. Saddam shouldn't have taunted the Americans.

Major Emmet Portman banked the A-10 Warthog gently away from the tanker's left wing while 'Razor', his wingman, edged his Hog forward and connected to the boom just vacated. This CAS – close air support – airborne alert shit had been dragging on for what seemed like hours. And yet, Portman hoped they wouldn't get the call. The weather down on the deck was crap: gusty winds, rain, and thick smoke haze from blazing oil wells.

The only reason they were flying tonight at all was because General Glosson had made it clear to the wing king that weather aborts were no excuse. Buster Glosson had also made it abundantly clear that

ground forces were to be supported at all costs; and the wing commander knew better than to do anything else other than salute smartly and say, 'Three bags full, sir.'

The VHF crackled to life: '*Slam Two-One, Moonbeam.*'

Damn it - Moonbeam. The A-B-triple C, the airborne battlefield command and control centre orbiting down near Q8. He and Razor were getting the call. The ensuing command informed them that they were in for a little BAI – Battlefield Air Interdiction, an attack against hostile land forces not in contact with friendly troops, but close to them.

Razor backed down and away from the boom, his off-load complete, then manoeuvred onto Portman's left wing to make room for the next flight in the line.

A handful of minutes later, they were approaching the coast, passing FL 120, twelve thousand feet.

Major Portman pushed the Warthog hard over when he judged the waypoint was reached, and began the descent through the undercast. He checked his airspeed. Somewhere below, approaching at around 320 knots, was the Iraqi army, while behind and below him were probably Apaches, AC-130 Spectre gunships, more Hogs, Strike Eagles, Vipers. *Damn*, it could really be crowded down there if the target area was as lucrative as it sounded. No doubt other flights were already probing forward and engaging the head and the tail of the column. Those Republican Guards, if that's who it was, were in for a hell of a fright; and their nightmare was about to go from bad to get-my-elite-goddamn-ass-outta-here.

Major Portman played briefly with his air-conditioning controls before giving up, sweat rolling down his neck. The crew chief had said the problem was fixed, but it patently wasn't – one of those gremlins that came and went with no apparent cause. Emmet waited until the altimeter wound back through 5000 feet, and then did what he'd been doing whenever he drew this jet: opened the vents and unclipped one side of his oxygen mask. The air coming through the vents was refreshingly cool and damp, though it smelt of burning crude from the oil fires, something he wished he could get used to.

At 3000 feet, the flight broke through the haze. 'Jesus...' Emmet said aloud, stunned by the unexpected spectacle below. On the billiard-table of the Kuwaiti desert was a highway crammed with

vehicles heading north-east; hundreds, maybe thousands, of vehicles, their headlights burning bright holes in the night - a conga-line of stars. It reminded him of the Vegas strip on Saturday nights.

The major continued the descent towards the brilliant column of moving light, levelled off 2500 feet above it, and selected the infra-red display from the Maverick missile located on station eight under the right wing. The missile's imaging infra-red nose camera magnified the picture on the road and delivered it in glowing white on black to the video screen on the upper right-hand side of the instrument panel. The picture on the screen was clear enough to make out individual vehicles from out beyond 3000 feet. And the picture told him there were trucks and flatbeds that were obviously military down there. The overwhelming majority of the vehicles, though, were civilian.

So this was the Iraqi army heading home, giving up on its occupation of Kuwait. It appeared that Saddam's finest had grabbed anything they could find to drive home in. Doubtless they'd also taken everything that wasn't nailed down to make the trip with them.

Emmet glanced behind his right shoulder and caught the glow of Razor's panelescents, which made the aircraft appear a ghostly green. He called the turn, then banked hard right and crossed the highway at right angles before banking again, another crisp, 3g, ninety-degree turn, making for the section of road allocated to him and his flight by the 'Moonbeam' folks.

Daleel saw the unearthly glowing green shapes moving low and fast against the black sky and wondered what they were, until a thunderous jet roar arrived a second later and overwhelmed the music blaring in his headphones.

'What was that?' yelled Amjad, peering up through the windshield.

Time to go to work. Major Portman reconnected his mask, pushing the bayonet firmly in place. He didn't want the mask sagging off his nose during the turns. He then re-checked his weapons loadout on his knee card: four CBU-58s on TERS – triple ejector racks - on stations three and nine, AGM-65 Mavericks on stations two, four, eight and ten. On station number one, outboard under the left wing, was the Electronic Counter Measures (ECM) jamming pod, and on the opposite side, the outboard station, was a pair of AIM-9 air-to-air missiles for airborne threats. He doubted the Iraqi Air Force would put in an appearance; so far, they were the only people in Iraq who'd shown a lick of common sense by staying home.

The allocated target was a stretch of highway choking with traffic, mostly of the expensive European variety, but interspersed here and there with military trucks and low-loaders. In this environment, the CBUs – cluster bombs - were out. With a fuse function height of 1800 feet, he could deliver them level but he'd have to pass straight and level over the target, and that would make him and his wingman susceptible to ground fire. And any other kind of delivery would put him and Razor them into the murk of those oily clouds. We'll go guns, he told himself, and break away at a mile to keep well clear of ground-fire.

After confirming intentions with Razor, Emmet performed a low-g one-eighty to line up on the target area. Razor did the same two seconds later, and then pushed up the throttle to get himself into position off his leader's wing.

Rolling out of the turn, the pipper on the head-up display settled down and showed Portman what he wanted to see – a sea of targets. He took the ECM jammer off stand-by and onto active mode, and selected 'Gun' with the Guns & Stores select switch. Master Arm – on. The light on the panel indicated that the weapon was ready to fire. A glance to his left revealed that Razor was where he should be, a thousand feet away, and line abreast.

A heavy truck between three others sat in the middle of the pipper. Now all Portman had to do was gently caress the trigger and the weapon around which the A-10 Warthog had been built, the fearsome seven barrel, thirty millimetre GAU-8 Avenger Gatling gun designed to stop a Soviet armoured thrust into Western Europe,

blasted into action. A two-second burst roared out from the Hog's nose and the cockpit filled with the familiar smell of cordite.

Within an instant, a hundred and four rounds of extruded depleted uranium alloyed with titanium and encased in aluminium, plus thirty-two rounds of HEI - high-explosive incendiary - smashed into the truck, destroying it completely. Gas and diesel fuel from the targeted vehicles combined with atomised human fats and other liquids producing orange flowers that bloomed high over the desert, rolling into the night sky. The shells from Razor's volley struck home moments later to underline the point.

Emmet brought the Hog around for another run as the column of traffic, unable to stop, piled into the burning, twisted wreckage and added to the carnage. Flaming vehicles continued to roll along, causing additional pile-ups that blocked all lanes of the highway in both directions.

The fireballs could be seen for miles against the black sky, beacons of destruction, harbingers of the horror to follow.

'What's happening?' asked Amjad with a mixture of wonder and panic when he saw them.

'The Americans have found us,' said Raaghib, fear cracking his voice.

'But we're *retreating* - why are they still fighting? They have won, *they have won!*'

The brake lights on the car in front suddenly lit up and its wheels locked. Amjad stamped on the brake pedal and wrenched the steering wheel to one side to avoid the collision. The Range Rover lurched into oversteer. Amjad caught the savage movement just in time and managed to bring the vehicle skidding to a halt. All around them could be heard the awful shriek of tortured tyres as the column came to a panic stop.

Daleel turned when he heard the noise. It was an Audi, travelling fast and sideways, out of control. The car ran off the highway and onto the sandy desert verge where it teetered on two wheels and then flipped and rolled. And rolled again. It finally came to a stop, dented,

rocking and steaming back on its wheels, one headlight still working, the inside of the cracked windscreen thick with blood ooze.

A whole series of explosions lit up the sky half a mile ahead and a couple of miles behind. Daleel glanced up as two jets flew low overhead, almost invisible against the sky. And Daleel realised he was crying.

A long convoy of army trucks pulled to the side of the highway, unable to move forward or backwards, came into Portman's view. Many were old-style lorries covered by tarpaulins. They were troop carriers, thoughtfully illuminated by all the headlights of the stalled traffic jam around them.

On the cockpit TV screen, he could see the hot images of men sprinting from the trucks as his trigger finger sent more 30mm rounds of DU on their way. Within moments, the troop carriers, as well as the troops themselves, were minced, shredded, and then blown to atoms. And then the heat generated by the fires consumed all the vehicles as well as the people running from the convoy in a massive and hungry conflagration.

'Fish in a goddamn barrel,' came a burst of pointless chatter in Emmet's headset. The voice wasn't angry, not in the least triumphant. Just stating a fact.

'Razor, stay frosty,' Portman reminded him, even though he agreed - fish in a barrel. Washington sure didn't want this army getting home safe and sound.

His wingman came back with a warning: *'Wino, tracer! Right, 3 o'clock!'*

Something clanged harmlessly off the titanium bathtub that enveloped the cockpit of Portman's A-10. If there was any complacency, he just snapped out of it. Threats from the ground had been low. There'd been sporadic small arms fire, identified by its green streaks shot randomly into the sky, but so far this mission really was a cakewalk. But it could easily turn ugly in a heartbeat if anybody down there had a trunkful of SAMs.

With the area now lit up by the fires, Major Portman reached over and selected the AGM-65s - the Mavericks - and went hunting along the road for large targets, Razor close behind. Thirty seconds later, he found them: fuel tankers, tanks, and artillery pieces - a column of maybe fifty vehicles - breaking out into the road's sandy verges, some of them probing for escape. Portman depressed a button on the base of the control stick grip, which enabled him to position the aiming gate. He settled the gate on an old Soviet-made T-72 main battle tank loaded onto a transporter, then released the button. It had a good lock, the missile's seeker head following the target. Portman tapped the trigger; the screen blanked - missile away. He thumbed the button again, moving the gate fifty metres down the road. He lined up on another target and released the button. *Shoot!* Again the screen blanked and the missile was on its way. Thiokol TX-481 solid propellant rocket motors accelerated the missiles to just under the speed of sound, while optical imaging guidance systems adjusted flight as the targets manoeuvred. Portman had nothing to do except look for more targets. Moments later, 125-pound warheads smashed into metal with such heat and force that the surrounding sand was fused into glass.

'Amjad! Let's go, let's go!' Raaghib and Daleel urged. 'Now! *Come on!*'

Amjad snapped out of his trance, jammed the gearbox into drive and floored the pedal. The Range Rover leapt forward and charged through some smoking debris, knocking it aside. Two armless men, blackened and bloody, suddenly appeared in the headlight beams, staggering from the burning wreckage of their vehicle, a Mercedes with a bent fridge hanging forward over the hood. The young soldier stamped his foot on the brake pedal to avoid hitting them.

'*Yebnan kelp!* Son of a dog!' Raaghib swore. 'Amjad. We can't do anything for them. Go! Go!'

The Range Rover accelerated onto the verge. Men were wandering everywhere in shock. An escaping truck ploughed through a group of soldiers, tossing them aside like a pile of store dummies, and didn't slow.

Major Emmet Portman was all out of missiles, except for the two air-to-air AIM-9s and the IR Maverick he now only occasionally needed to see with.

He pulled up into a shallow climb, re-engaged the Avenger gatling gun and gave it a quick test, tapping the trigger. The airframe shuddered the way it always did. Yep, still good. Levelling off, he glanced below and saw a cluster of vehicles still moving, begging to be obliterated by DU.

Amjad saw an armoured troop carrier two hundred yards ahead being pounded by an overwhelming force that seemed to push it into the ground like a bug mashed underfoot. Whatever was hitting the vehicle sparkled briefly before metal panels and chassis and engine simply burst into flame, just like the tanks he'd seen from that slit trench. Several cars either side of it were instantly flattened by this same sparkling force before erupting into cones of fire. Another armoured carrier seemed to crush itself into a ball a quarter of its size before a geyser of flame shot from its side. Men caught fire and ran around with their arms outstretched until they ran into each other or could run no more and dropped to the sand and continued to burn, screaming, gurgling.

The air coming through the A-10's vent smelt like a mixture of burnt diesel, human flesh and scorched French perfume. Portman had never smelt anything like it before. He gagged and instinctively flipped the oxygen to a hundred per cent. Perhaps it was the damn perfume making it somehow personal on a level that sickened him. He had smelt perfume like that before, handed out on cards by pretty saleswomen in cheap department stores.

He flipped the switch back to cabin air, but left his mask in place. The road disappearing over the horizon was a continuous string of bonfires. His eyes swept the instruments: temps, pressures, and RPMs, all normal. Plenty of fuel and the Avenger's hoppers were still just under half full of ammunition – 480 rounds. He had his orders, and there was plenty of equipment down there still reasonably intact.

Portman rolled into a dive, heading for a brace of trucks trying to make a run for it. He depressed the trigger for two seconds. The volley of DU lifted the first truck off the deck and caused it to curl in on itself like a snail curling around a hot match. The second truck was sawn completely in half, its tyres blown out and its steel body panels on fire. The third, fourth and fifth trucks seemed to be pushed beneath the desert sand before explosions ripped them apart.

A rush of heat and dust shot through the A-10's vents, enough to cause a tickle in Emmet's throat that resulted in a coughing fit. He banked away to find some clean air. *Fucking air-conditioner.*

And that's when he saw the speeding vehicle, lit up in the glow of the fires. It was a Range Rover – a new model. Nice little unit. Somehow it had managed to get away from the road, and now it was heading due north, bouncing across the sand at high speed.

Portman dived low and flew over the vehicle's roof. He then executed a climbing turn to bring the four-by-four into the Avenger's kill zone. The Hog came around, and Emmet lined up the Range Rover on the HUD. He compressed the trigger for a half-second. A whirring-vibration rattled up through the seat as a continuous stream of molten orange fire shot from the nose of the aircraft and sliced through the night.

Amjad and Raaghib heard the plane's engines before they saw its green glow through the windshield, passing low and fast overhead. But, Amjad reasoned, the Range Rover was black - in such darkness, perhaps they had a chance.

'Where is it?' Daleel asked, searching the night sky out of his window. 'Where is it?'

'Shut up!' said Amjad, wrestling with the steering wheel through a patch of soft sand. He needed every ounce of concentration to drive with the lights off across the desert at this speed.

Daleel looked back behind them at the highway and saw a ribbon of fire that stretched as far as he could see. He was about to say something about this when thirty depleted uranium and HEI shells drilled into the Range Rover, bringing it to an instant stop. The staggering kinetic energy released by the impact caused the DU and titanium alloy to ignite. They burned at 6000 degrees Celsius - the surface temperature of the sun - vaporising parts of the vehicle in a swirling cloud of superheated uranium aerosol.

The major's descending turn brought him back over the burning Range Rover, now reduced to a blob of liquid metal in the sand. That smell came through the vents again - the awful sweet perfume smell. And this time, he threw up.