

Weapon of Hunger
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Crossing the one pole barrier into the Nukha Mountains had been easy enough. Captain Yemenu had read the General's authorisation twice and ordered a thorough inspection of the lorry's cargo. While that was going on, amid protests from Jack Rivers that it would take all week to unload and load again, the Captain had sent a signal to the base at Adan. Then as abruptly as he had ordered it the Captain stopped the inspection and ordered them to proceed.

The road beyond the barrier was, as the General had warned, mostly not there. From time to time the driver stopped to allow Jack to roll some boulders out of the way before they could go on. On that first day they covered a mere fifty kilometres, the heavily loaded lorry creaking and groaning every metre of the way. The road had long ago degenerated to a deep gully that carried rainwater down the mountainside into the rocky ravines.

The driver was sweating profusely, licking his lips, shaking his head and muttering in Talacina, leaving no doubt he was wishing he had turned down Jack River's offer of two hundred dollars to get the lorry to Kalam and back. By the second day, it was too late to turn back.

They had started the long painful climb to the first ridge before the gorge, the road getting narrower and narrower before opening into -the plateau itself. On one side was the rough and rocky wall of the mountain. On the other side the road fell over a hundred metres into a ravine without end. There was no way they could have turned back.

From the look of it, Jack Rivers realised that the only way to go back was to travel the hundred kilometres down to the central desert turn the lorry and come back. No wonder the soldiers never went beyond the outposts on the northern slopes of the mountains.

It was on the afternoon of the third day of this tortuous journey that it happened. They were coming out of the second series of mountains towards the gorge when suddenly an armed man stepped from behind a boulder onto the road and signalled the lorry to stop.

They were travelling at such a slow pace it seemed superfluous to signal them to stop. However, instead of stopping, the driver panicked and accelerated. The truck leaped forward, swayed, and came dangerously close to flying off the edge into the ravine. The driver swung the wheel and, as the lorry came back under control, a dozen rifles opened fire.

Jack Rivers ducked under the dashboard as glass shattered and flew all over the cabin. The driver lost control. His head was blown off and the lorry rammed into the mountainside and stopped.

There followed a moment of total silence. Then, slowly, Jack Rivers raised his head to the level of the windscreen and looked out. Heavily armed men surrounded the truck, their guns at the ready. Their leader, a bearded giant with tobacco stained teeth, watched Jack Rivers for a moment then raised his rifle and aimed it at him. Jack watched, petrified. Instead of opening fire, the guerilla leader beckoned with the rifle.

Jack pushed the door open and hopped out. As he did so, a couple of men grabbed him, one on each arm, and shoved him to the ground. They frisked him quickly, efficiently and, taking his passport, let him go. They presented the passport to their leader who was at that moment barking orders to the others.

Jack rose and dusted himself. The lorry stood by the roadside, its cabin dented from its violent contact with the bank, its windscreen shattered, and the steel body pockmarked with bullet holes.

About a dozen heavily armed guerrillas watched two of their colleagues drag the body of the driver out of the cab and, as ordered, take it into the bushes for burial. Their leader, a huge black man with tangled wild hair and graying beard, watched briefly then turning ambled over to the shaken Jack.

"Your driver was a foolish man," he said.

Jack Rivers turned on him eyes that burned with anger.

"That's no reason to kill a man."

"Maybe not," said the guerilla leader. "But still he was a foolish man. Why he no stop?"

"You could see he couldn't get far," said Jack Rivers.

"Me, yes, but my men they do not see very good."

They stood by the edge of the road where the ground fell two hundred metres to the rocky floor of the ravine. A small black stream trickled through the rocks and boulders at the bottom.

The guerilla leader perused the passport in his hands. He glanced at Jack Rivers and spat tobacco juice from the corner of his mouth.

"My men do not trust big machines," he said.

Jack Rivers said nothing but continued to size-up the guerilla leader. The guerilla leader went on perusing through the passport. He studied the various visas intently and spat tobacco juice.

"So you are Jack Rivers," he said.

Jack Rivers said nothing.

"American," said the guerilla.

Jack Rivers eyed him quietly.

"Pop singer," the man appeared genuinely puzzled. "What job is that?"

"Music," said the American.

"Musician even," he went on shaking his head. "What do you want in my country, American?"

He spat tobacco juice at the feet of the American and handing back the passport said, "I too play music."

He patted the automatic rifle slung over his shoulder.

"With this thing I play terrible music," he said. "Music of death. Do you sing?"

"Sometimes."

"What do you sing?"

"Love," said the American. "And life."

"Of love, I know a little," said the guerilla laughing. "But of life ... one day you must tell me about it."

The American slipped the passport back into his pocket.

"No one comes this way but us," the guerilla told him. "Where are you going?"

"To Kalam."

"Kalam?" spat tobacco juice. "Most interesting. But there is no Kalam."

"Who says?"

"Who says? I say."

The American watched him doubtfully.

"Wait," he said. "I show you."

Stepping up on the running board of the battered truck, he reached onto the dashboard and brought out a road map. Without a word, he spread it for the guerilla leader to see for himself.

The man shook his head firmly.

"There is no Kalam."

"But it's right here, see?"

"Maybe," he spat brown juice. "But they have things on that map that are mostly no longer of this earth. That bridge there at Hugai. It is not there. My men blew it up last year. And this other place here you call Chemi. It is also not there. So also is Kalam not there."

Jack Rivers looked incredulously from the bully guerilla to the map in his hands. The map was dated a year before. He folded it thoughtfully wished he had heeded General Dinka's advice.

"You are going to a land that is mostly not there," the General had said. "You see things are not on the ground what they appear to be on the map. You wont find *Bandit Territory* marked on our maps but you'd do well to look out for them."

"Tell me about Kalam," said the American to the bandit chief.

"There is no Kalam," said the bandit chief.

He said it easily. Like stating that there was no water in the desert beyond. Something one did think about it until some stupid foreigner comes around asking about it.

"How come there is no Kalam?"

"How?" the giant spat tobacco juice. "I tell you how. First the Khamsin. All crops and things die on their feet. Then the rivers and the wells and all the Wadis and *Chem-chemi* dry up. You see," he spat tobacco juice, "no water, no rain, no anything. So the cows die, the donkeys die, the goats die, and people die too. People, as you know die most quickly. Dozens, hundreds of people die."

"The whole desert smell of the dead things in Kalam."

"Then," he spat again, "then the planes come down from Adan and blow everything to dust. Good, say the birds of the air, now we do not have to clean up."

He laughed. His men smiled. No doubt, the joke had been around a while. Not less than a year if the guerilla leader was to be believed.

"That is how come there is no Kalam," he said. "What do you carry in your lorry?"

Jack Rivers came to with a start. The thought did cross his mind to lie about the cargo.

They told me in Adan ...”

“What do they know in Adan?” said the guerilla chief. “What do you carry, I ask?”

“Food.”

“Food?” There was excitement all round. “That is very good.”

“Not for you,” Jack Rivers told them. “For the hungry people in Kalam and Bahadir and Jirom.”

The guerilla leader spat tobacco juice and smiled ruefully. He was being very patient.

“For Kalam you are late,” he said. “But for Bahadir and Jirom you will not get there mostly.”

“Why not?”

“Why not?” showing slowly mounting impatience at the stupidity of this American. “I tell you why not. First, the way is too long. Second, the way is too dry. Then the way is too covered with thorns, rocks, and some bad bandits until there is no road. So ...,” he again spat slimy, brown mess at Jack’s feet. ‘so ... how do you get to Bahadir and Jirom and all those places?’”

Jack Rivers looked from the bandit chief to the armed men. They seemed just a bit bored by the proceedings. Nothing short of a shoot-up could excite them. Next, Jack Rivers considered the shot-up truck and wondered how he had survived the fusillade of automatic gunfire. He should have listened to General Dinka’s advise and stayed in Adan.

The guerilla chief adjusted the curved dagger at his waist, adjusted the bandolier of ammunition over his shoulders, and spat more tobacco juice.

Jack Rivers watched, thought this was as good a time as any to admit he had made a foolish mistake and then turn back.

“Do you carry blankets?” asked the bandit leader.

He nodded.

“Good.” said the man. “It is what we need. You see we too are the victims of the drought. Open the lorry.”

Jack Rivers ignored him.

“Better still, you give me the key,” the armed man said stretching out his hand.

Jack Rivers shook his head.

“Not so fast. It is not Christmas yet. The cargo either goes to Kalam or back to Adan.”

The bandit chief looked from the American to his own outstretched hand with embarrassment. Obviously, he had never before met someone who refused to be robbed. He smiled coldly.

“You are a foolish kind of American, it is true,” he unslung his rifle. “What is this? What do you call this thing?”

Jack ignored him.

“I tell you,” spat more tobacco juice. “This thing is called Kalashnikov. That is a communist word meaning mighty club. You know what it is good for? I tell you. This thing is good for getting what I want. For my people and for myself. You see, my people, they want freedom and self-government. Things like that. Me too I want what they want, but I also want blankets for my men, for it is cold in the mountains.”

He paused to look up at the sound of a highflying military reconnaissance plane. As they watched, the plane turned and started to circle in the clear blue skies. The guerillas talked excitedly at each other. Their leader barked something in Talacina that silenced them. Then he turned to the American.

“Soldiers,” he said. They try to kill us all the time.” He spat more tobacco juice. “But when I see you driving this way my men say to me ... Babu, they call me Babu, they say to me, Babu, here comes someone very stupid or your prayers have been answered.”

He glanced upwards. The plane circled lower, obviously having spotted the stopped truck.

“But I think we must go now,” he said.

“Where?”

“I show you,” he said. “When my men bury your driver we must go. We must take the lorry, you understand. We must need the lorry to get where we are going.”

As he spoke, the four guerillas came back from the bushes where they buried the driver.

“We must go now,” he said again. “You drive.”

Jack glanced upwards at the circling plane and climbed into the driver’s seat. The guerilla leader walked round to the passenger side clambered aboard and slammed the door shut.

“Go.”

“Your men?”

“Do not worry, go.”

Jack hesitated, started the engine, and pulled slowly away. Caught by surprise by its sudden lurch the guerillas jumped to hang onto the lorry.

Their leader leaned out of the cab to shout instructions in Talacina that were lost in the wind, and the mad rush to board the moving truck. Then, turning to Jack Rivers, he yelled, "Go, I tell you. We must be to the pass before the bombs."

"What bombs?"

"You see," said the guerilla. "Soon you see."

Jack glanced upwards and saw nothing but the rocky mountains towering over them. He stepped on the accelerator. The truck careened dangerously along the rough trail and the guerillas hang on for their lives.

A couple of minutes later the mountainside erupted as the first rocket landed. The sound of the F5 fighter-bomber came a few seconds later, an ear-splitting scream that reverberated through the rocky mountains, more shocking than the crash of the rocket and the ensuing shower of rocks and soil.

"Whores," the guerilla leader swore, shaking his fist at the skies, but the jet was long gone.

The echo of its passage died away and was replaced by the laboured sound of the truck's engine.

"What now?" asked Jack.

The guerilla chief laughed.

"They come back," he promised. "You will see. When we get to the pass they leave us alone. It is dangerous to bomb the pass. Many planes fall there before."

They listened for the approaching scream of the returning jet. Futile exercise for, as they knew, one hears the sound of a fighter jet only after it has released its deadly rockets and passed.

Jack glanced in the rear view mirror. A guerilla hang one handed onto the side of the truck while, with the other hand, he tried to keep his hat from blowing away in the wind.

"Faster," yelled the guerilla chief.

The truck bumped on the stony surface of the trail. They heard the faint sound of the returning airplane. The guerilla leader covered his ears with his hands and laughed heartily.

A rocket slammed into the mountainside and bombarded the trail with flying rocks and fragments of shrapnel. The heavy truck ploughed through the debris, leaped over boulders, and swerving, came dangerously close to flying off the trail and plunging into the yawning gorge below. Jack Rivers fought the lunging and plunging monster to keep it on the narrow road. When he next glanced into the mirror, the guerilla with a hat problem was no longer hanging onto the side of the truck. He slammed on the breaks. The truck skidded wildly on the sandy trail and was lost in the resulting dust cloud.

"Why you stop?"

"We have lost a man,"

"Go, do not stop now," said the guerilla leader bringing his rifle to bear. "We are nearly there."

Jack released the breaks, trod on the accelerator, and let go the clutch pedal. The lorry jerked and lurched forward, as the noise of the jet caught up with them and drowned all other sounds. Rocket and machine gun fire rained down the trail. The mountain erupted repeatedly sending rocks, soil, bushes, and whole tree trunks hurtling through the air.

The guerilla leader was no longer laughing. He sat clutching at the door, eyes wide, and stared at the flying debris in awe.

Shutting his mind to the possibility of being killed on this wild country, Jack Rivers face was a mask of resolute concentration as he bulldozed through the increasing chaos and dodged the huge craters that popped open wherever the rockets landed.

As suddenly as it had started, the bombardment stopped. The smoke and dust fell behind.

"We beat them," cried the guerilla chief waving his fist at the sky. "We beat the sons of whores."

Jack drove for another fifty metres or so before slowing to a stop. The silence was overpowering after the racket of a few moments ago.

"We are safe here," said the guerilla chief opening his door.

They jumped down. The truck looked like a crushed and dented tin box. Gaping holes indicated where the shrapnel had struck, cutting through the steel body of the truck as if it was made of aluminium. Half a dozen or so guerillas hopped down from the truck and, amazed that they had survived, hugged one another.

A hundred metres back along the trail a guerilla picked himself up from the road and dusting himself walked nonchalantly towards the truck. The guerilla chief talked briefly to his men.

"The others are dead," he said to Jack. "They went down that way."

“How many?”

“Three, maybe four.”

“Maybe?” Jack Rivers was outraged. “You don’t even know how many men you have lost?”

The guerilla leader looked taken aback by Jack’s anger.

“I know.” he said defensively.

“How many?”

He made a dramatic show of counting his knuckles. His men watched with undivided interest. He smiled at them, turned to Jack.

“Three,” he said, “I have lost three men exactly.”

Jack wiped the sweat from his hands on the seat of his jeans, looked up at the empty skies, and shook his head. Slowly he walked to the edge of the road and looked down into the ravine, a sheer drop of about a hundred metres to the bottom. The guerilla leader strode over.

“Do not be sad, American.” he said. “You drive good.”

Jack Rivers shook his head.

“Not good enough. We lost three men.”

The guerilla spat into the ravine.

“Baah. But for you we would all be dead.”

“We lost three men,” repeated Jack.

“No, American,” the guerilla leader said angrily. “You lost nothing. I lost three men. But not to worry. I lose more men in one fight.”

Jack Rivers shook his head in despair and said to himself, “What am I doing in this terrible place?”

“Not your fault, American,” said the guerilla leader trying to placate him. “We should all be dead today. But you drive like a mad devil and we defeat death badly.”

The sky was a clear blue dome above them. Not a cloud in sight.

Jack Rivers lit a cigarette. Birds sang. The wind whispered through the bushes. The smell of cordite and death was barely perceptible in the languid morning air.

The guerilla leader popped a fresh plug of tobacco into his mouth and observed seriously.

“We must go now.”

Jack ignored him.

He stood simmering quietly for a bit, turned and shouted at his men to get aboard the truck.

“We must go now,” he repeated.

Jack continued to ignore him. Spitting angrily he gripped his automatic rifle and aimed it at the American. Jack glared at him and dared him to use it. The guerilla leader snorted and stormed to the truck. He climbed into the passenger seat and slammed the door. Jack allowed a respectable pause before flicking his cigarette into the gorge and climbing into the truck. Without a word to the guerilla leader, he started the truck and drove slowly down the trail.

Presently the road narrowed into the pass. The mountains rose rugged and hostile above them, turning the sound of the engine into a faint and forlorn sound. The passage grew narrower and narrower, so narrow that in places the guerillas hanging onto the sides had to get off the side of the truck and walk behind it so as not to be crushed against the rocky walls of the ravine. Driving at a walking pace Jack Rivers gave the guerillas time to hop off and back on as the situation warranted.

Finally, after a long and deep brooding, the guerilla leader spoke up.

“It is good we meet,” he said. “It is not your fault my men die. Do not be sad. You drive good, man. You drive like that we go everywhere. Say you want to Kalam, I take you Kalam. I take you Bahadir. I take you Jirom too. I take you everywhere you say. Hey, you are a clever kind of American.”

Jack glanced at him. The man stuck his hand out.

“I am called Shakira,” he said. “You kill me they give you much money in Assab. But is not possible to kill the jackal.”

Then he laughed merrily adding, “Now I take you Jirom. You know Jirom, no? My mother live in Jirom. Drive like crazy devil now. Go! Go! Go! But stay on road, ok?”

“What road?” Jack reached in the glove box for his sunglasses.

“This road,” said the bandit. “Stay on road, ok? My men lay mine everywhere. I take you many place, but stay on road, ok? Have you been Jijiga? Best women in Arrakan. I must take you Jijiga. Drive quick-quick, crazy devil, we go many place.”