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CLIVE CUSSLER'S FIRE STRIKE

A NOVEL FROM THE OREGON FILES



WRITTEN BY MIKE MADE



PENGUIN BOOKS

Clive Cussler's Fire Strike

Clive Cussler was the author and co-author of a great number of international bestsellers. His series include the famous Dirk Pitt® adventures, such as *The Devil's Sea*; the NUMA® Files adventures, most recently *Dark Vector*; the *Oregon* Files, such as *Hellburner*; the Isaac Bell historical thrillers, which began with *The Chase*; and the recent Fargo Adventures, which lastly included *Wrath of Poseidon*. Cussler passed away in 2020.

Mike Maden is the author of *Clive Cussler's Hellburner*, the critically acclaimed Drone series, and four novels in Tom Clancy's #1 *New York Times* bestselling Jack Ryan Jr series. He holds both a master's and PhD in political science from the University of California at Davis, specializing in international relations and comparative politics. He has lectured and consulted on the topics of war and the Middle East, among others. Maden has served as a political consultant and campaign manager in state and national elections, and hosted his own local weekly radio show.

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Juan Cabrillo Chairman of the Corporation and captain of the *Oregon*.

Max Hanley President of the Corporation, Juan's second-in-command, and the *Oregon*'s chief engineer. US Navy and Vietnam swift boat veteran.

Linda Ross Vice President, Operations. Retired US Navy intelligence officer.

Eddie Seng Director, Shore Operations. Former CIA agent.

Franklin 'Linc' Lincoln Operations. Former US Navy SEAL sniper.

Marion MacDougal 'MacD' Lawless Operations. Former US Army Ranger.

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Moulin Salan's number two and old comrade from the French Marine paratroopers.

Sergeant Angus Fellowes Salan's training supervisor and former British Special Air Service sergeant.

Risto Macedonian SurChev operative deployed to Dr Hightower.

Mat Malaysian SurChev operative deployed to Dr Hightower.

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‘History began when humans invented gods, and
will end when humans become gods.’

— YUVAL NOAH HARARI

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Prologue

Borneo, 1963

A drenching rain in the moonless night was perfect cover for the three Special Boat Section operatives.

The ‘wet cousins’ of the better-known Special Air Service, the SBS was a commando unit of the Royal Marines specializing in coastal insertions – hence the mission tonight running a Zodiac deep upriver.

A stubborn British national named Rawlinson desperately needed an emergency exfil from his family’s rubber plantation. The communist Indonesian insurgents raiding across the region were hell-bent on killing all foreigners and seizing their properties. A Dutch family just eight kilometers away had been decimated by the bandy-legged Marxists the night before and Rawlinson and his wife suddenly realized they were next on their list.

Private Desmond ‘Wraith’ Vickers killed the Zodiac’s big outboard Evinrude and the three men paddled the last five hundred meters in practiced synchronicity. They were grateful for the splattering downpour that soaked their kits but silenced their efforts. All three men scanned the dim shoreline for any sign of movement – of rebels, certainly, but also for Bornean crocodiles, thick as flies in this part of the country. So far, lady luck had paddled along with them.

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The lieutenant gestured with his free hand and the men angled the rubber-hulled boat toward the shore. They slipped noiselessly out of the Zodiac and dragged it into the cover of thick brush. Each man unslung their 'Silent Sten' submachine guns and checked their mags by feel. Vickers slipped his hand to his hip and patted the holster of his .38 Webley revolver, then he snaked his fingers down his thigh to the hilt of his razor-sharp Fairbairn-Sykes dagger in its well-oiled leather scabbard.

Good to go.

The lieutenant nodded in the direction of the plantation. Vickers, just eighteen years old and the youngest operator in the entire squadron, took the point, threading his way through the leaves and brush beneath the orderly rows of rubber trees. On base he carried himself with the self-possessed dignity of a landed earl, but in the field he moved with the preternatural grace and cunning of a jungle cat. His inaudible movements and sudden appearances had earned him the moniker 'Wraith.'

Vickers halted at the edge of the clearing that led to the darkened plantation house looming in the distance and scanned the perimeter yet again. The lights were off as per the lieutenant's instructions. So far, so good.

Confident that the way was clear, Vickers dashed for the house in a crouching run, his Sten up and his finger on the trigger guard. He silently prayed that Rawlinson remembered the lieutenant's order not to fire on them as they approached the house. A nervous British civilian armed with a loaded Lee-Enfield No. 1 could prove as lethal as any Indonesian killer.

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Vickers leaped onto the porch with quiet ease and gazed into the front window. The rain hammered the sheet metal roofing like a mad drummer. He saw no signs of movement inside as the lieutenant and Corporal Sterling, a hulking Scotsman, thundered up next to him.

Vickers shook his head.

The lieutenant's eyes swept the shadowy perimeter once again before he crossed over to the front door and kicked it open with his muddy boot.

Vickers charged in first, gun up, with Sterling – his closest friend – hard on his heels, and the lieutenant right behind them.

'Rawlinson!' the lieutenant called out. 'It's the Queen's own come to get you out of here!'

Nothing.

'Sterling, head upstairs. Wraith, check the back.'

The two men sped away as the lieutenant pushed open the basement door. He pulled the light chain and called out again. 'Rawlinson! Don't shoot. We're here to get you out. Are you there?' He jogged down the wooden staircase and scanned the dank room. All he found were undisturbed storage shelves laden with canned goods and household sundries.

The lieutenant climbed back upstairs into the kitchen. Vickers and Sterling shook their heads.

Nothing.

'Rawlinson may have already bugged out without telling us,' the lieutenant said. 'But we can't take any chances he's still on the property. Sterling, check the storage shed out back. Wraith, head over to the machine shop. I'll sweep the perimeter. We'll meet back at the drop-off point

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in fifteen minutes, no exceptions. And give it some rice. Understood?"

Heads nodded. Sterling added, 'Sure, boss.'

The suffocating heat came on as suddenly as the pounding rain had stopped and raised a shroud of fog from the waterlogged ground.

The lieutenant's eyes strained in the dark as he crouched at the drop-off point near the boat. No sign of his two men. He checked his watch. Where were they?

'Boss.'

The lieutenant flinched, startled by Vickers's sudden appearance behind him, seemingly out of nowhere. The boy really was a ghost.

'Any sign of the Rawlinsons?' the lieutenant asked, his whisper masked by the din of chirring insects and croaking frogs.

'Behind the machine shop. Throats slashed ear to ear.'

'Dear God. And Sterling?'

Both men heard the crash of leaves ahead of them, but didn't see the –

Thump!

A Chinese-made 'potato masher' hand grenade splattered in the mud at their feet.

Wraith shoved the lieutenant aside and threw himself on the explosive.

'Vickers!' The lieutenant reached down to grab him, but a bullet plowed through his skull.

His corpse thudded into the mud next to Vickers.

'Boss!'

Vickers crawled to his knees and scrambled over to the

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lieutenant's corpse. The Chinese grenade was a dud, but the bullets zipping overhead were very much alive and threatened to cut him down, too. No matter.

Vickers slipped away as the Indonesians advanced through the rows of rubber trees. The air echoed with the ripsaw staccato of their automatic-rifle fire as rounds splintered the bark and branches.

Vickers raced perpendicular to their advance, silent as a shadow, then turned north.

Emboldened by the lack of British resistance, the Indonesians shouted and laughed as they emptied their magazines into the bush where the lieutenant had fallen. Moments later, they stood over the commando's shattered corpse.

They had no idea that Wraith had completely flanked them from behind.

Vickers fired his silenced machine gun at the shadowy figures. His bullets found their marks as he emptied the thirty-round mag, stitching across the backs of the Indonesians from left to right, felling them like bowling pins into the mud. Two were left.

Vickers reloaded and angled his gun at the last two rebels ducking behind a tree – one a head taller than the other – and suddenly froze.

Sterling!

Vickers could now see the tall Scot was gagged and his arms bound behind his back, pushed along by the shorter communist, who held a pistol to the base of Sterling's spine. The smaller Indonesian hid behind the big Scot, using him as a human shield as he maneuvered between the trees.

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Bastard.

Vickers circled through the trees, using the trunks for cover as he closed the distance between them, trying to flank him yet again.

Panicked, the Indonesian spun in circles, keeping Sterling close in front of him, one hand around the Scotsman's neck, uncertain where the next gunshot would come from.

Vickers rested the barrel of his Sten on the side of a tree for stability and sighted his weapon at the spinning figures, waiting for the chance –

Pop!

A single 9mm bullet tore into the Indonesian's chest and dropped him to the ground.

Vickers raced out from behind the tree and straight for Sterling.

His mouth still gagged and his hands still bound, Sterling saw Vickers emerge from the trees and shouted a muffled scream.

And then he turned, and ran.

‘Sterling! It’s me!’

The Scotsman took three long strides before the British L2 grenade – tied around the back of his neck – exploded.

The Indonesian had booby-trapped him. By looping his finger through the grenade pin, the Indonesian’s corpse pulled it when he fell away, just as he had planned.

Vickers stopped dead in his tracks, the air ringing with the rising cacophony of insects and the distant, angry shouts of more rebels in the forest beyond.

What had he done?

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With the bodies of Sterling and the lieutenant safely secured in the Zodiac, Vickers gunned the throttle, not caring about the roar of the big Evinrude motor nor the splash of bullets geysering the water around him. The boat rose high out of the water as it rocketed away, his tear-streaked face cooled by the warm air beating against it.

Her Majesty's Naval Base, Singapore

Two weeks later

Admiral Bromley glanced up from the file folder on his burnished teakwood desk and crushed out his cigarette in a silver art nouveau ashtray.

Vickers sat upright in his crisply ironed Royal Marine uniform, its creases sharp enough to shave with. His shoes were polished to a gleaming mirrored gloss in stark contrast to the blank expression on his handsome face.

'I refuse to sign this,' Bromley said, stabbing a letter in the file. 'You're one of our finest soldiers and a tremendous asset in Her Majesty's service. We can't afford to lose you.'

'I believe I've made my reasons clear, sir.'

'Nonsense. The board of inquiry found you completely innocent of any wrongdoing whatsoever. No one holds you accountable in the least – except yourself.'

'My best friend is dead because of my actions.'

'Your best friend is dead because a fiendish communist cutthroat killed him. I urge you to see things as they truly are.'

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‘I’ve tried, sir.’

‘Tell me, Vickers. Do you like military service?’

‘All I ever wanted to do since I was a young schoolboy was to serve my country. The day I earned the Bootneck green beret was the greatest day of my life.’

‘Your uncle, Sir Edmund Vickers-Hart, was the finest officer I ever had the privilege to serve with. Judging by your exemplary service record, it’s clear you and he were cut from the same jib.’

‘I take that as the highest compliment, sir, though I doubt I deserve it.’

‘Would you consider a transfer away from your beloved Bootnecks and into the Royal Navy?’

Vickers frowned. ‘I could never allow myself to be put in a position where I might risk the lives of my comrades ever again.’

‘I quite understand.’ The admiral held up his pack of cigarettes. ‘Care for one?’

‘No, thank you, sir.’

‘Good for you. Filthy habit.’

The admiral lifted a silver Dunhill lighter and lit another cigarette. He blew a cloud of blue smoke as he studied Vickers’s file again.

‘I noticed here a number of letters of support from your commanding officers and enlisted comrades.’ He held one up for closer inspection. ‘This one says you are “well liked, and highly commended for his manners, deportment, and diction.”’

‘A reflection of my Eton education, I’m afraid.’

‘It also seems as if you have quite a flair for the finer

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things in life.' Bromley held up another letter. “‘Something of an amateur sommelier,’ this officer states.’

‘One of the many privileges of my upbringing as the son of a landed viscount.’

‘Frankly, I could use someone like you on my personal staff.’

The admiral came out from behind his desk.

‘Sir?’

‘It’s a position as far away from close-quarters combat as I can imagine. But it is honorable service in Her Majesty’s Navy. It’s a position that requires discretion, tact, and taste. I think you’d be perfect for it. Shall I tell you about it?’

‘Please do.’

Vickers’s eyes narrowed as he listened to the job description. It only took him a moment to decide.

‘Honorable service, indeed, sir. I had never considered it before.’

‘I only foresee one difficulty.’

‘Sir?’

‘You served with one of the finest commando units in the service, and participated in several top secret missions. Missions that were, shall we say, off the books?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Well, when you transfer to another branch, so will your records, and we can’t have unauthorized eyes raking over them. To avoid that, we’ll have to seal your records permanently so that no one may know of your service with the SBS. In fact, we’ll have to terminate the service of Private Desmond Vickers. He’ll disappear to “parts

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unknown,” so long as you’re in uniform. After you retire, you may resurrect him if you wish.’

‘I understand.’

‘That means, of course, we’ll have to create an entirely new service record for you. A new name, background, everything. How do you feel about all of that?’

‘If it gives me the freedom to serve Queen and country, I’m all for it.’

‘Excellent. I’ll have my adjutant make the necessary arrangements. In the meantime, take a few days off and enjoy Singapore. It’s a truly marvelous city.’

Vickers stood, a smile creasing his face for the first time in weeks.

‘Thank you, sir.’

The admiral extended his hand. Vickers shook it.

‘I look forward to our relationship, Vickers – Oh, say. While you’re gallivanting about for the next few days, you will need to conjure up a new name for yourself. A nom de plume, as it were. Something quite the opposite of your given name.’

Vickers frowned, his mind racing for an answer.

‘I believe I have it.’

The admiral beamed. ‘Excellent. Tell me, then, with whom shall I be working?’

‘Last name “Chavasse,” after an uncle on my mother’s side. Killed at El Alamein.’

‘My condolences. Excellent choice.’

‘For a middle name I’ll go with “Morley” for a cousin I lost in Korea.’

‘We lost too many good men in those godforsaken hills. And the first?’

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Vickers smiled. ‘My father’s manservant was buried in our family plot last year. I admired him greatly. Terribly wounded at the Battle of the Somme in 1916. He was awarded a Croix de Guerre with an *étoile d’argent* for valorous service.’

‘A hero by any measure. His name?’

‘Maurice.’

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I

Present Day

*Gorno-Badakhshan
Autonomous Region, Tajikistan*

The vintage Soviet-era snowcat crested the final rise on the steep climb. Its big diesel engine belched a plume of oily smoke as it roared with the effort. It had taken three hours clanking through a narrow pass high in the towering Pamir Mountains through the swirling snow to reach the ancient Tibetan fortress. It loomed above the forested valley floor, perched on the edge of an insurmountable cliff. Its sturdy walls could resist the siege weapons of its day, but the fort's remoteness and sheer inaccessibility had always been its primary defense. All but the most determined visitors were deterred from even venturing here. How the mighty stone edifice had ever been built by ancient hands in this location several hundred years ago remained a mystery.

The snowcat finally ground to a halt just opposite the short drawbridge crossing the abyssal chasm. The cab door opened and a sturdy Chechen in a sheepskin coat and boots leaped out, then opened the rear doors for the seven esteemed guests.

The passengers – six men and one woman – stretched out knotted muscles and aching backs from the long, monotonous ride. They had sat in silence for the entire

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trip, sizing each other up with sidelong glances in the snowcat's spacious but utilitarian cabin. Outside in the frigid air, their breaths jetted out of their mouths, but the vapors were quickly swept away by the biting wind.

The morbidly obese Venezuelan, Yeferson Osorio, was the head of security for South America's largest drug cartel. His red-rimmed nostrils and eyes suggested he was addicted to his own product. Despite the temperature, he didn't button up his gaudy, full-length ermine coat and his shoulder-length hair danced in the snowy breeze.

Osorio was familiar with the elegant Russian, Yakov Mityaev, and the bespectacled Chinese woman, Wu Shanshan, from the reports he'd read. Like him, they were the functional equivalents of security chiefs for their respective criminal enterprises, heading up organizations with intelligence-gathering assets that equaled or exceeded the capabilities of most nations. Had Osorio known these two world-class dirtbags were attending today's gathering he would have made other arrangements entirely.

The Venezuelan couldn't identify the others, but he assumed they were high-ranking members of their respective security departments as well. The tattoos peeking beyond the collar and sleeves of the Japanese man identified him as a yakuza even without the missing finger. A portly, clean-shaven Indian; a silver-toed, cowboy-booted Mexican; and a Thai highlander wearing a bright yellow ski parka that reached to his knees rounded out the rest of the passengers.

Osorio wondered if there had ever been a gathering of this level of criminal technical talent before. Police

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organizations around the world would salivate at the opportunity to gather them all up in one fell swoop.

The Chechen called into his walkie-talkie and a moment later the fort's portcullis rose on its chains. He pointed the seven visitors toward the cavernous entrance, where a tall soldier in a civilian snowsuit waited for them, a rifle slung over one shoulder. A third, shorter man stood by his side with a wand to check for weapons and other contraband items.

The seven invited shuffled toward the gate, their apprehension rising with each step. What lay beyond could change their lives forever.

Or end them.

Osorio silently fumed at the importunity of yet another weapons check as he stood inside the airport-styled millimeter wave scanner. He raised his arms above his massive head for the third time that day. These people were taking their security precautions seriously. He'd counted at least fifty armed guards as he made his way through the ancient castle. It would have been impossible to assault the fortress with any hope of success.

The former Cuban intelligence officer monitoring the wave scanner fought back a smile as he examined the digital readout of the rotund gangster. Osorio's thick beard couldn't fully hide the double chin waddling beneath his jawline. At just over six feet tall with a size sixty-four waist, the Venezuelan crime boss was built like an enormous avocado. His designer-label green velvet tracksuit, though quite expensive, only added to the comic effect.

Despite his poor physique and even poorer health, the

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crime boss came fully vetted and possessed more than sufficient funds to qualify for today's auction. The unfortunate man had to climb five flights of stairs because the ancient fortress had no elevator. Sweat beaded his forehead. The Cuban was surprised the Venezuelan hadn't dropped dead of a heart attack with the exertion. How they would have ever managed to move his four-hundred-pound carcass from the narrow stairwell without a forklift would have been anyone's guess.

The Cuban signaled for Osorio to quit the booth as he whispered in his comms, 'All clear.' He nodded at the smaller bins on the table. 'Your jewelry and watch will be returned to you after you finish your business with Mr Martin,' he said in Spanish.

Osorio answered him in the same language. 'Make sure they are, *pendejo*.'

The insult wiped the solicitous smile off the Cuban's face. His eyes narrowed as a voice command reverberated in his earpiece. He turned toward the guests.

'*Señor y señores*, we have one last stop. Please follow me.'

Osorio snatched up his ermine coat from the bin on the nearby table and followed the Russian and the Chinese into another room, where a portable retinal scanning station had been installed. The ex-intelligence officer pointed at the seat just vacated by the Indian.

'Ms Wu' – not her real name, of course – 'if you please.'

Wu nodded and took the seat, and the technician gave her instructions. She leaned forward and placed her chin on the machine's chin rest. Moments later, the retina of Wu's right eye had been scanned and her identity validated. Mityaev followed suit, as did Osorio, who grunted

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with the effort of mounting the small plastic chair and rising from it.

‘Time for business.’ The smiling Cuban escorted the seven invitees to a final waiting room. It was well appointed with luxurious, locally crafted furniture. Bottles of wine and iced tins of beluga caviar sat on a long table, along with a silver samovar, bottles of water, glasses, eating utensils, and the like.

‘Please help yourselves to refreshments. Señor Martin will be with you momentarily.’

The Russian and Chinese helped themselves to cups of steaming hot tea from the samovar while Osorio cracked open a bottle of water. The others picked at the slabs of goat and sheep cheeses, or tore off hunks from the giant wheels of colorful tandoor-baked flatbreads. Nobody wanted their thoughts clouded by alcohol. They all took a seat in comfortable chairs.

They drank in silence as they watched the large LCD television display. On it, a tall, raven-haired woman in baggy gray prison coveralls paced the floor, her thick-soled running shoes squeaking on the worn stones at each turn. Occasionally she would stop and stare up at the high-def CCTV camera recording her every move. One of her sparkling green eyes was blackened above her high cheekbone, and her lower lip slightly swollen. She looked like a runway model who had taken a nasty spill in a bicycle crash. She’d obviously had a rough time of it somewhere along the line.

Osorio recognized the face. He wondered if the others did as well. He hoped not.

Things could go very sideways if they did.

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A lean, angular man with wide cheekbones and a long face stepped through a doorway. His silver hair was short and precisely combed. He wore a smartly cut Savile Row suit, handcrafted Paolo Scafara leather shoes, and a Jaeger-LeCoultre wristwatch. He looked every inch the well-heeled European corporate executive that he was, of a sort.

‘Madam, sirs. Thank you for coming, and thank you for your patience. I know it’s been an arduous journey and our security precautions extraordinary. All of that has been for your protection as much as ours.’

The man’s English was faultless, but Osorio detected a slight Eastern European accent. Bulgarian, if he wasn’t mistaken. He doubted Martin was his real name.

‘My family has been in the kidnapping game since before the fall of Constantinople. I will be so bold as to say we not only invented the business model, but have perfected it. Our auctioning service delivers the highest-quality assets in a manner designed to protect each of the participating parties, including ourselves. Tonight is no exception.

‘Your respective organizations were contacted because you alone are able to afford the payment we require. As previously communicated to each of you, all bids will be made and paid for in undiluted isotonitazene, known by its street name, ISO.’

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Osorio hid his disgust. ISO was nasty stuff. The latest DEA studies concluded that the synthetic opioid was up to one hundred times more powerful than fentanyl. It was so new to the market that drug enforcement laws and agencies were having a hard time even keeping up with it. The highly addictive and lethal concoction was rare and difficult to produce, which made it all the more valuable.

Martin continued. 'As you are well aware, the asset we have up for auction is the senior systems engineer for the American DEA's Intelligence Program. As previously communicated to you, she has the ability to grant you access to all DEA databases and any other police and intelligence organizations they are connected with, including Interpol, the National Counterterrorism Center, and the FSB, to name a few. Undercover operations, their agents, informants, home addresses, bank accounts – the list of actionable intelligence is endless. Consider what value such information would add to the success of your organizations. Equally important, consider the advantages such information would give you over your competitors.'

Martin didn't bother adding the phrase *Including those gathered in this room*, because he didn't need to.

The seven heads nodded. Suddenly their fatigue and irritation disappeared and they sat up in their chairs.

'The added value we've brought to this transaction is our own impeccable service. As previously communicated to you, we arranged for our asset's untimely death in an all-consuming fire. As far as the DEA is concerned, her remains were unrecoverable. Therefore, no one is looking for her. She is yours to use as you see fit with no

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fear of authorities searching for her or seeking retribution against you.'

'Is she cooperative?' Mityaev asked.

'Exceedingly so, though of course she initially resisted. But now that she has been fully apprised of her hopeless situation she has become quite compliant. We also briefly employed our own time-proven methods of persuasion.'

A few knowing chuckles burbled around the room.

Martin smiled. 'All of you received supporting documentation and video evidence to validate the asset's bona fides. I assume you verified them independently or you wouldn't be here this evening. Am I correct?'

'Why state the obvious?' Osorio grunted in his thick Spanish accent.

'Then I shall proceed. You have all received prior written instructions, but let me repeat them here.

'First, each bidder will be allowed five minutes alone with the asset. You are not permitted to touch the asset or offer her any form of food, beverage, or technology. In short, you are not permitted physical contact of any kind. Doing so immediately disqualifies you from the bidding process. Any attempt to harm her in order to deprive others of her value will be dealt with most harshly.' Martin nodded to one of his grinning Chechen goons standing in the corner. He wore an enormous blade on one hip and an even larger semi-auto pistol on the other.

'However, you are allowed to ask as many questions as you like to satisfy any other concerns you may have. She understands the penalty for noncooperation, so I believe you will find her quite forthcoming. However, make the best of your limited time.'

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‘Second, your session will be neither broadcast nor recorded for utmost privacy.’ Martin pulled a remote out of his pocket and killed the CCTV camera feed. ‘We understand that questions you may ask of the asset could have implications for the other bidders present and so we respect your privacy and security. Even in the event you don’t win the bid, you may gain some valuable intelligence that would have made your inconvenient travels worthwhile. I should also note that we ourselves have no interest in the asset’s information nor its importance to any of you. All we care about is your final bid. Any questions?’

There were none.

‘Third, each bidder will only be allowed to submit one bid. The highest bid wins and is final, so make sure you offer your highest possible bid. There will be no post-bid negotiations or offers accepted.

‘Fourth, after each bidder meets with the asset they will submit their written bid within five minutes and then retire to the guest lounge. The next bidder will then be allowed to enter the cell for five minutes, and then have an additional five minutes afterward to submit their bid. The third will have the same opportunity. After all seven of you have submitted your bids, you will leave the premises and be transported back to the airport. Each of you will then be contacted by text exactly twelve hours later. The winner will then indicate where the asset is to be delivered and we shall make immediate delivery in good faith. We understand the challenge you face acquiring and transporting such large amounts of ISO. Nevertheless, we require payment within thirty days of delivery.’

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Martin's friendly demeanor suddenly darkened. 'Anyone who betrays our faith will suffer accordingly. The so-called untimely death of the prime minister of Zanzibar and his entire family last year is just one such example, rare as they are.'

Osorio remembered reading about the fatal plane crash. Authorities ruled it was the result of a pilot error. Apparently, they were wrong.

'Finally, for the security of the winner, the winning bidder will not be identified nor the amount of the winning bid announced. Any questions?'

The room fell silent as a heavy hand of expectation hung in the air.

'Then *vámonos*,' Osorio grunted. 'Let's get started.'

Martin flashed an oily smile.

'I should also add that there is a minimum bid. I refuse to name that amount because bidding will cluster around that number. We want to maximize our profits. You need to bid the largest possible amount that you can provide within thirty days. If no bidder meets our minimum price, the asset will be terminated along with the possibility of her future auction. Shall we begin?'

'Who goes first?' the Russian asked.

Martin stepped over to the long table. He reached into his pocket and pulled out seven white poker chips marked with the numerals 1 through 7 and dropped them tinkling into a ceramic vase. He gestured toward the vase with his hand.

'Please hold your chip until the last is drawn. Ms Wu, you're first.'

Wu stood and crossed over to the vase and drew a chip.

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Martin directed the other bidders in turn. Osorio was the last to draw. The bidders all stood in a loose circle.

Martin placed the vase up in front of Wu first, then Mityaev and finally Osorio.

‘Please show your chip to the other bidders.’

They did.

Wu was pleased. She would go last.

Mityaev was even more pleased. He was first.

Osorio hid his discomfort. Number two.

Not good.

Osorio was counting on being the first interrogator in order to give his plan the best chance to work. But he could only play the cards he was dealt.

Exactly five minutes after he crossed the hall and entered the asset’s cell, Mityaev reappeared, his handsome faced dimmed by a blank poker face, a skill he no doubt cultivated as a former colonel in the GRU, Russia’s military intelligence agency. Osorio knew the very lack of any kind of emotion meant that the Russian liked what he heard and would no doubt be putting in a significant bid. Mityaev had been in charge of the GRU’s infamous Unit 74455, the spear tip of Russia’s cyber warfare operations. It would be a disaster if he took the woman back to Moscow – though not for the reasons the Russian could imagine as yet.

Osorio cast a quick glance at Wu. She was a cool customer for sure. She reacted to Mityaev’s poker face the same way Osorio did, but pretended not to. But the subtle shift in her breathing told the Venezuelan that her own ferocious curiosity regarding the asset had been piqued.

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That was bad. If anything, she was even more dangerous than the Russian. She was a former People's Liberation Army intelligence officer now working for China's largest criminal triad.

Osorio drained the rest of his water and crushed the bottle in his meaty fist before letting out a belch that would have impressed a bull elephant seal. It had the intended effect of breaking the concentration of the other bidders. Mityaev used up his entire five minutes in a mock display of indecision and annoyance, but it was clear he had made up his mind before he left the cell. In order to avoid appearing too anxious, he waited until his allowed five minutes were up.

'Mr Mityaev, your bid?'

Mityaev scratched a number on the provided pad, then dropped the folded paper in the same cup as the others. He nodded at Martin and headed back to the banquet table, making a beeline for the beluga caviar.

'Mr Osorio, I believe you're next.'

The Venezuelan turned toward Wu. 'Ladies first?'

The Chinese snorted and shook her head. 'I think not.'

Osorio nodded dejectedly, then raised himself up, leveraging his enormous weight with his hands against his jiggly thighs.

A surly, almond-eyed Turkman with a Tokarev pistol on his hip opened the heavy steel cell door.

'Your five minutes begins the moment the door is shut,' Martin said.

'Comprendo.' Osorio stepped through the door and it shut behind him with a clang of ominous finality.

Here goes nothin'.

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3

The woman looked up from her cot. She was clearly surprised to see the Weeble-shaped crime lord. She looked haggard but defiant. Osorio was grateful for that.

Osorio bit down hard on the false cap on his left rear molar. This activated a tiny jammer that would block any audio and video signals. Martin may have killed the CCTV feed to the outer room, but there was no guarantee he still wasn't monitoring what was going on in the cell. They were safe now.

‘Good evening, Mrs Cabrillo.’

The woman's eyes narrowed with confusion as a smile creased her mouth. ‘Cabrillo?’

‘Juan and the same.’

‘Like I've never heard that one before.’ She looked him up and down, incredulous. ‘You've gained a few pounds since I last saw you.’

‘Livin' la vida loca. We've got less than five minutes to bust you out of Bram Stoker's castle before the vampires come to get you.’

‘If you'll look around, I believe you're stuck in the same rat trap. Any ideas?’

‘A few.’

‘A few?’

‘Okay, one.’

‘It had better be a doozy.’

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Juan Cabrillo stripped off his green tracksuit, exposing his enormous body carpeted back to front in curly black hair.

Gretchen Wagner turned up her nose. 'I don't remember you needing to shave your back. Or all of the other parts. Gross.'

'So judgy. Why did I ever marry you? Four minutes, thirty seconds, by the way.'

'You didn't. That was just our cover in Nicaragua, remember?'

'Guess we dodged a bullet, eh?'

'The night isn't over yet.'

Juan Cabrillo slipped a finger into a carefully concealed joint fold beneath one of his rolls of latex blubber. He found the Velcro fastener and zipped open his enormous belly. Inside it contained everything he needed for the escape – except for the time they didn't have. He was wearing a bodysuit comprised entirely of thick latex, designed and built by Kevin Nixon and his Magic Shop aboard Cabrillo's ship, the *Oregon*, along with facial prosthetics, wig, and even body hair. The heavy rubber suit was of sufficient density to defeat any wave millimeter or other probing devices, including most metal detectors. Even Juan's artificial foot and leg were built with acrylic bones, and covered with the hairy skin-colored latex to appear completely lifelike. As an additional precaution, his technicians equipped him with the fewest metallic materials possible in the unlikely case a more advanced detection device was deployed.

'Here, help me with this stuff,' Juan said as he pulled out prepackaged items from his rubber gut. The largest

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ones were vacuum sealed and compressed to fit inside the belly compartment. The suit and its contents added nearly two hundred pounds of weight to Juan's body frame.

Though he was an excellent undercover actor, all of his straining and grunting had been for real. Fortunately, he was an expert swimmer and could handle the load, but the exertion had caused him to sweat like a Cajun at an RV show.

'Take this.' Juan shoved an oversize plastic needle dispenser into her hand. 'And hurry. Just three minutes and twenty-two seconds left.' He was confident of the number. His mental stopwatch was as accurate as a Thomas Mercer marine chronometer.

'What is it?' Wagner asked.

'Cyanoacrylate on steroids, the ultimate superglue. Hit the doorjamb with this, especially around the locking mechanism, and it'll weld it shut. Don't get any on you. And hurry.'

'Got it.' Gretchen bolted past Juan and got to work, squirting as much of the stuff as she could deep into the cracks.

It took another forty seconds for Juan to climb out of the sweat-drenched latex bodysuit. The rubber Osorio fell to the floor in a heap of hairy, skin-toned Jell-O like a boneless corpse.

'I think I saw that scene in *The Thing*,' Wagner said as she dashed back over, nodding at the monstrosity on the ground at Juan's feet. 'Only, you're no Kurt Russell.'

Juan then peeled off a pair of synthetic long johns, also dripping with moisture, and tossed them aside. He stood naked as a jaybird. He'd sweated off at least ten pounds of

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weight with all of the effort he'd exerted carrying the heavy load for the last several hours. His already ripped muscular physique was even more well-defined and glistening with sweat. His musky body odor suddenly filled the room.

Wagner let out a little whistle as she eyed him up and down. 'That's the fake husband I remember. Door's finished. What do you need me to do next?'

'Two minutes until they start pounding on that door,' Juan said as he picked up the heaviest package, waiting for the perspiration to evaporate from his skin.

'Didn't you bring a "Do Not Disturb" sign with you?'

'I asked for the honeymoon suite. I assumed it came with the package. Help me with these.'

Juan pulled out the ceramic knife and cut open the heaviest package. It was comprised of shaped directional charges – blocks of C4 plastic explosive with thick Kevlar plates for backing. He slapped the self-adhesive brick onto the thick stone wall, the first of several that could blast a doorway-sized hole.

'I thought I saw a retinal scanner out there when they brought me to this cell,' Wagner said. 'How'd you get past that?'

'My man Murph swapped the files of Osorio's retinal scans for mine.' Juan slapped another directional charge into place. '*No problema.*' He handed Wagner a block of C4.

'How did you manage to pull *that* off?' She fixed the explosive brick onto the wall and grabbed another one.

'Long story.'

In fact, Osorio was currently in American custody in a

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secret offshore facility. His capture was the only reason any of Juan's crazy plan was even possible.

Gretchen Wagner was a senior CIA field operative posing as the DEA intelligence executive. Her mission was to find and identify the members of the mysterious organization run by Martin, whose real name was Count Ludovico da Porto, the head of a family crime syndicate dating from the time of the Borgias. Their current base of operations was in Bulgaria, but they were a worldwide network.

The good news was that Wagner had successfully contacted the da Porto organization two weeks ago. The bad news was that the kidnapping syndicate was far more efficient and clever than Langley had supposed. Though her cover hadn't been blown – in fact, it had been *too* good – she was whisked away and her death convincingly faked. The CIA panicked because they had no idea where she was or what had really happened to her.

Juan's CIA contact informed him of Wagner's kidnapping. He'd immediately reached out to his nefarious underworld and dark web contacts, whom he worked with on occasion. It was from them he learned about a mysterious upcoming 'auction' of an important DEA asset taking place in seven days and further discovered that the Venezuelan Osorio was invited.

What da Porto's organization didn't realize was that Osorio had been coincidentally swept up in a CIA operation just hours after his invitation. Osorio's outfit couldn't inform da Porto of the development because they had no way of reaching out to 'Mr Martin,' who had a specially encrypted cell phone delivered to Osorio. All

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communication was strictly sent by da Porto and only received by Osorio. The CIA had recovered the phone when they picked up Osorio and now it was in Juan's possession.

Just thirty-six hours ago, Juan – now posing as the corpulent crime lord – got the call to be at a remote location outside of Karachi, Pakistan, where he was loaded into a private plane and flown to Tajikistan.

And now he was here.

As Gretchen slapped the last C4 brick into position, Juan opened up another package and tossed the rolled garment to her.

'Pull that on.'

'What is it?' Wagner asked as she shook it out.

Juan grinned as he unfurled his with a snap.

'A wingsuit.'

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4

Juan pulled on the forty-pound parachute harness as Wagner did the same. She was better parachute-jump qualified than he was. More important, she had spent more time in a wingsuit than he had. That wasn't saying much. She had done it only once and hated every second of it. Tonight was Juan's first attempt at navigating one.

'Thirty seconds,' Juan said. He tossed her a pair of ski goggles. 'Hurry.'

Juan had already pulled on a pair of cold-weather pants and a shirt, and another artificial carbon-fiber leg, along with a pair of boots and a Bivouac 9000 mechanical altimeter he'd had stashed in his big Venezuelan gut. As he snapped on his own pair of goggles he pointed Gretchen toward the far corner along the exterior wall. Staying parallel to the explosion was their best chance of avoiding the blast radius.

'Ten seconds,' he said as they both crouched down. 'Get behind me. Open your mouth, plug your ears, and shut your eyes.'

Juan unfolded a collapsible multi-threat Kevlar ballistic shield and held it up in front of him. It wasn't much protection from the blast and concussion, but it was all they had. The place would be humming with stone shrapnel in seconds.

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‘One escape route, coming up.’ Juan punched the remote wire detonator.

The C4 bricks blew in sync. The blast rang in Juan’s ears like a siren and vacuumed the air out of his lungs faster than a Hoover upright. He felt chunks of rock pummeling the Kevlar shield where he held it with his hands.

He turned toward Wagner. ‘You good?’

‘What? I can’t hear you?’

‘You’re good. Let’s go?’

Juan dropped the shield and leaped to his feet. A gaping hole was ripped out of the wall. The room was choked with dusty smoke that smelled like burnt diesel. The acrid cloud was already being dissipated by the swirling snow-storm now licking inside their shattered cell. He heard distant thumping behind him. His brain registered fists beating on a faraway steel door – probably the one just behind him.

Juan dashed across the rock-littered floor to the jagged doorway framed by stones that looked like broken teeth. There was just enough room for him to stand in it. The slashing air caught his fake beard and slapped it around like the hair extensions floating above his head.

He turned to Gretchen, whose ears and nose were leaking blood.

‘On me.’

She nodded.

Without another word Juan turned and leaped into the snowy void.

The eye goggles helped, but icy snowflakes in subzero wind hitting his face at a hundred and seventy kilometers

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per hour scoured his skin like a Brillo pad. Not exactly a day at the spa.

But that was hardly Juan's biggest problem.

He had gotten a quick demo on how to fly the wingsuit from Eric Stone back on the *Oregon*, though 'demo' was probably too generous of a term. It was more like Eric showing him a video game simulating a wingsuit flight and Eddie Seng, an experienced wingsuit jumper, walking him through the process of suiting up and actually flying the thing. Eddie volunteered to take Juan's place, but since there was a high probability of capture or worse, Juan took the mission for himself, despite his total lack of experience in a 'flying squirrel' suit. Gretchen Wagner was an old friend. His only real fear was failing her.

'The biggest thing you need to watch out for is gusting wind,' Eddie said with a final warning. 'It can kill you.'

His words were prophetic, Juan thought, as he battled the gusting winds pummeling him from all directions.

The snowstorm had picked up in intensity since he'd arrived at the fortress over an hour ago. He had no idea it had gotten so bad until he stood in the hole in the blasted wall and felt the wind battering him. But there was no going back.

Juan had checked the weather reports when they were putting together the plan for this op. There was always some kind of wind whistling through the mountains in this region, which contained some of the highest peaks on the planet. It was because of those winds that a straight parachute jump from the top of the fortress had been ruled out. The wingsuit idea was their best and only option.

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The initial dive into the snowy night felt like every other night jump he'd ever done. The difference was that he wasn't falling straight down. He and Wagner had to cross over twelve kilometers of rough mountain terrain to reach the clearing down on the forested valley floor. That's where George 'Gomez' Adams would pick them up in the AgustaWestland AW609 tilt-rotor.

In order to cover that distance, Juan had to slow his descent as much as possible and that meant stretching out his hands and legs in order to maximize the aerodynamic qualities of the wingsuit. That changed his geometric profile to something akin to a maple leaf and the turbulent wind was playing havoc with his stability. He felt like he was trying to hold on to a sheet of plywood in a hurricane. It didn't help that his entire body was numbing from the freezing temps.

The only way to avoid the turbulence was to draw his arms to his sides and close his legs and form an arrow, minimizing his wing surface. But as soon as he did this his speed accelerated to over two hundred and forty kilometers per hour – and so did his descent. His only hope was to feel his way between the two extremes, alternately surfing the breaking waves of air or plunging through them like a spear, the noise of the rushing wind roaring in his ears.

He didn't have any way to communicate with Gretchen and he couldn't turn around to check her progress. Chances were that she was doing a lot better than he was. If she survived the ordeal she would be able to notify Juan's next of kin – except he didn't have any.

Through the swirling flakes clouding his vision he

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could barely make out the forest clearing far up ahead. There was no sign of the tilt-rotor and he was losing too much altitude too fast. The automatic aviation device in his parachute pack would fire off his canopy as soon as he hit two hundred and fifty meters, and according to his altimeter that was going to happen any second –

Fwop!

Juan's parachute deployed. Too soon, he thought.

There was still a long way to go.

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Juan's ram-air parachute deployed perfectly, jerking his frame as it snapped open. He gripped the leather loops of his steering toggles with his nearly frozen fingers, alternately cupping and flaring the canopy, trying to keep it on course through the buffeting winds. He was having about as much success as a plastic shopping bag fighting a leaf blower.

And the trees were coming up fast.

Spinning around in a haphazard loop, he managed a glance up and saw Wagner several hundred meters above him, dancing the same aerial dance beneath her black canopy, and struggling as much as he was with the wind.

Suddenly he felt his body drop as a violent downdraft collapsed his chute like an invisible fist pushing down on a pillow. Just as quickly as it hit it disappeared and the canopy reinflated, but not quick enough to keep him from crashing into the trees.

Pine needles scraped his face as he plummeted through the branches until his silks finally snagged on one. He jerked to a hard stop and found himself dangling five meters above the snowy forest floor. The freight train noise of rushing wind ceased in an instant, all sound absorbed by the blanket of snow and trees. The utter sensory stillness was instantly calming until he heard the faint, mosquito-like whining of engines in the distance.

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Was it the AW's twin Pratt & Whitney turboshafts? No, he decided. Those were thunderously loud. Snowmobiles.

He counted two. Even if all they carried were a couple of slingshots he was in big trouble. Stuck up here he was helpless as a kitten. He hoped Wagner had fared better.

As if on cue, Juan heard her crash into the trees a hundred meters behind him. She cried out in pain as she snapped to a halt. He turned around in his harness, but he couldn't see her.

‘Gretch! You okay?’

‘I think my wrist is busted. Where are you? You good?’

‘All good. Just hanging out. We have company on the way.’

‘I hear it. Can you get me down? I’m stuck.’

‘Let me see what I can do.’

The two former Russian mercenaries had received the prisoner escape message from their commander. They could hardly believe his description of the incredible wingsuit stunt. Minutes later they both saw two parachutes struggling in the high winds above the forest.

It was an insanely brave move to try and wingsuit their way out of the fortress, they agreed, though insanity was the better explanation than bravery. Their orders were to recover the woman unharmed, but to kill the man they called the Venezuelan if he offered any resistance.

They gunned their turbocharged four-stroke Yamaha Sidewinders and raced across an open area toward the chutes falling in the distance. Snow rooster-tailed behind their fast machines. They reached the edge of the forest

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nearest where they thought the parachutists had landed and dove into the tree line. It took another ten minutes slaloming through the sturdy pines to reach the area where they thought the asset and her rescuer had descended.

‘There!’ one of them said in his helmet comms, pointing high in the branches just up ahead. Gretchen Wagner hung helplessly in her harness several meters above them, suspended by a ripped chute perilously clinging to a single branch. Suddenly the air began to beat with the heavy chop of big rotor blades.

‘That’s a helicopter,’ the first merc, a former Army sergeant, said. ‘One of ours?’

‘In this weather? Must be a rescue mission.’ The second merc had been a corporal in the same Army unit.

‘Go check it out. Shoot it down if you have to. I’ll take care of the woman.’

‘What about the Venezuelan?’

‘Shoot him if you see him. Otherwise, I’ll find him. Go!’

The Russian nodded, cranked his throttle, and sped back toward the sound approaching the clearing.

The other Russian killed his engine and got off his sled. His boots sunk down into a foot of soft snow. He opened up his face mask as he trudged over to Wagner’s tree and called up to her.

‘That was a very stupid thing you did,’ he said in labored English. ‘Mr Martin is very angry with you.’

Gretchen answered him in Russian. The mercenary laughed.

‘You kiss your mother with a mouth like that?’

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‘Who do you think I learned it from?’ she replied. ‘Make yourself useful and get me down from here.’

The former sergeant pulled his sidearm and glanced around, searching the trees.

‘Where is your Venezuelan friend? I’d like to ask him a few questions.’

Gretchen pointed in the direction of Juan’s tree. ‘He’s over that way, about thirty meters. Stuck in the branches like me. Don’t hurt him. He’s not such a bad fella, even if he is my ex-husband.’

‘I won’t hurt him . . . much,’ the Russian said, laughing, as he climbed back onto the Yamaha. The rotor sounds were louder now.

‘Definitely a helicopter . . . but one I’ve never seen before,’ his friend reported over the comms. ‘Civilian, no guns.’

‘Then take him out!’

‘Will do, Sarge.’

Moments later, automatic-rifle fire echoed in the valley and the roar of the turbines changed as the helicopter began evasive maneuvers.

The ex-sergeant goosed the throttle and wended his way through the trees, his eyes scanning the treetops in search of the Venezuelan’s parachute.

That was a mistake.

The Russian picked his way forward at a crawl until he saw the flapping shroud high in the branches up ahead. He killed the engine and jumped off his sled as he drew his Archon Type B pistol. Dashing behind a tree for cover, he gripped the gun in both hands and pointed it at the parachute. His eyes narrowed as he tried to get a better view.

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Just as he realized the harness was empty, Juan exploded up out of the snow at the mercenary's feet and drove a ceramic-bladed knife into his groin. The Russian cried out as he dropped his gun.

Cabrillo finished the job with a couple of quick thrusts and left the man in the snow.

The other mercenary gunned his engine and chased the AW609 for several hundred meters, firing at the tilt-rotor with one hand and his other on the throttle. Despite the snowstorm, he could see his rounds sparking against the aircraft's metal skin.

He heard the big Yamaha turbo engine screaming out of the woods before he saw it. He turned around to see his helmeted comrade racing straight at him.

‘Grab your rifle, Sarge! I’ve already hit him once! We can take him down!’

‘Hold your fire! But stay with him!’

The corporal didn’t understand the order, but he knew to obey it. The *podonok* probably wanted the pleasure of shooting down the helicopter himself.

He slowed enough to shove the rifle back into its plastic scabbard, then slammed the throttle again, turning the snowmobile to match the AW’s turn. The odd-looking machine was circling the clearing, waiting for something to happen. But what?

The AW continued to turn and his sergeant’s Yamaha was coming up fast. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the big machine screaming through the snowstorm and coming right at him.

Before he realized what was happening, the sergeant’s

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snowmobile slammed into his rig with a roaring crash. The merc was tossed hard out of his seat, which probably saved his life because the other Yamaha climbed right over it, the ripsaw track tearing up the saddle and everything else underneath it.

Buried in snow, the stunned merc reached for the pistol in his leg harness, but the helmeted figure leaped off his sled and crashed into him, driving his knees into the Russian's gut and knocking the wind out of him. The Russian felt his helmet ripping off his head just as the giant rotors of the descending AW appeared right above them, the rising sound of the blades nearly deafening. The rotors kicked up so much snow that the Russian could hardly make out the helmeted man standing over him, holding the corporal's own pistol in his hand and pointing it at his face.

Cabrillo pulled off his helmet and tossed it aside.

Before the AW even touched down, two *Oregon* operators – Eddie Seng and Raven Malloy – leaped out of the cabin door with rifles drawn and stormed over.

'It's your lucky day, Ivan,' Juan said in excellent Russian, one of three foreign languages he spoke fluently. 'We're going to go for a little ride in my tilt-rotor. You're going to tell me everything I want to know and then I'll drop you off. How high that drop is will depend on how quickly and how well you answer me. *Ponyatno?*'

'*Da, ponyatno!*'

'Where's our package?' Seng asked Cabrillo.

'She's in the trees. We'll have to rope her out.'

Malloy nodded at the Russian. 'What happened to his friend?'

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