

It Should be Simple!

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CHAPTER 1

The Intruder.

Wearing a dark neoprene bodysuit and full-face mask, the willowy figure crept silently through the building of the London, Geological Research Centre. Apart from a couple of sleepy security guards on the front desk, there was supposed to be no one else in the building. A fake by-pass swipe-card allowed the person to enter any door or office, and was given a detailed layout of the building. Eventually, on the tenth floor, the door to the research laboratory was entered and he/she went in. It was very difficult to assess in the dim light whether it was a man or woman, but the person was very slender, agile and light-footed. A magnetic, digital box with led lights and a keypad was placed onto one of the large metal filing cabinets. Once a few buttons were pressed on the keypad, the lights flashed in sequence, and the electronic security lock for the cabinet opened. As the intruder began searching and photographing a large number of documents inside, a noise was heard. The intruder quietly closed the cabinet door, took away all the components and knelt beside the cabinet. After a short while, one of the corridors passive infra-red sensors (PIR), picked up the movement of someone walking down the corridor towards the laboratory, and automatically switched on the lights. The dividing wall between the laboratory and the corridor was split, with the lower half being solid, and the upper half

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forming a long, opaque window. During daylight hours, it allowed more natural light into the laboratory, but at night it also allowed a passer-by to peer into the laboratory. This made it easier for the security guards on their inspection rounds. The intruder realised that he/she could be seen, and went to the door to crouch down as low as possible.

Professor Allan Jenkins' office was on the same floor, and he was holding an unscheduled video conference with a member of his team at Yale University, New York, USA. It helped with the time difference to hold the conference late at night, and for the other members of the team, who were based at Oxford university, and Hereford, midnight was not too late for them. The professor wanted to show them some important data for their upcoming research trip to China, and realised that it was locked in the research laboratory filing cabinets. He explained to his team that it would not take him long to get the documents.

'Talk amongst yourselves for a few minutes... I won't be long.'

When he approached the door to the research laboratory, Professor Jenkins, who was not a strong man, tried to open the door, but it appeared to 'stick'. He muttered to himself.

'This door always gives me problems... I must remember to report it tomorrow.'

The intruder, behind the door, listened and hoped it would deter the man from entering, otherwise force would be required to restrain him. Following a couple of failed attempts to open the door, Professor Jenkins used his shoulder to barge into the door.

'Wham!'

The door opened very quickly and crashed into the intruder's head, knocking the person out. Professor Jenkins was shocked, as he saw a dark suited, and fully masked body lying on the floor.

‘What! Oh my! What on earth is this?’

The professor knelt down beside the intruder and noticed that he/she was wearing a full-face mask. He muttered to himself again.

‘This person must have come to rob the place or something... but there is nothing of value here.... I shall alert the security guards at once.’

Before he went to a wall-mounted telephone, Professor Jenkins decided to remove the intruder’s face mask. He gasped at what he saw.

‘Oh my! It...it’s a woman! ... How unusual!’

No sooner had he removed the mask, the intruder regained consciousness and jumped to her feet, bowling the professor over. The female intruder grabbed her equipment and ran out of the research laboratory, using a fire escape to get away. Professor Jenkins was left stunned, as he had never experienced anything like that before. With the fire alarms now ringing throughout the building, Professor Jenkins knew that he had to evacuate to the assembly area outside of the building. He suddenly remembered the video conference, and dashed back to his office. The American guy was getting annoyed at having to wait.

‘Hey professor! I have another meeting soon, so, can we finish this?’

Professor Jenkins spoke to them all.

‘Please forgive me! However, an intruder was in the building and has set off the fire alarm on her exit...I...I must attend the assembly area as part of the safety routine.’ The man in Hereford questioned.

‘Professor! You said ‘her’... Are you saying that a woman was trying to rob the building?’

The noise of the fire alarm bell was disorientating the professor.

‘No! I mean Yes!... I will contact you another time... I really must go.’

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He switched off his video call and grabbing his mobile phone, he ran to the elevator. Then he realised that in case of a fire. He was told not to use the elevator. He had no alternative but to walk down the emergency staircase. Breathless, he eventually made it outside to the assembly area, where he met one of the security guards.

‘The...There is no fire.... But there was an intruder in the building.... and ... she used the fire escape to get away... I don’t think anything was taken.’

The security guard could see that Professor Jenkins was very stressed and sweating from the long walk down the stairs to safety.

‘Are you alright professor? Do you want medical assistance?’

‘No! I am fine, but it was me who disturbed the intruder, and she set off the fire alarm... I am sure that nothing was taken... I will get my staff to check everything tomorrow.’

‘OK professor. We will carry out a complete search of the building when the alarm has been reset. Just to make sure there are no other intruders.’

‘When can I get back into the building? I have to collect my briefcase before I can go home.’

‘The fire brigade has just arrived, and they shouldn’t be more than thirty minutes. I will let them know that there isn’t a fire, but they have to check everything.’

‘I understand.’

An hour later, the police had finished questioning Professor Jenkins, and he was allowed to go home to his house in Derbyshire. Normally, he would stay in a rented apartment when in London, but as he was feeling stressed, and decided to return home for a day or so. Before he left the office, he called his wife to let her know what had happened and why he was going home. As it was almost 2am in the morning

Mrs Jenkins was very concerned to be getting a phone call from her husband.

‘Allan! Are you alright? Why are you calling at this time?’

‘Emma! There has been an intruder in our offices and...well, I am coming home for a few days until the police have finished their investigation.’

‘Are you hurt! Did you see them?’

‘I am fine, and yes, I did see one of them.... A woman, but she got away.... I will explain all when I get home.’

It took Professor Jenkins just over three hours to get to his home in Ashbourne, Derbyshire. At that time of the morning, there was very little traffic, and it gave him time to think of reasons why anyone would want to break into an old research centre. The work they were doing was important scientifically, but of no great monetary value, and he could only assume that a rival organisation had resorted to such tactics to obtain his research material. By the time he arrived at his house, he had decided to concentrate on the upcoming research trip to China. As he pulled onto his driveway to the remote house, nestled in the quiet hillside, his wife opened the door to greet him.

‘Allan, I was very worried... are you hurt in anyway?’

He took his briefcase from the backseat of the car, and went into the house with his wife holding his arm.

‘Emma, really! ... I am fine, and you don’t have to fuss...It happened very quickly, and I gave the police all the details.’

She led him to the kitchen and sat him at the table.

‘I have made you a fresh pot of coffee, and I will make breakfast if you wish.’

‘Coffee is fine Emma, and then I will relax... I don’t want to go to bed just yet.... I want to go over my speech for the press conference.’

‘Very well dear, but you should relax and de-stress.’

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Professor Jenkins relaxed in his favourite armchair and began to review his speech, before nodding off into a deep sleep. A little later, his mobile phone rang, which woke him up. He was a little disoriented, but eventually answered it.

‘Hello!’

An electronic voice spoke slowly and clearly.

‘Is that Professor Allan Jenkins from the London Geological Research Centre?’

‘Yes! Yes, it is... To whom am I speaking?’

‘Listen very carefully professor.’

‘Who! What is this...Who are you?’

The mystery voice paused for a few seconds, before continuing.

‘We know all about your research trip to China, and what you will be looking for... You will be contacted soon to provide us with specific details of your research data. If you do not comply, then we will kill your family.’

The voice went silent to allow the professor time to comprehend what was happening. A few minutes later, the voice continued.

‘We know where you live in Derbyshire, England. We know everything about you and your family.... If you contact the police, or anyone, we will kill your family. We will give you detailed instructions, and you must keep us informed every day as to your location and research status. You must report any important findings you have during your field trip.... Do you understand?’

The phone went dead, and Professor Jenkins sat shocked.

He did not know what to do, or whether to let his wife know... or even call the police. He sat in his chair until dawn before he moved, and kept thinking about the contents of the call, which was very sinister indeed. The situation was no clearer for the professor by the time Emma called the children to breakfast. She brought her husband a cup of tea and fresh toast.

‘Allan, do not think about work today... you have to relax, as I can see that you are stressed... There is no school for the children today, so we should all go for a walk in the hills.’

Professor Jenkins agreed with his wife, that a little fresh would clear his mind and relax him. Though, he knew the threats were serious, and he did not want to risk the lives of his family.

There were only ten days to go before he gave a press conference for his upcoming research trip to China. Apart from Professor Jenkins, the whole team were ready. As they were all looking forward to finding and testing samples of rock that lay deep beneath the mountains of Northern China. All the early research signs were good, which managed to convince the sponsors to go ahead with the full research trip. Professor Jenkins hoped that the incident at the research laboratory with the intruder, and the phone call, were not linked, but there was a nagging doubt in his brain that said they were. He did not want to cause any stress to his family, or his team, and decided to keep everything to himself. The police investigation to the break-in proved negative, although, they promised that a patrol car would pass-by as often as possible. The research centre also carried out its own detailed investigation, and although certain documents were out of place or in the wrong file, there was nothing stolen. However, they could not rule out the possibility of photograph copies taken of some documents. The facility IT department also carried out a full investigation of their computer system and changed many of the passwords, and updated safety protocols.

The days were passing by quickly, as final preparations were made to all those involved. Everything had to be planned in

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advance, including transport, accommodation, and supplies. Not to mention, the mass of paperwork involved in such an expedition, which involved at least three major nations. Nevertheless, despite his problems at home, Professor Jenkins and his team were keen to get underway, and the excitement was beginning to build. Five days before the press conference, Professor Jenkins finalised his press briefing, and printed out several bulletins and handouts. To maximise press coverage, e-mails were sent out, together with invitation reminders to all of his sponsors and supporters. It was decided that the team would fly to China, three days after the press conference, which was good news to those in UK and USA. That afternoon, when he finished work, he checked the messages on his phone, but none were from those who had threatened him. He hoped that it was all a hoax, and that nothing else would happen before the flight.

Around 1pm the same day, a large 4X4 vehicle drove up to Professor Jenkin's house in the remote countryside of Derbyshire, England. Two, well-dressed Asian men in dark coloured suits and wearing sunglasses, along with a slim Asian woman in a dark business suit, also wearing sunglasses, got out of the vehicle. The woman slowly walked up to the house, whilst the men stayed a little way behind her. The men looked all around the area looking for anything unusual, and each held one hand inside their jackets. When the woman got to the main door of the house, she rang a small bell on the right-hand side of the door. Twice, she rang it before Mrs Jenkins answered the door.

'Yes! May I help you?'

The woman took off her sunglasses and replied.

'Are you Mrs Allan Jenkins? Professor Jenkins wife?'

Mrs Jenkins was immediately fearful, as she thought that something else had happened to her husband.

‘Allan! Yes! Is he alright? Has anything happened to him?’
The woman replied.

‘No! Nothing has happened to him.....YET!’
The woman pushed passed Mrs Jenkins and grabbed her arms, then the two men entered the house and used plastic tie wraps to secure Mrs Jenkins hands. She was then bundled onto a wooden chair at the kitchen table. The woman told her.

‘Keep quiet, and only speak when we tell you to.’
Mrs Jenkins began to cry, and immediately thought of her children.

‘My children! Please don’t hurt them.’
The woman asked.

‘Where are they?’
At that moment, on hearing voices, the children, Alice (11), Ann (5) and Oliver (3), came rushing into the house after playing with a ball in the garden. Alice, the eldest, called out.

‘Mummy! We heard voices...is daddy home yet?’
She stopped suddenly when she saw the strange people, and her mother sitting awkwardly at the table.

‘Oh! Mummy! Is everything alright?’
The other children stopped behind their big sister and began to cry.

‘Mummy! Mummy!’
The woman grabbed hold of Alice’s hand and almost dragged her up the stairs.

‘Tell your brother and sister to come with us.’
Alice was very tearful, but called to them.

‘Ann! Oliver! Come with me now... please!’
The younger children were pulling at their mother’s apron and crying. Mrs Jenkins tried to calm them.

‘It’s OK children... You can go with your sister, and I will be with you soon... Please go now!’

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The children were very reluctant to leave, but eventually they did, with young Oliver screaming loudly for his mother. The woman took the children into Alice's bedroom.

'Stay here and be quiet... If I hear any noise from any of you, then I will be back to beat you... Do you understand?' Alice understood and just nodded, but the other two didn't understand and kept crying for their mother. The woman locked the bedroom door and returned to the kitchen. Mrs Jenkins kept asking the men what they wanted, but they never spoke, as they were told to only allow the woman to communicate with the mother. When the female kidnapper returned, Mrs Jenkins pleaded with her.

'Please! Let me go to my children!'

One of the men slapped Mrs Jenkins hard across her face with the palm of his hand.

'Quiet!'

The gang seemed determined to be in complete control of the situation, and did not want to listen to the professor's wife. Mrs Jenkins was hurt and shocked at the brutality, it made her weep, but she remained silent. The woman walked around the kitchen impatiently looking through the window, and then looking at the men. They seemed agitated too, and kept looking at their watches. They spoke in Chinese, as one man broke his silence.

'I hate this part... I would much rather kill them and get out quickly... it is much easier.'

The other man scolded him.

'Be quiet, and do as you have been told... you have your orders and we must stick to the plan.'

He tried to calm the man, and was obviously the leader.

'We have to wait for the professor to return, then he will see that we mean business... Keep watching for his arrival, and report anything or anyone you see that is out of the ordinary.'

The woman returned to Mrs Jenkins.

‘What time does the professor get home from work?’
Mrs Jenkins did not feel very cooperative.

‘You should know.... As you seem to have everything planned... otherwise you wouldn’t be here.’

The leader slapped Mrs Jenkins across the face again, but she didn’t allow her pain to be seen, and simply replied.

‘You can hurt me as much as you want, but don’t hurt my children.’

The female stepped away and whispered to the leader.

‘She is a stubborn old bitch that one, but I will break her soon... We have been told that the professor usually gets home between four and five pm.’

They both looked at their watches and confirmed the time to be 15:55pm.

The leader pointed to the door.

‘He should be here soon, so, I will wait by the door and grab him when he comes in. You go upstairs and keep the kids quiet, and Tao can watch the woman.’

‘Very good Jun.’

The leader, Jun, grabbed hold of her arm.

‘Try not to use our names Meili, as we do not know if anyone is listening or if the wife understands Mandarin.’

Meili bowed her head in acknowledgment, then went to the bedroom. The children were in a huddle on the bed, and weeping. Alice was brave, and questioned Meili.

‘Why are you doing this? We have not caused you any harm, and we want to see our mother.’

Meili’s expression was stern as she answered.

‘Keep quiet, and your mother will be with you soon... Any noise from you and she will be tied up and not given any food.’

Alice began to cry, which set off the others.

‘That’s just mean!’

Meili ignored her and looked out of the window for any sign of Professor Jenkins arrival. Ten minutes later, Professor

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Jenkins drove up to his house, parked the car, then spent several minutes trying to gather several files together from the passenger seat. His arms were full as he opened the door, only to be grabbed by Jun.

‘Oh! My! What! What is happening...Who are you?’

The files were dropped, and they were scattered all over the hallway. Jun kicked some of them away, and forcefully took the professor into the kitchen where he saw his wife had been tied up.

‘Emma! Are! Are you alright? What have they done to you?’

Professor Jenkins was forced to sit on one of the chairs at the table, and he looked across at his wife as tears welled in both their eyes. Meili entered the kitchen and grabbed hold of the professor’s tie.

‘We are here to warn you about your promise to us, and that you will keep us informed of your movements when you get to China. If you do not! Then...’

She drew a finger across her own throat to simulate a throat being cut. Professor Jenkins tried to be calm.

‘Yes! I... I understand completely.’

Up until then, the professor had only been contacted by telephone at work, but whenever he answered, no one replied. However, he never expected anyone to turn up at his home, but now they were here, he realised that they were very serious indeed. Meili continued.

‘We are going to stay here with your family until you have completed your research and given us all your findings, which up until now, have proved to be very valuable. If anything goes wrong... then we will not hesitate to kill your family.’

Emma, struggled wildly in her chair, but her bonds were too tight.

‘You cruel and despicable people... why don’t you go away and leave us alone.’

Jun placed a gag over Emma's mouth which silenced her. Professor Jenkins tried to be as calm as he could for the sake of his family.

'Yes! Yes! Of course, I will do anything you wish, but please do not harm my family.'

Meili took out a piece of paper from her jacket pocket and read instructions to him.

'You are to contact all your friends and office colleagues to let them know that whilst you are away in China, your family will be going on a long holiday to the Caribbean, and it will be difficult to contact them...Do you understand?'

'Yes! Yes, I do... I understand.'

'Good! We will give you an untraceable mobile phone, which you will use to update us on your location and status of your journey.'

'OK!'

'If you do not keep us informed, then we will have no hesitation to kill your family...do you understand professor?'

Allan Jenkins was very upset and found it difficult to concentrate, but he knew that he had to obey all their instructions.

'Yes, I understand, now please can you release my wife.'

Emma was released and allowed to join her children in Alice's bedroom. Professor Jenkins had to remain in the kitchen. Eventually, Mrs Jenkins was allowed to prepare food for everyone, although the Chinese people did not really enjoy her English food of sausages and mash potatoes, with peas and gravy. It was a long night for everyone as apart from the children, Emma and Allan could not sleep, and the kidnappers had a rota system to keep watch on them and the surrounding area. The next day, Professor Jenkins was woken early, and had everything repeated to him. Then, he was allowed to leave the house and go to his office, and was to act as normal as possible. Until the time of the departure flight from Heathrow airport, the kidnappers kept

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in regular contact with him. The female kidnapper was the one who entered the research centre, and managed to find and photograph several of Professor Jenkin's private notes. The information proved to be very valuable, and made the kidnappers more determined to pursue their plans.

CHAPTER 2

Press Briefing

At the London Geological Research Centre: Professor Allan Jenkins spoke to a small gathering of people, including members of the press and a delegation from the Chinese Embassy in London. With the aid of projections, he began: -

*"The Greater Khingan Range also called the Greater Hing'an Range. Although it is Da Xing' and Ling, to use the modern Chinese Pinyin spelling, is a volcanic mountain range in Inner Mongolia of north-eastern China. The range extends approximately 1,200 km from north to south, narrowing towards the south. It divides the plains of northeastern China to the east from the Mongolian Plateau to the west. The area has an elevation of 1,200 to 1,300 metres, with the highest peak at 2,035 metres. The range was formed during the Jurassic Period, roughly 200 to 145 million years ago, and it is essentially a tilted fault block; its ancient fault line forms its eastern edge, facing the Northeast Plain. The ranges are markedly asymmetrical, with a sharp eastern face and a gentler western slope down to the Mongolian Plateau at an elevation of 790–1,000 m (2,590–3,300 ft). The eastern slopes are more heavily dissected by the numerous tributaries of the Nen and Sungari rivers, but generally the mountains are rounded with flat peaks. The ranges are composed largely of igneous rock, which is formed through the solidification of magma.'

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Professor Jenkins paused, took a sip of water and looked across the room to see if his audience was still attentive. He noticed that many were taking photographs of the presentation, he continued...

‘The range is also densely forested. As an eco-region, it is noted for its Durian flora, that is transient between Siberian and Manchurian floras. The mountains form an important climatic divide. They take most of the precipitation from the southeasterly winds and produce a comparatively wet climate that contrasts sharply with the arid region to the west. The northern section of the mountains is the coldest part of eastern China, with extremely severe winters (mean temperature -28°C (-18°F)) and with large areas under permafrost. This region is covered by forests of larch, birch, aspen, and pine, with shrub cover on the highest elevations. It is rich in wildlife, including deer, elk, marten, hare, and many other fur-bearing animals. The central and southern sections of the range, however, are considerably warmer and drier than in the north. The coniferous forests of the north, gradually give way in the south to broad-leaved forests and then to patches of grassland interspersed with woodland. In the south, the forests cover the higher ground above 1,500 m (4,900 ft), while the greater part of the area is covered with tall grassland. In May 1987 a devastating fire swept the Da Hinggan forests, destroying perhaps 10,000 km² (3,900 sq mi) of timber; it became known as the Black Dragon Fire, for the Heilong Jiang (‘Black Dragon River’; i.e., the Amur) that flows through the area. Its slopes are a relatively rich grazing area and where the region that the Khitan people emerged from before establishing the Liao Dynasty in the tenth century.’

Professor Jenkins wanted to provide a thorough overview of the region, more for the benefit of the Chinese audience, to ensure they were impressed with his research. He continued.

‘The Khingan region was to a large extent unexplored until the twentieth century. The exploitation of the northern part of the region began with the construction early in the twentieth century of the first railway across the mountains—the Chinese Eastern Railroad from Qiqihar in Heilongjiang province, to Manzhouli, north of Lake Hulun, in northeastern Inner Mongolia, close to the border with Russia. During the Japanese occupation of Northeast China (Manchuria; 1931–45), a number of railways were constructed into the mountains north and south of this line in order to extract timber, the most important being those running into the area north of Tulihe (Tol Gol). These lines were later extended eastward into the Yilehuli Mountains, which strike east and west and join the Da Hinggan Range to the Xiao Hinggan Range. Farther south a more recent line follows the Tao’er River valley northwest from Baicheng in Jilin province to Suolun (Solon) and the hot springs at Arxan in Inner Mongolia. However, many hot springs can also be found throughout the region, as there is still a lot of minor volcanic activity in the area.’

He paused for another sip of water.

‘Logging continues to be the major economic activity for the region. However, the potential for new minerals, including precious metals, rare minerals and fossil reserves is immense, and it is my belief that this short expedition will discover enough data to warrant a much larger research program. We shall be concentrating the initial research near the base of the Baikalu Shan Mountain Range, east of Tahe.... The Chinese government has given us a short window to carry out this research, and so, we have to make the most of it. The summer season is coming to an end, and that is why we have selected a small group to cover this specific area.’

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He then posted a list of names for the expedition, and continued...

‘The expedition is sponsored by NuTech Ltd, which is an International Geological Research Company, based in California, USA. They are keen to assist the Chinese to fully realise the areas potential, in providing the world with much needed mineral resources. Also, there is a possibility of finding rare earth metal deposits like those in Bayan Obo.’

**Information provided through Wikipedia.*

After a short pause, to allow the audience to fully comprehend the same information and data written on their handouts. Professor Jenkins outlined the details of the field research team:

There is myself - Professor Allan Jenkins (45): Team Scientist, from the London Geological Research Centre.

Dylan Masters (48): Team Field Leader and agent for sponsor Company NuTech Ltd, and former SAS captain.

Jennifer Brambles (38): Team Geology & Biology Researcher, Oxford University, Translator and first aider.

Bradley Hardy (23): Team Geology Researcher, Yale University, and mountaineer.

Jung Ho Li (35): Team Guide, Chinese Government, Botany Lecturer in Beijing. Born in the research area.

Professor Jenkins continued.

‘This is a multinational expedition, that will hopefully provide mutual benefits to many other countries. It has to be noted that, China, United States of America and Great

Britain have all provided funds, equipment and personnel to complete the task. There will also be a Chinese support group providing transport, a base camp for welfare, drilling and research facilities, and I would like to thank them for this on behalf of the London Institution.'

He paused and looked across the room.

'Though it has taken many months of preparation, to gather research, obtain visas and access permits. Within three days of this meeting, the team will be assembled and heading for Beijing, China. As everything has been carefully prepared, I intend this to be a straightforward research expedition, and nothing more... ***It should be simple!***'

Jenkins, paused, surveyed the room, and then asked.

'Do any of you have questions?'

Following a series of media questions on budget costs, viability of the expedition, and a photo opportunity with the Chinese and American delegates, the briefing was adjourned, and the team began to prepare for the expedition.

On leaving the conference room, Professor Jenkins made a detour to a small office, where he made a telephone call. He did not look at all pleased to be making the call and seemed nervous and secretive. Checking that no one was in the room, he closed and locked the door before making the call. As a voice answered his call, Professor Jenkins anxiously said.

'Yes! Yes! It's all arranged, we leave in three days.... Can I speak to....?'

But the phone went dead, and beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. He stood there holding the phone for a long time, in anticipation that the person would answer. But they didn't.

London Heathrow Airport.

The expedition team had spent many weeks holding video conferences, and receiving data via email, but they had never met in person. Professor Jenkins was either at the London Geological Research Centre, or at his home in Derbyshire, England.

Dylan Masters was either, leading other geological expeditions for NuTech Ltd, or teaching new recruits at various locations for the United Kingdom Special Forces (UKSF). Which is a directorate comprising the Special Air Service, the Special Boat Service, the Special Reconnaissance Regiment, the Special Forces Support Group, 18 (UKSF) Signal Regiment and the Joint Special Forces Aviation Wing. His home was in Hereford, UK.

Jennifer Brambles, a researcher at Oxford University, had been working on correlation studies between geological formations and biological environments. Including the formation of minerals. She had been working closely with Professor Jenkins for many months, and was fully conversant with the research programme.

Bradley Hardy, from Effingham, Illinois, USA. A geology researcher at Yale University, and a keen mountaineer and scientist studying fossil formations. He too has been working with Professor Jenkins, and was able to use NuTech's facilities in California to assist in the detailed research and analysis.

Jung Ho Li, was born in the Da Hinggan Ling Region of China, he is a Botany Lecturer in Beijing, and will meet the team in China. He had been studying the area of the proposed research for many months, and had planned many areas that could provide valuable research for the team.

The flight from London Heathrow airport to Beijing was expected to take 11 to 12 hours dependent on conditions. Only Professor Jenkins, Dylan Masters and Jenny Brambles would meet at Heathrow airport. Bradley Hardy was to take a flight from JFK airport, and would be met at Beijing airport by a Chinese official. In London, a British Embassy official had arranged separate transport to the airport for Professor Jenkins, Dylan and Jenny, where they were led to an executive lounge to await their departure. As each one arrived, their bags were taken away, documents processed and visas checked. Then they were allowed to relax until their flight was called. Although, it was a standard charter flight to Beijing, they were to travel in the business-class section.

The executive lounge was half-full of people waiting for various flights. Jenny Brambles was the first to arrive from the UK team. She looked very elegant in a dark pink trouser suit, with matching top and trousers, which was a handy two in one style that could be worn together or separate. A chiffon hanky hem top featured a bead embellished sparkle trim, whilst the floaty wide leg trouser was elasticated for comfort. She thought it to be perfect for the long flight, and felt very comfortable and stylish. Her long blond was kept loose for the flight, but could be tied up when tougher journeys demanded. Once she was processed, she was offered a glass of champagne, and shown where all the edible treats were. She took one of the glasses and sat in a comfortable lounge chair. Next to arrive was Dylan Masters, who carried a heavy-duty canvas military style bag. He preferred to travel in a simple white T-shirt and jeans, with a dark jacket on top. Because of his superb physic, the clothes looked firm and snug on his muscled body, and his dark sunglasses gave him a positive air of self-assurance. Jenny

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saw him come in, and watched his every move. She had seen him before, during video calls, but his monitor screen was never clear and sharp, so she could not appreciate his true appearance. When he was processed and offered a glass of bubbly, Jenny called to him and waved.

‘Dylan! Dylan Masters! ... Over here?’

Dylan twisted his head around until he saw her, then he smiled and slowly walked over. As he sat down into a chair apposite her, he introduced himself.

‘Hello Jenny Brambles! I am Dylan Masters, and it is very nice to meet you in person rather than those stuffy video calls.... I must say, that you look lovely.’

Jenny pretended to be embarrassed, but she knew that she looked good.

‘Thank you for the compliment, Dylan...I only hope we both look this good at the end of the expedition.’

Dylan laughed.

‘I don’t see why not, and I can assure you that I have never been on such an easy and comfortable expedition as this one is supposed to be...So, I am looking forward to it.’

Jenny smiled and took a sip of champagne.

‘From your resumé Dylan, I know we will be safe in your strong hands.’

Dylan laughed at her inuendo.

‘Ha! Ha! According to Professor Jenkins, we should not have too much trouble, and for me, one month’s babysitting a couple of scientists is a perfect break from the work I have been doing.’

Jenny was intrigued.

‘Ooh! Can you divulge any of the details?’

Dylan Grinned.

‘Afraid not Jenny! All my work is top-secret.’

Jenny felt a little awkward by her question, which Dylan saw, and then laughed again.

'I am joking with you...don't worry... I have only been training basic soldiers how to be better soldiers.'

Jenny smiled, and became more enamoured with the man. At that moment, Professor Jenkins arrived, wearing a plain brown suit, complete with brown tie and matching shoes. He was accompanied by his very attentive personal secretary, who was trying to ensure he had everything he needed for his journey.

'Professor... You are very good at making scientific lists, but you always forget to bring the essentials for a long journey.... I have everything you need for the flight here in this bag. So, don't forget to take it on the plane with you.'

'Of course, of course Mildred... I have plenty of time to ensure I have everything I need.'

As Mildred wasn't a passenger, she was asked to leave, much to the relief of the professor.

'Bye Mildred, and see you when I get back.'

Although only 45 years old, he looked much older, and his receding hair was mostly grey, and wore an old pair of reading glasses on top of his head. Professor Jenkins was processed but refused the champagne, as he wanted to go to the bathroom. Dylan noticed how agitated he looked, and that he was fumbling for his mobile phone. He mentioned it to Jenny.

'Do you think the prof is alright? He looks very worried to me.'

Jenny was finishing her drink and ordering another.

'He will be fine Dylan... to me, he always looks worried and stressed, he spends hours with his research... I am not sure how his wife puts up with him.'

Dylan seemed satisfied with her answer, and looked around at the food. He chose a few items, a hot cup of tea was poured for him, then he sat down again and relaxed. After a few minutes, Professor Jenkins came back into the lounge, and sat down in a chair next to Dylan.

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‘Ah! It is good to see you here Mr Masters, and I hope you are ready for a most enjoyable experience in the mountains and caves of northern China.’

Dylan smiled.

‘It will make a change from all those boring video calls and endless email communications... I am a man of action, and I am looking forward to a trek in the mountains.’

The professor looked a little perturbed by Dylan’s answer, as he had put a lot of work into preparing for the expedition.’

Jenny noticed, and calmed him.

‘Ignore Dylan, professor... he is only joking... I for one appreciate all you have done, and I am looking forward to working with you in the field.’

The professor was given a cup of tea by the lounge staff, and seemed happy with Jenny’s reply.

‘Ah! Quite so.’

Eventually, their flight was called and they boarded the plane. It was a long flight, and each one relaxed into their bunk seats, and either watched the onboard entertainment, made notes, or fell asleep. Dylan was used to empty cargo and military planes, and so, business-class comfort was a real treat for him, which he intended to enjoy. Jenny was more used to it, and seemed relaxed and enjoyed the free stuff. Professor Jenkins was too busy making notes, and kept looking at his watch and phone, which at the time, he was not allowed to use, and it irritated him greatly. With the flight well underway, and after a quite palatable meal, although small in size for Dylan, he prepared his bunk to relax, watch a movie or to sleep. He tossed around several times trying to get comfortable, but his large and muscular frame filled every millimetre of space.

‘Wow! These things are cramped...who the hell designed them?’

An air stewardess passed by and could see that Dylan was having problems.

‘Are you alright sir? Is there anything I can get you?’

Dylan laughed.

‘Ha! I’d like a bigger bunk... these things are too tiny for me.’

The stewardess tried to understand.

‘I am very sorry sir, but these are the biggest we have on this flight... Maybe a vodka, gin or whisky could make you feel more relaxed?’

Dylan was not a big drinker, as he liked to keep his wits sharp at all times. However, as there was nothing else, he could do to alleviate the problem, he accepted a large malt whisky.

‘Do you have any Lagavulin, single malt?’

The stewardess thought for a moment.

‘I am sorry sir, we do not have that particular brand of whisky on board, but we do have a 15-year-old Laphroaig single malt.’

Dylan smiled.

‘That will do very nicely, thank you.’

The UK expedition team landed at Beijing Airport, where they were met by James Thornton from the British Embassy, and a Chinese official who gave them priority clearance through customs. However, they had to wait for Bradley Hardy to arrive from the US, as his flight was taking longer. James arranged for them to stay at a local hotel, until Bradley arrived. Then, when they were ready, they would all take an internal flight to Harbin Taiping Airport, north-east China, where they would meet up with team guide, Jung Ho Li. As they entered the arrivals area, Dylan began to stretch his body several times. He spoke to Jenny as they waited to be processed.

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‘Wow! That flight was not comfortable for me at all...those bunks are so tiny! Give me an empty cargo plane any day.’

Jenny laughed.

‘You don’t know when you are well off Dylan. I enjoyed the flight, and slept well.’

They quickly passed through customs, and with all the paperwork checked and approved, the team waited for transport to take them to their hotel. Professor Jenkins used this as an excuse to go to the bathroom, something that Dylan was expecting. Jenny noticed too and grabbed Dylan’s arm as he was about to follow him.

‘Dylan! He obviously has some problems at home or something, and maybe we should give him some space to resolve it... I am sure that if there was anything wrong then he would let us know.’

Dylan really wanted to know what the professor was up to, but he agreed to wait and see what happens.

‘Alright Jenny, but it is beginning to bug me a little, and I want to know everything that is going on with this team if I am to lead it.’

James Thornton noted a little tension between Dylan and Jenny, and approached them.

‘You two look a little tense...Is there anything I should know?’

Jenny replied calmly.

‘It’s alright James. We are just a little worried that the professor has some unresolved issues back home... I am sure he will clear everything up soon.’

Satisfied with her answer, James beckoned the group to follow him to an embassy staff car that had just arrived.

‘Get into the car and it will take you to your hotel... Your luggage should be there by the time you arrive.’

Professor Jenkins returned from the bathroom, and joined them as they got into the car. After a twenty-minute journey,

they arrived at a hotel in the centre of Beijing. James was already there, as he used his own car, and was booking them in at the reception desk. They each signed for their room keys and gathered at the hotel elevators. James explained what they should do next.

‘Please! Rest and relax, and I will see you in the hotel dining room this evening around 7pm... is that clear?’ All three nodded and were keen to unwind in their rooms. It was about 11am Beijing time, so they had plenty of time to recover and get used to the time difference. Professor Jenkins locked himself in his room and looked over the expedition agenda, as well as wait for yet another phone call. Jenny said that she was going to take a long and very luxurious bath, and enjoy her time getting ready for the journey ahead. Dylan wasted no time at all, and went into the hotel lobby, where he took out cash from an ATM machine. He then approached the hotel concierge, who could speak several languages, including English. Dylan secretly showed him a wad of Yuan (CNY) banknotes, and asked.

‘Can you help me? I need a handgun, and am prepared to pay for it.’

The concierge did not seem surprised by his request, and took the money, before placing it discreetly into his coat pocket.

‘What is your room number?’

Dylan replied.

‘Room 234.’

The men parted, and Dylan went out to the nearest street market. He wanted to reconnoitre the hotel and surrounding area to ensure that there were to be no surprises, as he was still concerned about Professor Jenkins. He got as far as the main doors to the hotel, when he heard his name called.

‘Dylan! Dylan Wait!’

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He turned and saw Jenny, who had changed into a casual pair of blue trousers with a white top and grey jacket. She approached Dylan who was surprised to see her.

‘I thought you said you were going to take a long hot bath?’

Jenny smiled.

‘Yes, I was, but I want some special Chinese creams that I had run out of in England, and I know which store has them in Beijing... there is one just around the corner.’

Dylan was amazed at the number of cosmetics women used.

‘You women certainly like to be pampered... I hope you realise, that where we are going, you will have very little facilities, and no beauty shops either.’

Jenny laughed.

‘I know, and I am looking forward to it, so don’t worry.... Where are you going?’

Dylan tried to be vague.

‘Oh! Only to stretch my legs and maybe buy a couple of things from a street market.... There is only so much they allowed me to bring to China.’

Jenny grabbed hold of Dylan’s arm, and led him out of the hotel.

‘Well! I am coming with you, and as I speak Chinese, then I am sure we can get some good bargains at the market... If there are any street food stalls, then we should sample them too.’

Dylan seemed to have no choice in the matter, and accepted her company.

‘Very well, but stay close to me at all times.’

‘That will not be a problem for me big guy.’

Once they had found the beauty shop Jenny wanted, she spent thirty minutes looking around it before buying anything. Dylan, waited outside, as he was sure that someone was following them, but he could not see anything unusual.’

When they got to the street market, it was very busy with local people buying and selling a variety of merchandise. The smell of freshly cooked food wafted through the air, and stimulated their stomach juices. Jenny led Dylan into the busiest part of the market.

‘Let’s sample some food, as the one thing that I learned during my time in China before, was that if you can see the food being cooked, and there is at least one large icebox to keep the raw food fresh, then it will be fine.’

Jenny took her time to choose the right food stall, and then spoke to the owner in fluent Chinese. A few minutes later, she returned to Dylan with a small plastic tray of cooked delicacies.

‘Here! Taste these, and tell me that you don’t like them... they are all local dishes made by a very old, but good chef.’ They stood and enjoyed the mixture of fish, chicken and pork samples that were cooked in different sauces. Dylan enjoyed them.

‘Wow! Jenny... you really know what to look for...these are delicious.’

Jenny laughed.

‘Yes! I could eat more, but we are expected at dinner at the hotel this evening, so, we had better not eat too much. Mind you...I do not like to see all the plastic containers that they use nowadays, and the sooner we all go back to using paper and cardboard, the better.’

Dylan agreed.

‘Amen to that Jenny. Now! I must buy what I came here for, and maybe you can help me barter for them.’

Jenny was intrigued.

‘Oh! Dylan! What on earth is it that you want?’

Dylan took Jenny’s hand and led her through the market.

‘I will explain when I find the right stall.’

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A few minutes later, Dylan found the stall he had been looking for. It was one of those stalls that sold everything from soap powder to military clothing.

‘Here it is Jenny... This one seems to have everything... I am looking for a good bush knife, or hunting knife, and a set of binoculars.’

Jenny seemed confused.

‘What on earth for Dylan? Surely the expedition will have those?’

‘Yes, but I want to be independent, and have a back-up.... It’s an army thing you know.’

Jenny did not really understand.

‘You boys and your toys! Never mind, I am sure we can get a good bargain.’

Jenny spoke to the owner, who brought out several large hunting knives, which looked shiny and lethal. Dylan looked at each one carefully, and seemed to prefer a particular knife that looked well made. Jenny interrupted him.

‘Dylan! Try and break it.’

‘What do you mean Jenny?’

‘If it is a good knife, then it should not break. Is that correct?’

‘Yes, that is correct.’

Dylan, noted that there were several bench vices at the stall, and he placed the knife into the vice and tightened it up. Then he gave the knife a sharp blow from the palm of his hand, and the knife broke easily. He looked at Jenny.

‘What! How did you know?’

She picked up the pieces, and swore at the owner, telling him to get the good knives out.

‘Ha! From my time in China, I was told that the Chinese are very good and replicating most things, but the materials used are not as good as the original. This stall will try to sell you the fake stuff, but now I have told him to get the good stuff out.’

Dylan smiled, and hugged her.

‘Jenny Brambles! You are an amazing person, and I am very pleased that you are on my team.’

She smiled, and then winced at his strong hug.

‘Urgh! Think nothing of it Dylan.’

The stall owner brought out a selection of good quality knives, and Dylan tested them in the same way. When they didn’t break, he chose one and asked for a set of field binoculars. The owner disappeared for a few minutes, and then returned with eight different types of binoculars. Dylan looked at each one, and then looked at Jenny.

‘Are these legit Jenny?’

She nodded.

‘Yes, the owner knows better now, so choose one and let’s get back to the hotel before they start asking awkward questions.’

Dylan chose a set of binoculars, and let Jenny barter the price. After a few, what seemed to be, heated words in Chinese between Jenny and the stall holder, Dylan was told what to pay and the couple left for the hotel. On their way back to the hotel, Dylan kept looking around, trying to see if anyone looked out of place, or appeared to be watching them. Jenny enquired.

‘What are you looking for Dylan.... Is there someone following us?’

‘I am not sure, but all my instincts are telling me that there is someone. It is probably the Chinese authorities keeping an eye on us, but I don’t like it.’

Jenny did not want to know anymore.

‘Let’s get back to the hotel, as I want to dive into that big bath tub before dinner.’

Three hours later a knock came to Dylan’s door, and he looked through the door spyglass before opening the door. A small Chinese man stood there, and kept looking up and

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down the corridor, he seemed very nervous. Dylan opened the door and with his big hand, dragged him into the room. The man spoke in Chinese, which Dylan could not understand, but got the meaning, and the man took out a white muslin cloth with a gun and spare clips inside it. Dylan took hold of the gun, and swiftly stripped it down to ensure it was legit. It was an ordinary Chinese QSZ-92 9mm handgun that held twenty rounds in each clip. It was not Dylan's preferred choice, but it was better than nothing. He knew that the Chinese authorities would provide security, and would frown on him having his own weapon, but he did not want to take any chances. His training allowed for every eventuality, and he did not like surprises. He gave the man a few CNY banknotes, and let him out of the room.

At Beijing airport, Bradley Hardy eventually arrived, and was greeted by a Chinese official as he passed through passport control. At 23 years old, he was full of life, and had a big grin on his face, as he was escorted to an official government car. He wore casual sportswear and a baseball cap, sunglasses, and white sneakers. This was his first foreign field trip, and he was very excited about it, and kept asking questions to the Chinese official sat next to him in the back seat of the car.

‘Are you guys going to be with us for the whole trip? Will I get a chance to see Beijing?’

However, the official was stony-faced and silent during the twenty-minute journey to the hotel. When he got to the hotel, the official ensured that Brad was booked into his room, and once he had signed for the key, the official left the hotel. Brad spoke to the receptionist.

‘Wow! That guy was no barrel of laughs.... Gee!’

He got no response from the receptionist.

James Thornton had returned to the hotel and was sat in a hotel lobby chair talking on his mobile phone.

‘Yes! He has just arrived, and you can certainly tell that he is an American.’

James got up and introduced himself to Brad who was waiting for his baggage to arrive.

‘Good afternoon! My name is James Thornton, from the British Embassy, and you must be Bradley Hardy.’

Brad was pleased that someone was there to meet him, who spoke English.

‘Yeah! It is great to meet you and to be here... I can’t believe it... Are the rest of team here too?’

James replied.

‘They are, and they are resting at the moment... We are all to meet in the hotel dining room at 7pm tonight... Beijing time that is. So, please adjust your watch.’

Bradley was pleased that everything was organised, and noted that his large sports bag style holdall had finally arrived from the airport.

‘That’s great news Mr Thornton... I will be ready... Gee! I am looking forward to meeting the team. When do we get to go to the mountains?’

James gasped at Brads exuberance.

‘All being well, we hope to take a plane to Harbin tomorrow... but we shall wait and see what the Chinese authorities have to say this evening.

‘Alright then.... I’ll see you tonight at seven.’

Brad got into the elevator and James returned to the embassy.

That evening at dinner, everyone met up for cocktails before their meal. Jenny wore a beautiful full length blue dress, with matching accessories. Dylan wore a pair of dark grey trousers and a crisp white shirt, and Professor Jenkins, wore the same brown suit, but with a clean light-blue shirt. They were enjoying a drink and chatting at the bar, when Brad bounced in. He wore a bright blue shirt with light, tawny

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coloured trousers and white sneakers. He was a tall, lean, and good-looking guy, clean-shaven with a broad grin at all times.

‘Hey guys! I recognise you all from the video calls... but I must say, that Jenny looks much better in person...! Wow!’ Jenny cast him a discerning look, and Dylan intervened.

‘Easy Brad... remember that you are in a foreign country, and have to show respect at all times... even to those you know.’

‘Ouch!’

Brad replied as he was aware that he had just been admonished for being himself.

‘OK! OK! I get it... I am just excited is all... Please accept my apologies if I seem a bit rude... I don’t mean to be.’ Dylan eased the situation.

‘Forget it big guy... come here and meet the team.’

As they were greeting each other, James Thornton arrived with three Chinese officials, one of whom spoke very good English. James introduced him to the team.

‘This is Wei Zhang from the Chinese Geological Research Department... He will inform you of your duties whilst here in China.’

Wei Zhang was aware of all the names, and had a thorough understanding of the research that was to be undertaken. He approached Professor Jenkins.

‘Ah! Professor Jenkins, it is so good to meet you at last in person. Conference calls are useful, but you never get to meet the real person. I have read a lot about you and your work... I am very pleased that you are here to assist with our research.’

Jenkins was impressed and was happy to be greeted with such enthusiasm.

‘Thank you very much Mr Zhang... It is going to be a pleasure working with you and your team, and to be in such

a fine country. China has some amazing geological features and I am keen to explore them with you.'

Dylan, Jenny and Brad were very impressed with the way in which the professor acted so diplomatically. Wei Zhang continued.

'I must inform you however, that you must not stray from your designated, and approved areas of research, and that you will be accompanied at all times by our security service.' Dylan immediately took that to mean armed guards would be watching them 24/7.

'Furthermore, we will provide all the field equipment you will need, and our own team of scientific researchers will accompany you. There will also be adequate transport and accommodation facilities during your stay.'

He paused to see the reaction on their faces, and also if they had any questions. The whole team were silent.

'Good! I hope you have a pleasant evening, and transport will be with you at ten am sharp tomorrow, to take you to the airport for your flight to Harbin.... Please! Have a good evening.'

He was about to leave, when Jenny asked.

'Wei Zhang? Are you not going to join us for dinner?' Wei Zhang bowed courteously.

'Thank you, but no. I have many issues to pursue, and must take my leave of you.'

Wei Zhang, and the other officials, left the group and returned to their vehicle. Dylan noticed that there were two armed policemen stationed in the hotel lobby, which he assumed were to keep an eye on the team. His instincts were fully alert, and he felt uneasy at being watched. He was also pleased to have bought the gun before the guards arrived.

The team enjoyed their meal and discussed many topics, but because of the long flights and time difference, they went to bed early. Dylan wanted to test the guards in the lobby, and

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he used the excuse of going outside for a breath of fresh air. However, the police guards stopped him and pointed towards the elevator. Next morning, after breakfast everyone was ready for the next phase of their journey. Most of them wore some kind of hiking clothing, or military style fatigues, except for Professor Jenkins, who wore a clean shirt and tie, a pair of black trousers and a grey jacket. At 09:50hrs James Thornton greeted them.

‘Ah! Good to see you are all ready for the airport... Your luggage will be taken care of, and you just need to have your passports ready at the check-in desk. Now follow me, and we shall depart immediately.’

The flight from Beijing to Harbin only took a couple of hours. They soon landed and were taken through passport control by officials and guards. Waiting for them in the arrivals lounge was Jung Ho Li, their local guide. After the initial greetings and introductions, Jung beckoned the group to follow him, as he had arranged hotel accommodation for the night, before they were to continue by another internal flight to the Da Hinggan Ling, Heilongjiang region, a journey of approximately 600 miles. They were to board a chartered cargo airplane to one of the first and most northerly airports in China, Mohe Gulian. From there a fleet of vehicles would take them to a base camp in the centre of the research area. When she heard of the additional travel arrangements, Jenny seemed perplexed.

‘Wow! I was not aware that China was such a big country, and that we would need two planes to get to our destination... I think my body needs a good massage.’ Brad heard that and offered his services.

‘No problem, Jenny! I am sure that I can help you to unwind and give you a good.... Massage.’

‘Wack!’

Dylan clipped the back of his head for being too forward and too cheeky.'

'When are you going to learn son... That sooner or later, Jenny is going to kick your ass!'

'Ouch!'

Brad winced.

'I was only joking Dylan.... My! You have strong hands.'

Jenny smiled at the way in which Dylan handled himself, and gave Brad a condescending warning look, to be aware of Dylan's power.

That evening, the group met at a local restaurant, laid on by relatives of Jung, who were excited to see their devoted nephew mixing with such an eminent group of people. The meal was very lavishly presented and Jung made the most of his position as organizer of the Chinese part of the expedition. Over dinner, as traditional music played in the background by four local musicians, he told stories of his childhood growing up in the area, which were mostly in English, with difficult sections and phrases translated by either Jenny, or one of the local Chinese delegates brought in for the start of the journey. Jung however, managed most of his stories with little assistance in translation.

'I remember growing up in this area... and I have been to many parts that we are going to explore, but there are some areas that no one has ever been to, and there have been very few expeditions of this kind that I can remember.'

He then went on to regale his own adventures, and wondrous sights he had seen, and been told of. He spoke endlessly of the myths and legends that go with such an ancient land. Everyone around the large round table were enjoying themselves, except for Dylan, who was keen to get going, as he hated these gatherings. Professor Jenkins too, was immersed in his note books, and presumably planning the next part of the research program. When he thought that

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everyone was busy listening to Jung, Jenkins managed to slip away unseen. Everyone was distracted as Jung was being grossly embarrassed by his relatives over a previous childhood tale, much to the pleasure of the audience. Jenkins quietly made his way to the bathroom to make yet another telephone call. The reaction was the same as last time, he spoke to confirm his location, and then the line went dead. Seemingly unnoticed, he left the bathroom to go back to the table. Dylan Masters however, had noticed Jenkins movements, as he was keen to be aware of everything during the expedition, Dylan knew only too well that unexpected events often happen on these trips, and he was not going to be caught out unawares. Dylan had followed Jenkins to the bathroom, but could only catch the disappointment on the professor's face as he came out. Startled, Jenkins exclaimed.

'Oh! You made me jump! I...I...did not hear you come in.'

Dylan was calm in his answer.

'No problem professor, I am getting ready for bed soon, and I suggest we all do the same, as it could be another long day tomorrow.'

Jenkins scurried out of the bathroom stuttering his words.

'Of course...of course you are quite correct Mr Masters.'

Upon his return to the gathering, Dylan announced that an early night to be the best option for everyone. The group departed to their rooms, where everyone seemed full of thoughts of the expedition ahead and keen to get going. Dylan remained a little longer, just in case anything untoward might take place. As yet, he did not trust anyone in the group, especially the professor, and he certainly did not trust the Chinese officials guarding them. As he set off for his own room, he noticed a man in the far corner of the hotel lounge. The man was alone, and shifted nervously as Dylan paused to check him out, and to see if he could make out his features. The man quickly got up and left through

another door. It had been a long and tiring day and Dylan did not want to exert himself on what could be a pointless and possibly harmless chase. Instead, he too headed for his room.

The next morning after a light breakfast, the group gathered in the hotel foyer, and all were busy discussing the potential events of the day. Jung had three taxis waiting to take them and their luggage to the airport. Their equipment was already stowed into a large truck, to which Jung had spent a great deal of time and effort organising. He knew how meticulous Professor Jenkins was about his research equipment and did not want anything to go wrong. A couple of hours later they were boarding a twin-prop' airplane and heading due-north. During the flight, conversation was kept to a minimum due to the noise of the engines, but the scenery more than made up for it. They flew over vast regions of forest, and meandering rivers with many areas of natural beauty. It was mostly of wilderness with roads and railway lines criss-crossing beneath them. As the aircraft began its descent, they could make out strange rock and hill formations formed through centuries of time and exposure to severe weather conditions. On arrival at Mohe Gulian airport, Jung told everyone to wait until he had spoken with the officials at the airport, and to ensure all the ongoing vehicles were ready. After a short break in the airport lounge, and what seemed like several lectures from Chinese officials, especially to Dylan Masters, the team boarded into a fleet of 4X4 vehicles setting off in convoy format. Jung, and Jenny were in the lead vehicle, and Dylan, Brad and Professor Jenkins followed in the second vehicle, each with a local driver. A third vehicle contained five other members of the base camp crew, organised by Jung. They included a cook, three support staff and a scientist from the Chinese government, who was to ensure any official queries were dealt with, and

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two security guards. The convoy took the S207 Jiamo Expy road out of Mohe, to a point where the rough tarmac road gave way to an even rougher dirt-track road. The weather was good, and had been warm and sunny over recent days with a seasonal temperature of 28-degrees C. However, it made the dirt-track dusty as they drove, and it was difficult at times to see the vehicle in front. Dylan, as usual, did think that they were being followed, as he could see similar plumes of dust about two hundred metres behind them. After three hours of driving, the convoy reached a small village near the foot of Baikalu Shan mountain range, they then went further up the mountain, to established a base camp about ten miles outside of the village. As the support crew prepared the camp in a clearing next to a clear mountain stream, Professor Jenkins suggested that the team should set off for an initial reconnoitre trip. Jung had selected one of the tunnels at the base of the mountain as a research start point. However, he was concerned that the team's long journey had made them tired.

'We can leave this until the morning if you are all too tired?'

Jenny was stiff from too much sitting down and exclaimed.

'No way! I have been sat down, bumped, banged and squeezed into too many vehicles, and I want to stretch my legs...so let's do it.'

Brad added.

'I agree... I am bored stiff and want to explore.'

So, with the majority of the research team in favour of a little ramble into the hills, Jung led the way. They were quickly kitted out with safety gear, from hard hats with lamps, to safety boots and gloves. The air was fresh and clean, and the smell of forest trees and bushes wafted and stimulated their senses. It gave them a feeling of being immersed into a vast and remote, almost prehistoric forest complex, that was devoid of human life. They followed the

stream up the hill towards the mountain, and each one of them wallowed in the splendour of the wild terrain. The track to the tunnel opening was rough but wide, and could be approached by vehicle. However, the group were pleased to be walking, and began to feel their muscles loosen up. Jung took them into the tunnel, and explained to the group the basic layout of it, and that during the next few days, they would gather rock samples from different levels.

‘There are many levels to this tunnel, but we will only look at the top level today... I just wanted you to understand the environment in which we will all be working in.’

Dylan checked out the tunnel carefully, and gave the team a little advice and warning.

‘We must stay together at all times, and do not stray. If Jung or myself give you an instruction, then you must follow it... It is for your own safety.’

No one said anything, and they entered into the tunnel in single file with Jung leading the way, as Dylan brought up the rear. Professor Jenkins had already written a detailed chart to which they could accurately record the levels, samples and position of each rock. He gave each one a laminated copy and marker pens. Following three hours of slipping, bumping and squeezing through several small side tunnels. They were all satisfied that Jung had found the perfect location to commence the survey, then Dylan keenly suggested they should head back to camp.

‘We need to make sure that our bodies are well rested, and you can see the type of terrain we will be dealing with, so please wear all the safety equipment when we enter these tunnels. Now, let’s get back to camp.’

All the others agreed, except for Jenkins, who wanted to stay a little longer. However, on the advice of Jung, and a determined Dylan, Jenkins agreed to go with the majority.

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Over the next few days, the expedition soon developed into a well organised routine, where small groups would look for rock samples that could be analysed at the base camp mini-laboratory. The samples would be plotted onto a laptop, and data programmed into the geological survey programme devised by Professor Jenkins. The camp was organised to military level, including a small diesel/electric generator providing sufficient power for all their needs. Evenings were spent in the campsite, either eating around the main tables or individuals carrying out their own studies of the day's finds and discoveries. Professor Jenkins was always deep in thought, pouring over selected samples, or writing in his personal notebook. Occasionally he would secrete himself away to make a telephone call on one of the sat-phones, which did not go unnoticed by Dylan. Jenny and Brad enjoyed each other's company and found a common interest in the work they were doing at their universities, and discussed previous research they had experienced. Dylan on the other hand, kept himself to himself, and often spent the evening walking through the forest, and checking the perimeter for signs of being watched or followed. Jung chatted with Professor Jenkins.

'Professor, are there any specific areas that you wish to study first?

Jenkins took out one of his note books and scrolled through the pages until he found a specific note,

'Ah! Yes! I want to see if there are any recent volcanic deposits in the region, as I believe that we may find rock samples containing the minerals I am looking for.'

Jung was keen to impress the professor, and make it known to him just how important he was to the team. He thought it could open up a new and lucrative career for him and his family, especially with the Chinese government.

'For a long time, there has been very little volcanic activity in this region, although there are numerous hot-springs and

underground tunnels and caves that could contain the samples you wish to collect... I will look at my own notes and arrange a visit to them.'

'Splendid! My boy... Splendid!'

Jung grew up in the province, and spent most of his thirty-five years in the area, and knew almost every cave, forest, mountain and valley. He was a valuable asset to the team, and was also keen to learn as much as he could from the scientists about the minerals that were there. After spending the first week collecting rock samples and mapping out the area, the team were slowly making their way through one last tunnel before returning to their base camp. However, heavy rain during the day had begun to seep into the tunnels creating a difficult terrain for them to negotiate.

CHAPTER 3

N. E. China

In pitch darkness, narrow beams of light, from flashlights and helmet lamps, criss-crossed in sporadic formation across the empty space ahead of them. Mumbled, groaning voices echoed within the narrow black passageways that riddled the inside of the mountain. As the team slowly made their way in single file towards the exit, each step found another uneven rock, causing feet to slip and sink into muddy shallow pools of water. Nor could they avoid the constant drip of water coming from the wet tunnel ceiling. A louder moan rang out as someone's knee hit a large rock jutting out from the side of the narrow tunnel, unseen in the dim light.

‘For god’s sake! Why is it always me who finds them?’

It was followed by a swift reply from the back of the group, as the five-man team tried to make their way through a labyrinth of ancient tunnels.

‘Shut up professor, and keep going, or we’ll never get out of this hell hole.’

Suddenly, Dylan Masters, the team leader, alerted them.

‘Stop! Did you hear that?’

‘Hear what?’

Replied Professor Jenkins, who was leaning against a large rock, whilst rubbing a rapidly swelling bruise on his knee.

At that moment, a violent tremor shook the ground, walls, and ceiling all around the group, causing flashlights and cargo to be dropped, creating panic amid unseen obstacles. The vibrations grew stronger, and stronger. Lumps of rock and boulders were dropping from all angles, as the team tried in vain to shelter from the debris. They did whatever they could to keep upright, fearful that falling in these conditions could easily break an arm or a leg. What little visibility there was, rapidly reduced, as dust poured in dense clouds from every orifice of the tunnel, causing eyes to sting and throats to choke.

‘This way!’

Dylan screamed, at the top of his voice.

‘I think there’s another way through here!’

He groped his way along the heavily vibrating wall, feeling for the opening.

‘Try and keep together, we must get out as soon as possible.’

Although, his words could not be heard above the din of the tremors, the team somehow managed to follow his lead into a side tunnel. The buffeting continued, for what seemed an eternity, but was only a few minutes. Then, masked by noise and vibrations, the ground suddenly opened up beneath them. They all plunged through the floor into icy, turbulent waters below, knocking one of the group unconscious. It was of little consequence, as the violent flow of water swept all of them on in an instant, with no choice of controlling their disposition, conscious or not. Clutching at whatever baggage they could, the crew spiralled into a black abyss of torrential waters, ever descending, and gathering speed. The only thing saving their skulls from being smashed against the rocks were the protective headgear, strapped firmly on, as a result of endless safety briefings before the expedition began. Those of the group with lamps still attached to their

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helmets, could be seen bobbing up and down in the murky waters as the flow carried them ever onwards, and downwards. A hand grabbed the unconscious guy, and an arm was then wrapped around his neck, in an attempt to keep his mouth out of the water. There was no way of knowing where they were headed, or if the tremors had ceased, as the noise of the crashing waters upon the rocks stifled all other sounds. They moved as corks in water, as they were pushed through endless tunnels, hoping that they would survive. The boring routine of day, had now become a matter of survival. With a mighty whoosh! The battered, lifeless bodies of the team were 'spat out' of an opening in the tunnel wall, as the waters emerged via a cascading waterfall, into a large underground lake, some thirty feet below the opening. Catapulted in all directions the group were immersed into deep, black waters. The noise from the falling water echoed, and was amplified by the vast cavernous underground that they had just been thrust into. For several seconds there was no sign of human life. Then slowly, bodies emerged from the murky depths of the dark lake, that spanned at least fifty metres across. Lumps of rock from the ceiling high above them crashed randomly into the lake, just missing the group, but becoming less frequent as the tremors abated. At first there was no movement in the bodies. They listlessly drifted across the lake, as they were pushed by a gentle current towards a river outlet that seemed to disappear into the side wall of the cavern. As they eased away from the falls, the noise softened, and the angry falls turned into a placid pool of tranquillity. The tremors too had eased, and were little more than a distant rumble from the high ceiling above their heads. Then, what seemed like a choreographed scene from a synchronized swimming routine, two of the team leaped out of the water, gasping for air. They swirled around trying to find a way to take them out of the cold, black waters. But to no avail, and they were

soon plunged back under the water after inhaling the precious air. The cold began to take effect on their consciousness and brought them round a little. Still dizzy, and trying to focus, they swam for, what seemed to be a rocky outcrop, picked out by the tiny beams of light from the remaining working helmet lamps against the massive dark abyss. They had just enough energy to acknowledge one another as they slowly swam towards the outcrop, hindered by clothing, backpacks, and the cold, muscle numbing waters. Nearer the waterfall, Professor Jenkins winced in pain, as he too fought for consciousness. He had been thrown further to one side and had no idea where he was. However, he quickly realised that he had to get out of the icy waters, or he would die from hypothermia. Noticing the flicker of light from the other two heading for the outcrop, he gritted his chattering teeth and made his way to them. He could only manage a one-handed crawl however, as he thought his left arm was broken. The cold though, was numbing the pain... for now, but he was not happy with his situation.

‘Damn! This is all I need.... someone should have told us about earth tremors.’

Professor Jenkins always tried to blame someone when things went wrong, but for now, he needed their help as he inched his small, but bulky frame through the water.

Jenny had made it to the rocky outcrop first, and was drying her long blonde hair with a towel she had salvaged from her backpack. She always kept certain items wrapped in polythene bags, ‘just in case’. Her lighter frame meant that she did not sink as deep as the men when she fell into the lake. The current too had sent her quickly in the direction of the outcrop., and with nothing more serious than a few bruises and a couple of broken finger nails. She noticed the

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men in the group were struggling to join her, and she scathed at them in a clear and polished English accent.

‘Come along gentlemen! What is taking you so long? I’ve been sitting here for ages, and if I don’t get a hot bath soon, along with clean ‘dry’ clothes, I will not be happy.’

She sounded confident, although she was every bit as frightened as the others, but tried not to show it, and she was also relieved to be in one piece. Brad Hardy spluttered as he dragged his wet and bedraggled body out of the water.

‘What the hell just happened?’

He too, was relieved to be in one piece, and tried to take stock of the situation.

‘One minute we were in tight narrow tunnels, and the next we’re in Lake Michigan, inside a ...a...god-damn cathedral?’ Although very cold and wet, he had survived with only a few cuts and bruises. Obviously, the flexibility of youth aided his survival, together with the safety helmet and a well-padded backpack strapped to his back.

‘Quit gibbering you two, and give me a hand out of this god forsaken cess pit!’

Yelled Dylan Masters. Although at forty-eight and older than the others in the group, he was a lot stronger than them. With many more years’ experience in remote geological expeditions. He had honed his body and wits using his former SAS training as a British Army captain, and also managed to salvage more of their equipment.

‘Why is it that I seem to be the only one to have saved any of the extra backpacks?’

He snarled at the youngsters and yelled.

‘Now grab hold of these, and help me out!’

His big hand hauled out two of the backpacks onto the outcrop, and then gestured to one of the bags.

‘There should be a sat-phone in one of these bags.’

Brad and Jenny rushed over to his aid, and struggled as they hauled the two bags further onto the rocks. At the same

time, Dylan almost jumped out of the water onto a big flat stone, his muscles rippled in the dim light. Jenny caught sight of his amazing physic, but said nothing and began to open up one of the backpacks. As he began to check his body for damage he noticed a gash in his right thigh, and he began to stem the blood flow with a tourniquet made from his belt.

‘That’s going to need stitches’

Jenny said, who was also the dedicated first-aider of the team, and she searched in her own bag for a medical kit, that each member of the group carried, for emergencies. Using her helmet lamp to focus on his injury, she used a small folding knife to cut his trousers covering the wound, and when she had a clear view of the wound, she said calmly.

‘There’s no anaesthetic though! ... only antiseptic wipes’
Dylan replied swiftly.

‘That’s for wimps...Anyhow, my legs are too numb from the cold water to feel anything, so you had better get on with it.’

Jenny took a sewing kit from the medical kit, and threaded the needle, wiping it several times with an antiseptic wipe for sterilisation. She cleaned the wound the same way, and quickly began to stitch Dylan’s leg. Although by now, he could feel his legs begin to throb back to life again. He took his mind off the pain, and focussed on their situation.

‘We must try and find a way out of here... and quickly, before hypothermia sets in.’
She had no sooner finished when...

‘HELP!’ ‘HELP!’

Echoed a weakened cry from the lake.

‘Please get me out of here. I can’t hang on much longer.’
Jenkins groaned in agony, but he had managed to swim to within five meters of the outcrop. However, he could feel

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his strength sapping quickly from sheer exhaustion, and his suspected broken arm. Brad responded quickly, and hurled himself back into the water, clutching at the professor as his head dropped below the surface.

‘Hang on buddy, I’ve got you.’

Brad took a big breath of air as he followed the man under the water, and using all of his strength, he managed to keep the professor afloat. He manipulated Jenkins around to enable himself to swim slowly back towards the others.

Dylan and Jenny dragged Jenkins out of the water, and laid him unconscious, onto the flat stones. Unfortunately, they grabbed his arms, which brought him round, and he screamed with pain.

‘Ow!! Watch my arm you great baboon, I think it’s broken.’

Dylan was about to tell him to shut up, when Jenkins sank into unconsciousness again, brought on by exhaustion and the onset of hypothermia. Jenny immediately began CPR, and between them, they managed to revive Jenkins before wrapping him in as many dry items of clothing and towels as they could find in the packs. Dylan looked around on their rocky island to see if there was anything that could be used to light a fire, but everything was too wet. The air in the cavern was not too cold, but the cold mountain river water that entered into the lake was freezing. Jenny managed to get some dry clothes out of his backpack, together with a small, but dry blanket. This was enough to ensure the professor was comfortable and a little warmer. She then strapped up his arm as best she could, using drift wood as a splint, and bandages. When they thought he would survive, Dylan began to look around at the group.

‘OK! Who’s missing?’

Brad looked too.

‘Where’s Jung?’

The two men looked around trying to locate him, with the use of their helmet lamps, but could find no sign of him. Jenny was worried.

‘He is young and strong and should have survived the fall easily, as we all did... Unless!’

Brad was aware of what she was thinking, and went over to Dylan to explain what he remembered.

‘Jung was knocked out when the floor gave way... I tried to hang on to him, but the current was too strong, and he was ripped from my grasp. He must still be in the water!’ The men began to peer across the lake trying to see any sign of him. Jenny came over.

‘What are you looking for?’

Dylan kept his eyes on the lake as he replied.

‘Jung is missing... Brad saw him get knocked out as he fell... He must be here somewhere... keep looking.’

They looked across the lake, and strained their eyes in the dim light, lit only by the two remaining helmet lamps, Dylan’s and Jenny’s, and she was getting very concerned.

‘He has to be here somewhere!’

‘Jung! Jung!’.... ‘Nǐ zài nǎlǐ’ ... ‘Where are you?’

Her grasp of the traditional Chinese language came in useful, and was another reason why she was selected for the team, especially when Jung could not make the group understand him. His English was good, but there were many expressions that confused the others. Her four years in Beijing as a researcher meant she learned a lot of the language. Suddenly, Brad cried out.

‘There! Over there!’

Brad’s young sharp eyes spotted, what looked like a rag doll in the water. Jung’s head was face down, but there was no movement. He was floating face-down, and there was no safety helmet. Dylan and Brad instinctively dived into the freezing cold water without any hesitation. But as they approached him, they could see that Jung’s face was a mass

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of deep cuts, with blood oozing out of several wounds. As they swam towards him, Brad called across to Dylan.

‘Not looking good!’

Dylan ignored him.

‘Let’s just get him out of here... he is a tough little bugger.’ Dylan knew what the outcome would be though, as he had seen a lot of injuries during his army career. Yet he tried to impress on young Brad, the need to be positive. They swam to within five meters of Jung, but stopped when they noticed a change in the water around them. The still black waters suddenly erupted into a cauldron of swirling pools, and a giant pair of jaws burst out of the water to snatch Jung’s body, as if it was made of paper. The jaws were nearly a metre long with razor sharp teeth, very similar to a crocodile, but much bigger, and a second later, Jung was gone. Panicked by the event, Dylan and Brad swam wildly back to the outcrop, with arms flailing, and with screaming frightened voices, mostly from Brad.

‘Holy shit!!! What the hell was that? I’ve never seen anything like that. Ever!... It must be over twenty feet long.’ Dylan yelled at him.

‘Stop talking and get the hell out of this water Brad.’

Meanwhile on the rocky outcrop, Jenkins and Jenny saw the whole thing and were frantically calling the two guys to get out.

‘Hurry! Hurry! It could be back any minute.’

Her voice was as high pitched, and as frantic as it could go. Jenkins, awakened by the noise, had been observing the commotion from his rock bed. He leaned on his good arm to scan the murky waters, straining his eyes to see any signs of the creature. His anxiety over the event was mirrored by the scientific fascination that something, possibly never seen for thousands of years, could actually exist in this part of the world. There were no records of such beasts ever existing in

this area. He crawled closer to the edge of the outcrop, and peered into the black abyss. Jenny saw him and screamed at him.

‘Keep back professor! That thing could jump right out of the water if it wanted to.’

Professor Jenkins rolled back onto his bed, but was keen to know more about the creature.

‘Oh! Yes...Of course, although... I am quite sure it has gone.’

Jenny ignored him, and tried to get as far away from the water as possible, but Professor Jenkins persisted.

‘It got what it wanted, but it’s a pity I didn’t get a clearer view.... We must find out what it is?’

His mind was already writing a paper on the subject to present to the National Museum. He muttered to himself, whilst searching for his field camera, his eagerness masking the pain of his injury.

‘If only I can get some pictures.’

Dylan and Brad dragged themselves out of the water, the adrenaline had pumped the blood through their bodies so fast, all sense of cold had gone, and replaced it with hot sweaty perspiration, and a mixture of fear and exhaustion. Steam rose from their bodies, as they lay breathless on the rock.

‘Get back all of you! That thing could easily leap onto this small rock... and we don’t know how many more there are?’ As soon as he regained his composure, he quickly gathered what equipment they had, and headed further into the middle of the outcrop. The rock they were marooned on was no more than four metres wide, and six metres long. At best it was half a metre out of the water, with a large flat stone in the centre. The group huddled onto the rock, and tried to gather their senses. All thoughts of cold and pain from their battered bodies were put to one side, as a new terror threat surrounded them, one which occupied their

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every thought. For several minutes there was only the sound of the distant waterfall to break the eerie silence. Dylan eventually broke the silence.

‘Jenny! Use your headlamp to scan the perimeter on your side, and I will do the same on this side.’

As he pointed to the far reaches of the cavern, he strained his eyes to pick out any sign of an exit to get them away from the water. Jenny replied, focusing her light beam in the direction he pointed.

‘Certainly Dylan, but what are we looking for exactly?’

‘Any sign of an escape route. A tunnel, ledge, or even a way back up to the top of the falls... We have to get off this god damn rock, and soon, before that thing comes back for more.’

Dylan turned to Brad and Jenkins and gave them their instructions, as he knew it was time to take control of their situation, and try to lead the team out of danger.

‘You guys should keep an eye on the water, and let me know if you see anything, no matter how trivial, and get that sat’ phone out!’

‘We will Dylan, I’ve already found a couple of hand flashlights in the packs, that should help.’

Brad, switched on the torches and shone the lights into the oily black waters. Dylan saw that and encouraged the team.

‘OK! That’s good, but stay alert, and see what weapons we have in the packs? I have my army knife, but it won’t be much use against the size of that beast.’

His mind was now fully alert, and working out all the options to get out of the watery tomb that they had been plunged into. When it was handed to him, Dylan switched on the satellite phone found in one of the bags, but there was no signal.

‘Damn! The signal cannot penetrate the rock strata... we have to get out into the open to get a better signal.’

As he stared into the dark corners of the cavern his mind wandered as to how they got into this mess, and how they were going to get out of it.

It seemed a long time since he was boarding the flight back in London, just two weeks ago. He thought the short expedition to carry out initial research in this area would net him his retirement package. He could then set up his bar in Cyprus, build his boat, and spend the rest of his days fishing. He recalled the first time he met Jenkins in the National Museum and Research Centre in London. The guy was full of it, and Dylan remembered the long sermon he gave on the merits of the area. He mused to himself.

‘All that bullshit... I bet the professor would like to be safe in his office right now.’

CHAPTER 4

The Cavern.

After two cold and miserable hours had passed by, the small group camped on the centre and most elevated point of the rocky outcrop. They constantly stared over the black waters of the underground lake not knowing if, or when, the beast would strike. Jenny did what she could for the injured professor, who flitted in and out of consciousness, only to be awakened by cries of panic through what seemed to be a nightmare of events for him. Dylan was trying to fabricate makeshift weapons from passing driftwood, and contemplating an escape route, whilst Brad watched for signs of movement in or on the water. Their flashlights were switched off, as they strained their eyes to get the most out of the darkness. No one talked, and if they did, it was only in a very faint whisper, for fear of attracting attention from whatever lay in the watery depths. Brad moved closer to the edge of the rock and spoke in a soft, but panicked voice, and pointed at something.

“There, what’s that in the water? It’s big.... And it’s coming back to finish us off!”

He jumped back from the edge of the outcrop and knelt down in the middle of it. Dylan and Jenny moved to focus

on the object as it stealthily approached their position. Dylan focused his flashlight beam at the area Brad had pointed, which was about ten metres from their position. He picked out what looked like a crocodile form, about five meters long, its gnarled back submerged for most of its length. They all stared at the creature, waiting to see what move it was going to make. Hoping they would have enough time to jump out of the way, and into the water if need be. As it slowly moved towards them, Jenny whispered.

‘It may just be circling us for now, trying to assess our defences... We must keep calm.’

Professor Jenkins had woken up, and heard what she said. He was fully focused as he crawled to the highest point of the outcrop in an effort to keep safe.

‘That’s easy for you to say... you can swim faster than the rest of us... especially me.’

Closer and closer it came, until it appeared to nudge the edge of a submerged part of the outcrop. At that moment the creature rolled over and raised a massive arm out of the water. The movement sprayed the team with a shower of cold water, causing a jolt of panic which made them leap back onto the rock. Dylan leaped forward with his knife, not knowing what to expect. Jenkins screamed.

‘Agh! It’s coming for us! Get back Dylan... get back!’

Dylan was about to jump onto the beast, then stopped and looked closer at it.

‘Wait! Look! Its, ... it’s... not the beast at all!’

He gathered his senses and headed for the dark object, knife and flashlight in hand. Jenny was very concerned.

‘Don’t go near it Dylan! It’s too dangerous!’

Dylan’s reply was much calmer, and answered in an amused tone.

‘I don’t think this will harm us... This is going to save us!’ Brad was curious, but cautious.

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‘Dylan for pity’s sake...be careful!’

Dylan explained what it was.

‘It’s a large part of a tree ...It must have been ripped apart by the tremor and washed down with us. Look! There are more branches over there.’

What appeared to have been a creature’s arm, turned out to be a long branch, and its equilibrium was disturbed when the tree trunk hit the outcrop. It caused the log to roll over, springing the branch out of the water, and spraying the team into panic mode. They were all relieved, especially Jenny and Jenkins.

‘Thank God for that! For a moment there...’

She was interrupted, as Dylan wanted their assistance to drag the tree closer.

‘Quick, help me guide this around to the other side. I noticed a small ledge on the far side of the cavern. I think we can use this as a float to reach it.’

He continued.

‘It’s big enough to support us all, and if we can get a couple more, we could build a rough raft which will give us a better chance to get off this rock.’

Dylan hacked off the large branch with his army knife, and was able to use the branch to steer another two smaller tree trunks next to the outcrop. Jenny and Brad were able to group the logs together three abreast. Dylan then used other branches, and tied them across the three logs with one of Brads climbing ropes from a salvaged backpack. He then hacked other branches to form oars, and a longer branch to form a wooden pole, to which he tied his knife on, to create a rough spear.

‘Right! Let’s get Jenkins on first, and load the bags around him...the rest of us can climb on board after him.’

The team were very impressed by the efficiency of Dylan, who took the whole thing in his stride, especially Jenny. For an older guy she thought, he was pretty cool. She watched

him working as she cared for Jenkins, then turned away as Dylan noticed her staring at him. An hour later the group had boarded the makeshift raft and were slowly paddling towards the shore of the cavern. Dylan insisted they take it really slow.

‘The less we disturb the water the better, and try to remain calm... if anything happens... Jump into the water and head for that ledge.’

Jenkins sat in the middle clutching the bags, whilst Jenny sat behind him trying to stop the rest of the baggage from falling into the water. Brad sat astride the left hand log, and Dylan sat on the right. They pushed off from their outcrop rock, and after a little re-adjusting were soon able to move the raft in the right direction.

All this work had opened up Dylan’s wound, which he was oblivious to. As he paddled, a trickle of blood ran from under his bandage, down his leg and into the water, creating a red misty cloud, which billowed and spread as it sank. He continued to organise the team to ensure they were heading for the floor of the cavern.

‘Switch off your light Jenny, keep it steady Brad, and be quiet... no sudden moves. We have about 20 metres to go.’ Slowly, in the darkness, they inched towards the shore. The thought of surviving the nightmare could soon be a reality. They all kept their breathing low as they paddled to the relative safety of the shore. Another five metres had been reached when...

! WHOOSH!

The calm surface of the lake erupted, as the crocodile like creature broke the surface right next to the makeshift raft, sending a massive shower of water all over the crew. Sensing the blood from Dylan’s leg, the creature made straight for him, but Dylan sensed the disturbance in the water as the creature swam towards them. He whipped his leg out of the

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water with only a split second to spare. The jaws of the creature got a mouthful of branch instead of his leg, and snapped shut inches from Dylan's leg. However, as the creature fell back into the water, Dylan grabbed his spear, and with one quick movement, pierced the side of the beast. Blood gushed out from the wound as it swam away from the raft. At the same time Dylan shouted at his startled crew.

'Quick! Don't stop... Let's get the hell outta here. I don't know how much I hurt it, and I don't want to be around to find out.'

They paddled as hard as they could to reach the shore, which seemed agonizingly slow, and as they approached the safety of the ledge, Dylan looked back. He turned on his helmet light and could see the silhouette of the creature heading straight for them. It was about ten metres away, its eyes shining like beacons by the flashlight. Dylan yelled at his team.

'Hurry! Get everything off. That thing has not finished with us yet'

He quickly readied his spear, to face the onrushing beast. Jenny and Brad managed to climb onto the narrow ledge, and began to lift off the baggage that surrounded Jenkins. Dylan stood up on the raft, and faced the creature. Only one of them was going to survive this clash he thought, and he was determined to get in the first blow. As the beast leapt out of the water about two metres from the raft, Dylan tensed, and kept low, looking for his best and only shot at surviving.

! SNAP!

Giant jaws clamped shut, splitting bone and muscle in one massive bite. Dylan was pushed back by the force, sending him flying into the water. Yet it was not him that was injured. Another, even bigger, creature had sensed the blood from the wound Dylan had inflicted on the first beast. Unseen it emerged from the depths of the lake to the side,

and rose out of the water, and took out the first creature in one flying movement. The last thing Dylan saw was its massive tail, as it took its catch back to the murky depths. The rest of the team could only watch the event in horror from the ledge. No one spoke, or could speak for several minutes. Then Brad led the cheers of joy, thumping the air with his fist.

‘Hooray! About time we got a break... Now stop messing with the fish Dylan, and let’s get the hell outta here.’

Brad tried to lighten the atmosphere, as he and Jenny managed to haul Dylan out of the water and onto the narrow ledge. He got to his feet immediately and without anyone saying a word, they quickly picked up all their possessions and ran along the ledge. Although narrow, there was enough room to stand up, and there were very few obstacles in their way. About thirty meters along, they noticed the ledge was getting wider and rising up. They followed the water’s edge, keeping an eye on the water, and walked on until they reached more rocks jutting out into the lake forming other outcrops and islands. These then formed a plateau of about three meters in height, to which they climbed on to and looked for a more sheltered place to rest, and was as far away from the lake as possible. About fifty metres in, Dylan noticed a niche in the wall of the cavern.

‘This’ll do guys. We can set up camp here for the night.’ Although nobody really knew whether it was day or night, and in all the commotion, neither did they look at their watches. They instinctively felt it was nighttime. Dylan issued more instructions.

‘Brad, Jenny, take care of Jenkins, and I will scout the area... and while you’re at it, find out what’s in the backpacks, food and clothes wise.’

Jenny yelled at Dylan.

‘Stop!’

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He paused and wondered what the problem was. She continued.

‘Let me clean your wound, because we don’t want a trail of blood for those.... things to follow.’

Dylan had forgotten about his leg.

‘Of course, sorry! Good job you are alert.’

Jenny used her now dimming light from her helmet lamp to place a clean dressing on Dylan’s leg. When he left to scout the area, she unloaded the bags, and settled Professor Jenkins down in a flat corner of the niche. Brad looked in the smaller backpacks for food, as he was sure they all carried energy bars at least. The niche was dry in the middle, but water streamed down the edges from above forming small rivulets which ran towards the lake. Brad also noticed dead roots, and bits of timber scattered about, which he gathered to make a fire. Dylan crept slowly across the cavern floor with his spear in hand, but kept his helmet light switched off, as he tried to acclimatize his eyes to the darkness. As a former SAS soldier he was used to being plunged into all sorts of weird environments. Though he didn’t think he would be using those skills again since retiring from active duty. As far as he could tell, the massive underground cavern was now getting smaller, and the ceiling was about twenty meters high and getting lower. There were no signs of light filtering down, but he could feel a slight breeze coming from up ahead. There was still at least one hundred meters to go before they would reach the narrowest point, but he did not want to venture too far. He was exhausted, and in need of food and rest. His battered body was beginning to ache, and he knew the damp air would not do it much good. As far as he could tell, there were no obvious dangers out of the lake, but his senses were now prepared for anything. Allowing himself one last look around Dylan made his way back to the niche. Up ahead he could see the warm glow of a small fire.

‘Nice one Brad.’

He thought, as he trudged wearily back to the group. By the time Dylan had returned to the others, Brad was adding more timber to the fire and to one side there was a small pile of assorted food. He had found a dozen energy bars; two full water bottles; three energy drinks in plastic bottles, and a couple of packs of mints. Jenny had strung out one of his climbing ropes and hung it to form a washing line near the fire, and was busy hanging wet clothes onto it. She saw Dylan return.

‘Hi Dylan! There are a couple towels and dry shirts over there next to Jenkins.’

She turned to face him.

‘What’s it looking like out there?’

She asked, nodding in the direction he had come from.

‘I can’t see too much at the moment... but the cavern gets smaller, and I can feel a slight breeze, which must mean an opening somewhere.’

He began to remove his wet clothes, and continued.

‘I think we need to regroup, and prepare ourselves for another difficult day ahead. By my reckoning its 20:30 hours.’ He said looking at the fluorescent dials of his wristwatch.

‘We’ve lost about 3 to 4 hours, and the guys at base camp will be sending out a search party by now.’

He did not say anything to the others, but at the back of his mind, Dylan thought there could be little chance of them being found, as they must have travelled over a couple of hundred metres from their last known position. Nevertheless, he tried to instil confidence.

‘They must have felt the tremors too, as we were only about one hundred metres away from the tunnel opening, and two hundred from the camp.’

He scanned the ceiling of the cavern.

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‘It’ll be dark out there now, and they will call off the search in another hour or so to resume in the morning.’

He continued.

‘We must eat, rest and get Jenkins ready for travelling in a few hours’ time...I will take the first watch, then its Brads turn.’

He nodded in Brads direction, and the young man nodded back without a saying a word, as it seemed that a bond was forming between the group.

‘You two get some rest, and keep warm. You will need lots of energy tomorrow, and you have to be prepared for the hard work ahead.’

Dylan looked deep into their eyes to see if there were any signs of stress, but could see none. He looked at Jenny in particular, holding her gaze until she looked away. She was pleased to have this powerful man in their midst, and was determined not to show her emotions.

‘We are alright Dylan, but how about you?’

Dylan smiled as he changed his wet clothing for dry.

‘I am fine, and this is the sort of environment I teach my recruits about. So, I have lots to tell them when I get back.’

The group began to ration out the supplies and prepared for a few hours rest. None of them could sleep properly, as what they had just been through was etched in their memories forever, and only time would ease that tension. Jenny made sure Jenkins was comfortable, and managed to reset his broken arm with splints of timber Dylan had prepared with his knife. She also gave him some aspirins which she salvaged from one of the safety kit. She then assessed everyone’s wounds and applied whatever treatment she could with her limited resources. Apart from the aspirins, she had bandages, plasters, wipes and antiseptic cream, which she hoped would be enough until they reached their camp. Brad remembered, that apart from his climbing

ropes, he had brought other basic climbing equipment in his rucksack, such as carabineers and crampons. These, together with the maps he found in the bags could be invaluable later on he thought. Jenkins lay on his side and looked through his note book by the light of the fire. Using a jewellers loupe eye glass that he always wore around his neck, Jenkins looked at some of the rocks close by. He then wondered if the samples they had collected earlier in the day were in one of the bags Dylan had saved. He began to recall some of the interesting samples they had found, and was looking forward to testing them at the camp mini-lab. As he toyed with the rocks in the firelight, he noticed some of them had veins of, what seemed to be gold, but he couldn't be sure in the dim light. As he scraped and put some samples into his pocket, he mused to himself.

'I must test these as soon as possible, we might have to return here and set up a field research unit, although the thought of facing those creatures again was not something I want to do.'

He then looked at a photograph of his family, and tears welled in his eyes, then kissing it he lay down on a makeshift pillow. The medication, and warmth of the fire soon got the better of him, exhausted by the events of the day, and his own personal traumas at home, he drifted into a deep sleep. Dylan sat nearby scanning the shadows created by the firelight. He had another attempt at getting a signal from the sat-phone, but in was no use. He decided not to waste the batteries as they would be needed when they eventually got out of the cavern. He then spent the rest of the time perfecting his spear, and creating a couple of wooden clubs from the surrounding debris, as he wanted to defend his team much better than the last time, should anything happen. There were lots of fallen tree roots that had made their way through the cavern roof over time, and by recent tremors. Those that had dried made ideal fire wood, and

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Brad was able to create a large pile to ensure their fire was kept high for warmth, and to ward off predators. The peace was broken twice during the night, once, when Jenkins, as part of his nightmare, woke up screaming and shouting.

‘Get it off me, get it off me!’

He squirmed on the floor, with his legs kicking out wildly, before Jenny leaned over and held him tightly in her arms and tried to calm him. It worked, as he soon relaxed and went back to sleep.

‘Lucky sod!’

Brad whispered softly, peering from his makeshift bed of backpacks. He initially thought of Jenny as an arrogant high flying bitch who thought she was ‘too good’ for anyone. But during this trip, and the events of the last few hours he saw her in a different light. Her blonde hair was usually kept in a tight knot which gave her that secretary look, but now it was cascading down her shoulders, and the top few buttons on her loose khaki blouse were open, revealing the smooth soft swell of her breasts. The firelight made her look particularly appealing, and Brad could not help but enjoy the view, but then Jenny caught his gaze, and embarrassed, Brad turned, and pretended to look into the distant shadows. The second time the peace was broken, was when a group of bats came swooping down within a few feet of the camp, but the fire managed to ward them off. Their high-pitched screams were almost ear shattering, and Dylan noticed that the creatures were larger than normal. The biggest he had ever seen were giant fruit bats from south-east Asia, but these were twice their size. He wondered why the creatures were bigger in this region, and shared his thoughts with Brad.

‘Must be something in this area to produce these animal changes.... I must ask the professor when he is more coherent.’

Brad thought the same.

Donald Wraith

‘Yes, I am sure he will shed some light on it... but from what we know of the area, it is rich in many minerals, and there are lots of underground volcanic activities... maybe a combination of them all has provided sufficient nourishment for excessive growth.’

‘One thing is certain Brad... if the bats can get into the cavern, then they can get out, and maybe that could be our way out too.’

Dylan stoked up the fire to keep whatever was out there at bay, as he knew that all creatures were afraid of fire, no matter how big they were.

CHAPTER 5

Get Out.

A few hours later, Dylan looked at his watch again and saw that it was almost six am, and decided that it was time to get going. He thought, that in another couple of hours the base camp team would be out looking for them, and he wanted to be out in the open by then. He prodded at Jenny who squirmed and wanted to rest more, but Dylan persisted.

‘Wake up everyone...It’s time to go!’

Brad, who was still on sentry duty, went over to Dylan, who explained to him the plan for the day.

‘We need to be outside when the others restart their search for us. That tremor yesterday might not have been a one off, so let’s get moving.’

Picking his way over the huddled bodies of sleeping Jenny and Jenkins, Dylan added.

‘I’ll wake the other two, and when we have eaten, you can put the fire out.’

Brad looked at Dylan anxiously.

‘I hope we get out soon, I’m starving, I miss that camp bed, and I never thought I would say that.’

Dylan laughed.

‘Ha! Ha! I know what you mean Brad.’

Dylan woke the others, and put a finger to his lips as he gestured for them to keep quiet. Jenny was a little indignant, and looked around to see if there was any running water.

‘I need a shower.... I stink, and my hair is a real mess.’

Dylan tried to understand, but he could never appreciate that a woman’s needs were completely different to a man’s.

‘For God’s sake Jenny... we are alive and hope to be out of here soon... Just wear a hat, and there are puddles of water over there.’

Disgruntled, Jenny rummaged in her bag, piled up her hair and put on a baseball cap, then she grabbed her clothes and hid behind the washing line of clothes to dress. She replied to his criticism.

‘I know! I know! But a woman has to look her best ... whatever the situation!’

Brad noticed the mood she was in, and joked.

‘Jenny! You can always go back to the lake for a swim... the water looks clean and cool.’

Jenny threw a rock towards Brad, which he easily dodged.

‘Yes! You would like that... It would give you another chance to see my tits too!’

Brad did not reply, and stalked away slowly to pack up their equipment and to fill up the water bottles from fresh water that trickled out of the rocks. He assumed that the day would involve climbing, and so he arranged a separate bag for all his climbing equipment. When Jenny had dressed, she went over to Jenkins to check on his condition. She gave him an energy bar, and one of the bottles of energy drinks.

‘Take this, you need all the strength you can get, as I want to get you back to camp as soon as possible to treat your arm, and get you to a hospital.’

Jenkins was awake, and was looking at his note book. He had also tried to use his mobile phone, but of course, there was no signal. He seemed most concerned about it.

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‘Damn! I must call home as soon as possible... it is very important to me.’

Jenny wondered why he was so adamant about calling home so often.

‘Professor! As soon as we get outside, then you can use the sat-phone... until then we have to get going and look for a way out.’

She stayed with him until he had eaten the food, then Jenny helped him to dress, being careful not to disturb his broken arm.

‘Can you stand up now professor?’

Jenkins laboured for several minutes trying to balance himself, but eventually was able to stand. Jenny encouraged him.

‘Great professor! You are doing well! Your arm splint is secured, and you just have to be careful when walking across the cavern floor.... I will stay with you and use my light to show you the pathway.’

The group stretched, and felt every aching muscle as they prepared to leave the camp. Even Dylan was feeling the pain, but he could not show it, as he had to appear strong for the next phase of the journey. He knew the others needed a strong leader, and he was not going to let them down. They quickly stowed all the equipment, and Brad passed a new flashlight he found in one of the bags to Dylan, who was pleased that the kid was proving to be quite adaptable. He was happy to have him in the team, and somehow knew that he would be needed over the next few hours. The group donned their safety hats and Dylan spoke with Brad.

‘I want you to tie a rope to each one of us so that we do not get too far apart in the dark, and also if anyone slips, or falls into a pothole, they can be rescued.’

Brad was impressed by Dylan's calmness, and appreciated his leadership.

'Anything you say Dylan...just get us out of here buddy!' When the safety rope was tied to each person, Dylan led the way as the team followed in single file, first Jenny, then Jenkins, with Brad bringing up the rear. Jenny wore the helmet light with the best battery to ensure that Jenkins could see the way clearly, as she did not want him to fall. Brad had the other helmet lamp, and was told to look for danger from above, below and behind them. Dylan stressed the importance of working as a team.

'We must stay together at all times, and if anyone stops, then we all stop.... Stay in line, and do not to stray, as the ground is littered with potholes and fallen rocks from the tremors.... Shout out if you see or hear anything.' Everyone was silent, but nodded that they agreed, as they knew very well that there could be danger ahead. Dylan walked at a steady pace, and used the flashlight to search the contours of the cavern as it meandered into the darkness ahead of them. He noticed how the ceiling height was getting much lower, as it was only about 15mtrs at this point, and 30mtrs wide. Water was streaming in from fissures in the rock walls, but had formed their own escape route into the stream they were following. Dylan was pleased that the stream water was not deep enough for the creatures to use, as it was only a few centimetres deep, but he kept checking the depth just in case. It lost time to do it, but it also gave Jenkins time to rest and drink water. Dylan was sure that the stream would exit somewhere, or the place would be flooded with all the water seeping in. He decided there must be another hidden river similar to the one that brought them into the cavern.

After a while, Dylan stopped the team, and they gathered around him, hoping that he had good news. He shone his

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flashlight onto the stream they were following, and then onto the cavern wall.

‘Over there, I have noticed that the streams are converging into a small river which carries on further into the mountain.’

As a geologist, Brad wanted to know if it could be a way out.

‘Dylan, we should follow it, as over thousands of years the water will have carved out an opening in the mountain that could lead us out.’

Dylan was not sure.

‘Maybe Brad, but also, there is breeze coming from the ceiling somewhere... I cannot see from where, but it could be the opening that the bats use at night.’

Jenny interjected.

‘If you ask me, then both options could get us out of here, and we should try one of them first, then use the other if needed.’

Dylan agreed.

‘Yes, and my instincts tell me to follow the source of the breeze first as it should be closer... The river route could go on for miles.’

Brad pondered for a few minutes trying to assess the best option himself.

‘As a mountaineer, I am happy with the bat hole, and would soon climb up to provide a secure exit route. It will depend on the rock surface though.’

Jenkins in the meantime was trying to make notes and diagrams in a pocket note book with his good hand. He used a small novelty flashlight he kept on his keyring, similar to the ones companies dish out for being ‘safe at work’. He held it in his mouth as he scribbled. It was made easier as he was carrying nothing more than a small backpack, the rest of the cargo was spread amongst the others. As he walked, he noticed more gold-like seams, some of which were quite large. Whilst the others were busy, he took photographs and

made sketches in his book. He also noticed other potential mineral deposits, which should be further researched. He muttered to himself.

‘These deposits could be of great scientific value, we must return as soon as possible, to collect more samples, and carry out a more detailed search.’

Whilst the others were still talking, he picked up small samples close by, and wrote in his book. Jenny took the opportunity to talk to Dylan.

‘Tell me Dylan. Why did they pick you for this job? You’re not a geologist or anything.’

She stopped herself from saying any more, as she thought her words sounded a little condescending. Dylan smiled smugly.

‘Oh! No particular reason... but someone had to get you geeks in and out of these remote places safely.’

‘Touché’

Jenny said.

‘I asked for that... It’s just, that you seem more of an all-action military man, than research support member by the way you handle yourself.’

Dylan interjected quickly.

‘I was in the army for too many years, and well, the pay here is good and it, err, takes my mind of stuff. For the record, this is my fifth geological survey.’

‘! Oh! Stuff? What stuff? ... I’m intrigued now.’

Jenny replied.

‘What stuff?’

‘That can wait... Now come along, and stop wasting time chatting.’

As he started out again, he shone his flashlight over Jenny and Jenkins heads.

‘Keep up you two! Or we’ll have to spend another night here.’

Brad told him the reason for their slowness.

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‘Dylan, it’s Jenkins, he keeps scribbling in his book and slowing us down.’

‘Well! Make him move, or I will.’

Dylan shook his head and continued walking, being careful where he stepped as he looked up at the ceiling looking for the bat hole. Then after a hundred meters or so, he stopped the team again, and switched his flashlight off, and stared up into the ceiling of the cavern. Jenny queried his action.

‘Why have you turned out the light Dylan?’

He pointed up into the roof space.

‘Look! Up there!’

As her eyes adapted to the dim light, Jenny noticed a distant light source to where Dylan had pointed, she replied.

‘Yes, yes. I see it, is that the way out?’

Jenkins and Brad rushed up to see what all the fuss was about, and the group stood together trying to focus on the source of light. High up in the corner of the cavern there was a narrow beam of sun light shining into the cavern through an aperture. The sun beam lit up parts of the cavern floor, walls and lake and they could see how beautiful the cavern was when lit. Jenny was impressed.

‘If it wasn’t for the dangers in this place, it would be wonderful to explore and appreciate this natural phenomenon.’

Brad interrupted her dreamy thoughts.

‘Jenny, it’s too dangerous, and we need to get out as quickly as possible.’

The aperture was quite high up, difficult to judge its size, and looked impossible to reach. Dylan told them of his initial thoughts.

‘It could be a way out. But how do we get up there?’

Brad quickly assessed the situation.

‘No problem... I could easily get up there, I’ve done quite a bit of cave climbing, and I have brought some equipment that should get us up there.’

Dylan patted Brad on his back.

‘Good man! Now, let’s get closer and see what we need.’
The team walked in single file until they reached an area immediately below the opening, and they all sighed with relief at the possibility of escape from their watery dungeon. Brad laid out his climbing equipment, assessed the opening, and the adjacent rock wall. Everyone else took off the safety rope and sat down to wait for his assessment. Jenny passed round some food and water. Brad reported back to Dylan.

‘The walls are quite steep and wet with constant rainfall... many areas look to be covered in moss or wet algae. The tremor and dampness has also loosened some of the rocks.’ He took out a couple of crampons from his pack, and began to prepare his ropes. Dylan switched the flashlight back on and looked at the equipment.

‘That’s all very well for you and me Brad, but what about Jenkins and Jenny?’

‘Hey!’

Exclaimed Jenny.

‘I’m not useless you know...have you forgotten that I was first to swim onto that rocky outcrop back there.’

Dylan had assessed the situation too, and decided against climbing.

‘This is different. It will be difficult and dangerous for Brad, but for Jenkins... it would be impossible.’

Brad was indignant with Dylan’s answer.

‘That’s bullshit! This could be our only chance, and we’ve got to take it... Let me have a go first, then I could at least use the sat phone to send for help.’

Dylan was adamant.

‘No! I cannot risk you falling, and you said yourself that the walls are very slimy...it’s too dangerous Brad. We move on, and we’ll take another hour or so to find an alternative exit...If we don’t find anything, then we come back. OK?’
Jenny tried to deflect the tension.

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'Dylan! Try the sat-phone again... You might get a signal now.'

Dylan smiled at her, and realised why she said it, as it would give them time to calm down before moving on. He took out the sat-phone and switched it on.

'Nothing! Only static...we need to get to the surface for it to operate.... Now, let's get going.'

He looked around for Brad, and saw him trying to climb up the rockface.

'Brad! Get back here...it's too dangerous!'

Brad seemed insistent and called back.

'I'll be fine... just let me see how far I can get.'

He climbed about ten metres, and placed a crampon into a fissure in the wall to secure a line, then he slowly made his way further. Several times, he slipped on the wet rocks, causing the others to become very worried. Jenny called after him.

'Brad! Be careful.'

At about twenty metres up, Brad placed a hand onto, what he thought, was a secure rock. Then it gave way and several rocks seemed to explode out of the rockface. It caused him to fall, and if it wasn't for the ten-metre crampon, he would have fallen to the floor below.

'Arghh!'

He called as he fell, and Dylan instinctively climbed up the rockface to rescue him, and he slowly helped Brad to reach the floor. He was bruised but no bones were broken, and Dylan admonished him.

'See! I told you it was too dangerous.'

Jenny ran over and tended to his bruises as Brad sat against the wet wall feeling a little dejected.

'I had to try Dylan... I had to try.'

Dylan patted Brad's helmet.

'I know boy...I would have done the same at your age.'

When Brad had recovered, Dylan seemed more resolute than before.

‘Let’s get going, and please listen to me at all times if you want to get out of here in one piece.’

He looked at the others, but no one dare say otherwise, as they could see he was determined to lead the team his way. Dylan scanned the perimeter with his flashlight for an alternative route. He noticed one of the small streams disappear under the main wall of the cavern just up ahead. It looked as if it had worn out an opening that could be passable.

‘This way! I think we ought to check this out first.’

He headed off to investigate, and the others duly followed, although Brad was still trying to assess the climb.

They reached the opening in the side of the wall which was about two metres wide, and one metre high. Dylan jumped into the stream and found it was only about knee deep.

He turned to the others.

‘You guys wait here while I investigate.’

As he bent down to enter the tunnel Brad came forward with a smaller nylon rope from his kit bag.

‘Wait Dylan, put this on first...Tie this on, and holler if you get into trouble.’

‘Good idea Brad. I knew you would come in handy.’

As he tied the rope around his waist, Brad secured the other end around a big boulder sticking out of the ground, and prepared to belay out the line. Brad looked at Jenny.

‘Jenny! You get the other big flashlight and follow his progress as far as you can.’

‘OK Brad.’

Jenny opened up one of the two backpacks they had salvaged and took out the torch. Jenkins wanted to help.

‘What shall I do Dylan?’

‘Watch the perimeter for anything unusual, and get a fire going...I think I’m going to get wet.’

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Dylan bent his six-foot four-inch frame as low as he could and entered the opening, while Brad slowly released the rope. Jenny watched from the side and followed Dylan's path with the flashlight, and wondered what was in store for him. Jenkins carefully gathered driftwood with his one good hand, and laid it on a section of dry ground. Everyone was quiet as they concentrated on the task in hand. They all thought that they could not afford to lose Dylan. That would mean more trouble than anyone cared to think about. Jenny thought that Brad was a capable enough guy, but with little experience, and if he couldn't climb to that opening in the cave roof, then what would happen to them, and she allowed herself a small prayer of hope.

Dylan inched himself forward taking care to view every step, he scanned the ceiling and walls of the opening with his flashlight, and they appeared to be getting bigger. The water was crystal clear, with a gentle flow that took it along a fairly level, yet slippery path. He continued on for another five metres, and then he noticed the stream split into two tunnels. The one to the right was smaller and darker, and Dylan felt a warm draft of air coming from it. The one to the left dropped gently in front of him. He shone the flashlight down trying to locate the stream's path, and caught a glimpse of light at the far end. He muttered to himself.

'Interesting, but this looks pretty hopeless, I don't fancy going down there, I'd much rather be being going up.'

Dylan turned to return back to the others, when his foot slipped on the slippery stream bed, causing him to lose his balance and plummet down the shallow gulley. As he fell the rope around his waist tightened, which slowed him down. However, Brad on the other end of the rope could not hold Dylan's weight and he lost his grip. This caused Dylan to plummet further down the gulley until the rope, which was tied to the boulder, went tight, but held firm.

‘Dylan! Dylan!’

Jenny screamed.

‘Are you alright? Where are you? Talk to me?’

Jenkins ran over to Brad, who had fallen into the stream, but was able to get out again.

‘What happened?’

Jenkins enquired, and with his good arm, he and Jenny helped Brad to his feet.

‘I...I... Don’t know... One minute he was fine, and the next? He suddenly dropped off the edge or something.’

Dylan was stunned as he dangled from the taught rope held firmly around his waist. The cold water showered onto him from above, as he tried to get a foothold. He managed to swing to one side onto a rocky ledge jutting out from the edge of the stream, as it cascaded its way past him. He caught his breath and called out..

‘It’s OK! I’m all right!’

The gushing water around him meant he had to shout loudly to be heard. Jenny heard his call and replied.

‘What happened Dylan?’

She stood in the stream almost a metre into the opening, and she frantically shone the flashlight, trying to get a glimpse of Dylan. But all she saw was the rope disappearing over the edge of the gulley. When he had caught his breath, Dylan answered.

‘I slipped and went down this steep gulley, but I’m OK... Now, give me a minute, and I’ll make my way back up, there’s nothing here anyway.’

As he steadied himself Dylan took hold of the flashlight which fortunately, had a strap looped around his wrist. As he looked around for the best way to climb back up, he looked down. The water flowing down the gulley began to drop more gently for another three or four meters, then went into a much larger river that appeared to be coming out of the cavern. Plumes of mist billowed out of the entrance to the

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cavern, and formed a dense cloud that followed the river into the open air. There were high, vertical embankments either side of the river which contained the dense mist clouds, and masked the flow of the river, and of course its inhabitants. At the side of the river was a ledge barely large enough for Dylan to stand on. He climbed down and stood on the ledge, where he could see the flow of the river was quite steady, and he could see there were patches of dense vegetation, with sunlight sporadically streaming through the mist. The air was also a lot warmer there, giving the impression of a tropical atmosphere. He thought to himself.

‘This must be our best chance of escape and definitely worth a try.’

Dylan grasped the rope and made his way back up the gulley to the others who were pleased to see him, yet they all wanted to know what happened. After a brief explanation, he explained about the new discovery.

‘It took me by surprise, but the gulley slope is quite shallow, and very slippery. You could almost slide down it.’

‘Not with my broken arm’

Jenkins interrupted, and Jenny added.

‘Hang on a minute Dylan! Where does that river come from?’

She added more to her question.

‘I mean, is it possible the underground lake feeds it, and if it does, will it not be full of those...’

She paused, reluctant to say the words.

‘Those, things!’

She exclaimed, and then Jenkins spoke as a college lecturer.

‘Oh yes! Highly probable... Let me try to understand for you. When we left the lake, and those creatures.’

He shuddered.

‘We then climbed about three or four meters onto the plateau, did we not?’

He said looking at Dylan.

‘Yes, that’s about right.’

Jenkins continued.

‘Well! Assuming the lake does have an exit river, which must be the case, otherwise the cavern would have been full of water. Then we can assume that the river course must get lower to be able to flow out of the cavern.’

He continued with a monotonous lecturer’s tone.

‘And the distance you say of the stream gully is approximately three to five metres lower from the plateau, we can conclude that the river in question could indeed be fed from the lake, and thus contain the.... the creatures.’

He added.

‘Also, if the environment is as you say Dylan, then it is a perfect terrain and breeding area for those creatures to inhabit. Which is why I refuse to use that route as a means of escape?’

Brad smiled at the protracted assessment.

‘You can’t argue with that.’

Jenny also nodded in agreement, and then Dylan intervened.

‘Hang on a minute! What about the vegetation? And I could see sunlight streaming through the mist, which must mean an outside entrance is not too far away, and therefore a way out.’

Jenny agreed initially.

‘You could be right, but you have seen how fast those creatures can travel, and they have already tasted human flesh. They only need to smell blood in the water, and ugh!!?’ She could not continue. Dylan then added.

‘There was another tunnel in there that went to the right... It was smaller, looked longer, and had very warm air coming from it, and I could smell sulphur.’

‘Ah!’

Professor Jenkins exclaimed.

‘That could further explain the creatures inhabiting this place.’

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‘How’s that professor?’

Brad enquired.

‘Well, this area has quite a lot of volcanic activity, and there are many areas with active hot-springs. If that is the case, these hot-springs would warm the ground and the waters enough to sustain the sort of creatures such as those we have encountered.’

He chose his words carefully as he did not want to give them a name that could frighten everyone, especially himself.

‘There could well be other caverns here with perfect breeding temperatures. Also, we know from our research, that the area is rich in wildlife, including fish, deer and elk, providing an adequate food source and a perfect environment for them in which to breed.’

Professor Jenkins paused, rubbed his chin, and continued

‘Though I cannot understand why they have not spread further, which would have alerted the authorities, and scientist, although the mists in the valley could well mask their existence. But I’m sure there is a perfectly logical explanation.’

‘How hot could it get down there?’

Dylan asked, and the professor replied instantly.

‘Temperatures could very well be anywhere between 30°C to 1000°C’

Dylan paused to think before answering.

‘Well, I still think we have more chance of getting out by the river, than we do through the roof.... I also don’t fancy the sauna of the sulphur pits. If we took the river option, I could distract the creatures which will give you guys a better chance of escape.’

‘How are you going to do that?’

Jenny stressed, and then added.

‘And how are you going to escape?’

Dylan was calm with his reply.

‘Don’t worry about me. I’ll make it. First of all, I will go back to the lake and create a lot of noise in the water. I will then put in a couple of small floats tied with some blood-soaked clothing. When I know they are there, I will signal with the flashlight.’

He paused to look at the strained faces of his team.

‘You guys then make it down to the ledge. Brad will use the rope to lower Jenny down first, then Jenkins. Leave the rope tied, and then Brad will go down followed by me.’ He waited for an interruption from one of them, but none came. He continued.

‘When you get to the river, follow the bank to the outside as far as you can, jump into the river, and get out as soon as you reach the outside.’

Again, he looked at them before continuing

‘I will wrap some clothing on sticks to make fire torches... They are only animals and they won’t like the fire.... What do you think?’

Brad piped up first.

‘Just a minute Dylan. With all due respect you are getting on a bit, and I think I am a lot faster over that distance than you are. Let me go back to the lake.’

Jenny added.

‘I’d rather have you with us Dylan, and Brads right. He will be quicker than you. What do you think Professor?’

Jenkins was utterly dismayed at the idea.

‘I don’t like it... I don’t like it at all.’

Dylan interrupted, not waiting for Jenkins to talk the others out of it.

‘That’s it then. Let’s get everything ready.’

Over the next few hours, they sat round the fire Jenkins had prepared, and sorted the equipment to minimize the weight in their backpacks. They shared out more of the rations, and built the small floats for the lake. They made three in total,

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all about the size of a dinner plate. Jenny then changed Dylan's blood-soaked bandages, and stained plasters from other wounds in the group, which were then secured to the floats. Dylan opened up his wound a little and filled a small sample bottle from their kit bag. He handed it over to Brad.

'Brad, make sure there is enough blood stains in the water, when you set the floats off, and pour this blood into the lake.'

From the surrounding timber, Dylan used his knife to create a pointed wooden spear for Brad. If he was lucky, he might be able to skewer one of the beasts to aid the confusion, and inject more blood into the frenzy. Jenkins looked up at Dylan and enquired.

'What if the river banks are too steep for us to get out? What then?'

They all stopped what they were doing and looked at Dylan, as if he had all the answers already mapped out.

'Let's hope that's not the case. We will keep the other rope with us and hook onto whatever we can to get out.'

He added.

'Make sure you put your backpack on from the front, help each other to secure them. That way, when you jump in the river, they can be used as a float to keep you out of the water.'

He paused.

'Not you Brad. You won't be carrying anything... you need to get back as quickly as possible.'

'Sure, Dylan... I just hope that there are only a couple left in the lake.'

Brad began to understand the dangers involved, and prepared himself mentally, by going over his task in his head several times. He practiced with the wooden spear to see how far he could throw it. Jenny ensured the professor's arm was fully strapped up, and carefully fastened his backpack. She offered a little advice to distract him a little

‘Professor, you should put your glasses into a safe pocket, and take deep breaths before you enter the water.’

Professor Jenkins was only thinking about his family, and if he was killed, what would happen to them. Dylan made as many wooden torches as he could, by using petroleum jelly from the safety kits and smearing it on strips of cloth, then wrapping it around the end of a metre long stick. He had a small disposable gas lighter which he would use to ignite them when ready. He inspected everything to ensure all that could be done, was done. Then, he stood up and looked at his bedraggled, but seemingly focussed team.

‘OK! Are we all ready?’

CHAPTER 6

Fight back

Brad set off for the lake. Dylan had him to take his time to get there, as he needed to be fresh for the race back. Brad thought he could make it back in about forty seconds at best if there were no problems. He double checked the items he had to carry as he walked, which were three floats, a wooden spear, and of course the flashlight, which he would use to select the best and quickest route back. As he walked, he tried to memorize as many details of the route as possible, because he didn't want to spend time dodging potholes, or worse still, falling in one. Also, he would only have the flashlight to carry back, if it all went to plan that is. He thought to himself.

'Some plan! In a few moments I will be in a life-or-death race with prehistoric amphibians that have had millions of years to perfect their speed in the water over 150 metres?' Dylan made sure the rope was secured to the boulder and tied the other end around Jenny's waist. Their faces were inches apart as he passed the rope around her slender waist, their eyes met and Dylan held her stare.

'Keep as close to me as you can Jenny.'

Dylan tied the rope, and Jenny replied, trying to lighten the mood, and feeling a little breathless at his closeness.

‘You know how to talk to a girl.’

Dylan then allowed Jenny to enter the tunnel of the stream, and took the strain of the rope as she lowered herself down the gulley onto the ledge next to the river.

Dylan gave her further instructions.

‘Keep your helmet light off, and keep tight to the wall side. I think there is still a two metre drop before the river. When you get the chance, see what there is at the entrance?’ He began to lower her down and added.

‘Let me have the rope back and I will send Jenkins down next, then the remaining bags.’

Jenny reached the ledge and replied, trying to sound confident.

‘OK! Send him down... I am ready.’

A few moments later Jenny and Jenkins were standing with their backs to the wall on the ledge, it was about two meters square and about one and a half metres from the river. The ledge then continued out into the opening of the cavern.

Dylan passed down the remaining bags. He then waited at the top for Brad’s signal. Jenny and Professor Jenkins could see the river was not flowing too fast, and was about three metres across to the other side and very clear. The roof was not a problem either as the river had created a large entrance over many hundreds of years. They could see ferns, shrubs and trees, overhanging the sides. The light from the entrance, which was about twenty metres away, was quite bright, making their eyes squint. Jenny noticed that the bank on the far side was flat for about three metres in, then it turned into steep, vertical cliffs. They could not see the near side bank, but they both agreed that the far side bank could be their best option out of the river. They checked each other’s bags were fully strapped, and prepared themselves mentally and physically. Jenny tried to reassure the professor.

It Should be Simple!

‘Professor... Allan... I know this will be difficult for you with only one good arm, but Dylan is right... This is our best chance of getting out of here.’

Professor Jenkins was not convinced.

‘I think we should stay in the cavern until a rescue team arrives...I do not like this method one little bit.’

Jenny understood.

‘Yes! But at the same time, we don’t know how long it would take them to find us, or if there will be anymore tremors. At least this way will get us out into the open, then we can use the sat phone for help.’

Brad eventually reached the side of the lake, and paused at the edge of the plateau, which was three to four metres above the water level. He scanned the area with his flashlight, and concluded that it was safe to get closer. He then climbed down to the water’s edge, and lowered in the three floats, making sure the blood-stained rags were well soaked and trailing in the water, and then he emptied the bottle of blood. He used his spear to push off the floats as far out as he could reach. Brad went as far to the side as possible to where he thought the river might exit the lake. He began to smash the surface with his spear, and shouted any obscenity he could think off.

‘Come on you frigging red-necked captive retards, come and get some 21st century blood, you evil bastards!!!’

Pausing, he watched the surface of the water change from the wild ripples he had created with the spear, into a calm mirror-like smoothness. His flashlight beam darted through the water which was very clear up to about three metres, and then it went pitch black. Back at the stream, Dylan could hear the commotion Brad had created, and was keen to see his signal, and to see him come running back. Several minutes went by, and all Brad could see were a few fish darting about in confusion. He stood up and looked back

towards Dylan, hoping to see some sign from him, but Dylan kept his flashlight switched off, and Brad could not see anything else over that distance.

Suddenly...Brad spun round just in time to see one of the crocodile-like creatures leap out of the water, with the remains of one of the floats in its mouth. It was enormous, about five meters long, with massive jaws that smashed the float into smithereens. It was quickly followed by another, and another. There were now about five in the lake, and he felt much too close to the water's edge. He raised his spear and launched it at the nearest one, and he just managed to nick the side of the creature. It wasn't enough to hurt it, but the blood that came out was enough to drive the already frenzied creatures into a wild fury. The others attacked the wounded one immediately, and blood was everywhere.

'Time to leave'

Brad thought, and he jumped back up onto the plateau and waved the flashlight beam in Dylan's direction. He began the race across the ground, trying to remember where the potholes were. Using the flashlight to highlight the path ahead, he was then able to pre-judge the trip hazards. He looked up to see Dylan disappearing down the stream tunnel.

'Good!'

He thought.

'Dylan has seen me. I just need to get my ass down that hole PDQ.'

He muttered as his lungs began to burst, but ran as fast as could in the dim light. Ahead, Dylan quickly lowered himself down the gully and jumped onto the ledge next to Jenny and Jenkins.

'Now!'

He yelled.

It Should be Simple!

'Make your way along the ledge as far as you can, then jump into the river... I will light the torches and throw them upstream... get going!'

Dylan lit the torches and placed two in the rock face for Brad to use, then he grabbed Jenny's hand and told her.

'Jenny? Take these two bags and get them on the bank if you can... you can use them as a raft.'

Dylan yelled again to encourage Jenkins.

'Jenkins! Get as far as you can, then jump in and swim like hell to the other bank.'

Jenny grabbed the bags, and once Jenkins had jumped into the river, she followed him. She floated and doggy paddled to the far bank, keeping close to Jenkins to help wherever possible. They were still a long way off, as Dylan shouted at them again.

'Swim to the bank side and get out as quick as you can. I'll wait for Brad.'

Jenkins had already reached the bank and was attempting to scramble up it, but he was struggling. Jenny approached him but could do nothing except bump into him, causing him to lose his grip, and float further downstream. Jenny managed to grab an overhanging branch which she clung onto with one hand, and flung the bags she was holding with the other onto the bank one at a time. She then dragged herself onto the bank, and lay there exhausted. Jenkins managed to grab onto a shrub branch, but could do no more as his strength had left him. Meanwhile, Brad scrambled down the stream tunnel and almost dropped down the gulley head first. He just managed to cling on to the rope, and he quickly turned himself around. Lowering onto the ledge by the river, he noticed the torches Dylan had left. He looked up and saw Dylan in the river on the far bank, spear in hand trying desperately to reach Jenkins. The first flaming torches Dylan had thrown were now passing him, and fizzling out. Further downstream he could see Jenny on the far bank, with

Jenkins still in the water, clinging onto a branch with his good hand. Dylan yelled.

‘Come on Brad! Stop gawping and get over here.’

He was just about to dive into the river when he saw a dark shape out of the corner of his eye, coming fast downstream. It was one of the beasts, and heading straight for Dylan.

‘Look out!’

Brad screamed.

‘Over there!’

He pointed, and Dylan saw it coming, and just as the creature leaped upwards towards him. He took a deep breath and ducked under the water in an instant. As he did so, he thrust his spear upwards, which pierced the under belly of the creature. The wounded animal could do no more than to continue downstream. Brad meanwhile, lit and threw the remaining torches upstream before diving into the river. He quickly swam over to Dylan, who was slightly stunned, as the creature’s hind leg had caught the side of his safety helmet. Brad managed to drag Dylan to the surface, and the two men swam to the far bank.

‘Let’s get outta here, now!’

Brad exclaimed.

‘There’s at least three more of the things in there.’

Dylan and Brad reached the bank where Jenny was standing, and she lowered one of the thick overhanging branches towards them, and with one movement Dylan swung himself onto the bank. Brad who was close behind him, stopped himself from being taken further downstream by clinging onto the same branch, as the under current was quite strong. Dylan immediately spun round and grabbed his forearm. At that moment, another creature came out of the cavern with awesome speed towards Brad, and was just about to clamp its jaws onto him, when Dylan hurled him out of the water and onto the bank. Its jaws snapped shut, but were empty.

It Should be Simple!

‘That was close Dylan.’

Then Jenny shouted.

‘PROFESSOR!’

Dylan, Brad and Jenny looked downstream only to see the same creature rip Jenkins from his branch, and there was nothing they could do. The creature immediately took him under the water and disappeared. Jenkins had managed to take his backpack off and throw it onto the bank, but he did not have the strength to get himself out. For a moment the three survivors were stunned, until Dylan’s military training kicked in and quickly assessed the situation.

‘We’re not finished yet guys...there could be others, and on land too.’

‘Oh! Shit’

Cried Brad.

‘Look over there!’

He pointed further downstream, and another two creatures were already coming out of the river from a shallow part of the bank. Dylan quickly surveyed the area and noticed the steep cliffs, there was no way back or forward.

‘Only one thing for it guys...We’re going up!’

Brad was already one step ahead, and began climbing the cliff with ease.

‘I’ll get as high as possible and pass a rope down. Dylan, get Jenny ready, and I’ll haul her up first.’

The two creatures were approaching fast, and as modern crocodiles, they were quite fast on land too. Brad managed to get at least 10 metres up, and found a suitable ledge and anchor point for his crampon, to which he fastened one end of the rope. He flung the other end down to Dylan, who quickly fastened it around Jenny. She was anxiously watching the creatures getting closer and closer, and could only stand there shaking.

‘Hurry Dylan, hurry!’

Dylan tugged on the rope and called up to Brad.

‘Go! Go! Go!’

Jenny scrambled up the cliff as best as she could while Brad pulled just as fast. When he was sure she was safe, Dylan turned to face the creatures. There was no way he could make it up the cliff in time. He leaped into a forward roll over to his spear as the two creatures rushed at him. He admonished himself.

‘How many times can I dodge these brutes and get away with it.’

He reached for his spear as the beasts turned on him again. He threw the spear and it hit one in the eye, causing it to reel away in agony. Before the other creature could attack, Dylan dived into the river and disappeared under the water. The creature tried to follow him, but was held up by bushes on the bank, giving Dylan a slight head start.

‘Dylan!’

Jenny screamed at the top of her voice.

‘Dylan! Nooooo!’

She began to cry, and just hung there clinging onto the cliff face. Brad tried to comfort her as he did not want her to fall.

‘Jenny? Come on! We have to go.’

With a lot of effort, he began to haul her up to his location at the anchor point. She realised she had to go and began to climb the cliff face, but she could hardly see for the tears. When she reached the anchor point, Brad wrapped her in his arms, and they clung to each other for a few moments.

‘We have to get to the cliff top Jenny and raise the alarm.’

‘And do what? There’s no point... Dylan and Jenkins are gone. There will be no trace left of them!’

She continued to sob into his arms, leaving Brad feeling helpless. She went on.

‘It’s just me and you now, but you are right Brad... Dylan would want us to raise the alarm, and save others from those beasts.’

It Should be Simple!

She tried to dry her streaming eyes and focussed on getting to the top. Brad tried to distract her attention a little.

‘We need to get help, and we must get back to base camp, as the others will be looking for us.’

Brad was about to climb to the cliff top and bring Jenny up, when he heard a yell from below.

‘Hey! Throw that rope down, and get me out of here.’

Jenny screamed into Brads ear.

‘Dylan! Dylan y... you, you’re alive!’

‘Yes, now quick! Send the rope down before they come back.’

He plucked the spear out of the dead creature’s eye, and untied his knife from it, before wiping it and putting it back into its sheath. Brad had a grin on his face, as he too was pleased to see the big guy.

‘Coming right down buddy.’

Brad launched the rope down to Dylan, who quickly tied it to the bags he retrieved from the bank. Brad hauled them up and secured them to the anchor point, before dropping the rope down again. Dylan tied the rope around his waist and shouted.

‘Coming up!’

Brad reeled in the line as Dylan made his way up the cliff face to join them. When he eventually reached them, Brad said.

‘Your one lucky son of a bitch, buddy, how’d you get away?’

Dylan was more concerned with their safety as well as his.

‘Let’s get to the top first Brad, and I’ll gladly tell you all about it.’

Jenny just hugged him as she was speechless, but very pleased to see him again. Brad quickly made his way to the cliff top, whilst Jenny clung on to Dylan.

‘I... I thought you were dead.’

Dylan hugged her.

‘It takes more than a couple of reptiles to kill me, but it was a bit close.’

They watched Brad reach the top safely and waited for him to secure the rope before sending it down. Dylan tried to reassure Jenny.

‘As I told you earlier. Stick close to me, and I’ll look after you. I just had to make a slight diversion that’s all.’

He kissed her on the top of the head, and hugged her again. Brad called from the cliff top.

‘Rope’s coming down!’

As the rope reached them Dylan tied it around Jenny’s waist.

‘We’ve been here before.’

Dylan said and winked at Jenny, whose face was now beaming and flushed as she dried the tears. He then called to Brad.

‘OK! Brad, take her up.’

As she was hauled up the cliff face, Dylan gave Jenny a playful tap on the butt as she began the ascent. She smiled at him, and seemed more than pleased to see him.

When they had all reached the cliff top, Dylan and Brad checked the immediate area for any dangers. The area was covered in dense forest, the sun was shining and the ground was dry. They selected a small clearing to recover, treat any wounds, and take stock of their equipment. Jenny found the last remnants of the energy bars and one remaining bottle of water, to which she passed around. As they sat trying to relax and regain their strength, they relived the moments. Brad was keen to know about Dylan’s escape.

‘So, Dylan, how did you get away? I saw that beast follow you, it was right on your tail. There was no way it missed you.’

‘Well!’

Dylan exclaimed.

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‘Quite simple really. As I went into the river, I threw my backpack downstream, and the confused croc went for it like a dog after a stick. I then doubled back straight away and hid in the overhanging bushes until the coast was clear.’

He concluded, shaking his head in disappointment.

‘However, that was the bag with the sat-phone in.’

Jenny did not care about any of the equipment.

‘Never mind that now! You’re here and that’s all that matters... Although poor Jenkins, he never stood a chance. If I hadn’t bumped into him, he might have made it onto the bank and be with us now.’

Dylan clamped his big hand onto her shoulder to reassure her.

‘Don’t blame yourself Jenny. It’s no one’s fault. Jenkins was just...well... unlucky that’s all.’

Jenny went on.

‘Yes, but what happened to him was the only thing he feared the most.’

Brad agreed and added.

‘Yeah! He didn’t want to take that route... It’s a pity, ‘cause I liked the guy.’

Dylan tried to be positive.

‘We all liked him, he was part of the team, and that made him one of us. He was a really smart guy too, and I did manage to pick up his backpack that he managed to get onto the bank before.... You know.’

Brad added.

‘He was always writing stuff down in a little notebook, and maybe it has some personal stuff? We have to contact his family as soon as possible.’

Jenny opened the nearest backpack.

‘I think this is Jenkins pack. It’s full of stones, a couple of note books, a few clothes, and a couple of field cameras.’ She took out one of the note books and tossed the bag over to Dylan. The others assessed what other kit they had, and

discussed the next step to safety. Jenny meanwhile, read Jenkins books. Dylan looked at his watch, scanned the sky, and the surrounding area, and concluded they were due north of their base camp, which he estimated to be about a mile, maybe two at the most.

‘We should head south and hope we bump into the search team from the base camp, although I would have thought they should have been to this part already.’

He continued.

‘We’ll de-brief when we get to camp, then report to the Chinese authorities, and the company, and tell them to get us out of here.’

‘The sooner the better.’

Brad added, jumping to his feet, and stowing away their possessions. He gently nudged Jenny, who seemed engrossed.

‘Come on Jenny, let’s move it!’

‘Wait! Wait!’

Jenny said, quickly thumbing through Jenkins books.

‘Have you seen what’s in here?’

Dylan and Brad became interested and sat down either side of her. She was keen to know more about what Jenkins had been up to.

‘Pass me Jenkins bag, quickly.’

She said pointing at the bag next to Brad. Jenny opened the bag and picked out a couple of rocks, and looked at them carefully.

‘Yes! It’s true! Look you guys, look at this!’

She threw a rock each to Brad and Dylan, and began to explain.

‘While we were busy trying to get out of that hell-hole, Jenkins was carrying out his own research. Collecting samples along the way, and making loads of notes.’

‘So what?’

Brad said, who was more interested in getting back to camp.

It Should be Simple!

‘It won’t do him any good now.’

Jenny ignored his negativity and continued.

‘But look at the samples! There are traces of gold in them, pure gold. His notes are full of it. He also mentions taking photos of larger seams that he had seen. There are detailed drawings of the cavern, approximate locations, drawings of rock formations, and loads of stuff about other minerals.’ She fumbled in the bag again, and pulled out one of the field cameras that were stowed into plastic zip-bags.

‘Let’s have a look at his photos.’

Jenny turned on the camera, as Dylan and Brad studied the rock samples. In the light of day, they could clearly make out thick yellow veins of, what appeared to be gold running through the samples. Dylan was not sure, and wanted to remain impartial.

‘How do we know this is the real thing?’

Jenny threw one of the notebooks at Dylan.

‘Well for one thing, he is... err was, an expert. He knew the difference instantly, otherwise he wouldn’t have made such detailed notes.’

She turned on the camera and studied the photographs and exclaimed loudly.

‘Wow! Look at this!’

She passed over the camera to Brad, and as he studied the photographs, he could clearly see that they showed seams of gold traversing the cavern walls, which were over six-inches in depth according to the notes. Jenkins had placed a small steel ruler against them to prove the depth. The sketches of the cavern showed the exact position of the seams in relation to the areas the team had rested whilst inside the cavern. Other photographs and notes showed deposits of various minerals including rare earth-iron niobium metals, similar to that found at the Bayan Obo mine in Mongolia. Jenny had made her mind up that what Jenkins had found was invaluable research for the project.

‘This information is worth a fortune...We have to take it back to the authorities as soon as possible.’

She paused and looked closely at the pages in the back of the book, and suddenly became concerned.

‘Dylan, there are a series of what looks like telephone calls, with dates and times. All made up to the time of those earth tremors. It’s as if he was trying to contact someone, and update them at each stage of the expedition. Did he mention anything to you?’

Dylan listened, and began to place the pieces together in his mind, as he had often seen Jenkins acting strangely.

‘No, I was the only one using the sat-phone. He must have borrowed it without my knowledge. Although I did see Jenkins acting strange over the whole trip, and I was sure someone was following us. Anyway, the sat-phone is lost now, so we can’t check who he was calling until we get back to base...Come on guys, we must get moving while we still have the light’.

Before they set off Dylan took out his mobile phone, that he had wrapped in a polythene bag for protection, and although he could not get a signal, it did have a small magnetic compass as part of the leather case. He took some readings, which he wrote down on his shirt sleeve, and made some notes in the mobile phone. He then turned to Jenny and , who had stowed their equipment and were ready to leave.

‘Let’s go!’

CHAPTER 7

Attack

On the day of the earth tremors, as Professor Jenkins and his team were busy collecting rock samples in the mountain tunnels. The Chinese research scientists and their team were preparing their equipment for the next batch of samples when the professor returned. The base camp had several large tents, and being next to a clear-flowing mountain stream, had plenty of water for their research tasks. The sleeping tents were erected when they first arrived at the site, and each had their own tent. Dylan ensured that his was set up to a military standard, where everything was neatly stowed or folded away. Over the next few days, the rest of the camp was slowly built up to ensure that all scientific equipment was carefully unloaded, set up and tested. On that day, Jung was keen to show the professor a new set of tunnels that had never been explored before, and that many rumours had spread about the area. As soon as daylight arrived, everything was checked, and all safety equipment was securely fastened. Brad packed some of his climbing equipment, and Dylan ensured there was more than enough food and water, should anything happen. The rest of the research team were kept busy storing rock samples into boxes and updating data on their field computers. During the day, solar panels powered their equipment, and

generators were used at night. Satellite masts had been installed for communication and for internet access.

Everyone was busy, as there was a lot of information to record and store. Even the two security men helped to put the collapsible tables together when needed, and to help set up the camp kitchen, as they were all ready for a hot drink. As the afternoon wore on, the camp was cleaned and kept neat and tidy. The research tents were separate from sleeping tents, and two washing facility tents were set up downstream of the river. After another long day, they were all ready for a well-earned break and hot meal, hopefully, before the return of Professor Jenkins and his team.

An hour or so later, four large 4X4 vehicles drove very fast into the camp. They knocked over a row of tables that had been set up near the kitchen tent, and the research team scattered out of the way of the vehicles. Several men dressed in black, and carrying automatic weapons, poured out of the vehicles and began searching the tents. One of the security men tried to fire at them, but was quickly mown down by a hail of bullets. The other security man shot and hit one of the intruders, but was shot himself, although he managed to crawl into a tent and hid under one of the bunk beds, but fell unconscious. The research team were all rounded up and made to stand in the middle of the camp until the search had been completed. The leader of the gang shouted.

‘Where is he? Find the professor at once and bring him here.’

The rest of the gang spread out and destroyed everything they could, and searched every tent and undergrowth around the camp site. Eventually one of them reported back.

‘He is not here boss! None of the westerners are here.’
The gang leader grabbed one of the researchers by the throat.

‘Where are they? Where is Professor Jenkins?’

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The scientist was terrified.

‘He... They... are in the mountain.’

The leader was not happy.

‘What! When will they return?’

The scientist shook his head negatively, and as he did not answer to his liking, the gang leader took out his knife and slit the man’s throat, then shot him in the head as he fell. Two other gang members dragged the body into the forest and dumped him. The rest of the scientists were petrified, and began crying and begging not to be killed. Once the search for the westerners was completed, the leader ordered them all to be taken into the forest.

At the same time, the ground began to tremble and shake. Trees were visibly swaying as the tremors got bigger. In the forest, several shots were fired before the gang emerged running away from falling trees, and terrified that the ground would open up and swallow them. The gang leader stood motionless in the middle of the camp wondering what was happening, and what he should do next. One of his men approached him.

‘Boss! We got to get out of here quickly... It’s an earthquake, and that mountain could come down on top of us any time soon.’

The gang leader did not want to show any fear, but also realised that the man could be telling the truth.

‘Alright! Let’s get going.... Take their vehicles and head back to the city... quickly!’

His men did not need telling twice, as they drove the vehicles at full speed back down the track. Many kept looking back to see if the mountain was going to explode.

In Beijing:

The day after the earth tremors, Chinese authorities were concerned that the officials at the research campsite had not reported in. The officer in charge reported to his superior immediately.

‘Sir, we have been trying to get a signal from the research base camp all morning, and as yet we have been unsuccessful. They were due to report in at 08:00 hours, and it is 12:00 hours now sir.’

The senior officer had just been given new information from the national weather centre.

‘It seems that several earth tremors have been reported in the Baikal Shan Mountain Range, and it may have affected the research team. Keep trying to call them, and if you get no response after two hours, then we will send someone from the nearest military base.’

The officer acknowledged his superior and continued trying to contact the research team.

‘Come in Khingan Research Team! This is Beijing Research Centre... Come in...over!’

The officer continued for another two hours before he alerted his superior again, and that he was going to organise a search and rescue unit.

Return to Camp.

In single file, Dylan, Jenny and Brad followed the edge of the cliff top which led upwards to where it merged with the mountain. They could just make out the river disappearing into the mountain, which was almost covered by dense overhanging trees and shrubs. At this point the heavy mist emanating from the cavern could not be seen, and the area appeared to disappear or blend in with the surrounding ecology of dense vegetation. After that there was only forest, with the occasional set of large rocks that had established its

It Should be Simple!

own space in the midst of the trees. They could also see the tiny hole in the mountain which they assumed was the bat entrance from earlier. Brad pointed to the opening and declared to Dylan.

‘See Dylan! We could have easily made it out of that bat hole. The ground around it is nearly flat, and leads right into the forest.’

Dylan acknowledged, but was prepared to stand by his own judgement of their escape out of the cavern.

‘Yes! I just did not think Jenkins would have made it up there, as it was a hell of a steep and slippery climb.’

He looked at Jenny who muttered to Dylan.

‘But he might still be alive.’

She understood that Dylan had to take charge and make his own decisions, and was pleased that he, out of all of the group, was still with them. At least now they will have a very good chance of making it out of the area alive. She wondered if he realised how she felt about him, and if they could be more than colleagues or friends when it was all over. Maybe back in the real-world things will be different, and they would go their separate ways.

The trio slowly made their way through the forest, making occasional stops at rocky outcrops so Dylan could take some bearings. They had been travelling for about an hour when Dylan seemed concerned.

‘That’s strange, I was sure we would have met the search party by now. They wouldn’t have given up so easily and this early too, it’s only midday... and we have not heard any search helicopters either.’

Both Jenny and Brad could see the doubt etched on Dylan’s face, but decided not to pursue the questioning. Instead, they continued silently through the forest until they came upon a trail Dylan recognized.

‘This is the trail we took to the research the first tunnel with Jung. The base camp is about one hundred metres away from here.’

He paused, and looked around.

‘But there is still no sign of the search party?’

Jenny was pleased at the thought of reaching the camp and her luggage.

‘Never mind that. I’m sure there’s a perfectly good explanation.... I need a wash and a change of clothes, I stink.’ Brad joked.

‘I didn’t like to say... I’m too much of a gentleman.’

Jenny swiped at him playfully, until Dylan gave them both a stern look, and what seemed to be military instructions.

‘Something is not right.... Keep low and stay behind me, and don’t make a sound.’

They made their way back down the trail with Dylan leading, his SAS training had alerted his senses, and he could tell something was wrong. As they got closer to the camp, he noticed a few fallen trees, which he assumed were felled during the earth tremor. Cautiously, he used hand signals for the others to stay put, whilst he went closer to investigate, and they did not question his instructions. A few moments later, upon his return, Dylan gathered the two together and whispered.

‘Let’s take it easy when we get to the camp. Something is not right, and I don’t want to fall into any traps or ambush... I do not like surprises.’

The trail continued downhill, following the path of the meandering mountain stream as it made its way noisily to the nearest river. The rushing sound of the stream masked a sense of eerie stillness as the group edged closer and closer to the seemingly empty campsite. They came upon a small clearing in the forest, the far end of which was their base camp, and which appeared to be deserted. Dylan raised his

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arm instinctively, as his training kicked in again, stopping the small group.

‘Wait here! I will check it out.’

Brad and Jenny did as they were told. They knew better than to interrupt Dylan. They had seen enough of him to know, this guy was a well-trained combatant with years of experience, and his instincts were still finely honed, despite his age. Dylan took the perimeter route until he reached the very edge of the camp. He knelt down, and took out his army knife. Peering around the camp, he couldn’t see any movement, not even a camp fire. He looked around for the vehicles, but they had gone. He mused to himself.

‘How strange? They would not have just left us without leaving a message or something.’

As he got closer to the camp, he could see from the ground disturbance that there had been a struggle of some sort. There were drag marks, as if someone had moved something heavy, ‘bodies!’ he thought. That’s when he noticed an arm sticking out from one of the tents. He cautiously moved round to the back of the camp until he came to the tent with the arm sticking out. Slowly he cut the back of the tent with his knife. The slit was just big enough to look inside.

‘Shit!’

He thought, as he could see the owner of the arm was one of the camp security crew. It looked like he’d been shot, as there were two patches of blood in the man’s back. He knelt down and turned him over to see if there was a pulse. He was still alive, but only just, and the movement made the man regain consciousness, then Dylan leaned closer to him and asked.

‘What happened?’

The security man slowly opened his eyes and spluttered.

‘Bandits! Bandits...’

Dylan replied.

‘Bandits? How, why...?’

‘Don’t know...they came (cough)...too many for us...I hit one (cough)... got shot...but hid (cough)...killed everyone...I?’

The man did not say anymore, as his chest lurched up into Dylan’s arms and then he died. Dylan closed the man’s eyes and laid him out on the ground, then covered him with a blanket. He continued with his perimeter check, and decided that there was no one there, still alive that was, and that he could find no other bodies. He then tried to make sense of the information.

‘Bandits killed everyone, but why? There were several men in the camp, and two of those were armed police for protection against wild animals, but not bandits...and where are the bodies?’ The questions continued to mount up in his mind, as Dylan rose up and began a more detailed search of the camp. He followed the drag marks he had spotted earlier, and they led him into the forest where he saw the reason for the missing camp members. A row of dead bodies, all had their hands tied behind their backs and were shot. It looked like an execution.

‘Why? They had no valuables, and no valuable rock samples yet.’

Dylan said aloud, staring at the carnage. Then he made his way back to Jenny and Brad, and told them what he had found. Both were shocked, Jenny in particular.

‘Why Dylan? There was no good reason to kill them like that.’

Dylan attempted to provide an explanation.

‘There was nothing valuable in the camp. Only a few research items, test and drilling equipment. Apart from the vehicles, the field computers were the most expensive thing there. But not worth killing for! They also destroyed the satellite communications system, so we have no way to alert the authorities.’

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Brad was speechless for a few moments, and then asked Dylan what he thought.

‘Dylan, you are a man of the world, and must have seen stuff like this... What do you think happened?’

Dylan rubbed his chin, and thought carefully before answering.

‘My own view, is that this is the work of Chinese bandits, or triads, as some are known... they can be evil... and this certainly seems to be their style.... But why?’

As he led them carefully into the camp, he noticed another body at the camp perimeter, which was slightly hidden by bushes. He approached the body stealthily until he reached it, and realised that even this guy was dead. Shot in the chest, but on closer inspection, Dylan could see that he was dressed differently than all the others. He informed Brad and Jenny what he thought.

‘The research crew were all in khaki and this guy is dressed in an all-black outfit, with a headband... Chinese of course, but he looks out of place.’

Brad gave a suggestion.

‘Maybe one of the policemen shot him, and this is one of the bandits?’

Dylan agreed.

‘Yes Brad. I think the same, and he sure looks like a triad bandit.’

Jenny immediately broke down and cried. Her nerves were only just recovering from the recent nightmare of the cavern, and this was the last thing she wanted.

‘No! No! No!’

She cried.

‘I can’t take any more of this. What’s happening to us?’

Dylan put his arm around her, and they sat on one of the fallen trees nearby. At the same time, Dylan told Brad what he thought.

‘I am not sure of the motive behind all this, but it looks more than just a robbery by bandits.... We will make Jenny comfortable in her tent, and you and I will bury the bodies.’ Brad nodded in agreement, and Dylan continued.

‘After that we should secure the camp and spend the night here.’

Brad was not sure.

‘Is it safe? Will they return?’

Dylan grimaced, but tried to reassure them.

‘I don’t know for sure. I think it’s safe... They would have only hung around for a day or so. If they were waiting for us to return, and that’s assuming they knew we were here, they may have thought we perished in the earth tremor. Especially, as we didn’t show up yesterday, so they must have moved on.’

Dylan stayed with Jenny while Brad located her tent and made sure there were no signs of the bandits, or dead bodies. She needed to rest, and Dylan lifted her into his arms, took her to the tent, and laid her down onto the camp bed. As he kissed her on the forehead, she covered her face so he did not see her reddened eyes and pitiful look, then she lay back and eventually fell asleep. Dylan covered her with a blanket and left her in peace.

Dylan and Brad spent the next few hours burying the bodies, ensuring they collected all means of identification, so as to inform their families. Dylan wrote a note, which he put into a large plastic bag along with all the identification details, and tied it to a tree in the hope that the authorities would eventually find the camp. Then, they checked the Chinese bandit for any identification, and weapons, before simply covering him with leaves, as Dylan was not bothered if wild animals got to him. Dylan also noticed that he had a tattoo on the back of his neck, and took a photo of it with his mobile phone.

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‘This looks familiar...I’ve seen this before somewhere. Maybe Jenny might know, she spent some time in Beijing doing research.’

Brad could not make out what the symbols meant.

‘Jung would have known, and maybe even the professor... I am sure we will find out soon enough. Anyway, I’ve checked the other tents and the satellite communications system have all been smashed as you say and the other research equipment and documents have gone... Whoever they were, they knew what we were doing.’

He paused looked at Dylan and continued.

‘What if they knew about the gold?’

Dylan was trying to put the pieces together.

‘It’s possible Brad, but we didn’t know there would be that much gold until today. I know we were looking for the possibility of minerals and rare metals, but there have been many field researches like this, and nearly all have drawn blanks when looking for large gold deposits.’

‘So, what are you saying? Is this a government raid? Chinese or even Russians? Or could it be that Jenkins did know about the large gold deposits, and he let it slip to someone?’

Dylan could see that Brad was forming all kinds of scenarios, and tried to calm him.

‘Relax Brad. We can’t be sure on anything just yet. All we do know is that our guys are dead, and whoever killed them are well organized and dangerous. We have to get out of here and alert the authorities.’

They returned to the camp, started a fire for warmth, and then looked for some food. Fortunately, the small galley tent was intact, and there were full gas cylinders attached to the stove. Brad located cans of beans and stew, which he cooked, and fresh water from the stream provided a welcome cup of hot coffee. As they sat and ate, Dylan assessed what they should do next.

‘We’ll let Jenny sleep... she can eat later, or in the morning.’

Brad, who was pleased to be eating a good meal with hot coffee, nodded.

‘Yup! I think that is best Dylan.’

When he finished his meal, Dylan went to his own tent and moved his camp bed to one side, then dug out the soil underneath it to reveal a plastic bag. Before they went on the field trip two days ago, he buried a small package so no one would find it. In the plastic bag was the QSZ-92 hand gun he bought in Beijing, spare clips, a small set of binoculars, and a detailed map of the area.

‘Old habits die hard.’

He thought, then went back to Brad who was surprised to see the gun, but not shocked, as he knew Dylan was prepared for most things.

‘What are you going to do with that?’

‘Insurance!’

Dylan replied, as he took the pistol apart, checked each component, then reassembled it in a few, very quick movements.

‘I am fed up with surprises, and I have a feeling there’s going to be a few more before this trip is finished. But this time... I will be ready.’

Brad was amazed at the skill set Dylan possessed, and saw a determined look in his eyes that he had not seen before.

‘I have never fired a gun before Dylan...will you teach me?’

Dylan looked into the eyes of a very youthful looking Brad, and was not sure he was ready for guns yet.

‘It will be getting dark soon, so, let’s make a thorough search of the camp and see what equipment we can take with us tomorrow... and just bear in mind, that we will be travelling on foot. I’ll plan the best and safest route to the nearest embassy.’

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Brad agreed and they set off to search the camp from separate ends. By the time darkness had descended, they had found ropes, flashlights, water bottles, sleeping bags, more tins of food and a small quantity of plastic explosive. Dylan could see that Brad was exhausted.

‘You sleep in the tent next to Jenny, and I will take the first watch.... Be ready to move if anything happens in the night.’

Brad was pleased to be sleeping first, and went into Jenny’s tent to see if she was still asleep, she was, and not even the smell of his cooking could wake her. He then set up a camp bed in the next tent and made sure he would be able to see if she came out. Dylan carried out another perimeter check, and set up a few surprises in case the bandits returned. He then found a suitable vantage point for the first watch. Jenny was the only one who slept properly that night, as Dylan and Brad were kept on full alert. They heard every twig snap, howl, and grunt from passing nocturnal wildlife in the forest. Fortunately, none of them found Dylan’s little surprises, and the camp fire also kept them at a comfortable distance.

Next morning Jenny stretched and rose from her bed, as light rain tapped on the roof of her tent, she looked around, realised where she was, and what had happened. She paused to reflect on the events before stepping out of the tent, only to be greeted by Brad.

‘Hi! Good morning how are you? You up for breakfast?’ Jenny was surprised.

‘Breakfast! You’ve prepared breakfast? What have you got?’

Brad led her to the galley tent.

‘Only beans or beef stew. I’m afraid. It’s the only edible thing left. Let me know what madam desires and I’ll open another tin.’

Jenny smiled as Brad helped her to sit down, then he bowed graciously.

‘Not so!’

Interrupted Dylan holding a couple of fresh trout in his hand.

‘We have fresh fish too.’

He continued with a grin.

‘I have just caught these from further downstream, as there is a large pool. I also have wild mushrooms, wild garlic and berries. Courtesy of my survival training.’

He took the bounty over to the galley table and prepared the food. Brad told Jenny what their plans were as they sat round the table. After breakfast Dylan told Brad and Jenny the details of the route. He cleared the table, spread out his map. And explained.

‘We’re not going back to the town of Take just in case the bandits have set up lookouts, as they could be looking for western faces. We’re taking this route instead.’

He traced a prepared route on the map.

‘We go back to the river, but onto the other bank...Don’t worry, as we can cross over the roof of the cavern tunnel. Next, we continue north through the forest until we get to another town called Fengshuishan. If possible, we can pick up some transport, then follow the Amu Erhe River north. We’ll head for the Chinese, Russian border. There are also lots of timber activities in this area and they are supported by trains, if we can get on one of those, it will make our journey much easier. But we cannot be seen, as we don’t know who the bandits are yet.’

‘Wait!’

Jenny interrupted.

‘Brad told me about the Chinese body you found. He said you took a photo of a tattoo, and I want to see it!’

Dylan took out his mobile phone and showed her the tattoo, she zoomed into it and sat back in her chair.

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‘Triad!’

She exclaimed with a start.

‘Chinese triads... This is traditional Chinese, Pinyin, Sānhéhuì, and it literally means ‘Triad Society’... it’s a term used to describe many branches of Chinese criminals.’

She went on.

‘If these are the bandits, then we are in trouble. They can be ruthless.’

‘We can vouch for that!’

Brad replied looking in the direction of where he and Dylan had buried the bodies.

‘I don’t suppose they’ve done with us, and just gone home?’

He added in hope.

‘No chance!’

Jenny insisted, and noticed Dylan’s phone.

‘Can you get a signal on that yet Dylan?’

‘Unfortunately, not yet, as we are too far from the nearest signal tower, and the battery is very low.’

Dylan then made a connection with the tattoo.

‘I knew I’d seen that sign before. It makes much more sense now. Jenkins must have had a triad mole in the research team, and I think he knew more about this trip than he let on. Wait a minute!’

Dylan paused... his face brightened as a new theory entered his head.

‘Jenny, you said something about phones calls written in Jenkins book. They were made in secret without any of us knowing. Why would he do that? What if he was in contact with them? What if he led them here?’

There was another pause, as they mentally played through the scenario of this new theory which seemed totally out of character for the professor, as they knew him to be a good family man. Brad broke the silence.

‘The triads must have been waiting until we returned to the camp from that field trip. When we didn’t show up, and they were not contacted by Jenkins, then they took it out on the rest of the crew.’

Jenny interrupted him.

‘I cannot, and will not believe that of the professor. I have known him for years. He was a very honest, and dedicated man. He loved his work and family. Why would he get involved with those...those...thugs!’

As she thumbed through the note book looking for any other entries that would help them understand. Dylan jumped to his feet and cautioned them.

‘I don’t think they have given up, and that makes it even more important that we are not seen. We can’t trust anyone... Jenny’s right, they can be ruthless, and those bodies should convince you of that. Now! Let’s get going, but first we’ll leave the camp as we found it last night, just in case they do return here. I only hope they don’t notice that we buried the bodies?’

When the work was completed, which included dragging the bandit body back to where they found it, the trio set off back up the trail towards the cavern. The rain had stopped but the morning mist was taking it’s time to clear, and became thicker the higher they went. It was approaching noon before they reached the cavern entrance, where the river came out deep below the ravine, and the autumn sun had eventually cleared the murky skies. The visibility was greatly improved, and Dylan took the opportunity to climb onto one of the rocky outcrops in the forest to check back down the valley using his binoculars.

‘It looks quiet.’

He slowly scanned the forest, then as he scanned back over the forest canopy again, he saw something.

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‘Wait! I can see a dust cloud further down the valley. It’s moving quickly, mmh! Must be a vehicle on the dirt track, and it’s coming this way. We’d better get moving!’

Brad enquired.

‘How close is it?’

Dylan estimated and answered.

‘About five miles away and it seems to be heading to the base camp. Hopefully they won’t suspect anything.’

He looked from side to side along the valley to see if there were others.

‘But, what about the bodies?’

Brad added.

‘We buried them! They will know we were there!’

Dylan had already warned of that back at the camp, Brad was obviously not listening, but he tried to reassure him.

‘They were buried further into the forest, so they may not return to them. We can’t be certain though. So, we have to keep moving.’

Dylan clambered down from his vantage point and the trio made their way over the cavern to the cliff top on the far side of the river. From there, they could see that the river flowed down the other side of the valley heading for the larger Amu Erhe River. According to Dylan’s map, this was the river he wanted to follow. About three miles further on they stopped for a short break, Dylan peered over the edge of the cliff top with the river far below. The river had taken thousands of years to eat its way through the rock strata in order to be so far below the surface. He also noted that both sides were getting steeper and wider, about a mile apart. The lower banks either side of the river formed a small valley, and about five hundred metres further downstream, the river went over a waterfall then disappeared into the side of a mountain. It was a regular geographical feature, which Dylan was only too familiar with, from the many countries he had been to.

‘This section of the river looks to be isolated and inaccessible without climbing gear... It looks like those ancient crocodiles have been in their own eco systems for thousands of years. There must be enough wildlife down there to sustain them without venturing any further, nor would they go near the waterfall. These steep cliffs, heavy mists, and dense overgrown foliage have kept them hidden in their own world. Together with all the minerals and precious metals, it really is a well-kept and guarded secret.’ Jenny, as a naturalist, was pleased in a way.

‘Well, if that’s the case, we ought to leave it like that. As much as I hate those creatures, we should leave them in their own environment, and forget we ever came here.’

Brad stood up and interrupted her.

‘What about Jenkins, and Jung? How do we explain their deaths to people? All Jenkins efforts to find this place... We can’t just forget about it!’

Dylan gave them both a swift reminder of their situation.

‘We won’t have any say in the matter if those triads catch up with us... We’d better get moving. Let’s get as far as we can while there’s still light, then we had better camp for the night’

The group continued along the cliff top above the river, and then headed down the valley, passing the point where the river disappeared into the mountain. After a short while they met up with the river again, but this time there were no cliffs, and the river bank was quite close. Dylan chose a small clearing by the river bank, and the team prepared to camp there for the night. Having gathered lots of wooden poles from fallen branches and trees, Dylan formed them around the trunk of a large fallen tree, to make a lean-to shape. He then gathered twigs and loose bracken that were sandwiched between another layer of poles. This formed an insulated barrier from the elements. Inside the lean-to, Brad had gathered dry moss and leaves to provide a soft mattress

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to lie on. Jenny, meanwhile, prepared a camp fire, and took out enough food from their packs for one meal. She was also pleased that Dylan allowed them to take the light-weight sleeping bags. As they sat around the fire, sitting on logs that Dylan had gathered, they talked about the research camp. Dylan was worried.

‘They chose our group for a specific reason, and I am sure that Professor Jenkins has something to do with it.’

Jenny replied.

‘I looked in the professor’s tent, but it had been ransacked...as if they were looking for something. All his files had gone, and we only have these note books left.’

Brad made a suggestion.

‘We should contact the police as soon as possible, and get them to notify the research centre, as they might know more than us.’

Dylan thought carefully before answering.

‘Yes, I agree Brad, but we don’t know who is involved with the triads, and even the police can be corrupted to help them.... I think we should only contact the British embassy or the research centre, and let them inform the Chinese authorities.’

Jenny was worried.

‘I am amazed at how much influence the triads have, and how far does it go?’

Dylan gave her a stark reminder of their power.

‘You should know Jenny, that organisations like that have a lot of influence, and think nothing of threatening the families of important people to get what they want. They can be very ruthless indeed. I have been on many missions to take out warlords, and leaders of such groups, and they are very well organised... I have lost many good men because of their power.’

Jenny was fearful.

‘Do you think that they have threatened the professor’s family?’

‘I wouldn’t put it past them.’

Brad added.

‘Then we have to inform the authorities to check it out as soon as possible.’

Dylan stared into the fire and seemed very determined in his train of thought.

‘We will Brad, and we will deal with those chasing us too... Just stay close to me, and do everything I tell you.’

There was a silence as the group mulled over their situation. Dylan eventually told them.

‘Get as much rest as you can, as the next few days will be hard work and dangerous... I need you to be ready.’

Brad and Jenny nodded in agreement and crawled into their sleeping bags.

CHAPTER 8

Back at the base camp

A large 4 X 4 vehicle screeched to a halt at the base camp and several heavily armed members of the triad bandits got out, and looked carefully around the camp. After several minutes another guy emerged from the vehicle, he moved very slowly, but with an arrogant air of importance. Chang Bingtao had been sent from the triad headquarters in Beijing to ensure nothing went wrong in locating the gold. He was a small stocky man, clean shaven, with receding hairline and dressed in green jungle fatigues with matching cap. His facial features seemed to have been honed over time into a brutal sneer that matched the harshness of his voice. He calmly lit a cigarette and said in a dark, and rough voice.

‘Well? Did they come back?’

One of his lead men reported to him once the camp had been inspected.

‘It doesn’t look like it boss. They must have perished during the tremors, as the tunnel entrance is completely blocked. No one could have survived in there.’

Suddenly, another of his men came running over to him from the forest.

‘Boss! Boss! Come over here and see this!’

Chang was indignant, and refused to get his clean boots dirty.

'I'm not going anywhere you stupid idiot, there's too much mud around here. Tell me what you found.'

He wiped a very small stain of mud from the side of his highly polished army boot, onto the man's trouser leg.

'The bodies boss, they are not where we left them boss. Someone must have buried them!'

'What!... So, they did survive!'

Chang said, taking a drag on his cigarette and looking back towards the tunnel entrance.

'They must have found another way out of the tunnels... we must find them, and quickly.'

Another gang member added.

'The camp fire ashes are still warm boss.'

Chang sneered.

'Yes! They cannot be too far, as we have taken their vehicles, and they must be on foot. Spread out and see if you can pick up any tracks... We have to find Professor Jenkins so he can tell us where the gold deposits are. Once we have that information, we will kill them all.'

'Aargh!'

A loud shriek echoed from the perimeter of the camp, which was quickly followed by a loud explosion.

'Bang!'

A gang member had suddenly stumbled across one of Dylan's surprise traps. Suspended by a rope around one leg, the man was caught in a spring-loaded snare made from bent over branches. The trap had swung him with such force that he was impaled on a stake that was wedged in a nearby tree. Another man went to free him and stepped on another trap that was full of explosives. Both men were killed instantly.

Dylan and the others heard the explosion, and he immediately knew what had happened.

'Looks like they found one of my surprises Brad.'

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Jenny was frightened, and wanted to know more, and so Brad explained what might have happened.

‘Dylan thought that the gang would return, and placed a few traps to welcome them. He thinks that one of them must have triggered a trap, which caused the explosion.’ Jenny couldn’t believe it.

‘Really?’

Dylan interrupted them.

‘Yes! But that will only make them more determined to come after us, and I am pretty sure they are looking for our trail.... We had better get moving, so make sure we leave no trace of this camp.’

One of Chang’s men pleaded with his boss.

‘We have to cut him down boss.’

‘No!’

Exclaimed Chang.

‘Leave him! There could be other traps close by. This was deliberately prepared for us I think. Now be very careful and find out which way they went.’

The gang spent the next two hours looking for any sign of the group’s trail. Although Dylan was very careful in covering their tracks, the gang eventually found footprints, and broken foliage which directed them towards the trio. The triad gang got back into the vehicle and drove as far as the 4X4 would allow, until the dense forest prevented any further access. Chang pulled out a map from the glove compartment of the vehicle and studied it carefully. A few minutes later he gave his orders.

‘OK. Three of you will take the guns and other equipment from the back of the vehicle, and follow them on foot. Take one of the sat phones and keep me updated.’

He paused to show the gang the map before they left.

‘It looks like they are heading north for the river or the railway, obviously to raise the alarm. We must intercept them, but do not kill them until we have the information.’ He gave a stark look at each gang member before he continued.

‘I will take the vehicle back to the main road to the point where it meets the river. The railway is close by at this point. I will collect reinforcements on the way.’ Looking at his watch he continued.

‘They are on foot so they should not be too far ahead, maybe two or three hours, so get going.’ The gang members acknowledged his orders with a short bow of the head, and a grunt in Chinese which meant ‘yes’. The three men collected the equipment from the vehicle which included food supplies, flashlights, a sat phone and extra guns and ammunition, all carried in backpacks. Without waiting for further instructions, they continued tracking the trio. Chang gave the remaining gang members a determined look.

‘Let’s get going...I want them found before tomorrow. I will call for more men to ensure we reach them before they get to the authorities.’

The vehicle then returned back through the forest to the main road. Chang sat back in his seat, puffed on another cigarette, and smiled at the thought of capturing and torturing them, and then made a phone call.

The rain began falling again, but was heavier than before as the trio trekked across rough ground that followed the river. Dylan tried to deviate as much as possible, and used hard ground with little vegetation where he could, so as not to leave any tracks. However, the rain caused the ground to soften, which left muddy footprints in places. He wanted to double back, or take a longer way around, but he could see

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that Jenny and Brad were getting tired. He attempted to raise their spirits.

‘We will keep going for another hour or so, then make camp. We are making good progress, but we cannot let up guys.’

The thought of lying down, and crawling into a sleeping bag appealed to Jenny.

‘Just make it another hour Dylan... my feet are aching, and I would love to soak them in the river.’

Brad joked.

‘I am looking forward to another tin of beans, but I don’t know why, as I have always hated them as a kid.’

Dylan was pleased at their positive attitude, and let them follow the river.

‘Keep going, and I will catch up with you... I am going to try and create a diversion for them.’

Brad wanted to help, but he was too tired to be of any use.

‘Alright Dylan, but don’t be long.’

Dylan wanted to know how many men were following them, and he jogged back to a bend in the river which would give him a clear view of the men chasing them. As he waited, he walked across a muddy field next to the river, leaving only half tracks for the men to follow. Each time, he doubled back a different way. It was tiring work, but he hoped it would fool them enough to give his team more time to get away. Then he waited and watched for their arrival. He didn’t have to wait long, as he heard them squabbling before he saw them. One argued.

‘Why is it that boss Chang always gives us the shitty jobs to do, while Feng always gets to drive him around?’

Another replied.

‘Well, I am not going to say anything to him, and I don’t want to end up like Li who is still steaked to that tree.’

The third man added.

‘If you two don’t shut up, we will never catch up to those westerners, and if we lose them.... Then Chang will lose our heads... you can be sure about that.’

It was enough for Dylan to realise that, although they were dangerous men, he could tell that they were not professional soldiers. He did not want to start a gunfight, as they would alert their boss that he was armed. Nor did he want to risk being injured by them in a close quarter fight, as that would not be good for Jenny and Brad. He hoped his false trail would be enough for now, and he ran back to the others. Brad had found a good sheltered spot next to the river, with plenty of bush and tree cover to hide their position. Jenny was gathering branches and leaves to prepare a lean-to in the same way as Dylan had showed them. Brad kept watch, and hoped that Dylan would see them before it got too dark. Brad did not know, but Dylan had already seen them, and sneaked around to surprise him. Brad stared at the route they had just come from as Dylan crept up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder.

‘Not much of a lookout Brad!’

Brad jumped and screamed.

‘Ughh!!! Why did you do that?’

Dylan grinned.

‘I am trying to train you in military tactics, and that you must expect the unexpected at all times.’

Jenny heard the scream and came to investigate, and realised that Dylan’s arrival had surprised Brad.

‘Stop teasing the boy Dylan...We are both nervous wrecks as it is.’

Dylan apologised, and told them what he had seen.

‘Sorry about that Brad, but the good news is that there are only three men following us, and yes, they have weapons, but they are not military men.... I have left a false trail which should give us time to get away, and they will not want to travel in the dark... So, we should be OK for tonight.’

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Brad regained his composure.

‘What do you mean...only three armed men! Anyone of them could kill us all.’

Dylan placed a reassuring hand onto his shoulder.

‘Yes, but I am with you and I will take them out on my own when the time is right... don’t worry and get some rest.’

They settled down for the night. Brad took first sentry duty as Dylan completed the shelter interior from smaller branches and leaves. When the shelter was ready, they ate a meal of cold beans, and dried bread salvaged from the base camp. They could not risk a camp fire, just in case the triads were close by. After the meal Brad continued with his watch and buried the empty tins in the ground using Dylan’s camp knife. Dylan checked the perimeter and then joined Jenny as they sheltered from the rain. She leaned close to Dylan, trying to get the warmth from his body, making him squirm a little uncomfortably. Jenny smiled as she felt his discomfort.

‘Don’t tell me you are embarrassed by a little cuddle Dylan! I mean, we have been through a lot in the last few days, and I have seen the way you look at me.’

Dylan tried to deflect her attitude.

‘It’s not that. It’s just that...well, I haven’t been this close to a woman since...’

Jenny stopped smiling and wanted to know more.

‘What is it, Dylan? Is it your wife? Do you miss her?’

‘Yes, I do. You see...my wife died in a car accident two years ago along with my six-year-old daughter. I...I...have not been close to a woman since.’

Jenny felt terrible for bringing back his memories.

‘Oh! I’m very sorry Dylan. I had no idea.’

Jenny pulled away from him, but Dylan stopped her.

‘No! It’s alright I...’

He placed a hand on her shoulder, Jenny paused, and then turned her face to meet his, and they kissed. She put her arms around him to comfort him as he nestled his face into her neck. The embrace was held for a moment, and then they lay back on the ground and held each other close. No more was said as they lay there sharing each other's warmth. When Jenny eventually drifted off to sleep, Dylan slipped away from the embrace, looked at her sleeping, and slowly made his way over to Brad to take over sentry duty.

The dark night sky was slowly changing as the first streams of daylight stretched its fingers across the distant horizon. Narrow rays of sunshine glistened on the water as the low soft rumble of the passing river masked the beginnings of the dawn chorus birdsong. A slight chill in the air beckoned the early signs of winter. Brad, on the final watch of the night, watched squirrels darting about gathering winter stores, as he whittled at a stick with Dylan's knife. Dylan had chosen to sleep outside the shelter where Jenny slept, so as not to reveal to Brad any closeness between them.

'Don't move!'

Exclaimed a quiet, and broken English accent, as one of the triad members held a gun to the back of Brad's neck and clicked the trigger. Brad gulped in both horror and embarrassment, as he thought this would never have happened if Dylan was on sentry duty.

The triads had spent little time resting as they followed the false trail to a dead end, and realised that if they stopped for the night, then their boss would kill them. They retraced their steps and picked up the westerners' tracks using flashlights, and followed the river for most of the night. It was, however, sheer luck, that they noticed them. They were about a hundred metres away when they spotted the early morning sunlight flicker off the polished surface of Dylan's knife, as Brad whittled away at the stick. Stealthily, they crept

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up on Brad, but could not be sure where the others were. Brad kept static with fear as the other two looked around for signs of anyone else. They spotted the lean-to, and could just see a foot appear beneath its canopy. Then, they slowly crept up to the entrance. They approached to within one metre of the entrance when.

‘Bang!’

A shot rang out and echoed loudly across the river and forest. The bullet took out the triad holding the gun to Brads neck. It entered the side of his head through the temple, sending the man flying to the ground. As Brad saw the man sprawled out beside him, he instinctively dived to the floor and crawled behind the nearest tree. At the same time the other two triads leaped for cover on hearing the shot, and spun around looking for a target. They immediately sprayed any area they saw movement, with bullets fired from their AK47 automatic weapons. Jenny’s wrist was gripped firmly as she was unceremoniously wrenched out of the far side of the lean-to and into the forest. Dylan lay on top of her and used the cover of undergrowth and trees to escape the flying bullets.

‘Stay here.’

Dylan whispered into Jenny’s ear as he stealthily rolled away and disappeared into the forest like a ghost of the night. The forest became lighter as the daylight quickly spread across the early morning sky. The two triads held their fire, as they crouched on the ground looking for the slightest movement or to hear the slightest sound. Brad realising that it must have been Dylan who took out the triad, remained rigid, and was determined not to move a muscle.

‘Bang!’

‘Bang!’

Two shots rang out, which seemed to echo for ages through the forest. The remaining triads hit the ground with a thud. As a bullet ripped through the neck of one, and blood

spurted out from a punctured artery, spraying the ground everywhere. The remaining triad was only shot in the shoulder and managed to spin round to where the shot came from and sprayed the area with bullets. Dylan leaped out of the way and banged the side of his head against a tree, and he lay unconscious on the ground. The wounded triad stood up and went over to him taking careful aim to finish him off.

‘Thud!’

The triad winced in pain, and stood motionless for a second before falling unconscious to the ground. Brad had found the courage to get up when the shooting stopped and saw the triad moving towards Dylan. He threw the knife in an attempt to impale him in the back, but his technique failed, and instead, the butt of the handle hit the man’s head and knocked him out. Either way, it worked. Dylan slowly got up from the ground patting his head, as a trickle of blood ran from his temple. He saw the triad face down on the ground with Brad sitting on his back, roping him up like a steer at a wild-west rodeo.

‘Eeegh Hah!’

Brad cried out to Dylan.

‘This son of a gun was about to shoot your lights out, but I saved your ass.’

He said completing the knots, whilst emulating an American cowboy.

‘You’re either very skilful, or very lucky, and I’m not sure which?’

Dylan replied trying to clear his head.

‘But thanks again buddy. I owe you. Now, where’s Jenny?’

‘I’m over here!’

She answered.

‘Can I come out now?’

She crawled from the undergrowth, picking twigs and leaves out of her hair. Dylan smiled.

‘Yes. Come out, you’re safe now.’

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Dylan bent over each of the bodies to ensure that two of them were dead, and the other was disabled.

‘Is everybody alright?’

They both answered positively, but Brad asked.

‘How did you know they were there?’

Dylan looked up at Brad and replied.

‘Well! I was always expecting something, and when I heard that trigger click. I went into automatic reflex action. It’s an army thing.’

He nodded towards the triads.

‘You search these guys, and see what they have on them. I will check the perimeter to make sure there are no others.’

As he passed Jenny, he winked at her. She saw the wink but was too busy plucking the debris from her hair.

‘I’ll never get my hair right now!’

As he passed, she stopped Dylan from leaving, to roughly dress the graze on his head. Afterwards, Dylan double checked the perimeter and found where the triads had rested and stowed their equipment. Brad searched the two dead bodies, and the live prisoner. The haul was quite impressive with several guns and spare magazines. There was also a sat-phone, maps, food, although mostly noodles, and plenty of cash. Dylan made sure the wounded triad was secure, and Jenny patched up his wound. Dylan and Brad then buried the two dead triads in shallow graves in the forest. The three of them then prepared a breakfast from freshly caught fish, mushrooms, and the triad’s noodles. Dylan had shown Brad what to look for in the forest and how to catch the fish, lessons he thoroughly enjoyed. He also tossed Brad one of the AK-47 weapons and showed him how to use it, but did not allow him to fire it in case others in the area could hear. After the meal, Jenny went over to the triad captive, who was still bleeding, but the bullet had passed through his shoulder, and only required regular dressings.

‘Why are you trying to kill us?’

Jenny asked the wounded triad in her best Chinese.

‘Why did you kill all those people at the camp site?’

She stared angrily at the man whilst tending his wound, but he said nothing. Although Dylan did not speak Chinese, he knew what she was trying to say and he interrupted her.

‘It’s no use Jenny. He won’t tell you anything... he’d rather kill himself.... But maybe I could get something out of him.’

‘No!’

Jenny exclaimed as she turned her head to scold Dylan.

‘There has been too much bloodshed already. We will take him to the authorities, and they can deal with him... Dylan why don’t you see if their sat-phone is working?’

Dylan picked up the phone and dialled one of the contact numbers they had been given in case of emergencies, and it was answered by an English voice.

‘Charlie-Alpha Khingan research emergency line. How can I be of assistance?’

Dylan replied.

‘Charlie-Alpha, this is the Khingan expedition leader Dylan Masters, we have an emergency request.’

‘Khingian leader, please relay your message. – over.’

Dylan took his time to speak slowly and clearly.

‘We are the only surviving members of the Khingan research team, and we are being hunted by triads – over.’

‘Roger that, Khingan leader. We will send help as soon as possible. – over.’

Dylan continued.

‘We seek urgent assistance for our immediate evac, and I will provide my coordinates. – over.’

He gave the coordinates of their position, and waited for their reply.

‘Khingian leader, this is Charlie-Alpha... We will inform the authorities immediately. Standby – over and out.’

Dylan signed off, and then turned to Brad and Jenny.

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‘They are going to notify the Chinese authorities and they will send a chopper. We are to wait here until it arrives, which should be about three hours.’

He then took out a map and studied the terrain for a suitable landing point. After a few minutes he informed them.

‘There’s a small clearing on a ridge about two clicks north of here. When the chopper gets here I will check-in with them and they can give me the exact coordinates they prefer, but it should not be too far from the clearing. Then we can all get out of here. We should also prepare a signal fire to ensure they see us.’

The trio gathered all their belongings, cleared the camp, and took two of the triad’s weapons as insurance, including all the cash and extra clips. Everything else was placed in one of the triads bags and hidden under a bush. Dylan gave Jenny his hand gun and showed her how to use it.

‘Keep the safety latch on at all times, unless you are going to fire it... Hold it at arm’s length using both hands and squeeze the trigger, don’t snatch it.... Is that clear?’

Jenny seemed determined to play her part in their escape, and she thought that the gun might help them in some way.

‘I understand Dylan, but I really don’t want to shoot at anyone... let alone, kill them.’

Dylan tried to reassure her.

‘Leave the shooting to me and Brad... and you will know when the time is right for you to use it... don’t worry.’

Jenny placed the weapon in her belt, and tried not to think about it. They set off for the landing zone, and kept the wounded triad on a rope so he wouldn’t run off. When they reached the clearing, they started a small fire, which they kept going until the helicopter arrived, then would add vegetation onto it to create a better signal. This was the only thing Dylan did not like, as the triad gang looking for them might see the smoke signal as well as the helicopter pilot.

They made the triad prisoner sit down, and Dylan positioned

Brad and Jenny to search the skies for any sightings. They kept their weapons ready, just in case any of the triads showed up. They waited and hoped that the helicopter arrived before the triads.

In Beijing.

James Thornton was quickly notified of the research team's predicament, and spoke with a senior officer at the Chinese Research Headquarters.

'Hello? This is James Thornton from the British led Khingan expedition team. We have had a communication, that the research camp has been attacked by bandits, and that the remainder of the team are trying to escape from them.'

The Chinese official replied.

'We failed to get a report from our research scientist, and have been trying to raise them... A local military patrol has been sent out to the area, and now you have updated us, we will send a helicopter.'

Once the telephone conversation had ended, the Chinese official contacted the main police department in Beijing. When he explained what was happening, he was put through to a senior anti-terrorist officer.

Inspector Yan Ning was 44 years old, and for the past twelve years, he had been working with a dedicated team to control terrorism and triad gangs in and around Beijing. When the research official had fully explained the nature of his call, Yan Ning put the phone down and immediately sent out a beeper signal to notify his team. By the time his team had arrived at their headquarters, Yan Ning had placed a map of the Baikal Shan Mountain Range, and had pinpointed the location of the sat-phone message from Dylan. Yan Ning pointed to the map.

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‘We have had a report that a British led research team working in this area, which includes several research people from the Beijing Research Centre, has been attacked and many, if not all, have been killed. A military helicopter will be sent to the exact location, where the sat-phone message was transmitted.’

He paused and looked around the room to ensure that all of his eight-man team were listening.

‘This has all the signs of being a triad hit, although we do not have any details as yet, as to what the research team were looking for, or what they had found that was worthy of an attack.’

One of his men suggested.

‘Yan! You know as well as I, that they do not need an excuse to attack and kill people.... Maybe, the research team were in the wrong place at the wrong time.’

Yan Ning grimaced, and continued.

‘Mybe so, but it is too remote an area for any triad gangs to be there accidentally.... No! This was an organised event, and one which we will be looking into.’

Another of his team commented.

‘Surely the military will be doing the same, and you have already said that they are sending a helicopter.... Why are we needed.’

Yan paused, and looked into all their faces.

‘Because I believe that this is the work of Chang Bingtao. We have been after him for a long time, and recently he has disappeared from Beijing... I think he is up there in those mountains, and I am sure there must be something very valuable for him to be there.’

Some other member of his team questioned.

‘So, what do you want us to do?’

Yan Ning paused again and looked closely at the map.

‘It is a big area to cover, and we should send a team to assist the local police and military. I will arrange for a

helicopter to take five of us there, so choose between yourselves which of you want to come with me.’

As his men talked, Yan Ning telephoned his superiors to inform them of his plan, and to get a helicopter and all necessary equipment made ready for their journey. Although, they objected to the potential cost of the operation, it was finally agreed to send a team.

Rescue?

From a high vantage point on the side of Baikal Shan Mountain, Chang’s men used several powerful binoculars to scan the valley. One of them sighted something.

‘There boss! There! I can see smoke!’

A triad member beckoned his grim-faced leader, whilst at the same time pointing to a small plume of light grey smoke rising from the forest canopy, close to the river. Chang snatched the binoculars from the man and searched for the position. It had been several hours since the last communication from his men who were following the westerners, and he naturally assumed the worst. He had been informed of Dylan Masters’s qualities; British Army trained and ex SAS. Although, Chang thought his own ruthless men should have had no problem securing them, but now, he was uncertain. He leaned forward and focused the binoculars for maximum clarity, and muttered to his henchman.

‘Yes! That must be them... As I know that there are no logging camps in that area.... Mmmh! So, they think they are safe do they... we will see about that.’

‘What shall we do boss?’

Chang thought carefully for a few moments before replying.

‘If they have killed my men, then they must have their sat-phone, and will have called for help.... That can only mean, a helicopter. and they are sending a positioning signal for the helicopter.’

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He looked at his map and yelled instructions via sat-phone to a dozen heavily armed men waiting in the forest, about 500 feet below.

‘Look out for a helicopter, and do not let them get away, but do not kill them all...I want the professor alive.’

The leader of the men acknowledged Chang and set off.

‘OK boss, I will let you know when we reach them.’

As the gang set off on foot through the forest, Chang sent his two men to guide the hunters towards their target, using sat-phones. He jumped down from his vantage point and climbed into one of the waiting 4X4 vehicles, along with three of his men, and headed further up the mountain track to a better vantage point.

The forests surrounding the Baikal Shan Mountain Range were vast covering hundreds of hectares of land. They were littered with logging companies, who gained access along single-track dirt roads sporadically throughout the forest. The tracks led from isolated logging camps to either a main road or to the nearest rail loading depot. Logs would then be transported to the nearest process factory in one of the towns or cities close by. —

The triad gang entered into the dense forest towards the trio. They were evenly spaced in a line about twenty metres apart, covering between two and three hundred metres of ground. Chang’s two men guided them by sat-phone to the exact point of the trio’s camp, and then joined them. Chang, kept in contact with all of his men, to monitor and direct the activity. From his elevated mountain observation post, he could clearly see the river, railway and main road as all three converged just north of their position. If the going wasn’t too tough through the forest, he estimated they should be upon the westerners within two to three hours.

Jenny was looking through Jenkins note book to see what other information she could decipher from the various icons and scribbles he had made in it. Brad was busy sorting out the packs to see what equipment they should take and which they could leave behind when the chopper arrived. The wounded and bound triad was sitting on the forest floor completely still as if in a trance, and held a blank expression on his face. He knew his fate was not going to be good. Meanwhile, Dylan was pacing up and down carrying one of the AK-47 semi-automatic weapons. He was inwardly nervous, but externally very cool. His natural instincts were telling him that it was taking too long for the chopper to arrive, and it seemed too easy just to escape via the helicopter. He had a nagging feeling, that the triads would not be giving up so easily. As he paced, he checked each scenario in his head should all hell break loose.

‘Should we take the river, or even double back?’

He thought to himself. Jenny looked up at him and saw the concern on his face.

‘What’s the matter Dylan? Why are you pacing like that? Do you still think we are being followed?’

‘Not sure.’

He replied.

‘I don’t trust those triads, and it’s too quiet. They will have too many resources to give up on us now.’

He set off to re-check the perimeter, again. Two hours went by then a faint whirring noise disturbed the silence as a helicopter buzzed over the skyline. Dylans sat-phone beeped into life as he made his way to the centre of the clearing, where he could see more of the sky.

‘Khingnan Leader this is Rescue One – over.’

Dylan answered the sat-phone.

‘Rescue One, this is Khingnan Leader, we have a visual on you. Can you see our smoke? – over.’

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At the same time, Dylan gestured for Brad to pile the damp leaves onto the fire. As he did so the light grey smoke from the fire turned into a thick, dark, almost black plume, which seemed to spread as it rose out of the forest into the clear sky. The helicopter pilot replied immediately.

‘Roger Khingan Leader, we see your signal – over.’

Dylan was relieved.

‘Rescue One can you tell me your best landing coordinates? I think this clearing where we are is suitable, but it is up to you – over.’

Dylan juggled with the sat-phone whilst getting out his compass and map from a pocket in his trouser leg. The pilot relayed his preferred landing coordinates, and Dylan made a mental note of it. As the helicopter veered off to head for the LZ (landing zone), Dylan put the phone down and scribbled the coordinates onto the map. He then turned to the others and instructed them.

‘OK we’re off! They are going to use a larger clearing just north of here. They are going to land there and wait for us. So, let’s get going.’

Jenny grabbed all her equipment including the note books and stowed them into her backpack. Brad gathered the rest of the equipment, and placed anything they were leaving under a large shrub. He then went to collect the prisoner who struggled and was reluctant to move, until Brad ‘accidentally’ pressed his fist into the man’s wounded shoulder, which made him move. Finally, Dylan emptied one of the water bottles to put out the fire. He then placed sods of earth over it, and stamped it down. The group then headed towards the landing site.

The triads in the forest had heard the helicopter and reported back to Chang, who relayed his instructions.

‘I will let you know exactly where it lands, and you can go there and destroy it.’

The lookouts waited for the Chang's instructions as he watched the helicopter hover above the forest. He nodded, and pointed to the direction where his men could intercept the helicopter. Once he saw the landing zone, Chang instructed the men to divert to the new location. He told them to spread out and hopefully they would cut off any retreat once the helicopter had been destroyed.

'If we can get to the helicopter before Jenkins boards it, then we will have them. Make sure you do not alert the crew of the helicopter, as we must not be seen. If necessary, kill the crew.'

The leader of the gang acknowledged.

'Will do boss!'

Stealthily, the gang approached the LZ, until they could hear the noise from the powerful engine growing louder. They formed a wide semi-circle around the area and closed in until they could see branches from nearby trees swaying violently from the draught of the rotor blades. They could feel the air rushing into their faces, which was refreshing as it was a very hot day. The helicopter managed to land on a raised and slightly rocky plateau, but it was flat and there was at least three metres clearance all around the blades. Dylan, Jenny and Brad were about 200 metres from the helicopter when they heard gunfire from semi-automatic weapons. They immediately hit the ground, and Dylan quickly realised that the triads had arrived at the chopper first. Chang was furious with his men, as they had opened fire too soon.

'Idiots! Why didn't you wait until the westerners got closer...Now you have to chase after them again.'

Dylan instructed Jenny and Brad to take the captive and hide under behind the trees, while he went to investigate. At that moment he saw the helicopter rise from the forest canopy at a very acute angle. It passed over their heads as it rose into the sky. Dylan could see it was peppered with bullet holes.

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As it disappeared over the horizon his sat-phone beeped into life.

‘Rescue One to Khingan Leader come in Urgent! – over’ Dylan grabbed the sat-phone out of his pocket and replied.

‘Go ahead Rescue One, this is Khingan Leader. What is your status? – over.’

The anguished pilot reported.

‘Ambush! Ambush! Ambush! Khingan Leader – Get out of there quickly. We have one man down. Repeat one man down!’

Before Dylan could reply an RPG. rocket was launched from very close by, and took out the helicopter with an almighty explosion that made Dylan dive for the nearest cover. The helicopter veered off, crashed into the side of the mountain, and exploded into a massive fireball. Trees and vegetation nearby were instantly set on fire as the blazing chopper continued to explode, as its fuel tanks erupted. However, the crash site was sparsely populated with trees at that elevated section of the mountain, and early morning moisture on the foliage, limited the blaze to immediately around the helicopter. Nevertheless, plumes of dense, black smoke billowed high into the sky. The triads had broken cover when they approached the helicopter in an attempt to subdue the pilots, and prevent them from raising the alarm. However, the co-pilot spotted the heavily armed men as he turned around in the cockpit to pick up some papers that had fallen during the landing, and saw them approaching from the rear. He raised the alarm to the pilot who tried to lift-off. The gang opened fire, shot the co-pilot, and peppered the chopper with bullets to prevent it escaping. When they realised it was getting away, the order was given to use the RPG.

Dylan rolled out from under the cover of a large rock, and rose to his feet. He then went over to where Jenny and Brad were hiding and quickly updated them on the situation.

‘There’s no chance of escape by air now, and both pilots are dead. So, we have to double back and head for the river.’ Jenny was very worried.

‘How did they find us?’

Dylan, grabbing Jenny by the elbow to help her out of the undergrowth, replied.

‘They must have been in the area looking for us, and once they spotted the chopper, and our smoke signal, it wouldn’t have taken them long to work out what our plans were.’ They left their captive on the floor and began to head for the river, when shots rang out from the forest.

! Bang! Bang! Bang!

The triad’s semi-automatic weapons unleashed their deadly power, causing flying splinters of wood as bullets ripped into nearby trees. Dylan grabbed hold of his weapon, threw himself to the ground and returned fire, which held up the advancing triads for a few vital seconds. Dylan called to Brad.

‘Brad! take Jenny, and head for the river while I hold them off... Use that gun if you have to.... You too Jenny!’ Although Dylan had shown Brad how to use it, he had never actually fired a weapon before, let alone shot at anyone. Without a word he led Jenny back into the forest and headed downhill towards the river. Dylan continued to return fire, until he was sure that Brad and Jenny had enough of a lead to give them a chance to escape, and then he would catch them up. After about twenty minutes, Brad and Jenny reached the river and looked for the best opportunity to escape. The river bank was about five metres above the river, and it was about ten metres across to the other side, with steep, rocky banks, and no visible signs of escape. The river was flowing fast, with foaming white waters that sped

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on, as the rapids flowed towards small cascading waterfalls that curved around a slow bend. The river then disappeared into the side of the mountain. Brad and Jenny had just moved to the edge of the bank to look at their options, when another volley of shots rang out. Brad spun around taking the gun from his shoulder, and released the safety catch. Holding the gun loosely to his waist, he fired towards the direction of the triads. This was the first time he had fired a gun and he did not expect the recoil. The force, pushed him backwards, hurling him over the edge of the river bank, and into the river. He disappeared under the rapids and was swept away.

‘No!’

Jenny screamed holding her hands up to her face. She searched the length of the river looking for any sign of Brad, and was about to jump in after him. When a hand grabbed her from behind and pushed her to the floor with brutal force, then removed the handgun from her belt.

‘Stay there!’

Exclaimed the Chinese voice of one of the triads. At the same time, he ordered another man to check the river for any sign of Brad. These men were the two ordered by Chang to guide the main gang towards the westerners, and then they swept around the rear, to prevent any escape. The second man fired several bullet rounds into the river until his magazine emptied, and then returned to his colleague.

‘There is no sign of him. He must have perished.’

The leader of the men dragged Jenny up from the floor and bound her hands behind her back, then he took out his sat-phone to report back to Chang. At that moment, Dylan, who had been watching from within the forest, appeared and quickly assessed the situation. He took aim and fired a single round from his weapon, taking out the man before he could use his phone. He hesitated to shoot again as the second man had deliberately put Jenny between himself and

Dylan. The man crouched behind her and placed the nozzle of his weapon into Jenny's neck... the pair stepped back towards the edge of the bank. He gestured to Dylan, speaking in Chinese.

'Put your gun down or I will shoot!'

Dylan ignored him.

'Jenny? Are you hurt?'

She winced at the tight grip of the triad, but was able to reply.

'No. But he will shoot you if you don't put the gun down.'

Jenny translated to the man.

'Shoot me not him! Shoot me!'

She realised the situation was almost hopeless, and could not face watching Dylan get killed. Dylan held his gun up as if to shoot, but hesitated. He could not bear the thought of shooting Jenny, at the same time, the thought of inevitable torture would be worse if they were caught. He seemed to wrestle with the choices for ages as Jenny kept pleading with Dylan or the triad to shoot her. Dylan then stood up and was just about to shoot Jenny through the shoulder, and hopefully kill the triad at the same time, when the triad aimed at Dylan and pulled the trigger of his gun.

'Click!'

As the small hollow sound flitted through the air to Dylan's ear, he realised that this was the guy with the empty magazine, and made a dash for him. The triad let go of Jenny to reload, but did not get time to do it. As Jenny banged her boot onto the man's foot, and pushed back into his groin with all her strength.

'Aaagh!'

The man cried out as he fell backwards over the edge of the river bank and into the river. Jenny staggered forward and stood up just in time to see Dylan, and also men coming out of the forest behind him.

'Dylan...No! Behind y....'

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She could not complete the words.

! Thump!

A blow from the butt of a rifle bounced off Dylan's head as one of the chasing group of triads had crept up from behind him. Dylan fell to the ground in an unconscious heap.

CHAPTER 9

All Seems Lost

Dylan regained consciousness when a container of cold river water was thrown into his face. He was tied upside down from the branch of a nearby tree next to the river bank. Jenny was tied to the same tree but was allowed to remain upright and secured to the tree trunk.

‘Wake up! Wake up!’

Chang screamed, in a broken, yet understandable English accent. Another container of water was thrown over Dylan as his lifeless body twitched back to consciousness. As Dylan slowly came round, Chang turned to Jenny and demanded.

‘Where is Jenkins? Tell me or I will kill this man.’

He took out a long, pointed knife from a sheath in his belt and pointed it at Dylan’s throat. Jenny could not bear it.

‘Wait...wait!’

Jenny relinquished.

‘I will tell you. I will tell you everything...Just don’t kill him.’

Dylan heard her, and pleaded with her as he spat water from his mouth.

‘No! Don’t tell him anything.’

He writhed about, as he hung from the branch, and one of the triads thumped him in the back. Jenny did not like the

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beating he was taking, but was pleased he had regained consciousness.

‘It’s alright Dylan, it’s not worth it. It’s not worth getting killed for.’

Dylan blurted.

‘Don’t you see.... It makes no difference to them. They’re going to kill us anyway.’

Another thump was delivered into his back to silence him.

Chang intervened.

‘Ah! I see... So that is what you think is it?’

Chang turned to Jenny.

‘That could be true, but we will find Professor Jenkins eventually, and when we do, we will kill you, but very slowly. However, if you help us to locate him and the gold deposits, we may let you live.’

He added with a sinister grin. Dylan was adamant for Jenny not to say anything.

‘Don’t say a word Jenny...don’t tell him anything.’

A large boot smashed into his head rendering him unconscious once more. Jenny could not take any more of the brutality, and turned to Chang and pleaded with him.

‘Enough of this... please! I will tell you everything, but first cut him down.’

She gestured towards Dylan with a nod of her head, as she struggled against the ropes holding her tight against the tree.

Chang gave a swift order to one of his men and the rope suspending Dylan was cut, sending him crashing to the floor with a thud. Jenny winced, looked at Chang and continued.

‘Well for a start.... Jenkins is dead, he...he...fell, during the earth tremors. There was nothing we could do.’

She did not want to reveal exactly how the professor died, as she knew that Dylan might be able to take advantage of the beasts in the cavern. Chang gave out a small gasp at this news, but remained silent as he thought through this latest

revelation. He paced up and down then turned again to Jenny and gave her a sinister grin.

‘We will do whatever it takes to get this gold, and up until now, the professor has kept us informed at all times. Unfortunately... now that he is dead.... You have to take his place.’

Jenny struggled to get free, but her bonds were too tight. Chang continued.

‘You are one of the other geologists on the team, and you must have the same information as Jenkins.’

He then grabbed Jenny by the jaw and snarled.

‘Tell me the location of the gold or I will kill you both now and him more slowly than you!’

Jenny tried to think as Dylan would.

‘I can do better than that.’

Jenny answered in a stern voice.

‘I can take you to it, it’s not far. But you must promise to let us go when we find it.’

‘Of course, I will, that is a fair trade.’

Chang replied, grinning. Although, Jenny of course, did not believe him, but was going to use the time to help Dylan to recover and maybe plan an escape.

‘You will need climbing equipment and lighting to enter the deep underground cavern and tunnels.’

Chang gave orders to his men, then went off to his vehicle to use his sat-phone to bring in the equipment needed. He instructed them to use off-road vehicles to create a new track to the cavern location when he got there.

By the time Dylan regained consciousness a few hours later, he found himself lying on the floor with his hands and feet securely tied. Jenny was sitting with her back against the tree. Although they had released her from the tree, her feet and hands remained tied. The triads were busy preparing for the

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journey to the mountain tunnels and cavern. Chang had sent for climbing equipment, generators, lighting and flashlights, including rope ladders and extra food rations. Jenny edged over to Dylan and whispered to him.

‘Dylan! I have told them about Jenkins death, but not how he died, and we will take them to the cavern through the bat hole.’

He gave Jenny a stern look, and was about to say something, but she stopped him and continued.

‘Shh! No! Listen Dylan... If I didn’t give them something, they would have killed us, but this way we have a chance to get away. If we take them to the cavern we could use - the elements - there to distract them while we escape. It was the only thing I could think of.’

She looked at Dylan whose expression had turned from anger to a thin smile as he realised that her plan could actually work.

‘Good girl... but where’s Brad?’

Jenny looked at Dylan and frowned.

‘I’m afraid he fell into the river, and I don’t think he made it.’

Dylan was most upset as he replied.

‘Shit, that’s awful. I quite liked that kid.’

Chang came over to Dylan and Jenny and told the guards to get them to their feet. The guards cut the ropes from their feet but not their hands, which were firmly tied behind their backs, then pushed them towards Chang’s men who were preparing to leave. Chang turned to Jenny.

‘If you do not keep your word, I will have no hesitation in slowly killing Mister Dylan. Do you understand?’

He held his knife to Dylan’s throat again, and gestured how he would slice his throat. He then gestured to the guards, and they were unceremoniously pushed to the front of a group of well prepared, and heavily armed triads. Jenny spoke to Chang.

‘I don’t know how to get to the cavern, but Dylan does. He needs to use his map and compass. So, you will have to untie our hands, and I know what to look for when we get there.’

Chang looked at Jenny and then Dylan and replied.

‘Alright, but any tricks, and I will not hesitate in shooting you both. I have found your note book, and rock samples in your bags, and I am sure we could eventually find the gold without you. So be warned!’

He tapped his shirt pocket as he spoke, and Jenny could see that was where he kept one of the note books. Chang gave an order in Chinese, and the ropes were cut from Dylan and Jenny as the group set off for the cavern. Jenny explained to Dylan.

‘Use your map and compass and figure out what to do when we get there.’

Dylan winked at her and set about formulating an escape plan in his head.

When Brad fell into the river, he was quickly swept downstream and surfaced about thirty metres away. Gasping for air and stunned by the cold water he fought to stay afloat. At the same time, he had to dodge loose boulders and rocks that came rushing up to him. As he passed close to the river bank, he saw an overhanging branch dipping its leaves into the water. He grimaced, as he used every ounce of strength in his body to grab the branch as it quickly came upon him.

‘Got it!’

As he grabbed the branch with one hand, it bent to a sharp angle, but held firm.

‘That was the easy bit.’

He thought, but the rushing current wanted to pull him from the branch and hurtle him towards the cascading falls either side. As he paused for breath, he noticed the body of

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one of the triads come rushing past him, only to be hurtled off the waterfall into the rock-strewn waters below. It convinced himself that he was not going to suffer the same fate. Brad fought wildly as he struggled to get his other hand onto the thick branch. Then slowly, he pulled himself along the branch until his foot caught the side of the river bank. He was then able to manoeuvre himself out of the river and onto the bank, where he lay exhausted. After a few minutes, the nightmare of the last hour or so came back to Brads consciousness. He jerked himself up from the grassy bank, and looked to see what damage had been caused to his body. He felt no pain, but wondered that the fall into the river would have surely caused serious damage to his body. He removed his backpack and wet clothes, and checked all his limbs and torso, but apart from many bruises, there were no serious injuries. Perhaps, the flexibility of youth gave him an advantage, he thought, or possibly his backpack protected him. He then laid out his clothes to dry in the warm sun, and assessed what this latest predicament had presented him. He stood up to search the area, and climbed up a mound of rocks for a better view. About fifty metres away he could see the triads milling about in a group around two people, one was hanging upside down from a tree branch, and the other was tied to the trunk of the same tree.

‘Dylan! Jenny! They’re still alive!’

He muttered to himself, realising there wasn’t much he could do, as he lost his gun in the river. Dylan’s knife was still in his backpack, but it was of little use against trained assassins. He decided the best thing to do was to follow them and look for an opportunity to release them.

‘But how?’

He dressed quickly and managed to get within twenty metres of the group, and hid behind a large bush between the forest and the river bank. He then used the cover of forest trees to slowly make his way closer to the group. Brad watched as

the group set off into the forest with Dylan and Jenny leading them. He could see that they were not tied up, and that Dylan appeared to be guiding them with his map and compass. He figured that Dylan would be using as many tricks as possible to delay them and try to escape. For now, though, all Brad could do was follow them.

In Beijing:

The Chinese authorities had been monitoring their radar as the helicopter vanished from the screen. The officer in charge asked for the last communication from the helicopter.

The operator replayed the recording.

‘This was last thing the pilot said sir.’

He flicked a switch.

‘Ambush! Ambush! Ambush! Khingan Leader – Get out of there quickly. We have one man down. Repeat one man down!’

‘Then there was an explosion sir.’

The officer immediately picked up the telephone and contacted his superior in another government office. When he finished the conversation, he turned to his second in command to inform him of their orders.

‘We are to send troops to the area at once, and we are to monitor all satellite phone communications in the area. Now go! Quickly.’

The officer then made several phone calls, one of which was to Yan Ning of the ant-terrorist group.

‘Inspector Ning, I have to inform you that the military helicopter was attacked, and it crashed into the mountain, killing all on board. Be aware that these people are heavily armed, and will kill anyone who gets in their way.... Be careful.’

Inspector Yan Ning replied.

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‘I understand, and we intend to be in the area late tomorrow afternoon. As soon as I get there, I will liaise with the military leader and get an update.’

Yan and his men were driven to a nearby military base. The base commander was there to meet him, and had already gathered 10 special forces soldiers who were getting kitted out with weapons and supplies. Yan’s men had all been given similar equipment, and made their way onto the helicopter. The commander gave Yan an update.

‘You are to fly with these men to our base at Harbin, where another helicopter will take you to the Baikal Shan Mountain Range. We have already deployed troops to the area in a fleet of vehicles, and they will liaise with you when you are on the ground.’

Inspector Ning was pleased with the quality of backup.

‘Thank you for providing the special forces commander, but make them aware that the men we are dealing with are ruthless killers, and we have been trying to kill or capture them for a long time.’

The commander nodded.

‘They have been fully appraised of the situation, and that is why we chose them... They will do the job for you Inspector.’

A few minutes later, the helicopter took off towards Harbin military base to refuel, and get any update before flying on to their final destination.

Return to the Cavern.

Dylan led the group through the forest, while at the same time trying to contrive a solution for their predicament.

Jenny followed behind him as guards walked either side of them, watching their every movement. A few moments later Chang walked up to Jenny and blew smoke from a cigarette

into her face causing her to cough, and he pretended to be sorry.

‘I sincerely apologise my dear, I have a few bad habits, this is one of them, and well... maybe we can share another one together a little later.’

Chang leered at Jenny’s cleavage from her open shirt, and she quickly buttoned it up. Then, deflecting his leer, as she enquired.

‘So how did you know about Professor Jenkins and the gold? We hardly spoke to anyone on our arrival here.’

Chang looked ahead as he took another drag from his cigarette and replied.

‘Well, you see, we have contacts all over the world, including some in your British Museums. Once we knew of the professor’s plans, we used... his family, to get him to tell us more about the expedition, and what we could expect to find here.’

Chang relished the thought of getting information out of people, often using brutal and barbaric methods. Jenny turned and looked disgustingly at Chang.

‘You mean you tortured the professor’s family in the UK to get him to tell you about the gold in China?’

Shaking her head disapprovingly she continued.

‘That is barbaric. We didn’t know for certain there would be any gold, or anything come to that, that is why we are here... It’s just a research trip, so why take the risk?’

Chang grinned, as he obviously knew more than her.

‘Come now my dear.’

Chang replied condescendingly.

‘You have to realise that we too have to carry out research, and Jenkins was very happy to impart additional information that convinced us this would be a very worthwhile, and viable expedition. We have not harmed his family in any way, as yet. They are being held as, shall we say insurance, in their own home to ensure Jenkins would lead us to the gold

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deposits, and not inform the government. He kept us updated throughout the trip. But then his communications stopped, and that is why we are here now.'

He continued with a hardened tone in his voice.

'But now he is dead... We have no further use of his family. I am sure our colleagues will.... Release them...eventually.'

Chang gave out a hideous laugh, and Jenny was about to berate Chang when Dylan placed his hand on her shoulder.

'Leave it Jenny.'

Dylan interrupted.

'Don't inflate his ego anymore, let's get this over with...

Ouch!

He yelled, as the butt from a guard's gun jabbed into his ribs at a nodded instruction from Chang. The guard urged them forward.

'Keep going...don't stop!'

The guard continued to swear at Dylan in Chinese, whilst pushing him on into the forest. Dylan ignored him as he needed time to plan their escape, so he decided to delay and take a longer route back to the cavern.

He looked up at the late afternoon sky and said to Chang.

'It will be getting dark soon...I think we should camp here for the night.'

'I decide when we stop!'

Chang declared, turning angrily to Dylan. He saw Jenny cringe, fearing another boot for Dylan, and so he softened his voice.

'But I agree, it is getting a little darker in the forest now. We can rest here until dawn.... Now! Tie them up.'

He gestured, waving his arms as he gave his orders to the guards. Dylan and Jenny had their hands tied behind them and were forced to sit back-to-back on the ground. Two guards were deployed to stay with them at all times. Chang then ordered his men to erect a large tent between the trees

within the forest. A wood fire was lit near the entrance, carefully maintained throughout the night by two other triad guards. The meal was a simple chicken noodle dish and green tea. Jenny and Dylan were given some of the cold remnants after all the triads had eaten. Dylan spat his out as they were force fed, and Jenny could eat only a little. After the meal, the group settled down for the night. Dylan took the opportunity to talk to Jenny in a low whisper, so the guards could not hear.

Jenny, I am going to take them on a longer route into the forest and then back to the river in the afternoon. By the time we reach the area around the cavern it will be quite late. We will use the bats entrance to climb into the cavern with ropes. If we delay as long as we can, and the timing is correct, the bats should come out at the same time for the evening.'

Jenny seemed puzzled.

'What good will that do Dylan?'

'Hopefully, when the bats come out of the entrance it will take them by surprise and cause enough confusion for us to escape. However, we may have to escape into the cavern during the chaos, before they get a chance to follow.'

'Oh! I see.'

Jenny replied.

'But that means we would have to escape via the river again, and face those.... crocodiles!'

'Well, it's either that, or certain death with the triads. Or, we could try and run through the forest... You choose?'

Jenny did not like any of the solutions.

'I don't think we have much choice then... You let me know what you want me to do, and when.'

Brad watched from the forest as the group settled down for the night. He then left them, to return to clearing where they lit a signal fire, which was not too far away, and he would

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return before daylight. When he arrived, he found the discarded equipment they had stored under the bushes. There was a spare rucksack that contained mostly waste material, but there were two unopened tins of stew, some dried noodles, a protective helmet complete with lamp and ropes. Dylan unfortunately, had thrown the triad weapons into the river. He opened one of the tins with Dylan's knife, and ate the meal, then stowed everything useful into the rucksack and returned to the triad's camp in the forest. At the triad's camp, Brad watched from a better vantage point, and tried to get some sleep. He did not know where they were going, or what he intended to do, but was sure that Dylan would be working on some sort of escape plan. The next morning as the first laser like rays of sunlight penetrated the forest canopy. The triads scurried about preparing a quick meal, and packing the equipment ready for the day's journey. They seemed oblivious to the cool, early morning mist as it wafted eerily through the trees. The noise woke Brad from his vantage point in the bushes nearby. He shivered as the early morning chill had penetrated through him. Stretching and stifling a yawn he tried to get the blood circulating through his body, taking great care not to reveal his location. Chang's tent was the last to be packed away so he could eat his breakfast in comfort, with the warm fire in front of the tent still burning bright. Hot water was then provided for him to complete his ablutions. He then emerged out of the tent, urinated on the nearest tree, and checked that everyone was ready to go. Dylan and Jenny were bundled up from the floor and untied. They were allowed to complete their toiletries at the edge of the forest, but were closely guarded at all times. Jenny's guards taking great pleasure in watching as she squatted for a pee and giggled to each other.

'Bring them over here! We do not have all day.'

Chang bellowed, as Dylan and Jenny were almost dragged towards him.

‘I hope you two had a comfortable night?’

Chang quizzed with a wry smile.

‘Let’s just get on with it.’

Dylan said, trying to appear disheartened and beaten, as he took the map from his pocket and set off through the forest. His abrupt pace caused the guards to trot alongside him. Jenny smiled at the look on Chang’s face, as he seemed to have lost control of Dylan’s actions. He had to quickly order his men to follow Dylan, and to regain his authority he ensured that Jenny was made to walk in front of Dylan in an effort to slow him down. As they left the camp, Brad waited until he was sure it was safe to come out. He then spent a little time in front of the ashes of the fire to get warm. A guard had covered it with dirt, but it was still hot. A few minutes later he took a parallel path in pursuit of the group, trailing them so they were always just in sight. Brad was slightly confused as to why Dylan was taking them deeper into the forest. He noted how they stopped every now and then at a clearing in the forest where large rocks and boulders jutted out of the ground preventing the trees from growing there. Dylan would pause at each clearing and look around as if he was searching for something. Then they would carry on into the forest again. Brad was sure Dylan was deliberately delaying them, but why?

The group stopped at the next clearing, and Chang said to Dylan, as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

‘Why are we not there yet? The woman said it was not far.’

Dylan looked at his map, put on a confused look and replied.

‘Well, we came out of a hole in rocks somewhere around here and we have been looking at each set of rocks we come

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to... I did not mark the exact coordinates on my map, but I am sure we will find it soon enough.'

Chang then ordered his men to make a fire and brew some noodles and green tea for lunch. It was early afternoon and Dylan and Jenny were tied up again. While the triads ate their food, Dylan took the opportunity to speak to Jenny.

'So far so good Jenny. We are about an hour from the river, and then we can head for the bat hole above the cavern. I had written the coordinates on my shirt sleeve when we left the cavern. So, I know exactly where we are...Are you OK?'

Jenny was hot and tired, but answered positively.

'I'm alright right now, but I don't trust that man. He could kill us at any moment so please be careful!'

When the triads had eaten, and the group were ready to leave, Dylan gestured to his guards that he wanted to take a pee. The guards looked over to Chang for guidance, and he begrudgingly nodded his approval. Dylan then stepped a few feet into the forest at the rear of the group, closely followed by his guards. They allowed him just a little privacy, as he began to pee. He looked straight ahead, trying to gather his thoughts, when his attention was drawn to a slight movement in the bushes about fifty paces away, next to a group of large rocks. A head deliberately appeared from the bushes for a few seconds, and then disappeared.

'Brad?'

Dylan said to himself.

'Brad! Great he made it!'

Dylan fastened his flies, and at the same time, he gave Brad a signal which pointed towards the river. At that moment a hand clamped on his shoulder and he was hauled out of the forest to rejoin the group. Brad saw Dylan's signal, but it took him a few minutes to realize that Dylan was pointing towards the river, and that he was to go there too. As Brad pondered the signal, he set off the way Dylan had pointed,

whilst the triad group headed in the other direction. Brad reached the river about thirty minutes later. As he stood and looked around, he could tell that this was close to the entrance of the cavern they had recently escaped from. The steep cliffs towered high above the valley below, with the river flowing out from the side of the mountain, which was still shrouded in mist. Brad walked along the river bank and headed upstream towards the mountain, and the cavern entrance. He decided to climb further up the slope of the mountain to get a better view of the valley. This way he could see when Dylan and the others arrived, he might then get another clue as to what Dylan wanted. Brad found a suitable position between two large boulders with a shrub growing between them. He made himself comfortable and waited. The late afternoon sun hung over the horizon as warm, bright rays soothed and comforted Brad, causing his eyelids to close and drift off to sleep. A few minutes later, he woke to an over emphasized call.

‘Over here!’

Dylan shouted loudly, as he changed direction from following the river, to heading deeper into the forest. He was aware Brad could be in the area and he didn’t want to catch him by surprise, and to let him know they were moving into the forest. The group unloaded their equipment and Chang instructed them to set up camp.

‘At last, we are here! Make sure the camp is hidden from view... I don’t want anyone to see us from the air.’

When he had finished giving specific instructions to his men, he turned to Dylan and queried.

‘If I did not know any better, I think you have been taking us around in circles.’

Dylan gave him a shrug of his shoulders and turned his back on Chang. He pointed to the surrounding hillside that was a mixture of large rocks in dispersed with bushes and trees, although there was no obvious sign of any opening.

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‘The entrance to the cavern is just up there.’

Dylan said in a raised voice, and purposely pointed to a location where the bat entrance was. He kept his arm up so Brad, if he was watching, could see his plans.

‘We still have enough daylight to get there and see the gold, if we set off now.’

Chang seemed adamant.

‘No! We have been walking for hours! I am tired and we have to wait for the equipment to arrive... I will give them our position and vehicles will arrive soon. It would be better if we began in the morning... We shall make camp here, have a good meal, and start again tomorrow. Now! Tie them up!’

Dylan though, was trying to convince Chang otherwise.

‘But we must go now! It makes no difference in the cavern. It’s dark there all the time, and we can set up camp inside it.’ Dylan almost pleaded as he realised that his plans were about to be destroyed. It made no difference, as Dylan and Jenny were hurriedly grabbed and bundled to the floor, then tied back-to-back. Chang explained.

‘I have made my decision, and besides, I do not like dark caves, and I hate being cold.’

He took a long drink out of a water bottle, walked back to the river, and sprawled himself out onto the grassy bank, trying to get the last warm rays from the sun. he used his sat phone to contact the men bringing in the equipment.

‘We have finally arrived at the entrance to the cavern, and I will send you the coordinates... Follow the river, as the ground will be better for the vehicles, only go through the forest if you have to.’

As they sat, bound on the floor, Jenny turned to Dylan and wondered.

‘Now what?’

Dylan checked to see that no one was listening, and grinned a little.

‘Don’t worry.’

Dylan whispered.

‘I’ve seen Brad... He is here, in the hills.’

Jenny was shocked.

‘Brad? You’ve seen Brad? Is...is...he alive?’

Her voice almost shrieking with excitement

‘Yes! Now Shh! ... Keep quiet! I saw him on the trail, he has been following us. I gave him a signal to come here, and I am sure he is watching us. We must go ahead with the plan to use the bat entrance, and hope he keeps one step ahead.’

‘Hope?’

Jenny replied.

‘Hope? What can Brad do? He has no experience at getting out of these situations.’

Dylan grinned.

‘He will surprise you.... He made it out of the river, didn’t he? And he has managed to follow us without being seen? He’s alright.’

Brad watched closely from the hillside. He had a clear view of the camp site and saw Dylan and Jenny tied together in the middle. There were armed guards either side of them at all times, and he realised there would be no chance of helping them escape now. He noted that Dylan had pointed up to the hillside when they first arrived, and the direction was only about fifty metres from his own position. He decided to wait until it was a little darker before going to investigate. Until then he made a careful note of how many men there were, where the guards were placed, and what weapons they had. By the time Chang’s tent was erected, the sun was fading over the far side of the valley. A chill went through him as he got up and stepped into the tent. He glanced at the fire being set up in front of it by two men, and was disgusted it was not already blazing hot.

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‘Get on with it! And hurry!’

He bellowed, causing one of the men to trip over a pile of logs and fall face first onto the ground. Without showing any concern for the man’s demise, Chang sat on the camp bed and demanded.

‘Bring my meal...Now!’

It caused another flurry of activity, as several men rushed about the camp in utter chaos. When the meal was ready, Chang was served first, and then the rest of the group sat around a second camp fire to eat. This left only a couple of guards at either end of the camp, and they too were eating. Chang sat in his tent and Dylan and Jenny, as usual, were not going to be fed until much later. Brad saw this was his chance to investigate the hillside. He very carefully stepped out of his rocky cover and headed up the hill, before turning towards the position Dylan had pointed to. As he approached the bat entrance he realised where he was, and that this led into the cavern. He knelt down on the edge of the entrance to peer into the black hole, when he was knocked completely off his feet as several large bats came swooping out of the cavern. He found it very hard not to yell out as he clung onto the rocks by the entrance, accidentally displacing some of the rocks, and causing them to crash down the hillside towards the camp. The guards heard the noise of the falling rocks, and immediately alerted the others in the camp. Within seconds some of them were armed and heading up the hillside towards the entrance, and to Brad. Dylan was fearful of Brad’s safety and called out.

‘Bats! Bats!’

Dylan yelled as he watched several of them fly out of the cavern.

‘It’s only Bats!’

He repeated several times, quickly realizing it might be Brad who had dislodged the rocks. He nudged Jenny and told her to repeat it in Chinese. The guards looked across at Jenny

and saw she was pointing to the sky as she shouted. They looked up and saw the giant bats trailing off into the distance. After a few words between themselves, they decided to return to their meal without investigating any further. Chang emerged from the tent to see what all the commotion was about, to which Dylan took great pleasure in telling him.

‘It’s nothing. Your men are simply afraid of a few flying mice, that’s all.’

Chang ignored him, as he didn’t really understand what Dylan had said, and spoke to the nearest guard, telling him to make sure Dylan was given an extra kick during the night. He then went back into his tent to complete his meal.

Meanwhile, Brad clung on to the rim of the bat entrance, his feet dangling inside the cavern nearly thirty metres up from the cavern floor. He had to almost dive into it when he realised the triads had been alerted, and just managed to grab the rim. He listened to see if they were getting any closer, not daring to move, yet his fingers and muscles were aching. When he realised that no one coming, he pulled himself out of the hole and rested his stomach onto the rim so he could take a breather. When he had recovered, and was sure none of the triads were coming, he laid low onto the rock face, trying not to create a silhouette. As he lay there, he figured that this was where Dylan was pointing to, and that they were going to enter the cavern from here. Yet, there was no more he could do or see until dawn, so he decided to return to the twin rocks to spend the night. Slowly he made his way back trying not to send any more loose rocks down the hill. When he got back to the twin rocks, he made himself as comfortable as possible with a few ferns, leaves, and small branches, before eating the last of his stew. There was no way he would be able to sleep and so, prepared himself for another cold, cramped night.

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By two o'clock the next morning, the triads were alerted to the sound of approaching vehicles, and grabbed their weapons. One of Chang's lead henchmen calmed them down.

'It's OK! It is only the equipment arriving for the cavern.... They should be down by the river, so go there and see if they can be guided to the camp.'

The all-terrain vehicles had made slow, but steady progress to the camp by following the river, as Chang had suggested when he ordered the equipment. The lead man instructed them.

'Follow my men to the camp and keep your vehicles out of sight... We will help you to unload the equipment... I am not going to wake the boss, as he would not be happy.'

CHAPTER 10

What Dangers?

At the break of dawn, Brad watched as the bats returned to the cavern, he marvelled at the size of them and the accuracy of their flying skills, especially when they flew back into the cavern, as the entrance was very small compared to their wing-span. As soon as there was sufficient light, he went back to the entrance to look at his options before the triads arrived. The entrance was oval in shape, long and narrow, about three metres wide by two metres. From his backpack he took out two slim, nylon climbing ropes, clipped on his carabineers and strapped on the hard hat. Once he had clambered inside the entrance, he switched on the hat lamp and surveyed the area. It was a sheer drop down to the rocky cavern floor, with plenty of hand holds, but he remembered how slippery and loose the walls were. Inside the entrance, and to one side, he noticed a narrow ledge about two metres from the entrance, which led to a small recess in the rock face. Brad slowly used what hand holds there were to make his way across to the ledge. When he eventually got to the recess, he noticed it was quite craggy, deeper than he thought and almost a metre square. He secured one of the ropes to an solid angular rock, and then checked to make

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sure the rope was long enough to reach the floor before coiling it up, and placing it to one side. When he finished, he looked around to see what his options were to create as much of a diversion as possible. He had no idea what he was going to do, but he wanted to give Dylan and Jenny a chance to escape. Inside the entrance to the cave there was a large tree root sticking out of the rock face just above the opening. Brad decided he didn't have much time before the triads arrived, and this was too good an opportunity to miss. He carefully climbed up to it and secured the second rope onto the root. Testing it was strong enough, he then dropped the rope in front of the entrance and abseiled down to the outer edge of the entrance. It wasn't a moment too soon, as he could hear the triads heading towards him. He swung on the rope back to the narrow ledge, hid in the recess he found, and placed Dylan's knife in his belt. Brad crouched close to the rock face and waited nervously for his moment to strike. Two of the triads had been sent up to the bat hole to ensure it was safe for Chang to get to. They didn't look too closely and spent the time enjoying a cigarette and chatting.

Back at the camp, the triads were once again scurrying about preparing Chang's breakfast and getting ready for the journey into the cavern. When they had eventually catered to Chang's every whim, they took their own breakfast, followed by the offer to Dylan and Jenny of the usual cold meal, which they refused. Chang's lead henchman had already informed his boss that the equipment had arrived during the night. He hoped for a little praise but received none. He then went over to Dylan and Jenny, untied them and they were made stand and wait for Chang. Dylan stepped closer to Jenny and whispered to her.

‘Be ready for anything Jenny, I am sure Brad will be trying to surprise the triads, so, we both have to be very alert today.’

Jenny nodded to confirm she understood. As they waited, Chang stepped out of his tent dressed in clean crisp, dark green fatigues and matching cap with shiny black army boots. He lit up a cigarette and said to Jenny.

‘Well, my dear, I hope you two are not going to do anything stupid today. Give me what I want... take me to the gold, and I will release you both. ***It should be simple!*** ... However, if you try to escape, I will kill you.’

Jenny replied.

‘Only Dylan knows the exact location in the cavern, but I will show you what to look for and how to get to the better seams of gold when we get there.’

‘Good! Now! Let us get started.’

He grinned, clapped his hands, and his triads reacted like well drilled soldiers, and brought all the equipment to the front. There were rope ladders, ropes, tripod battery lamps, flashlights, safety gear, explosives and a variety of tools. After closely inspecting the equipment, he gave the orders to take them to the entrance and prepare the way. Turning to Dylan and Jenny he said.

‘Mr. Dylan, you will go in first, just to make sure it is safe, followed by two of my men. Any tricks and I will kill Miss Jenny.’

Chang smiled at the thought of getting close and personal with her, but Jenny hid behind Dylan’s shoulder. Chang continued.

‘When it is secure, Miss Jenny will follow with the rest of my men and I will come in when it is safe and well lit. Now go!’

He clapped his hands again, spoke to his men in Chinese and watched as the first group set off. When they had left, Chang instructed five of his men to remain behind, two to

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remain in the camp, and three to look for other ways into the cavern. He then began to clamber up the grassy hillside towards the entrance with the remaining men. He lost his footing several times, which pleased many of his men, but they dared not show it.

Brad clung to the side of the rock face inside the cavern and waited, as the first of the triads arrived. He watched as two of them flung a long rope ladder into the entrance, and secured it. One of the men checked to see if the rope ladder was long enough, and was pleased when he saw the excess trailing on the floor below. Next, one of the tripod lights was setup at the entrance and shone directly to the floor of the cavern. Dylan was then forced to go down the ladder first, closely followed by one of the triads, and guns were aimed at Dylan as he descended. They were all wearing safety harnesses and safety helmets with lamps, which they found uncomfortable, and seemed to limit their movements. As they descended into the cavern, Dylan kept looking around to see if he could see Brad, but he could not, which made him wonder if Brad had a plan, or was just hiding. When they had safely reached the cavern floor, the triad signalled to the others to come down. The bright light from the tripod lamp at the entrance glared into the eyes of the men below, creating a blind spot which meant Brad could not be seen as they looked up. The first triad took his AK-47 gun from his shoulder and trained it on Dylan as the second man slowly climbed down. When he too had reached the floor, Jenny was then forced onto the rope ladder. She passed Brad, who was no more than three metres away, he tapped on the rock, and she glanced across and saw him. Her jaw opened in surprise as he put a finger to his lips and mouthed.

‘Shhhhhh!’

He used finger signs to point at Jenny, the floor, and then the knife in a cutting action on the rope. Jenny thought she understood what he was trying to say, and continued making her way down the rope ladder. When she reached the floor, a third triad began to make his way down.

As the triads on the cavern floor looked up, Jenny whispered to Dylan.

‘Brad is up there and he is going to cut the rope, but I am not sure what he means?’

She did not understand, but Dylan did, and placed himself behind one of the triads, who was engrossed in the vastness of the cavern. As the third triad passed Brad's position, he looked across and saw Brad, and gave out a call in Chinese to alert the others while fumbling for his rifle. Brad though, was quicker to react. He swung across to the rope ladder and swiftly cut it, causing the man to fall. As the falling man was about to crash to the ground, Dylan pushed the triad he was standing behind underneath him. The screams were terrible as the crunch of bone and flesh echoed loudly when they collided, killing them both instantly. Brad then swung back onto the ledge and the safety of the recess, where he pinned himself into the far corner of it and cowered. He had just made it, as a hail of bullets from the triad on the cavern floor peppered his position. The man then turned his gun on Dylan and was about to fire, when Jenny charged into him, causing him to lose his balance. Dylan then kicked the man in the face and knocked him out. A hail of bullets came into the cavern from the entrance above, and Dylan and Jenny dived into the safety of the cavern wall. The angle made it impossible for the triads to get a clear shot, but still they fired. The shots rang out through the cavern and echoed back even louder. Dylan could see one of the AK-47 rifles, but it was just out of reach, and the bullets were still flying and ricocheting off the floor and walls. He called to Brad to distract them while he grabbed it.

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‘How do I do that?’

Cried Brad in hand gestures. Dylan shouted, and pointed to his own head.

‘Just think of something, or we’re dead.’

By now Chang was at the entrance and bellowing out instructions to his men. They had already dropped another rope ladder down, and he kept two men firing at Dylan and Jenny. As two more men prepared to climb down, Brad sprang into action. He used the rope secured to the tree root over the entrance and swung across as fast as he could. He kicked the first man in the face, causing him to reel backwards, crashing into the lamp tripod that plunged the cavern into darkness. Only the tiny lamps on the headgear below provided small incandescent trails of light. The second man climbed onto the rope ladder, but was taken completely by surprise as Brad crashed into him on his return swing. He could do no more than drop his weapon and cling on to Brad, and the two of them swung backwards and forwards wrestling with each other. Dylan meanwhile, used the sudden cease fire, and darkness, to grab one of the weapons. He then stepped back into the cavern and looked up to see Brad and the triad wrestling on the swinging rope. All he could do was fire at the opening of the entrance to keep the others at bay once Brad had swung past.

Brad and the triad kept crashing into the rock wall as they fought. The triad was beginning to get the upper hand when the tree root gave way, causing one of them to fall as he clung to the rope, and crashed to the floor below. Dylan leaped out of the way as the man fell and smashed to the rocky floor of the cavern. Jenny screamed, and put her hands to her face and turned to the wall, not daring to look, as she feared Brads inexperience in combat would mean it was him lying dead on the floor. Dylan quickly went over to the body which was almost unrecognizable, and in the dim light, he could not be sure who it was. Suddenly a man

bounced down alongside him from another rope, taking Dylan completely by surprise.....it was Brad.

‘Come on Dylan!’

Brad said quickly, picking up the rope from the tangled body, and coiling it quickly into his backpack.

‘I hope you didn’t think that was me?’

He quizzed, pointing to the mangled body.

‘I am a mountaineer you know? And we always think safety first. I hitched myself to the other rope before I tackled that guy.’

‘Jesus!’

Dylan exclaimed.

‘That was close, I thought you’d had it, but you’re learning quickly my boy... Good job!’

The pair wasted no time and ran back towards Jenny, who hugged him closely.

‘When I saw you fall into the river... I... I thought you had gone.’

Brad managed to smile as recalled the event.

‘It was close Jenny, I can tell you that, but I managed to grab a tree branch and haul myself out.’

‘I don’t care how you did it... I am just so pleased to see that you are alive.’

Brad also explained to her how he secured himself to another rope before swinging out over the entrance, when the tree root caused the pair to drop, and that it was his equipment and climbing knowledge that saved him, but not the triad.

No sooner did the trio reach the safety of the cavern wall when all hell broke loose. Chang had replaced the tripod with two more, and the lamps soon illuminated the cavern floor directly below the entrance. Another man was firing randomly into the dark hidden corners of the cavern. At the same time two of his men were scrambling down the

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replaced rope ladder, but it was very slow and awkward and they kept spinning around, impeding their progress. It allowed the trio to escape, and by the time the two men stepped off the ladder, Dylan, Brad and Jenny were on the other side of the cavern, and they knew where they were going. About thirty minutes later Chang had managed to make it down the ladder. His remaining men had set up more tripod lamps to illuminate almost the whole cavern. Four of them were sweeping the edges of the cavern and the others were waiting for Chang's orders.

'Spread out and find them.'

He ordered, and they too set off across the large cavern. Dylan, Brad and Jenny made their way to the same exit tunnel they used the last time. They paused before entering the small opening. Brad asked.

'What's the plan Dylan? We don't have much time.'

Brad looked back into the cavern, and could see the glow of the tripod lamps, and flickering flashlights of the triads looking for them. Jenny added.

'I don't fancy crossing that river with those oversized crocs in it.'

Dylan paused before replying.

'Neither do I... But I want them to think that's the way we've gone.'

He paused again as Brad and Jenny looked on a little bemused. Dylan then stepped into the stream and into the opening. A few seconds later he came back, just as the triad's flashlights were closing in. Dylan pointed to the discarded items they had left the last time they went through the tunnel.

'OK!' Collect that stuff over there and scatter it about to let them think we have gone through here.'

Jenny was confused.

'But why? They don't know about this tunnel, and we need as much time to get as far away as possible.'

Dylan explained.

'I know, but there are two exits in there.... The river...and the hot springs...Let's make them think we took the river and they will follow it straight into trouble.'

Brad, still watching for the triads, turned to Dylan and blurted.

'We have no choice now, they are here!'

They used the rope from before, that was still tied to the rock. They then went into the main tunnel, and Dylan scattered more of their old equipment in the tunnel leading to the river. Then, they all entered the second tunnel and headed towards the hot springs, not knowing what they would find there. Within minutes of the trio going into the tunnels, the triads came across the discarded backpack equipment at the tunnel entrance.

'Over here, look they have gone through here!'

One of the triads used his two-way radio to talk to Chang, and then waved his flashlight from side to side to attract his attention of their location. He was soon met by the rest of the gang and they all shone their flashlights into the small opening. Chang arrived just as one of the men emerged out of the tunnel.

'Tell me! What is in there? Is this how they have escaped?' Chang bellowed at his men whilst trying to get a signal on his sat-phone.

'Yes boss, yes boss.'

The man replied and explained.

'There are two exits and they seem to have headed towards the river that comes out of the mountain... Shall we follow them?'

'Wait!'

Chang hesitated.

'Where does the other tunnel go to?'

'I do not know boss, but it is a lot warmer in there and smells of sulphur. It is not good that way!'

Chang not wanting to go into either tunnel decided it would be best to cover all the angles. Of the six men that remained he sent three in the river tunnel and two into the hot-springs tunnel. He required at least one man to help him get back up the rope ladder. When several minutes had passed by, Chang was getting impatient, and he eventually went back to the camp, Chang got the rest of his men to look for an opening where the river came out of the cavern in the lower valley. He also sent men onto the mountain, for any sign of the westerners.

Hot Springs

Dylan led the way as the trio slowly made their way into the hot-springs tunnel. He used his helmet lamp and checked the magazine on the AK-47 rifle, and noted he only had a few rounds left, and so he selected single fire mode only. The stream flowed gently through the tunnel, and was about a metre wide and only a few centimetres deep at this point. They followed it to where it split into two again. The main stream went left, but the tunnel walls were getting smaller, and looked impassable. The other part of the stream went right, and there was a warm breeze coming from it. The trio chose to go right into the warmer tunnel. After a few minutes the tunnel opened out into a small cave, with just enough room to stand up, but with no visible sign of an exit. The stream then flowed into a small pool, about five metres long and four metres wide. Bubbles of hot air were rising through the water and popping at the surface, as if it was a cauldron of boiling water, it was quite deep and continued under the rock face. The trio stepped out of the stream and looked around the walls for a possible exit. Dylan knelt down and he could see that there was a gap between the surface of the pool water and the ceiling of the rock cave,

enough to keep a man's head out of the water he thought. Brad looked back up the tunnel.

'I can hear someone coming!'

Dylan made his decision.

'We have no choice now. We have to go through there.'

He jumped into the pool and waded under the rock, keeping his head, and the gun out of the water. Jenny took out an elastic band from a pocket and re-fastened her long hair, before replacing her helmet and following. Brad hesitated for a moment, as if undecided what to do, and then he too jumped in. Jenny and Brad followed Dylan, carefully picking their way under the rocky ceiling as they waded through the water. At one point Brad had to hold Jenny up in the water as her feet could not reach the floor. They had travelled about ten metres when the tunnel opened out again to form a larger cave. Dylan got out of the water and helped Jenny and Brad to get out. The air temperature was at least 30°C. They stood for a moment, and used the helmet lamps to scan the area. Brad kept listening for the triads following, but there was no sign. The cavern was about ten metres high, twenty metres wide, and at least thirty metres long. The narrow channel of water they had just come through became much wider. Other streams from porous rock faces around the cave trickled into it, and the sound echoed throughout the cave. The hot springs were more prolific here, and the water was quite warm, giving off a mild smell of sulphur. The channel flowed to the far side of the cave, where it left by another tunnel in the rock face. However, this time there was a soft light coming from it.

Jenny saw the light first and pointed to it.

'That must be the way out.'

She said as she ran along the bank to take a closer look. As she was passing, Dylan grabbed her arm and made her stop.

'Hold it!'

He said quite sternly.

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‘Let’s make sure it’s safe before we go rushing into things. We’ve had too many surprises on this trip for my liking.’ She looked at him and realised he was probably correct.

‘Sorry Dylan!’

The side of the bank they were standing on was flat, but at the far exit there were larger rocks, and mounds. The other bank was higher and quite rocky, the streams dodged their way past the bigger rocks, before falling into the channel. The steep, craggy walls of the cave had one or two tree roots sticking through it. But there was no opening, and no bats, or their telltale droppings. Dylan led the way as the other two, in single file, followed the channel to the far side of the cave. They were within ten metres of the exit when Dylan held up his hand halting their progress. He shone his lamp onto the large rocks ahead, and then onto one of the mounds. By the side of the mounds there was what looked like, tree trunks.

‘Do you see that?’

Dylan quizzed staring into the dim light.

‘See what?’

Brad and Jenny replied in unison as they came alongside him.

‘Is it the triads?’

Brad added. Dylan went on looking intensely at one location.

‘There! That tree trunk next to the mound on the left...it moved’

The trio stood motionless as they watched for any sign of movement from the rocks. Then, next to one of the mounds, a tree trunk moved... and let out a throaty growl. Jenny whispered anxiously.

‘Oh! No! That’s no tree trunk! That’s another of those giant crocs.... Let’s get out of here.’

‘Shoot it! Shoot it!’

Brad pleaded with Dylan.

‘Jenny’s right...Let’s get out of here!’

Dylan took the AK-47 from his shoulder, aimed it at the beast, and then calmly said.

‘No! We can’t risk a shot in here. The noise will echo and the triads will hear it. They can’t be too far away. If I know Chang, he will have men on the outside as well.’

He lowered the rifle and looked around the exit tunnel for alternative ways of escaping. Dylan told Jenny and Brad to go back to the entrance they came in and wait while he reconnoitred the area.

‘Let me know if you hear the triads coming.’

He instructed as he jumped into the water and leaped onto the other bank.

‘Be careful!’

Jenny called in as loud a voice as she could without alerting the beast. Dylan made his way around the outside of the cavern to the opening at the far end, being very careful not to disturb the creatures. As he approached the crocodile, he noticed that there was more than one. As far as he could make out there was about six pairs of eyes glowing back at him as he shone the lamp over them in the half light. Each one was positioned next to a mound, which initially he thought were rocks, but now he could see it was piles of branches and leaves.

‘This is a nest site for those creatures. The warm conditions created by the hot-springs must be ideal for them.’

Dylan thought, as he was careful not to make any sudden movements. He managed to get close to the opposite side of the channel quite easily, as all the creatures seemed to prefer the lower and flatter bank. Just like modern crocodiles the females were guarding their nests, only moving for food or when threatened by predators. Not that they would have many of those, Dylan thought. Manoeuvring over the rocks, he was then able to inspect the exit tunnel, and could see

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that the ceiling was quite high, with smooth walls, as the water had eroded the river bed over several thousands of years. The warm waters running out of the cavern were clear, but he could see one or two crocodiles swimming in and out. When he completed his reconnoitre, Dylan made his way back to the others. When he told them of the nests Jenny said.

‘That makes perfect sense. The temperature in this cave is about 30°C due to the hot-springs; it’s sheltered, humid and would make an excellent nest site.’

Brad interrupted.

‘Well, that’s good to know.’

He continued sarcastically.

‘That’s all we need right now... an alien invasion!’

Dylan tried to make sense of their predicament.

‘I agree...It doesn’t look good. There’s not much chance of getting out that way, without some sort of distraction. And we don’t know how many crocs there are?’

He paused to think for a moment before continuing.

‘Let’s stay at this end for now and try and come up with some sort of plan to get out of here. We’ll wait here until we can be sure the triads are not following us. Then we could go back up to the main cavern.’

Brad and Jenny did not reply as they struggled with the lesser of the two evils. Dylan added.

‘We’ll get onto the opposite bank, which is much higher as they seem to prefer the low, flatter one.’

He then aimed his gun at the channel while Brad and Jenny swam over to the far bank, when they were safe, he followed.

Back at the river tunnel exit, the three triads had found more of the discarded equipment, and made their way down the slope onto the ledge of the river bank. Standing side by side on the ledge, they looked at the river, then looked across at

the far bank for any signs of the westerners. They also saw the steep cliffs with no sign of anyone climbing them. After a few moments talking between themselves, they used the radios to update Chang.

‘Boss! We are at the river coming out of the cavern, but there is no sign of the westerners.’

Chang wanted more information.

‘Waith there until we hear from the others, and stay alert.’

‘OK Boss!’

The two triads following the trio into the hot-springs had reached the smaller cavern, but as they could not see a viable way out, and didn’t want to get too wet, decided the westerners had not escaped that way. They were just about to return to the main cavern when one of them noticed an elastic band on the floor. It had fallen out of Jenny’s pocket as she must have taken two out instead of one, as she tied up her hair. Realising this item was completely out of place, and must therefore belong to the prisoners, the two men jumped into the water. The first man emerged into the larger cavern just as the trio in the other tunnel were discussing the best way out for them. Jenny noticed the movement in the water first, and alerted Dylan immediately because she was afraid it could’ve been a crocodile. She jumped to her feet and pointed to the water.

‘Dylan! Dylan! In the water.... quickly!’

She began to panic, but Dylan held her, and tried to keep her calm.

‘Shhh! Jenny... don’t wake up the creatures... we are safe up here for now.’

Dylan then turned to focus on the water, looking for signs of a crocodile, and trained his gun onto the water. He could see a dark shape coming from inside the tunnel. As the leading triad emerged out of the tunnel into the cave, he could see the rippled reflection of Dylan on the surface of the water, and shot at him. Dylan instinctively leaped for

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cover, as did Brad and Jenny. The triad continued shooting with rapid fire from his semi-automatic weapon until he was clear of the tunnel. He paused for a split second and Dylan used the gap to shoot once into the water. It was a direct hit, killing the man instantly with the bullet piercing his heart. The second triad began shooting from within the tunnel, but began to make his way back to the smaller cave. Dylan was just about to follow to prevent him raising the alarm, when Brad grabbed him by the arm.

‘Stop!’

He said at the top of his voice.

‘Look over there!’

He continued, pointing along the channel, as one of the swimming crocodiles had sensed the blood from the shot triad as soon as it entered the water. It came rushing to them at alarming speed and grabbed the body in its enormous jaws, before turning and heading out into the main river. The crocodiles by their nests had also sensed the blood and were soon diving into the channel to investigate. The second triad had managed to reach the safety of the smaller cavern and leaped out of the water. He saw his colleague being grabbed by something, but he did not know by what. There were many stories about this area which mentioned giant monsters, and he did not want to be the one to experience them first hand. Instead, he ran back to the main cavern, and met up with the others who were searching the river escape route. They had heard the gunfire and came back to the main cavern to investigate. The man who saw the creature drag his friend away was terrified and told the others what he saw.

‘It...it was huge, and a mouth that had thousands of teeth...it ate Ling whole...there was nothing I could do.’ After talking amongst themselves, they decided one of them should go back to the camp and explain to Chang. The others would remain in the cavern in case anyone or

anything came out of the tunnels. Back at the camp, Chang was checking the progress of the search for Dylan and Jenny. The last radio update was to advise him of the river flowing out of the cavern, and the steep cliffs down to the lower valley, but no sign of the escaped prisoners. He walked out of his tent, lit up a cigarette and pondered his options. He really had no need of the prisoners now that they had found the cavern, and the gold must be in there somewhere. After some deliberation Chang decided to bring in his own research team and drilling experts. He was arranging this on the sat-phone when one of his men ran into the camp from the cavern.

‘Boss! ‘Boss!’

The man splurged out as he stood in front of Chang, he was out of breath from the long climb up the rope ladder and running back to the camp.

‘What is it? You fool.’

Chang interrupted his call, holding one hand over the mouth piece of the sat-phone.

‘Can’t you see I am busy?’

‘I am very sorry lord, but I have news of the escaped prisoners from the tunnels.’

The man replied bowing to the floor. Chang concluded his conversation on the sat-phone, switched it off, and kicked the man for interrupting him.

‘What is it about the prisoners?’

He said angrily.

‘Have you found them yet?’

The man managed to stand up again, but kept his head bowed and reported his news.

‘We followed them into the tunnel with the foul-smelling air, and when we chased them into the deep water, Ling Ko was shot by one of them.’

He paused.

‘Yes! Yes!’

Chang urged.

‘But did you kill them?’

‘No boss! Because a giant creature ate Ling, and I escaped and went back into the cavern. By the time the others arrived, the prisoners had fled out into the big river boss. We have lost them.’

The man answered, managing to stimulate the truth a little. Chang did not believe his story.

‘A giant creature? Rubbish... I will not hear of this.’

Chang then picked up a two-way radio from a nearby table and ordered his men on the bank to get out the inflatable dinghy and get it into the river straight away. He turned to the man and ordered him to bring two men from the cavern to join the others by the river. The man set off at once, pleased that Chang didn’t punish him for the creature story. Within a few minutes, Chang’s men were abseiling down the steep cliff walls to the lower bank in the valley. They sent down a motorised, inflatable dinghy to cover the river more quickly. When the dinghy was ready in the river, two triads in the boat began searching every opening, or inlet into the river. There were several small tributaries entering the river, most though, were water simply seeping from fissures in the rock, creating streams and rivulets. But every now and then larger tributaries had created their own tunnels in the rock face, etched out over time. In some of them, they were able to manoeuvre the inflatable right into the mountain. The three other triads patrolled the nearside bank of the valley, again looking for any hole or opening. Their task was made much harder as the terrain was very rough going, with dense foliage, and only the occasional animal track.

The afternoon light was beginning to fade as the dinghy entered one of the larger outlets from the mountain. The channel narrowed as the water flowed out of a tunnel with a high ceiling, and smooth walls. The men slowly took the

dinghy into the tunnel, one man steering at the rear, and the other man at the bow guiding him through. With one hand, he trained the beam of a large heavy-duty flashlight onto the walls and ceiling of the tunnel. In the other hand, he held one of the semi-automatic weapons. The tunnel opened into quite a large cave, and the channel passed right through the middle. One side of the bank was flat with large rocks and boulders quite close to the entrance. The other bank was much higher, with a lot more smaller rocks scattered across the cave. They pulled up to the flatter bank where it sloped down to the water, and was about to get out, when they felt something bump into the underside of the dinghy. With guns at the ready they disembarked, secured the dinghy and stood on the bank, peering into the water. The man with the flashlight scanned the water for several seconds, and satisfied there was nothing there, he turned around....

Dylan, Brad and Jenny were at the far side of the cave discussing their escape plan, when they heard the sound of an outboard motor coming into the cave from the other end. Dylan gestured to the others to stay low and follow him around the perimeter of the cave, using the rocks as cover. They slowly made their way to the other entrance and saw a single flashlight shining into the water from the opposite bank. They watched as they saw the man turn around....

‘Agarh!

The nearest crocodile roared as it attacked the men at lightning speed, heading straight for the one holding the flashlight. The second man turned round to see what the noise was, when the beast was upon his colleague who had no time to react. The beast leapt at him, its massive jaws clamping around his body, as it swept him into the channel, immediately taking him under the water and out of the cave. The other triad could only stare at the horror on the man’s face as he disappeared in a cloud of blood under the surface.

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The flashlight had dropped onto the floor acting as a floodlight on the scene. The second man, on regaining his senses, raised his gun and faced into the cavern, only to see two more crocodiles heading straight for him. He only had time to fire a single burst from his weapon, taking out one of the creatures. It fell a few feet from him still struggling to reach him. He had no time to react to the second beast as it flew at him. It leaped from a slightly raised bank, and clamped its jaws around his head, ripping it right off. His torso fell into the channel with the impact, and with the crocodile on top of him. There was a frenzy of activity as other crocodiles, on smelling the blood, came rushing into the cavern looking for a meal. One of them grabbed the bloody torso and swam out of the cavern, being chased by the others. On the bank the dead crocodile was being torn apart by the other females who had left their nests to join the meal fest. Dylan, Brad and Jenny watched in horror as they witnessed the appalling attack. Dylan however, was thinking quickly, and told the others to get ready.

‘Come on this is our best chance!’

He said standing up and rushing towards the channel. Brad and Jenny followed, but they both wondered why he would want to go anywhere near those beasts. Dylan realised that as the animals were busy feeding out in the main river and on the far bank, it left the unattended dinghy available. If only they could get to it. Jenny stood on the side of the bank and watched as Dylan gave Brad his gun, and then jumped into the channel and swam the few meters across to the dinghy. His heart was in his mouth as he hoped all the beasts were busy, and would ignore him. Brad pointed the gun towards the bank and then the river, looking for any movement, knowing his history with guns was not good. With luck, Dylan reached the dinghy and leapt into it. He ripped the rope from its moorings and started the engine. Steering the dinghy over to Brad and Jenny, they carefully

got into it, not wanting to capsize and end up in the water. When they were all on board, Dylan headed out into the main river as fast as he could.

‘Ping! Whoosh! Ping!’

Bullets ricocheted off rocks, and plunged into the water all around them. Dylan instinctively went into evasive manoeuvres, as more bullets flew around them. The triads searching the lower valley had been alerted by the gunfire from the cavern, and had come closer to investigate. When they saw the trio emerging from the cave, they opened fire. It was only the mist, and the dense foliage along the river bank that prevented the gunmen from getting a clear target. Dylan weaved the dinghy from side to side as they sped down river. Any loose items bounced out of the dinghy, which included a sat-phone and radio the triads used to communicate with. Brad and Jenny clung on as they were tossed about. They were only just able to cling on to the dinghy’s safety ropes fastened to the rim of the craft, and their own backpacks. Brad held on to the AK-47 rifle, but he couldn’t see a target, let alone fire at it. When the river meandered around a bend the firing stopped, but Dylan kept up the pace until he thought they were clear of any threat. They continued on at full speed for another mile downstream. When he was sure they were out of danger Dylan slowed the dinghy down, enabling Brad and Jenny to loosen their grip on the safety ropes. Brad was the first to say something.

‘Geel Dylan... Is your life always like this?’

Dylan was too busy looking on either side of the bank to reply, as he wanted to be sure there were no triads. Jenny added.

‘That was too close for comfort, and whatever else we do from now on...I am not going back into those caves.’

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The daylight had almost gone as Dylan pulled into a sheltered bay on the river. The trio got out, moored up the dinghy and covered it with branches and leaves. They set up camp for the night away from the river. Dylan found a group of large boulders nestled between the trees and made screens out of fallen branches, so they could light a small fire without it being seen. Brad used his new found hunting skills to collect, mushrooms, herbs and berries for a makeshift meal, and ground herb roots, dried by the fire, produced a palatable coffee. Dylan and Brad then took it in turn to keep watch for the triads and the crocodiles as they settled down for the night. Brad asked.

‘Dylan. Do you think the triads will give up on us now? I mean, the Chinese government will be on their way soon, and Chang would not want to deal with them.’

Dylan thought carefully before replying.

‘Maybe. Maybe not... What I do know, is that we have to make as much distance between them and us... While Chang is alive, I am sure he will be more determined than ever to kill us... wherever we are in the world.’

Jenny didn’t like his reasoning.

‘Surely not Dylan! Chang will have too much on his mind to bother with the likes of us... especially when we leave China.’

‘Jenny! You know that the triads have professor Jenkins family as hostages... and they are in the middle of England... They are very determined people, with many contacts in the underworld.’

The team were quiet for most of the night, and tried not to think too much about what Chang would do next.

CHAPTER 11

The Military Arrive

From a military base in Harbin, the first set of Chinese government troops arrived at the Baikalu Shan Mountain Range in one 4X4 vehicle, and two all-terrain military troop carriers. They were to go to the research camp following reports that the team there were viciously attacked. They made very good time in reaching the heavily forested area at the base of the mountain, but it was getting too dark to see clearly, and decided to set up camp for the night. The officer in charge, Lieutenant Li Wang, was ordered to carry out a thorough search of the research camp and the area around the mountain. After that, they were to try and find any surviving geologists, and apprehend the triad gang if possible. They would also make their way over to the helicopter crash site and await further orders, as a Special Forces Unit were to be sent there as soon as possible. The next morning, the troops woke early and made their way to the research camp, where they carried out an initial search of the perimeter. Although they found signs of Chang's vehicle tracks, they did not find the triads or any of the geologists. Then, they began a thorough investigation of the geologist's research camp. As soon as they found the dead triads, and the condition of the bodies, Lieutenant Wang halted his men.

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‘Stop! Go no further! These men were killed by traps, and there could be others close by. Tape off a large perimeter, and then spread out to search slowly, and look for other traps. We must ensure the area is safe before we enter the campsite.’

It took the soldiers at least three hours before the area was declared clear. They found another three, well concealed traps laid out by Dylan, each one was lethal and well prepared. One of them had the remainder of the explosives he took from the camp stores, and had it been triggered, could have killed at least three men. Satisfied that there were no more traps, the soldiers continued to search the grounds around the camp, and discovered the shallow graves of the research team. The officer warned his men.

‘As you can see from the number graves here... this was a very aggressive attack. I want you all to spread out... find as much information as you can about which triad order was behind this appalling crime. Take photographs of any tattoos on the triad’s bodies, and we will send them to HQ.’

After about twenty minutes, one of the soldiers handed a plastic bag with various documents inside. He gave it to the officer in charge.

‘Sir, this was tied to a tree close to the bodies in the graves.’

The officer looked at the contents and realised what they were. He then made a radio call.

‘Harbin HQ - this is Delta patrol team leader – over.’

‘Delta patrol - this is Harbin HQ. Send your message – over.’

‘Harbin HQ - We have reached the research camp site at Baikalu Shan Mountain – over.’

‘Delta patrol – have you found any survivors? – over.’

‘Harbin HQ – Negative! There are no survivors, only shallow graves. Someone must have buried them and

removed all their identities, as they were placed into a plastic bag for us to find. – over.’

‘Delta patrol – We will send other vehicles to collect the bodies... continue your search, and see if there are any tracks to follow – over.’

‘Harbin HQ – Will do – over and out.’

Lieutenant Wang gathered his troops, and began to trace well-worn tracks made by the geologists to the mountain. They soon noticed that the tracks were covered in rocks and debris from the earth tremors, and they could not be certain which way they went. Eventually, they approached one of the tunnels used by the geologists, and noticed immediately that it was completely blocked by rocks and rubble. The officer halted his men.

‘This must have been the tunnel entrance that the geologists used, but from the quantity, and size of rocks that have fallen, means that none of them could have escaped through here.’

A junior officer made a suggestion.

‘Sir, maybe there are other tunnel entrances in the mountain, and we should keep looking.’

The commanding officer thought about the suggestion.

‘We could, but it would take too long... It will be better to let the helicopter reconnoitre the mountain first, then they will guide us to any other tunnels.’

The officer made a call to his HQ.

‘Harbin HQ - this is Delta patrol team leader – over.’

‘Delta patrol - this is Harbin HQ. Send your message – over.’

‘Harbin HQ - We have completed our search of the research camp site, and also the area around Baikalu Shan Mountain, but we did not find the geologists or any triads – over.’

‘Delta patrol – make your way to the helicopter crash site... we will be sending a specialist unit later today – over.’

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‘Harbin HQ from Delta patrol – I will transmit all the video data to you, and head to the crash site – over and out.’ The officer took a number of photographs, and collected many shell cartridges for analysis. They made their way back to the research camp to collect their vehicles, and the officer issued his orders.

‘You two men are to remain here and guard the camp. Take down all the tents and clear the area. When the trucks arrive, load the bodies, equipment and evidence, then return to Harbin HQ.’

The two soldiers saluted and were dismissed, he then turned to his junior officer.

‘Take six men to traverse around the mountain on foot, and look for any signs of the geologists or triads. Keep in radio contact, and meet up with us at the helicopter crash site. If you see any other tunnel entrances, then let me know before you enter them.’

The junior officer saluted, selected his men and prepared to leave the camp. Lieutenant Wang and the rest of his squad, boarded their vehicles and set off towards the helicopter crash site.

Harbin Military Base.

After a long, and noisy flight in the helicopter, Inspector Ning and the special forces unit arrived at Harbin military base. It was early in the morning, and everyone was stiff and a little tired, especially Inspector Yan Ning and his men. When they disembarked, the special forces team leader and Yan, were taken to the commander’s office for a briefing. The commander introduced himself to the inspector.

‘Good morning... I am Colonel Ling Junhui, and you must be Inspector Yan Ning from the anti-terrorist team, and of course, I know Captain Shao very well.’

They shook hands, and Inspector Ning enquired.

‘Yes, colonel... do you have any news of the geologists?’

Colonel Junhui pointed to a large wall map of the area.

‘Not as yet Inspector... We know that the crash site is here, and the research camp is here... We have already deployed men to camp site. We believe that the triads are still on the mountain, or following the river along this route here, but there are many trees in the forest that makes it easy for them to elude any aerial surveillance.’

Captain Shao looked at the map.

‘Colonel, I believe that we will find them a lot quicker when we have boots on the ground.... My men are excellent trackers.’

‘Good to know captain... We have a helicopter on standby ready to take you to the area, and fresh supplies have been added to your kit... When you have refreshed, then please get going and keep me regularly updated.’ With the briefing concluded, the men were given a quick meal before they boarded the helicopter.

At the helicopter crash site, the Harbin military helicopter arrived, and carried out a reconnaissance of the area to ensure there were no triads going to attack them. When it was declared safe, it landed within one hundred metres of the crash site, onto a flat and level ridge. The government special forces unit got out, and carefully set up a secure perimeter. When the ‘all clear’ signal was given, Inspector Yan Ning and his team got out, and Captain Shao approached him.

‘Inspector! My men will head down to the crash site now, and I will let you know by radio, when it is safe for you to begin your search... is there anything we should know before we set off?’

Yan Ning was given a two-way radio, and a radio call sign. He thought carefully before giving Captain Shao a little advice.

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‘Very good captain... However, if this is the work of triads, then watch out for any traps or snipers, as they often sacrifice men to ensure their escape route is safe.’

‘Of course, inspector, I will inform my men... I will call you soon.’

Captain Shao looked through his field glasses, and carefully scanned the area, to ensure everything appeared to be clear before they continued. Very slowly, the soldiers descended to the crash site, and checked every rock, bush and tree for signs of traps or snipers. It took them two hours to complete their initial search before the officer called Yan Ning.

‘Bravo Charlie two to Bravo Charlie three – come in – over.’

‘Bravo Charlie two from Bravo Charlie three – pass your message – over.’

‘Bravo Charlie three – the area has been searched and is all clear... it is safe for you to come down now – over.’

‘Bravo Charlie two – thanks for the all clear... we are on our way to you now – over and out.’

On arrival at the crash site, Inspector Yan Ning and his team were appalled by the damage done to the helicopter. Debris was strewn for more than two hundred metres, and there were no signs of any bodies. They worked all day with the government troops to sift through as much information as possible. Everything was recorded on camera, which was automatically transmitted back to their HQ in Harbin for analysis. When they had completed their search, they followed tracks that appeared to be heading towards the river. However, the sun was setting, and walking through the dark forest was not going to be easy. Instead, the helicopter took off to search the area again, and after a full sweep of the mountain, nothing was found. It was getting too dark to continue, and so the helicopter returned to the mountain

landing zone (LZ) to await further instructions. Inspector Ning and the special forces team, studied the tracks to see which direction the triads were going, then later, he spoke to Captain Shao.

‘My men confirmed that the tracks seem to be heading towards the river, and as soon as it gets lighter, the helicopter should follow the river to see if there are any signs of them, or if they have camped near there.’

Captain Shao took out a map, and the two men studied it closely. The officer pointed to their location and the crash site.

‘We are not far from the river now, and if the helicopter sees anything, then we should be able to send men in the helicopter to cut them off.’

Inspector Ning nodded his approval.

‘If their boss is who I think it is, then he will have taken every precaution so as not to be seen. We must also be careful, because if they have taken the geologists prisoner, then they would have no hesitation in using them to bargain their escape.’

This was something that Captain Shao had not considered, and was pleased to have Inspector Ning with him.

‘Inspector! We will be guided by your knowledge of these men, and between us, we should complete the mission without any casualties.’

‘I agree, but it is going to be very difficult ... please ensure that your men take no risks, and you and I will assess every situation together.’

‘Certainly inspector.’

An hour later, Captain Shao received a call from the officer heading towards them from the research camp site.

‘Bravo-Charlie two, this is Delta patrol – over.’

Captain Shao answered the call.

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‘Delta patrol. This is Bravo-Charlie two – pass your message – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie two, we are heading in your direction from the geologist’s base camp... We found several bodies of the research team, but none of the westerners... We will leave our vehicles at the helicopter crash site. Let me have your exact coordinates, and we will be with you within the hour – over.’

‘Delta patrol, copy that... I am sending our coordinates now – over and out.’

Inspector Ning listened to the call.

‘This is definitely the work of a particularly nasty triad order from Beijing, and the sooner we eliminate them, the better it will be for everyone.’

Captain Shao was pleased that a full deployment of men was at his disposal.

‘More troops are heading this way, and will be able to support us. As we have a lot of ground to cover, and the triads will moving fast if they know we are here.’

All they could do for now, was to eat a hot meal, and get a good night’s sleep. Inspector Ning and his men were given two large military tents, which were erected for them, and foldable camp beds to sleep on. It was sufficient for most of his men, although some complained as to how small they were. Inspector Ning tried to appease them.

‘Stop whinging, and it is better to sleep here than on the ground outside, when all the bugs, scorpions and snakes come out... Ha! Ha!’

One of his men did not realise the dangers of sleeping in the forest.

‘Inspector... you didn’t tell us we would be sleeping outside... I thought we would be in a nice hotel or something.’

Another man replied.

‘Can you see any hotels in this forest.... There are no humans here... only myths and legends about monsters Ha! Ha!’

A shoe was thrown towards the last man, then Inspector Ning calmed them down.

‘Get some sleep everyone... we have a busy day ahead.’

Just before midnight, Delta patrol arrived at the camp, and the officer was greeted by Captain Shao.

‘Good evening. I am Captain Shao of the Special Forces Unit from Beijing.’

The Delta patrol officer saluted, and then introduced himself.

‘Sir, I am Lieutenant Li Wang from Harbin Military HQ. I am pleased to be able to assist you in any way possible.’

‘Very good lieutenant, but for now... get some food and sleep, as it will be a long trek through the forest tomorrow.’

‘Can we use any of the vehicles captain?’

‘No! My men are better at tracking on foot, and I don’t want to miss anything as we search for the triads.... inform your men to be very careful and watchful at all times. The triads we are pursuing are very dangerous, and may set traps or snipers to delay us... Also, we believe they have the western geologists held captive, and we must try to free them. We will lead the way, but keep in radio contact at all times.’

‘Yes sir, Captain Shao.’

Lieutenant Wang ordered his men to set up their tents and make their own fire to cook a hot meal on. Lookouts were posted and the soldiers settled down for the night. However, lurking in the forest, and away from the sentries, two of Chang’s men watched the soldiers. Chang wanted to be kept informed of their location and numbers at all times, and the two men were to follow the troops closely.

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At first light the next day, the troops rose and carried out their ablutions by a cool mountain stream. Breakfast was quickly prepared, eaten and everything stowed away ready for the trek ahead. Captain Shao introduced the inspector.

‘Lieutenant Wang, this is Inspector Ning from the Beijing anti-terrorist and anti-crime unit... he is fully apprised of the situation and is to advise us on the best way to apprehend the criminals.’

Lieutenant Wang saluted, then Inspector Ning shook his hand.

‘I am just a civilian lieutenant... no need to salute me. I must warn you however, that these are a nasty set of criminals, and you and your men must be careful at all times.’

‘Inspector... From what we have seen at the research camp, then I am fully aware of how vicious these people are, and we are ready to do all we can to assist you in capturing them.’

A little while later, the troops resumed to follow the trail of the triads through the forest.

CHAPTER 12

The Tables are Turning

During the previous night, sitting in his tent back at the forest camp site below the bat hole, Chang was informed that the prisoners had escaped from the cavern, and that they had killed more of his men, and stolen the dinghy. Furious, he ordered four of his men to join those on the lower bank to go after them. He then made a call to his men waiting in one of the 4X4's at the main road near the river, ordering them to head up one of the tracks that followed the river, to cut them off at the first opportunity. Chang told them in a sinister voice.

'They have taken the dinghy and will be following the river to the nearest town, and I want them alive. I need to show them who they are dealing with.... But if they resist.... Shoot to kill.... They know too much already and must not live.'

He ended the call, but the sat-phone rang again immediately. Another of Chang's men, who was positioned close to the helicopter crash site, gave him an update.

'Boss! Government troops have arrived in another helicopter, and have landed at the crash site. They have been here all day, but now they are following your tracks.... So be careful.'

Chang cursed heavily in Chinese, kicked over the table, and then ordered his men to look out for them, but knew that

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the forest would be too dangerous to travel through at night. The forest covered a vast area, and he was careful to cover his tracks, and the convoluted route that Dylan had taken them would also add time for the troops to search. He therefore assumed he would have at least thirty-six hours before they reached their camp location. As he ended the call, he stepped out of the tent to speak to his men. Four armed men were just about to set off to join the men in the lower valley when Chang spoke.

‘Government troops will be coming through the upper valley, so watch out for them. Do not let them see you. Stay in the forest and keep away from open ground, as they will be using satellite and helicopters to look for you. Join the others chasing the prisoners... there will be a reward if you catch them alive.’

He continued.

‘The rest of you, make sure all the equipment is sent into the cavern. The mining equipment will be here soon and we must have it in the cavern before nightfall.’

He clapped his hands and the men scurried off. Those remaining in the camp began packing all but the basics for the night. They then lowered tools, explosives and equipment into the cavern while there was still enough daylight. Chang perched himself onto his camp bed, made a call on the sat-phone and spoke with the mining crew boss.

‘Listen carefully... my men will bring you and your equipment to this location... Be sure you have everything you need, and you must avoid any government troops or police... do not stop for anything, and I want you here before nightfall. Do you understand.’

The man replied.

‘Yes Mr Chang... I understand and will not let you down.’

Chang wanted to leave the cavern before the troops arrived, as the last thing he wanted was a gun fight, not to mention

leading them to the cavern, and the gold. Following his phone call, he lay back onto his camp bed and thought of ways to delay or confuse the military chasing them. He also, thumbed through the pages of Jenkins note book, whilst caressing the rock samples containing the gold. Chang had visions of the gold boosting his standing in the triad order, above all his ambitions; respect was the one thing he craved within the order. If there was plenty of gold, then perhaps he could also save a little for his retirement. As he made mental plans for his future, he drifted off into a heavy slumber.

The mining crew made good progress, and arrived mid-afternoon on the upper valley track. Their vehicles were all-terrain vehicles, but much heavier than Chang's 4X4 vehicles and they had to find an alternative route to the cavern. It added another two hours to their journey which was a slow and arduous task, but eventually they arrived. By late afternoon Chang's men were busy lowering the new mining equipment into the cavern and stowing it out of sight. When the work was completed, they covered the entrance of the cavern with heavy branches and leaves, and headed back to camp, caring little for the welfare of the bats. The camp was quickly packed up, and made sure that there was very little trace of them being there. It was dark by the time they reached the vehicles on the upper track, but they were soon heading towards the main road and away from the mountain. Chang's spies, who were constantly watching the government troops, kept him updated, which allowed him to escape safely away from them.

Government troops.

Inspector Ning, and the government troops took their time to follow Chang's tracks through the forest and along the river bank. The helicopter made several reconnaissance

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flights, but had to return to Harbin HQ to refuel several times. Satellite images were also available, and on one occasion a report was given to the officer in charge.

‘Harbin HQ to Bravo-Charlie Two – are you receiving - over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie two to Harbin HQ – receiving you loud and clear – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie two - It is strange, but the signals we are getting from your positions, show that you keep deviating from what should be, a straightforward path through the mountain valley. Are you sure that you are following their tracks correctly – over.’

Captain Shao looked at his field map before replying.

‘Harbin HQ, this is Bravo-Charlie Two – I agree with you, but we have to follow the same route the triads had taken or we might lose the trail completely – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie Two from Harbin HQ – understand... we just wanted you to know.... Keep us updated – over and out.’

Inspector Ning was listening to the communication.

‘Captain Shao, this seems to be a deliberate ploy either by the triads themselves, or it is possible that one of the geologists is trying to delay them for some reason.... Who was the designated field leader for them?’

Captain Shao looked at his notebook before replying.

‘Ah! The expedition field leader is Captain Dylan Masters, and he was a former British Army SAS officer.... It could be his doing.’

Inspector Ning thought carefully.

‘You could be right, but I just do not trust the triad leaders at all... We should keep following the trail and see where it leads us, and hopefully Captain Masters will delay them enough for us to get to them.’

‘I agree Inspector.’

The troops made slow progress as they followed the tracks, and collected evidence along the way, which was mostly discarded cigarettes, and litter. They were looking for anything that could be used to capture the triads and ensure the geologists were rescued unharmed. At the moment though, Chang seemed to be one step ahead of them at all times.

Rapids.

Cupped hands were placed over the mouths of Brad and Jenny as they slept in the early hours of the morning. They opened their eyes to see Dylan whispering for them to remain silent.

‘Shhh!’

They quickly responded and rose out of the shelter into the early morning mist as Dylan, using mostly sign language, informed them that there were Chinese voices only a few metres away. They gathered all their belongings and quietly crept up to the dinghy, uncovered it and pushed it into the river. The dinghy was then allowed to float downstream with the current so they did not have to use the engine. The morning light was clear, as the sun quickly burnt away any early morning mist, and eventually warmed up the cool air. The dinghy continued to float downstream with Brad steering, as Dylan looked at his map. Jenny sat in the dinghy re-tying her hair and poking it under her hat. Dylan looked up from his map and declared.

‘We must be getting close to the waterfalls we saw a few days ago... Those preventing the crocodiles from moving out of the valley.’

He paused looked at his map again, and continued.

‘We should cross over to the north bank of the river and head over the mountain to avoid capture. We have to warn

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the authorities of Jenkins captive family... now they are no longer needed, they will be killed.'

He then pointed to a small inlet on the north bank and Brad headed the dinghy into it. They got within ten feet of the bank, when the propellor and steering link got caught up in a submerged tree branch. The dinghy swung about wildly, and the motor engine stopped dead. Brad tried several times to restart it, but failed. Dylan looked for any oars in the dinghy, but there were none.

'Everyone! Use your hands to paddle on one side of the dinghy, and try to get to the river bank, but it was of no use, as the current was getting stronger. As the dinghy was pulled further downstream, it began to gather pace, and the water changed from a steady flow to fast-flowing. The dinghy was forced into the middle of the river, and the group were not able to control it. Faster and faster the rapids continued, until eventually they heard a distant roar from a large waterfall up ahead. Jenny was worried.

'Dylan! The waterfall is just up ahead, and if we don't get to the river bank soon... then.'

She did not have time to finish as Brad pointed at something and shouted.

'Dylan! Look! Up ahead.... There is a large overhanging tree... If we can get a rope over it then we might stop the dinghy.'

Dylan was one step ahead of him, and had already taken off his heavy boot and fastened a rope to it. As they approached the tree, he gave Brad his instructions.

'Brad! Loop the other end of the rope through the dinghy safety ropes and hang on to it... I will throw my end over the tree bough and try to loop it around several times.'

Brad understood, but Jenny was not sure.

'Dylan! Please do more than try!... Or we are dead.'

As they approached the overhanging tree bough, Dylan swung the booted rope in a circle, lasso style, as fast as he

could. He hoped the weight of his heavy boot would give it enough momentum to swing around the bough several times, and to give them enough purchase to stop the dinghy from heading over the falls. The dinghy arrived at the tree very quickly, and Dylan launched his booted rope at it. The boot swung around the tree bough and wrapped itself around the rope, and held firm. Meanwhile, Brad had pulled the slack rope through the dinghy safety ropes and he and Jenny pulled back as hard as they could. It worked, the dinghy stopped, and the current forced the dinghy towards the river bank. However, the dinghy was bouncing about all over, as the force of the rapids tried to dislodge it from its anchor point, making it difficult for the occupants to get off. Dylan though, was able to leap onto the bank and grabbed the rope end from Brad. He then tied it around the tree and the dinghy was secured. The trio got out and lay exhausted on the damp, but safe grass. Jenny looked up at the sky and cried out wearily.

‘Dylan.... we have to stop doing this.’

Dylan understood her meaning, Brad didn’t.

‘Stop doing what? Jenny!’

Dylan laughed, as he saw the funny side of most things.

‘Ha! She means that we should stop putting ourselves in danger in the first place.’

Jenny added.

‘Yes! We got away with that one by the skin of our teeth, and I like my teeth.’

Brad laughed as he understood.

‘Life is certainly interesting when Dylan is around... I will give you that.’

Although, the noise of the rapids was loud, Dylan stood up and searched the skies.

‘Can you hear that?’

The other two stood up and strained their ears to focus above the noisy rapids.

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‘Hear what?’

Dylan focused on the noise and then pointed to a gap in the clouds.

‘There! There! Look! A helicopter...it must be looking for us.’

The three of them began to wave their arms and shouted, but it was of no use, as the helicopter did not come close enough to see them, and it faded into the distance. Jenny was very disillusioned.

‘It’s just one thing after another... we are never going to get out of here.’

Dylan placed a reassuring arm around her.

‘Don’t be downhearted Jenny... Think positive. As far as I am concerned, it means that the Chinese government are still looking for us... I also think that if they are using helicopters, then they will have deployed soldiers on the ground to search for us too.’

Brad added pessimistically.

‘Yes Dylan, but they will also be looking for Chang and his thugs... He wants us killed as soon as possible, and it’s just a question of who gets to us first.’

Dylan ignored him, and pulled the dinghy as far onto the river bank as possible, Brad climbed up the tree to free the rope and give Dylan his boot back. They covered the dinghy with leaves and branches, then Dylan assessed their position.

‘Baikalu Shan mountain is over there, and we will head for the cover of the forest as we climb. It is getting dark now, so, we should set up camp.’

When they found a suitable place for the night, Jenny started a fire and Brad caught some fish from the river using one of Dylan’s wooden spear techniques. Dylan went on a perimeter check, before they all sat and ate a hot meal, including the last of the beans. They boiled water in the empty bean tin, to share hot coffee from the left-over dried roots. After the meal, they sat and discussed the best route

and tactics to avoid the triads, who Dylan believed were still on their tail. He spread out the map on the floor and pointed to their position.

‘We are here by this river, and the mountain is there.’
He slowly traced his finger over the map.

‘We will climb over the mountain’s north side and head for the town of Jintao or Mohe where we landed when we first arrived. When we get there, we will head straight for the authorities. Are there any questions?’
There was a pause, and Jenny said.

‘That looks a long way Dylan, especially after the mountain, it could take days.’
Dylan smiled and pointed to tracks on the map.

‘These tracks are railway lines, and they are used by logging companies who take their lumber to the nearest town by train. We will hitch a ride, and once we are in the town, we will get a taxi to the authorities.’
Brad interrupted with a grin.

‘The way you explain it Dylan... **it should be simple!**’
Dylan replied with a hint of caution in his voice.

‘Until we come up with a better plan, we’ll use this one for now.’
He then folded up the map and placed it into his trouser leg pocket. He looked at their tired faces.

‘Now, get some sleep, as I want you to be ready for another tough day tomorrow.’

Janney yawned and stretched before trying to make herself as comfortable as possible. Brad saw how strong and determined Dylan looked.

‘Dylan? Is this the sort of stuff you trained for when you were on active duty with the special forces team?’
Dylan smiled.

‘Sort of, but the only difference was ... that I was with guys that were trained for it, which made everything much easier.’

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Brad and Jenny laughed, as they realised that they were holding him up because of their inexperience. Brad checked what mountaineering equipment he had in his pack, before he went to sleep. There was only one rope, and half a dozen carabineers, but he didn't think there would be too many problems as the mountain did not seem to be that dangerous to climb.

Next day, after they had eaten some wild berries for breakfast, they filled their only water bottle, and cleared the camp. Dylan was careful not to leave a trail, and spent an hour covering their tracks. A short while later they headed towards the foot of the mountain. At 1400 feet, Baikalu Shan is not one of the biggest mountains in the Da Hinggan Ling range, but it covered a large area to traverse around. There was a thick carpet of forest right up to the 1000-foot level, but the remainder was a steep and rocky climb after that. Dylan wanted to use the elevated levels to confuse and confound the triads to impede their progress. At the same time, he did not want to be exposed on the higher levels where they could easily be seen. The plan was to use the very edge of the forest at the 1000-foot level to skirt around the mountain and head for the logging trains. They slowly picked their way through the forest as it climbed the lower levels of the mountain. The colours were amazing, as the greens of summer were turning to red and gold of early autumn. There was only one ravine which gave them a problem, where they had to use the rope to traverse it. Brad took great pleasure in showing off his skills as he took charge of the climb. By the time they reached the 1000-foot level it was midday, and they decided to rest while Dylan checked the area further up the exposed mountain. He climbed out of the forest and up onto a narrow ledge which gave him a perfect view of the valley below. He could see parts of the river they had left, as it passed in and out of

gaps in the forest. Farther over to the north side of the mountain he could see smoke rising from, what appeared to be, a logger's cabin.

'There could be a rail track there too.'

He thought, and estimated it would take them about two hours to reach it. There were no signs of the triads, but he knew how sneaky they were, and he was determined not to be taken by surprise. Dylan returned to the others and found them drinking fresh water out of a nearby mountain stream. The sun shone in the clear sky, and felt warm and soothing as Dylan, Brad and Jenny sprawled out on a small, exposed grassy slope to rest. The air on the edge of the forest felt cleaner and fresher from that of the damp, earthy forest floor below. They were beginning to enjoy the break when Dylan jumped to his feet.

'Come on you two! This is not a picnic, there's a logger's cabin not too far from here and there could be a rail track nearby.'

That was the best news of the day so far for Jenny and Brad, and they leaped to their feet with a spring. As they stealthily, approached the logger's cabin, Dylan told Jenny and Brad to wait out of sight, while he went closer for a better look. He took the higher ground and found a position from which he could see all the activities. The cabin was small, used mostly for shelter, with a plume of smoke emanating from the little chimney pot on the roof. Another flatter, building was positioned nearby, with open sides. Men were busy slicing branches off freshly cut trees using chain saws and axes. Then, the logs were lifted onto a large belt driven circular saw in the middle of the building and sawn to specific lengths. Positioned next to a single railway track were piles of recently sawn logs ready for shipment. There was no train, but with the amount of timber there, suggested that it wouldn't be long before one came. Dylan returned to the

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others and gave them an update, and they decided to wait for the next train. Brad enquired.

‘Do you think they would have a telephone at the cabin?’ Dylan replied.

‘I doubt it. The people in these remote areas are still fairly primitive, with only basic facilities if that.’

The logging camp was manned by only five workmen, who lived and worked for up to a month at a time in the small squalid facilities of the cabin. A clear mountain stream flowed past it, which provided for all their needs, and they brought food and fuel for their shift. They also trapped rabbits, and collected wild vegetation for extra food. The logs were loaded onto wagons using an old diesel driven crane, as there was no electricity in the camp. Even the main circular saw was belt driven from an old diesel tractor, but it worked and the workmen knew how to maintain it. About an hour later an old steam driven shunting train made its way through the clearing, where the rail track ran parallel with a dusty road track. The train pulled up in front of the crane, and the workforce began loading logs onto seven flat wagons. It took about thirty minutes for each wagon to be loaded and tied down with chains. Dylan made his decision.

‘We will head towards the last wagon, furthest away from the engine, where we would least be seen.... Just stay close to me at all times.’

This was the first wagon to be loaded, and they waited until they men were on the last one nearest the train, before they made their move. They were within twenty metres of the wagon when a cloud dust through the clearing appeared, and out of it emerged a 4X4 wagon with three triads in it. They were searching every logging camp in the area for Dylan and Jenny, but due to the size of the forest they had to split up into several smaller, but well-armed groups. As the vehicle pulled up alongside the train, the lead guy spoke to the workforce to ask if they had seen any strangers. As they did

not believe them when the logging men said they hadn't seen anyone, the triads carried out a detailed search of the camp. Dylan, Jenny and Brad were hiding behind a pile of reject logs, tethered to the hillside, that were to be used as fuel for the train engines. Dylan watched carefully, and noticed two of the triads heading up the hill towards them. He pressed himself back into the cover of the logs alongside Brad and Jenny, and whispered to them.

'Stay as low as possible... and don't move.'

He looked at the securing pins holding the logs in place and checked where the triads were. Dylan gave Brad a hand signal and both of them stood up, grabbed a large, thick branch from the floor and levered the securing pins out of the ground. The triads heard a rumble, as they looked up, and saw a huge pile of logs crashing towards them. There was no escape as the heavy logs rolled down the hill and trampled them. Muffled cries could be heard from the men as the crunch of bones from broken legs, arms, backs and necks echoed through the roar of the falling timber. Dylan immediately ran out, grabbed one of the dead triad's weapons, and headed towards the train, looking for the third triad, but he was too late. The man had seen the carnage, spotted Dylan coming at him with his gun, and leapt into the vehicle. A screech of tyres spun the vehicle around, as he headed back down the track. Dylan fired a couple of rounds at him, but the man got away. Brad picked up the other gun from the dead triad, along with two spare magazines, and joined Dylan. He beckoned Jenny to climb on board the train, then ran over to the train driver and pointed the gun at him, gesturing him to get the train moving. The workforce stood, stunned with all the activity, and did not move until the engine had disappeared into the forest. Dylan remained in the engine cab with the driver and his fireman, as the train slowly made its way through the forest. Brad and Jenny sat on the wagon next to the engine, and tried to make

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themselves comfortable. Jenny asked the driver where the train was headed, and he told her it was going to the main logging depot in Mohe. Dylan was pleased, as this was one of the towns he had planned to reach. As the escaping triad drove down the track to the main road, he used his two-way radio to alert Chang of his encounter with the escaped prisoners. When he received the call, Chang and his men were waiting in a hotel in Yuying Town to the east of Mohe City. He spread a map out and checked the coordinates given by the man and traced the rail track to Mohe. He then made a couple of calls on the sat-phone and ordered his men to get the vehicles ready. As they set off to Mohe, he ordered more men to meet him at the railway depot.

‘They won’t get away this time.’

He said with a grisly sneer to himself.

Government troops.

Inspector Ning and Captain Shao eventually found Chang’s camp site in the forest. It seemed to be deserted, however, before they went into the camp, the special forces squad stealthily crept around the camp site looking for any sight or sign of the triads. Although Chang’s men tried to completely clear any sign of their camp, the special forces team were meticulous in their search, and easily found traces of the camp. Captain Shao radioed in.

‘Bravo-Charlie two to Harbin HQ – come in – over.’

There was a pause before someone replied.

‘Harbin HQ to Bravo-Charlie two – receiving you loud and clear. – over.’

‘Harbin HQ – We have found the triads camp in the forest, but they have gone – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie two – continue your search of the mountain, and we will continue to send a helicopter to assist you – over and out.’

Captain Shao discussed their options with Inspector Ning.

‘HQ wants us to keep searching the mountain, but I would have thought that they would have left the area by now.’

‘I agree captain, but it all depends if they have the geologists held as prisoners, or if they are chasing them... either way, we should follow their tracks, and hope to get a sighting of them soon.’

The troops continued searching the area for another two hours until they found Chang’s vehicle tracks leading away from the mountain. Inspector Ning assessed the situation.

‘This makes much more sense, and I think they are chasing the geologists... I believe that Captain Master’s is doing his best to evade them... but I wonder which way he would be heading.’

Captain Shao seemed confused.

‘Why are they chasing the geologists? If nothing of value was found on the mountain, then they would have no further use for them.’

Inspector Ning smiled at the naivety of the officer.

‘Captain, the triads do not like loose ends, and if the geologists have seen their leader, then he will do whatever it takes to kill them.... That is why we must reach the geologists before the triads get to them.’

‘I understand now Inspector... Let us hope that we get a sighting soon of their direction.’

They spread their map out on the ground and Captain Shao pointed to their current location.

‘We are here Inspector.’

Inspector Ning looked at the map closely, and pointed to some icons on the map.

‘What are these captain?’

Captain Shao checked the list of icons on the side of the map.

‘According to this... they are logging camps, and they are positioned by the side of rail tracks to take timber from the camp to the nearest woodyard.’

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Inspector Ning grinned.

‘Of course, that is where Captain Masters is taking the geologists.’

Captain Shao wanted to know more.

‘What do you mean exactly inspector?’

Ning gathered his thoughts before explaining.

‘The quickest way to get from the mountain to the nearest city, would be by vehicle... a car or truck. However, as they are being chased by triads, Captain Masters is heading for the logging camps in the hope that a train is either there, or due to arrive. Then they will try to reach the authorities.’

Captain Shao understood.

‘Then we should get the helicopter to head to the logging camp and hope they can find the geologists before the triads do.’

‘Yes, captain.’

Captain Shao wasted no time in reporting their decision.

‘Bravo-Charlie two to Harbin HQ – come in – over.’

There was a pause before someone replied.

‘Harbin HQ to Bravo-Charlie two – receiving you loud and clear. – over.’

‘Harbin HQ – We believe that the geologists may be heading for one of the logging camps... Can you send a helicopter to reconnoitre them? I am sending you the coordinates now – over.’

‘Harbin HQ to Bravo-Charlie two – copy that, and we will keep you updated – over and out.’

The government troops made their way towards the nearest logging camp, and soon heard the unique sound of helicopter rotor blades. Through a slight gap in the forest canopy, they saw the helicopter pass by, and it was heading towards the same logging camp. After completing several passes of the camp, the helicopter deemed it safe to land in a clearing by the sawmills. The pilot reported to Captain Shao as he had seen them heading to the same camp.

‘Bravo-Charlie one to Bravo-Charlie two – are you receiving? – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie one this is Bravo-Charlie two – receiving you loud and clear – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie two – we have checked out the logging camp nearest you, and there are no signs of the geologists or the triads... We can see workmen there and will land to check it out further – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie one – Copy that – We should be there in about two hours – over and out -.’

The helicopter landed at the logging camp and the co-pilot moved to a quieter area in order to speak to the workmen.

‘Have you seen any westerners here?’

The man appeared to be shaking as he had never had so much activity before.

‘I... We... did see westerner’s ...and men with big guns came too... there was a lot of shooting... We all hid.... the westerners jumped onto the train to Mohe. Two of the men were killed when the logs fell on them Look... I show you.’

The man showed the co-pilot the bodies, which were still laid where they were crushed by the logs released by Dylan and Brad. The co-pilot had to reassure the man.

‘Don’t worry... government troops will be here soon and they will take care of everything... Just leave the bodies where they are, and they will be dealt with later.... We will leave now, but others will be coming to talk to you.’

The man was still shaking as the helicopter took off. The co-pilot contacted Captain Shao.

‘Bravo-Charlie one to Bravo-Charlie two – come in – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie two – receiving you – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie two – we have been to the logging camp, and the westerners were there, but have jumped onto the logging train going to Mohe city... They also killed two of

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the triads... you will find their bodies at the logging camp... we are going to try and locate the train for you – over.’

‘Copy that, we will be at the logging camp within the hour – over and out.’

Inspector Ning heard the report.

‘I am getting to like Captain Masters very much, and he seems to be able to handle himself in difficult situations. Hopefully, the helicopter will stop the logging train before it gets to Mohe. Then they can wait for us.’

‘I agree inspector, the sooner we have the westerners under our protection the better.’

The helicopter followed the rail track as it weaved in and out of the forest, but there were too many trees to catch sight of the train. Eventually, as they were running low on fuel, they had to return to Harbin, and the pilot notified captain Shao,

‘Bravo-Charlie one to Bravo-Charlie two – are you receiving me – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie one from Bravo-Charlie two – receiving you loud and clear – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie two – we could not find the logging train as there is too much dense forest... We are running low on fuel and must return to base – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie one – copy that... let me know when you return – over and out.’

Captain Shao informed Inspector Ning, who was very disappointed.

‘That is not the outcome I wanted captain... It means that when the westerners get into Mohe, the triad gang could be waiting for them. Order the men guarding your vehicles to head for Mohe city to try and intercept the westerners before the triads do. Another vehicle can come and pick us up...we must get to Mohe as soon as possible.’

Captain Shao contacted his men at the vehicles and they set off, but they thought it would take two or three hours before they got to Mohe city. Inspector Ning assessed the situation.

‘It all depends where the triads are located now.... Mohe seems to be a good city for them to hold up, and I would almost guarantee that is where they are now.’

Captain Shao tried to be positive about Dylan’s abilities.

‘Inspector, I would think that Captain Masters would have thought the same as you, and hopefully, taken evasive action.’

CHAPTER 13

The Chase.

Later that afternoon, the log train slowly pulled into Mohe railway depot to unload its cargo. It had no sooner stopped when a dozen heavily armed men came rushing out of four vehicles. They swarmed all over the train, and interrogated the terrified driver and fireman, who immediately told them what they wanted to know.

‘The westerners jumped off the train at the last bend, outside of town.’

The triads threatened the crew not to inform the police, or they would come back and kill them and their families. The gang then ran back to their vehicles and sped off out of town. They followed the rail track for several miles, checking every road and track nearby, but could not find them. The four vehicles split up to cover more ground, agreeing to wait until nightfall before informing Chang.

Dylan had already planned not to go into the train depot, as he guessed the fleeing triad at the logging camp would inform Chang as soon as possible. Instead, they jumped off the train as it slowed round a bend to walking pace. At this point they were well clear of the forest, and the land was mostly covered in rice fields, with only a few farmer’s shacks dotted about. The town of Mohe was only a mile or so away,

and they quickly found themselves on the main road into it, though Dylan was not too happy about being so exposed.

‘We’re a bit too conspicuous out here, so I think we ought to get out of the way until it gets darker, and then go into town.’

They went off the road to one of the small shacks, and as the door was not locked, they entered. The shack was empty with only a small table, and a single chair. In one corner was a pile of badly maintained farming tools, hoes, rakes, shovels etc. There was no food or water, and the air was musty with an earthy dampness creeping through it. Jenny was not enamoured with the place.

‘This place is awful, and I cannot stay here... I would rather sleep outside.’

Dylan reassured her.

‘Jenny, we are not sleeping here, only waiting until nightfall, then we can go into Mohe. Maybe we can find a hotel room.’

His words seemed to calm her, and they made themselves as comfortable as possible and waited until dark. After only a few minutes of entering the shack, the triads, who had raced out of the town in a convoy of four vehicles, went flying past the main road near the shack. Dylan heard the vehicles, which confirmed his fears that the triads were still after them. Brad was worried.

‘Why are they still chasing us... They know where the gold is.’

Dylan tried to make sense of it.

‘We can identify their leader for one thing, and I know the triads don’t like leaving any loose ends.’

Jenny laughed.

‘So, is that what we are? A loose end?’

Dylan smiled, and was pleased that they had a little humour left, as he knew they would need to be strong to survive the ordeal. When it was dark enough, Dylan led them out of the

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shack and headed for the town. Every time they heard a vehicle, they dodged into the shadows, fearing it might be the triads. It only took them about twenty minutes until they reached the town, and soon they were walking down the main street.

The city of Mohe is part of Mohe County: It is often referred to as the 'Village of Northern-Pole' it is the only place in China to enjoy polar day and pole light night, and is popular with tourists wishing to see the Aurora Borealis, 'northern lights.' The China-Russian cross-border river Heilongjiang River rises from Mohe. This area is known as the 'Gold Path' which is said to be the way where gold was transported in ancient times. Yanzhizhou is the famous gold production base where tourists can experience the gold rush by themselves.

Mohe City.

Eventually, the trio came across a small taxi cab office just off the town centre, and Jenny asked one of the two drivers to take them to the nearest police station. The man looked a little warily at the strangers, but agreed to take them when Dylan showed him some cash. They set off in a small, battered saloon car with Brad and Dylan in the back and Jenny up front translating to the driver. They did not get many European foreigners this far north at that time of year, and his curiosity was keen to know why. Jenny was happy to tell him a made-up story about a hiking trip, and seeing the northern lights. Suddenly, a 4X4 vehicle came rushing past them on the other side of the road. It was the triad gang looking for them. Dylan watched as he saw the vehicle screech to a halt on the dusty main road, and then spin round to give chase when they saw their European faces. He yelled at Jenny to get the driver to take the next turning to try and lose them. The nervous driver did as he was asked, and he watched through his mirrors as the triads gave chase, creating a cloud of dust as their wheels ripped up the dusty

road. Jenny translated more of Dylan's orders and the taxi swerved round the next couple of corners. After a while the driver, who was about sixty years old and had lived in Mohe all his life, realised what was going on and explained to Jenny that he knew all the streets, houses, and shortcuts in the town.

'Step on it!'

Dylan urged, noticing the triads gaining on them. Brad took out one of the rifles, that they kept concealed, which alarmed the driver more. Dylan stopped him from firing the weapon.

'Don't Brad... You could easily hit an innocent person.' However, the driver was not at all scared. He had seen many American movies with car chases and had always wanted to be in one. He pressed the pedal to the floor, and the little car backfired, then shot off around yet another corner. Shots were fired from the pursuing vehicles, and the few people who were out in the evening scattered for cover. Corner after corner the chase went on, down alleyways and side roads. They even went through a large, derelict warehouse, as they weaved around the supporting columns of the building. The little Chinese driver was having a great time, and couldn't stop laughing.

'Bruce Willis!... James Bond... Great movies.'

Jenny translated as the driver sped through the streets. Dylan though soon realised they were not going to lose them in the little car, and looked around for other options. At one point they passed the railway station, and he noticed a mainline passenger train was pulling in.

'That train... it could be our best chance.'

Dylan said to Jenny.

'You two get out when I tell you, and make for the train. I will take the triads away from the station, and see you later.'

'But what about you?'

Jenny replied.

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‘What if they catch you?’

Dylan added.

‘Don’t worry about me.... I’ll lose them.’

He patted the driver on the shoulder and the man seemed to understand what he wanted. At the last minute, the little taxi pulled into another side street, giving the triads no time to react, and they sped past the turning. Dylan gave the order to stop the car, telling Jenny and Brad to take cover as soon as they got out. The car screeched to a halt, Jenny and Brad grabbed their backpacks, flew out of the car and ran behind a row of bins. Jenny had told the driver what was happening, and then pushed a load of cash into his hand. He raced off again as soon as they were out of the vehicle. Dylan climbed into the front seat and directed the driver using hand signals. The triads were quickly in pursuit again as the chase continued.

Dylan directed the driver away from the station and waited until it was his turn to jump out. He fired a couple of shots at his pursuers which made them weave to one side, giving him a few extra seconds. The driver knew instinctively what he wanted and turned into a couple of narrow side streets which were very tight. He zigzagged through the streets until he could no longer see the pursuing vehicles, then he stopped, waved to Dylan to go, and set off again. Dylan leaped out of the taxi and dived behind a crate full of chickens in a doorway. Seconds later the triads went flying by in hot pursuit of the taxi.

‘It worked!’

Dylan muttered. He then quickly made his way towards the railway station, and he arrived on the edge of the station just as the mainline train was leaving. He ran across the road towards the train as it began to gather speed. Jenny and Brad looked out of a carriage window and frantically waved their arms beckoning him to make it. Dylan managed to jump

onto the steps of the last carriage as the train pulled away from the town. The trio were reunited in the last carriage and sat down at one of the empty tables. There was plenty of room, as the train was more than half empty. Dylan looked through the window to see the taxi still being chased by the gunmen.

A few moments later the train ticket collector came along the carriage, and approached the trio.

‘Tickets please!’

He said in Chinese, looking at the dishevelled state the strange westerners were in, and then glanced at the gun Dylan was trying to hide.

‘Where does the train go to?’

Jenny asked as she tried to make herself presentable.

‘Train go to Harbin.’

The ticket collector said in broken English.

‘What you do here, with that?’

He said, pointing to the gun.

‘Gun not allowed on train...not in rules!’

He continued in an assertive voice, waving his arms wildly.

Jenny continued the conversation in Chinese, and tried to calm him.

‘We are being chased by triad gangsters...They are trying to kill us...We must get to the police.... Do you have a telephone?’

The ticket collector paused, and looked at them up and down again and pleaded.

‘You not make trouble on train...Can use phone... Must leave train very quickly.’

He then handed Jenny a mobile phone and she dialled one of her memorized, emergency numbers the expedition team were given. She rang the British Embassy in Beijing. The phone rang for what seemed like an eternity as they all watched Jenny’s face for a reaction when someone

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answered. Eventually a man spoke with a plum English accent.

‘Hello. This is the British Embassy in Beijing. How may I help you?’

Jenny informed the man of their dilemma and asked to be put through to the expedition liaison officer based in the embassy. Again, she waited for ages before a reply came.

‘Hello. This is James Thornton speaking...Is that you, Jenny?’

Jenny answered.

‘Yes, yes James. It’s me.... Oh God! Thank goodness.’ Her voice was shaking as she almost broke down into a flood of tears, relieved to be speaking to someone on their side at last. Jenny gave James a brief outline of their problem, and that he must contact the UK police to release Jenkins family as soon as possible.

‘James! Professor Jenkins is dead... I will explain all later, but Chinese triads have been holding the professor’s family hostage for a long time, and could kill them soon if they find out that the professor is dead. Please help them.’

James tried to calm Jenny down.

‘Yes! Yes! Of course, Jenny... leave that to me. Just keep safe. I have been informed that government soldiers are heading to Mohe now... They having been looking for you since they found the helicopter crash site... they are trying to catch up with you, and using another helicopter to find you.’

Jenny gave James an update of the situation and an estimate of their arrival.

‘We cannot stay in Mohe, as the triads are there looking for us... we are on the Mohe to Harbin train now, and hopefully, we will be in Harbin in about...’

She paused and looked at the ticket collector, who told her the exact arrival time, which she mentally converted.

‘It will take about sixteen hours to get to Harbin.’

James was already making notes to advise the authorities.

‘Jenny, we will do all we can to keep you safe, and the authorities will try to get to you before the triads... I will contact you later.’

James advised her to stay on the train and they would be met by the police in Harbin. He also told her they would contact the UK authorities immediately with regards to Professor Jenkin’s family. The conversation ended and Jenny told Dylan and Brad what was happening. She handed the phone back to the ticket collector, and offered to pay for the tickets.

‘No! No! No! not pay tickets.... You get off next station... Not want trouble.’

The ticket collector was insistent, and he turned to walk back up the carriage, then Jenny grabbed his arm, and spoke in Chinese.

‘We are going to stay on this train to Harbin... We are to meet the police there... It will be alright.’

He turned round to continue his refusal, when he noticed Dylan had raised the gun, and reset the weapon. He gulped, said nothing and scurried through to the other carriages.

Jenny noticed his sudden loss of frustration and turned to see Dylan with the gun.

‘Dylan! We don’t need any more trouble.’

She said scornfully, then ran after the ticket collector pleading in her best Chinese. When she came back, she said.

‘He’s not happy, but I’ve managed to convince him. I had to pay double for the tickets, and if we cause any more trouble... we have to get off. The good news is that we each have a sleeping berth, the soft ones not the hard ones. They are in the next carriage.’

Dylan looked up at Jenny.

‘We’re staying on this train if he likes it or not.’

He said, lowering the weapon. Brad got up and headed towards the other carriage.

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‘I agree with Dylan, we’ve got to get to the city. So, we have to do whatever it takes to stay on this train.’

His face was angry, and was tired of running and hiding.

Jenny realised she was outnumbered, but she did not want to cause any suffering to innocent bystanders.

‘OK! But let’s not become the same as them, and hurt people to get our own way.’

The other passengers in their carriage, at the sight of the gun, had left to go into the other coaches further down the train. The trio were very tired and decided to relax and make themselves comfortable, as they realised it was going to be a long journey. They stretched out in the berths, and tried to sleep. Dylan though, couldn’t, as he knew the triads would not give up.

Back in Mohe.

The triad gang were still chasing the taxi, when the government troops came speeding into the town. However, the gang did not give up, and they eventually trapped him in a narrow street with a vehicle at each end. With nowhere to escape to, the taxi driver was dragged out of his seat and pinned him against the side of the car. The nozzle of a gun was thrust under his chin, and they threatened to blow his head off if he didn’t tell them where they had gone. Scared for his life, the taxi driver told them what he knew.

‘They made me help them.... Please! I have a family... I think they got onto a train, but I am not sure.’

The triads were just about to shoot him when troops saw them and fired a couple of warning shots, then began to deploy the men as quickly as they could. Local police were also arriving at the scene, and not wanting to be delayed any longer, they threw the taxi driver to the floor, jumped into their vehicles and sped out of town. They were not looking forward to explaining to Chang that the prisoners had escaped yet again. The taxi driver meanwhile was soon

surrounded by locals as he relived the chase and his driving antics, all with wild hand gestures and movie quotes in English. The troop commander questioned the taxi driver, and then reported in to Harbin HQ, who relayed the message on to Captain Shao.

‘Harbin HQ to Bravo-Charlie two – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie two receiving – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie two, we have to report that the triad gang were in Mohe, but managed to evade us... We are informed that the geologists are on the Mohe to Harbin train, and we believe that the triads will try to stop the train – over.’

‘Harbin HQ – if that is the case, then you must catch up with them as soon as possible before they do that... Send the helicopter to our position and we will try and catch up with the train – over and out.’

A little later, when all the government troops had left Mohe, Chang arrived hoping to see that his men had captured the escaped prisoners. As he waited, he received a phone call from his men looking for the escaped prisoners, and told him they had escaped on the train. Absolutely furious, Chang ranted and raved at the men for several minutes and told them he would kill them and their families if they didn’t get them.

‘Stop that train! Do whatever it takes! Blow it up if you have to.’

He said on the phone, still raging, and he kicked a crate of chickens that went sprawling across the street. Chang paced up and down the street, before lighting a cigarette to calm himself down. The westerners had made a fool of him and he demanded revenge, which he would carry out personally when his men get them. He spoke on the phone again.

‘Bring them back alive!’

Ambush

Jenny woke at 7am and was confronted by Brad holding a tray of hot noodles and green tea from the buffet car.

‘Breakfast!’

He said, holding out the tray.

‘Sorry, but there wasn’t any beans or stew.’

They both laughed, and he placed the tray on the lower bunk and left her to eat in peace. He had just reached the door when Jenny enquired.

‘Where’s Dylan?... and do we know when we arrive in Harbin?’

‘Dylan’s checking the other carriages to see if any triads have boarded, and we found out that the train should arrive in Harbin East station at 14:02.’

Brad replied, then adding.

‘It’s 07:05 now, so there’s no rush.’

He then turned and closed the door. Jenny was fortunate to have the whole four-berth cabin to herself. Dylan and Brad had to share with a short, fat and smelly Chinaman. Not that Dylan slept much as he sensed this trip had not finished. Brad though, could’ve slept through an earthquake, he was so tired. When they finished breakfast, they all met in the forward carriage next to the engine, and discussed what the next tactics would be. Jenny reminded them of the phone call to James Thornton.

‘James told me that the police would meet us at the station. They will take us to Beijing as soon as possible....

We also need to inform the authorities about those creatures, and that they should be left alone to live in the isolation they had become accustomed to.’

Both Dylan and Brad agreed, although Dylan was more concerned as to how much damage the triads would cause in trying to find the gold.

‘From what I saw, when we were with the triads, they had enough explosives with them to blow up the whole mountain.’

This worried Jenny.

‘Surely they wouldn’t do that Dylan?’

‘Jenny...they will do whatever it takes to get that gold, and you have seen how much blood has been shed up to now!’

It was about 11:00am when triads, in two powerful 4X4 vehicles overtook the train as the road ran parallel with the rail track and a wide fast flowing river. The flatter landscape was ideal for the well-manicured rice fields that grew either side of the river. The patchwork of rice fields was only broken by small areas of woodland, and farmer’s shacks that they used to maintain the fields. The long, quiet stretch of road, rail and river continued for at least ten miles, allowing the triads plenty of time to get well in front of the train. Eventually the road crossed over the railway track and bridged the river. The triads decided to use that point to stop the train. They commandeered a solitary passing truck carrying piles of freshly cut logs from the forest, killed the driver, and parked it onto the tracks. They hid their vehicles off the road in a nearby tree copse and waited, with weapons at the ready. Twenty minutes later the train came into view and gave several long blasts on its horn as it approached the junction and the truck. Dylan thought it was just another planned warning blast that all train drivers gave when approaching a crossing or junction. However, he thought he would look out of the window, if only to pass the time. The train suddenly lunged as the driver applied the brakes, realising the truck was not going to move. As the train slowed to a halt, Dylan decided not to take any chances and told Brad and Jenny to grab their backpacks and follow him. Dylan led the way as they made their way to the back of the train. They quickly passed through each carriage, which

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startled many of the passengers. When they passed the ticket collector, Dylan told Jenny to tell him that bandits were holding up the train, and he should alert the authorities. The ticket collector was furious at this constant disruption to his train, and made the call at once. Dylan, Jenny and Brad stepped out of the last carriage, and lay beside the rail track keeping out of sight. Dylan asked Brad for his knife, checked his weapon and loaded one of the new clips Brad had taken at the logging camp, then he crept to the other side of the carriage to get a better look at the problem. He could see about six armed triads spreading out along the coaches before boarding the train. They searched each carriage from the engine onwards looking for the trio, threatening anyone who stood in their way. As they made their way towards the rear of the train, Dylan urged Brad and Jenny to move towards the engine on the opposite side, keeping close to the carriages. When they eventually reached the engine, Dylan could see there was only one triad standing by the truck guarding it. He knelt by the engine and turned to Brad and Jenny.

‘On my count, I want you to run for the wood truck...Brad, if the keys are in it, you jump in and start it up...Jenny, you get in the passenger’s side, and I will follow once I’ve taken out the guard.’

Brad and Jenny took in a deep breath as Dylan counted.

‘One, two, three. Go!’

Dylan set off first and fired two shots, taking out the triad instantly. He then positioned himself beside the train engine and looked along the carriages, waiting for the triads to come out. Brad jumped into the truck and gave the thumbs up to Dylan that the keys were in the ignition. He had several attempts at starting it before the old vehicle coughed into life. Jenny had made it into the passenger seat as Brad grated the gears until he found one.

‘I hate stick-shift gears.’

He said, and then set off slowly towards the bridge over the river. They watched as Dylan fired a couple of rounds at the triads as they emerged from the carriages. It was enough to hold them up. Dylan made a run for the truck as random bursts of gunfire were aimed towards him. He approached the rear of the moving truck, and then began cutting the ropes holding down the logs on the back of the truck. When the truck had reached the bridge, the last rope was cut, scattering the pile of logs across the bridge and track, although two or three of them tumbled into the river. Dylan jumped onto the running board on the driver's side of the truck as Brad put his foot down. The triads ran towards the bridge shooting wildly at the truck, and managed to shoot out two of the tyres, and another bullet hit Brad in the shoulder. He struggled to control the truck as it swerved from side to side, with Jenny trying to help him steer. Dylan clung on to the door, grabbing the steering wheel as the truck continued veering from side to side. The triads ran back to their hidden vehicles and sped towards the bridge, only to be confronted by the pile of heavy logs spilled from the truck. Using ropes from the vehicles they dragged, pushed and pulled the logs from the bridge, cursing their bad luck. It was going to take time to clear the logs, which gave Dylan, Jenny and Brad valuable breathing space to get away. The truck though was still veering heavily out of control as they struggled with the steering. They came upon a fork in the road, where one headed back towards the railway track, and the other sending the road on a sharp bend to then run parallel with the river. It was the second road and sharp bend that caused the remaining two good tyres on the truck to burst, sending it crashing off the road and into the river. Dylan leaped off the truck's running board as the truck splashed into the cold, fast flowing river. As he swam to the bank, he could see Jenny had made it out

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of the cab, and was swimming towards him. He grabbed her hand and pulled her onto the bank.

‘Brad? Did Brad make it out?’

Dylan said anxiously looking at the truck as it quickly sank into the river. Jenny was frantic.

‘No...No...I think he’s still in there...Get him out Dylan, please.’

Dylan was not listening as he dived back into the water. He held onto the truck so he wasn’t swept away with the current. The water was about three metres deep, but the cab was completely submerged. The clarity of the water was not too bad though, and he soon found Brad, who was unconscious. Dylan tried to pull him out, but his foot was trapped under the brake pedal, and he had to work hard, swimming against the current to release it. They both made it to the surface, and by the time Dylan and Jenny had pulled Brad onto the bank, Brad was regaining consciousness. Jenny looked after Brad as Dylan climbed the bank to see if they were being followed. He looked back towards the bridge and could see the triads clearing the last of the logs.

‘Come on Jenny we have to get going, they’ll be on us any minute.’

‘Dylan, look! Brad can’t move like this.’

Jenny replied.

‘We have to give up.’

Dylan realised that Brad was in a bad way and, as there was nothing more he could do, he stood on the bank with his hands in the air. The triads drove up to the top of the bank and could see the truck in the river, Dylan with his hands in the air, and Brad badly wounded being tended to by Jenny. The triads got out of the vehicles with weapons ready, mostly pointing at Dylan. Three of them remained on the upper bank, and the others went down the bank to secure the prisoners. They set on Dylan first and used their rifle butts to hit him behind the knees, and then at the back of

the neck, which sent him crashing to the floor. Jenny was next as they roughly tied her up, and dragged her to her feet. Brad groaned as his hands were tied behind him and forced to stand. The triads were laughing and joking as they were relieved to have caught them at last. One of them made a phone call to tell Chang the good news.

‘Boss! Boss! We have them... we have caught the westerners.’

Chang laughed. But wanted to know more.

‘Ha! Ha! Are they all alive?’

‘Yes boss! They are injured but alive.’

‘Ha! Ha! Well done... Bring them to the cavern quickly.’

They could hear Chang laughing and congratulating them, when a loud whirring noise came from behind them.

The government troop helicopter, that was sent to collect Inspector Ning and Captain Shao and his team, was searching to intercept the train. When they saw the train had been stopped by logs on the track, they followed the road, and used the cover of nearby woodland to come sweeping over the trees in an instant. The triads on the upper bank had no time to react as the special-forces troops peppered the area with semi-automatic weapons, killing three of them instantly. Jenny pushed Brad to the ground as bullets flew everywhere, the lower bank provided cover for them as they hugged the grassy banks. Dylan lay unconscious on the bank, but was not hit, and began to recover. As the helicopter landed, troops got out to continue their attack. However, the two remaining triads acted very quickly and grabbed hold of Jenny and Brad, using them as cover. Captain Shao stopped the shooting immediately as the triads yelled at them.

‘We will kill them! We will kill them!’

The triads picked up Dylan, who was still groggy, and guided the hostages to their vehicle. The troops could do nothing but watch as the group drove off in one of the vehicles.

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When they had gone, the troops boarded the helicopter and Captain Shao relayed the information back to his HQ.

‘Harbin HQ from Bravo-Charlie one – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie one – this is Harbin HQ – receiving you – over.’

‘Harbin HQ – We have to report that we tried to intercept the triads before they got to the geologists, but we were too late, and they threatened to kill them... they drove off – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie one – try to locate their position and keep us informed. We will send vehicles to you when you find them – over and out.’

The helicopter tracked the vehicle as it sped through the countryside, but the triads took another route where the dirt-tracks went deep into the forest, and the helicopter lost them.

In the triad’s vehicle, one drove whilst the other held a gun at the tethered prisoners, he then phoned Chang.

‘Boss! We were attacked by a government helicopter and they killed three of our men. There is just two of us left... but we have the prisoners.’

Chang to his credit, did not panic, looked at his map and told them to head onto the forest tracks to lose the helicopter.

‘Use the old dirt-tracks as there will be more tree cover, and I will be with you soon.’

‘But Boss! This place will be crawling with troops soon!’

‘Let me worry about that... There should be several old logging camps close by... find one, and let me know where you are, and wait there.’

The triad ended the call, and Chang’s orders were given to the driver as they sped off down the road. Eventually, they reached a track leading into the forest, and were soon out of sight of the helicopter as the tall trees formed a canopy over

the single-track road. The buffeting of the vehicle as it went along the bumpy forest track, brought Dylan to his senses. He lay with his back to the gunman, but did not move as he wanted them to think he was still unconscious. He opened one eye, looked at Jenny and the injured Brad. Jenny then spoke to the triads in English, but only to alert Dylan of their situation. She looked at the triad guard and nodded towards Brad.

‘I managed to stop the bleeding before we were tied up, but this man needs medical attention urgently.’ She continued.

‘There are only two of you left, so why don’t you help us?’ She continued convincingly. The guard prodded Jenny in the side and told her in Chinese to stop talking. Dylan understood the situation and waited for an opportunity, but he was tied up, and somehow, must get free. The vehicle travelled on the forest tracks for several miles, trying to put as much distance between them and their pursuers as possible. They changed direction several times, using the myriad of tracks that spread throughout the forest. After passing a few busy logging camps they eventually found a small, deserted cabin, close by a mainline rail track as it carved its way right through the heart of the woodland. The driver stopped in front of the cabin and got out to check the area, while the second man continued to guard the prisoners. A few seconds later the man returned and they bundled the prisoners into the cabin, which was small, only had one room, and an unlit fireplace. It was dusty and had not been used for some time, but the tools leant against the wall suggested it was used by both loggers and rail track maintenance men. The driver took out his sat-phone and went outside to contact Chang, telling him of their location. The second man continued to guard the prisoners, but watched his colleague out of the only window in the cabin. Brad was still very groggy and moaned as his wounded

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shoulder ached, especially with having his hands tied behind his back. Jenny watched the guard, and when he wasn't looking, tapped Dylan with her foot and he opened his eyes. He lay motionless on the floor, but he could see the anxious guard looking out of the window. He adjusted his position to get a better view of the cabin, and noticed the tools leant against the walls, one of which was an axe. Jenny noticed it too and, in an effort to stand up, she crashed into the tools on purpose, knocking them onto the floor, with the axe falling close to Dylan. The guard turned and hit Jenny with the back of his hand, sending her crashing to floor next to Dylan, who remained still. He pointed his gun frustratingly at her and warned her.

'Keep quite or I will kill you!'

He then turned back to look out of the window. Jenny slowly pushed the axe towards Dylan's hands as they lay back-to-back on the floor. She positioned the axe so he could rub the ropes on his tethered hands along the blade. Fortunately, the axe was sharp and it quickly cut through the ropes. Dylan grabbed the axe, and in one swift movement, swung it around and buried it in the triads back. The man let out an agonizing scream as he plunged through the window with the axe in his back. The other triad was outside in the vehicle when he saw his colleague come crashing through the window with the axe in his back. He fired several shots into the cabin, started the vehicle, and drove off as fast as he could. Dylan and Jenny lay on the floor as the bullets ripped into the cabin, but by the time he looked up, the triad was disappearing along the forest track. Dylan made sure the area was secure before he untied Jenny and Brad. He then went outside to collect the dead man's weapon, and to see if he had a mobile phone, while Jenny comforted Brad. Dylan returned with only the AK47 rifle and a couple of spare clips.

'How are you both?'

‘He’s a lot more comfortable now, but we need to get him to hospital.’

She said wiping his brow. Brad was conscious, very weak, but still managed a smile as Jenny made him comfortable. Dylan looked out of the window.

‘We can’t stay here for long...If I know Chang, he will want to finish us off before we identify him to the police.’ He looked up to the sky and heard a helicopter hovering nearby. Running out of the cabin, Dylan waved his arms to alert the crew, but there were too many trees that masked the cabin from view, and the helicopter flew past. Dylan frustratingly went back into the cabin and told Jenny he missed it.

‘I thought that was too good to be true.’
He said shaking his head.

‘Although, I did notice a rail track about three hundred metres away. Let’s get to it and see if we have any luck with a train.’

He picked Brad up from the floor, and Jenny helped to get him outside, and they left the cabin to head for the rail track. When they got there, they sat Brad down against a tree trunk and looked up and down the track. Dylan checked the weapon for bullets and looked back at the cabin.

Chang had made good time as he sped towards the forest, his convoy of four vehicles were careful to keep away from any police or government troops. They had travelled fast, stopping only for fuel and cigarettes. Chang was made comfortable by his men and was able to fully recline in the seat during the whole journey. About an hour later, he came across the fleeing triad who informed Chang of Dylan’s vicious attack on his friend. Once he showed Chang the location of the cabin on the map, Chang took out a revolver from his shoulder holster, and shot the man between the eyes. He then ranted to his men in Chinese before heading

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off towards the cabin. Meanwhile, the trio waited by the rail track for what seemed to be several hours. Then Dylan held his ear to the rail track, and looked up at Jenny.

‘Come and listen to this? I can hear a train coming, we have to stop it.’

As she listened, he took off his shirt and fastened it onto a fallen tree branch. They waited patiently looking up and down the track, not sure which way the train was coming. After a few moments Jenny saw the train in the distance.

‘There! There it is!’

She shouted as she pointed along the track. The train was the Mohe to Harbin mainline express which they had previously been on. It had been delayed at the bridge due to the fallen logs and a full police investigation. The ticket collector was furious as his normally impeccable time keeping was in shreds. He sat alongside the train driver reliving the trauma as they travelled through the cutting in the forest. The driver suddenly applied the brakes when he saw two people on the track, one waving a banner of some sort. The ticket collector stopped him from applying the brakes any further.

‘Do not stop, we have been delayed for too long.... keep going!’

Dylan continued to wave frantically as the train appeared to slow, then speed up again. At that moment Chang’s convoy of vehicles drove down the track towards the cabin, they pulled in front of it and his heavily armed men stormed the building, firing into it. Dylan heard the shots and gave Jenny the banner as he set off to investigate with his gun. Brad managed to haul himself up to assist her in trying to slow down the train. The ticket collector looked out of the side window to see the vehicles pull up at the cabin. He watched as at least a dozen armed men get out to shoot into it. He then looked closely at Jenny and Brad as the train rushed by them.

‘Stop! Stop!’

He called to the driver.

‘It’s those foreigners from the hold up. They are the ones being chased by the bandits. We have to help them!’

He then thumped his fist on the emergency brake and the train began to stop. The passengers in the train lurched forward, stumbling and spilling drinks as the train suddenly slowed down and stopped, creating chaos throughout the carriages. The ticket collector opened the nearest door and waved to Jenny to quickly get onto the train. Jenny didn’t need asking twice as she supported Brad, and the two of them staggered fifty metres to where the train eventually stopped. Jenny shouted back towards Dylan.

‘Dylan! Come on it’s stopped. Come quickly!’

Chang arrived at the cabin, and his men quickly got out and searched the cabin inside and out. Chang stood by the vehicle, then he heard the screech of brakes, as the steel wheels of the train ground against the iron rails and stopped. He turned and saw the train through the trees three hundred metres away. Looking closer, he saw Jenny and Brad hobbling on the track towards it.

‘There they are! Get them.’

He fired his revolver at them, but the distance was too far. His men returned from the cabin and headed towards the train firing as much as they could. Dylan lay on the ground next to a large tree and took careful aim as the triads came running towards him. He looked back towards Jenny and Brad to see them boarding the train, as it slowly pulled away. He fired several shots, each one taking out one of the triads. The rest of them immediately dropped to the ground or took cover behind trees, and returned fire. Dylan saw Chang peering from behind a tree and fired two rounds towards him, the first smashed into the tree splintering the bark, and the second sent Chang’s favourite green cap flying off.

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Dylan cursed his bad luck for missing him and kept low, as the triads fired constantly at him, then he headed for the train. The triads quickly followed, firing wildly towards him. A bullet hit him in the upper thigh as he got within ten metres of the train, causing him to stumble. Jenny leaned out of the door of the last carriage and begged him to run. Shots continued to ping and whizz past him, as Dylan hobbled towards the train, just managing to grasp Jenny's hand as it gathered speed. However, she was not strong enough to hold on, and she could feel his fingers slipping away as he struggled to keep pace with the train.

Suddenly a hand came out of the carriage doorway and grabbed hold of Dylan's wrist, hauling him into the carriage. The ticket collector gave a big smile to Jenny as he pulled Dylan onto a seat.

'We Chinese are not all gangsters.'

He said, still smiling.

'We cannot allow our tourists to be killed...not on my train anyway.'

He made sure Dylan and Brad were comfortable and the train driver was told to head at full speed to Harbin. Jenny clasped her arms around the ticket collector and gave him a big kiss on the cheek. Embarrassed, he pulled away from her and hurried down the carriage with a bigger smile on his face. The train reached full speed as it left the triads, who fired pointlessly at it.

Chang looked at the train as it sped on down the track, then looked at the hole in his cap and cursed Dylan in unpronounceable Chinese. He then yelled and kicked at his men as they got back into their vehicles. As soon as the train heading to Harbin was out of sight, Chang ordered his men to head back to the cavern.

‘Take the longer route back, and don’t follow each other as I am sure more helicopters will be looking for us.’

He then made a call to his mining experts at the cavern.

‘You can begin drilling now as I believe that all the government troops have left the mountain. I wanted them to think I was only interested in the westerners, and it worked.... I will be with you soon.’

The vehicles dispersed in different directions, and Chang waited to see if the helicopter was going to arrive at his location. He knew the helicopter was searching the area since it attacked his men at the river, but he didn’t know that fuel shortage meant the helicopter had to return to Harbin. He expected them to be at his location soon, and he didn’t have to wait long, as the whirring of rotor blades became louder and louder. As soon as he was sure it was a military helicopter, Chang got into his vehicle and ordered the driver to head into the forest.

The helicopter carried out a sweep of the area before landing, but did not sight Chang due to the dense forest. When they landed close to the cabin and saw the triad bodies, especially the one with the axe in his back, Inspector Ning spoke to Captain Shao.

‘This has got to be the work of Captain Masters...he certainly knows what he is doing. Check to see if the geologists are here.’

Captain Shao was amazed at the damage one-man could do.

‘Despite his age, I wish he was on my team inspector... Wait here and I will report back in a few minutes.’

Captain Shao instructed his men to look at all the bodies, but he knew that none of them would be the westerners. He then radioed to his HQ.

‘Bravo-Charlie two to Harbin HQ – come in – over.’

‘Harbin HQ to Bravo-Charlie two – receiving you loud and clear... pass your message – over.’

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‘Harbin HQ – we are at a small logging cabin, south of our previous position at the river, and found several triad bodies, but no sign of the geologists – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie two... We have just had a report that the geologists are on the train to Harbin... We will keep you updated – over.’

‘Good news Harbin HQ – you had better send trucks to collect these bodies, they may help identify which triad order they are from... I am sending the coordinates now – over and out.’

Inspector Ning was listening to the radio call.

‘Captain, I know very well which order this is, and their leader is called Chang Bingtao from one of the Beijing orders... He has a very bad reputation, and Dylan Masters has done well to keep him at arm’s length.’

Captain Shao pondered at this latest information.

‘So, inspector... What do you think Chang will do, now that the geologists are on the train?’

Inspector Ning pondered the same question.

‘I am not sure! Maybe he is determined to follow, and kill them, but I don’t want to return to Harbin just yet, as I think there is more going on at that mountain... I am sure the geologists would have found many tunnels to explore their rocks... Maybe they did find something... If that is the case, then Chang will return to the mountain tunnels.... Let’s go there too.’

‘Very well inspector. I will leave a man here to wait for the trucks to remove the bodies, and we will set off now... We should get there before nightfall.’

Inspector Ning was trying to place all the pieces together in his head, and needed more information.

‘Where are the rest of the government troops now?’

Captain Shao was looking at his map.

‘They are heading back to Harbin HQ, as they found nothing more at the mountain.’

Inspector Ning was mulling over all the possibilities.

‘Get them to wait until we have searched the mountain again... I have a feeling that we might need them.’

CHAPTER 14

In the UK

The Chinese Government alerted the UK authorities that the family of Professor Allan Jenkins of The London Geological Research Centre, were being held hostage in their home by very dangerous members of a Chinese Triad Order. All efforts to secure their release must be carried out at once. The message also included the unfortunate death of Professor Jenkins, who was killed during an earth tremor whilst taking part in a government sponsored geological survey in North China (Upper Mongolia).

UK government agencies, including MI5 & MI6 departments were made aware of the situation, and they began an immediate investigation. They soon discovered that Professor Allan Jenkins' family had been held hostage for over three weeks in their own home. It was in a remote location in the Derbyshire Peak District, Central England, so would have very few visitors. The triads had forced Professor Jenkins into making holiday arrangements to deceive family and friends. They had also arranged for a private security company, in the employ of the triads, to monitor the house on a regular basis. This ensured delivery, post and maintenance people were kept at arm's length. The

hostages were treated well but all communication was banned, with no internet, land line or mobile phone calls allowed. Also, there were no external trips allowed, any further than the garden. Three armed triads were stationed in the house, two men and one woman. They wore plain clothes and gave the impression of servants, should anyone 'accidentally' get through the security cordon.

UK Special Forces were deployed immediately to free the hostages. Realising how dangerous the triads were, they worked closely with local police and an anti-triad terrorist specialist to initially monitor the house and triad activity. Undercover Special Forces agents hid in the surrounding hills and observed the security company visits, noting their routine and times of movement. Posing as a parcel delivery man, a single agent was sent to the house to make a routine delivery. The parcel was very well presented and contained legitimate geological samples which Professor Jenkins had been waiting for. However, concealed in the folds of the wrapping was a tiny microphone which could be monitored for over a thousand metres. The parcel was signed for by the triad maid and she placed it on the kitchen worktop. When the delivery man left, the other triads gathered around and closely inspected the parcel. As they could find nothing but rock samples, they threw it in the kitchen bin. The final location of the listening device was not great but it enabled the agents to hear what was going on. After a few translated conversations between the triads, it was obvious they had no idea that Jenkins was dead. This gave the rescue team hope, and more time to save the family from certain death. Equipment was set up nearby to monitor all mobile phone calls from and to the triads. For now, though, it was a wait and watch exercise.

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Two days had passed and the Special Forces were able to assess that there were only three triads in the house, two male and one female. It was noted though, that the three children were allowed out of the house and into the garden for twenty minutes every lunch time. However, each time, they were closely monitored by one of the male guards, who routinely sat on the perimeter garden fence with a hand gun in his belt. It also meant he could have a couple of cigarettes while they played. At the same time, agents observed that Mrs. Jenkins would sit in the kitchen eating a little lunch, whilst monitoring her children through the window as they played. She was closely watched by the female triad, but Mrs Jenkins was determined to build up a rapport with the female, who spoke very good English. Initially, it was only pleasantries they exchanged, but Mrs Jenkins realised that the woman was the only one that could be approached, as the men kept to themselves, and showed no sign of wanting to interact in any way. Mrs Jenkins began a conversation, in the hope that her children could be saved by the woman, if anything were to go wrong.

‘Your English is very good my dear! Have you been here long?’

The female was looking at the children playing in the garden, which seemed to soften her tone and attitude.

‘I was born in Beijing, but completed my education at Cambridge University, before being asked to work for the triads.’

The female looked across at the second male guard, who was also in the kitchen, eating a bowl of noodles. He banged his fist onto the table, which startled the women.

‘Stop! No private talk! Just watch them and keep quiet.’

He too spoke good English, but chose not to. As the leader of the group, he was loyal to the cause. He thought nothing of slapping Mrs. Jenkins when she protested as they first

arrived. Cold blooded and ruthless, he would kill the family in an instant when ordered to.

The Special Forces agreed that lunch time would be the best time to carry out the rescue. One man would be positioned early near the fence to deal with the smoker, and three more would be ready nearby to rescue the children. Snipers would take out the other two triads if the rest of the plan did not work. The plan was to be executed the following day.

At 11:00hrs the local police pulled in the triad security van heading to the house, as part of a routine traffic inspection. As the vehicle stopped four SAS Special Forces agents came out of a parked vehicle and swiftly overpowered them. Two Chinese police officers dressed in similar security uniforms, jumped in the van and drove to the house.

At 12:00hrs the children, Alice, Ann and Oliver were allowed to play outside in the rear garden. They kicked a ball between them on the lawn, while the male guard sat on the fence smoking as usual. A few minutes later a small white security van drove up the long drive to the house, as part of its routine visit. They got to within twenty metres of the house, stopped the vehicle and opened the bonnet of the van. The two men got out, leant over the engine and waited. Inside the house the triad in the kitchen watched on the cctv monitor at the sudden change of routine. Suspicious he went to the front door and warily opened it. A Chinese voice said.

"The engine has cut out. I think it is the alternator, come and see!"

Still wary, the triad stepped out of the house holding his hand gun in his trouser belt. In a split second the two men at the van spun round and fired two rounds each from silenced guns, and the triad dropped to the floor with a thump. The two Special Forces agents then dragged the body away from

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the front door. Inside the house, the female triad thought she heard a noise, and looked at the CCTV monitor. She could only see the van, but no one else. As she called out to her colleague, the guard on the fence had his neck broken by the SAS agent, who was only two metres away. Two other agents quickly ran out and grabbed the children, taking them to safety. The female triad turned, realised it was an attack and grabbed Jenkins wife, just as two more agents burst into the kitchen. She took a kitchen knife from the holder on the worktop and held it at Mrs. Jenkins neck.

‘Stay back! Stay back!’

She yelled at the two agents.

‘I will kill her!’

She continued as she edged Mrs. Jenkins to the main hallway. The agents were rooted to the spot as the two women moved out of the kitchen and closed the door. The triad then swapped the knife for a small pistol she held in her belt, and placed the nozzle behind Mrs. Jenkins neck. The agents at the front door could see the female triad through a small, curtained window next to the door. Unfortunately, the door had closed shut and they did not want to risk the possibility of the hostage getting killed, so they pulled back. Slowly the triad led Mrs. Jenkins up the main stairs to a bedroom overlooking the front of the house. This was where the triads kept the rest of their arsenal, and she exchanged the pistol for one of the AK-47 weapons. She made Mrs Jenkins sit on the bed and told her to keep quiet. At the same time several police cars raced up the driveway forming a semi-circular cordon in front of the house, their occupants ran out to take cover behind the vehicles, weapons at the ready. They were immediately followed by two military vehicles and three ambulances, to which they parked behind the cordon. The children were ushered into one of the ambulances and it was driven away, with the children shouting and crying, for their mother. Then the

officer in charge emerged from behind a police car, followed by a Chinese anti-triad terrorist specialist, and he raised a megaphone to his mouth.

‘The house is surrounded and there is no point in trying to escape, your colleagues are both dead. You should let the hostage go.’

The bedroom window was smashed and several rounds from a semi-automatic weapon were fired at the parked vehicles. The triad then grabbed hold of Mrs. Jenkins and hid behind her, as she did not want to be taken out by a sniper. When she stopped firing, she then drew the curtains across the window. Emma Jenkins was thrown onto the bed and told not to move, and the triad peeked out from the side of the curtain. Emma pleaded with the female triad.

‘Please! Let me go so I can see if my children are safe? I will tell the police that you treated me well.’

The triad turned away from the window and told her that she cannot let her go, as the triad order will make sure she is killed so as not to reveal any secrets. Meanwhile two Special Forces agents went into the back door of the house, slowly made their way upstairs, and positioned themselves outside the bedroom. They slipped a small camera on the end of a flexible wire under the door to locate the triad and the hostage. Relaying the information back to the control module in one of the military vehicles, the agents waited for further instructions. Other agents set up a close perimeter outside the house, and were ready to fire blast grenades through the window to disorientate the occupants while a rescue could be affected. Using a megaphone, the officer tried again to negotiate with the female triad.

‘If you give yourself up now, we will be very lenient towards you. You have not harmed anyone yet, and this will be in your favour.’

A few minutes went by and there was no response. He did not want to tell her that Professor Jenkins was dead, until

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Mrs. Jenkins had been informed first. In the bedroom, Emma tried to talk with her female captor.

‘Your name is Meili isn’t it? I heard one of the others call you that.’

Still, there was no reply, and so she continued.

‘You told me that you went to Cambridge University when you were younger. You must have made many good friends there?’

Meili said nothing, instead she kept looking out of the window through the tiniest of cracks between the curtain and the wall. She was beginning to show signs of anxiety as she mulled over her options. She didn’t want to be in this position at all, but it was forced upon her by a triad order who threatened to kill her family in Beijing. She was targeted because of her job working in the Geological Research Centre in London. She was a junior work colleague of Professor Jenkins, and understood his research well. She was able to provide the triad bosses with sufficient information for the project to go ahead. They also used Meili, to gain information about his daily routine and family. As she was fluent in English, and a woman, she was perfect to look after Jenkins family while the professor led the triads to the gold in Khingán. Meili mused quietly in Chinese.

‘What now? ... What will happen to my family now? ... Would it be better to die, and hopefully my family will be saved, or will they kill them anyway?’

She looked across at Emma, who could not understand a word she had said. Emma was wrapped up in her own turmoil, but she knew that she had to act soon, or the police will storm the building and make up her mind for her. Suddenly, Meili opened the bedroom window, threw out her gun, and shouted.

‘Alright! Alright! I give myself up!’

She then put her arms in the air and waited for the response. Within seconds, two agents outside the bedroom burst

through the door into the room. In one swift movement, Meili was grabbed and dropped onto the floor, and then her hands were secured with large plastic ties. At the same time, the second agent grabbed hold of Emma and dragged her out of the room.

‘Don’t kill her!’

Emma cried at the agents.

‘She is not a bad person.’

Meili was then roughly placed on the floor of the landing. The agents continued instinctively to secure the room before alerting the control vehicle of the situation.

‘The room is secure – all is clear!’

Other agents then stormed the house looking for any other dangers, including booby traps. Once the all clear was given, Mrs. Jenkins was taken to an ambulance for initial treatment, and Meili was then handcuffed and taken to a waiting police car. A few moments later, Mrs Jenkins was allowed back into her house where she was reunited with Alice, Ann and Oliver. They cried and hugged each other tightly as the trauma of the day unfolded, and they realised that everything was safe again. The police waited until the next day before they told her of her husband’s death. A trained police woman spoke managed to relax Emma, and after a cup of tea, she explained.

‘Mrs Jenkins... Emma... this was all an elaborate plan by organised criminal gangs from China... They found out about your husband’s research trip to China, and decided to take advantage of the situation by coercing him into providing information. Unfortunately, they used you and your children to force him into obeying their every instruction.’

Mrs Jenkins could not believe what she was being told.

‘What? Criminal gangs from China? How? ... Why?’

The police woman waited until Emma had calmed down.

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‘Mrs Jenkins, your husband was eventually able to warn the authorities of your kidnap, and UK special forces were able to release you... You are all safe now.’

Emma’s mind was trying to make sense of everything, and then she thought about her husband.

‘Allan! My husband! Is he safe? Where is he now... can I see him?’

The police woman took a sip of tea to moisten her throat before she explained the grim details.

‘Mrs Jenkins... Emma! Unfortunately I am sorry to tell you, that your husband died when an earth tremor caused him to fall.’

Emma shrieked.

‘No! No! No! It cannot be possible... everything was checked and carefully planned.’

‘Mrs Jenkins... we were informed that the earth tremor was sudden and there was nothing anyone could do about it. I was a tragic accident.’

The police woman was told not to reveal the actual cause of Professor Jenkin’s death, as it would have caused more anxiety and stress to his wife. The police woman, moved onto the sofa and sat next to Emma, she then gave her a hug to try and ease the situation. It was several moments before she regained a little composure.

‘What happened to the rest of his team? Jenny and Dylan?’

‘We believe they are safe, but there were others from the Chinese Research team that died too. A full investigation is being carried out.’

‘His body! Was it found? Can he be buried at home?’

‘The Chinese authorities are searching the area now, and will inform us as soon as possible.’

Mrs Jenkins, then thought about her children, and took her leave of the police woman.

‘I must speak to my children now... it is going to be very difficult indeed... Please keep me informed.’

‘Yes, of course, Mrs Jenkins... There will also be a police guard at your home until a thorough investigation has been completed. There will also be a family councillor available for you... I recommend you talk to them as it will help you.’

At UK police headquarters in London.

Meili was taken into police custody for further interrogation. A team of two women and one man from MI6 interviewed her.

‘Meili, if you want us to help you, then it will be better for you, if you told us everything that happened to you from the beginning.... Take your time.’

Meili was sobbing, but realised that she had to do something or her family would be killed.

‘OK... I managed to get a job as a junior researcher at the London Geological Centre in London... You should be able to trace that.’

The man interjected.

‘Don’t worry... we will be checking everything, and we have a team looking into your apartment right now.’

The first woman detective scowled at the abruptness of the man. Then, she tried to be more sensitive, in the hope getting more details from Meili.

‘Meili, as this is an important investigation... we will of course, look into all your documentation, including visa and work permits.’

Meili continued.

‘I had been working there for six months, and I really enjoy the work... Professor Jenkins is a very knowledgeable man. I have learned a lot from him.’

No one had informed Meili that the professor was dead.

‘Then one day, a young and handsome man from my hometown in China approached me, and... well... we became close. Then I noticed how he wanted to know more

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and more about the professor's research.... I was a fool to think he loved me.'

The second detective could see that Meili was getting upset.

'We understand Meili, it must have been lovely to have met someone from your own town... Please... continue.'

'Yes! We were happy for the first month, and then he changed... He said that I was not getting enough information, and that I should go into the filing cabinets to photograph more data.... He threatened me, and that is when he said that if I didn't do it... my family in China would be killed.'

The male detective asked.

'So, it was you who broke into the research centre, and Professor Jenkins disturbed you as you were taking photos.' Meili bowed her head in shame.

'Yes, they knew that I was an amateur gymnast, and forced me to do it... I did not have a choice believe me.'

The first woman asked.

'How did you communicate with your boyfriend or the gang members?'

'There is a mobile phone hidden in my apartment. You will find a loose floorboard under my desk. It has all the messages they sent me.... They told me to delete them, but I didn't.'

'Where is your boyfriend now?'

'He...he is one of the men you killed at the house.'

The detectives gave Meili time to compose herself, but she wanted to know about her family.

'My family in China! What will happen to them?'

The male detective offered her an incentive.

'If you tell us everything you know, then we will contact the Chinese authorities and they will protect your family. Also, if the information you give us is accurate, then we release a press statement to inform the public that all three kidnappers were killed by UK special forces.'

This information was not clear to Meili.

‘You mean, that you will say that I have been killed too?’

‘Yes! We would then arrange with the Chinese authorities to give you a new identity, and relocate your family. You would then join them after a month or two had passed.’

Meili’s tears of sadness turned into tears of joy when she heard this.

‘Of course... of course, I will tell you all I know.’

Meili continued to reveal everything she knew about the men she was with, if they met any other members of the gang, and where they lived before the kidnapping. She was then taken away until all her information had been processed. A secure message was sent to James Thornton’s office in Beijing, informing him of the successful rescue of Professor Jenkin’s family. They also informed him about Meili, and if he can get the Chinese security services to check out her story in China.

Two days later, following a lengthy telephone call from the British embassy in Beijing. The Chinese authorities contacted Inspector Ning, and fully appraised him of Meili’s family situation. He organised his team to carry out an initial reconnoitre of her family home to the north of the city.

Acting as city service people, Inspector Ning’s men surrounded the apartment building, and noted how many men were allocated to hold the hostages. They counted only four, three men and one woman. One man was positioned outside the building at the main entrance, another was positioned on the same floor as the family home, whilst another man and woman were inside the home. They also noted that each lunchtime, hot food was delivered to the triads in the home, and it was decided to use that as a way into the building. Lunchtime the next day, Inspector Ning’s team intercepted the food delivery man, and a detective took his place. As he arrived at the building, he purposely kept

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talking to the triad guard while two detectives apprehended the man. They used the same method to take out the guard on the same floor as the home, and Inspector Ning was pleased that no shots were fired, or any passersby hurt. The detective delivering the food rang the doorbell, and the male triad answered. As he opened the door, the detective dropped the food to the floor, causing the food to spill all over. The female triad came to see what the commotion was, and as the mess was being cleared, inspector Ning's men quickly apprehended them, and ensured that Meili's family were unhurt. The triads, were taken to the police station, and Meili's family were taken to a prepared safe house, before being processed, reallocated to another part of China, and given new identities. Meili was informed discreetly, which made her very happy.

CHAPTER 15

Get the Gold!

Chang knew that there was little time left to find the gold before the government troops came back to the mountain. He hoped that his ruse to follow the westerners would allow him more time to extract the gold before the troops arrived. He also knew it was a risk allowing Dylan and Jenny to see him at the logging cabin, but he had been taking risks all his life, and managed to survive. The reward of this risk was going to be very worthwhile indeed. By late afternoon, Chang arrived at the cavern to find his men had already set up a base camp within the cavern. The area below the entrance looked like a small town with bright floodlights mounted on tripods being powered by several small, and almost silent generators. The mining experts were busy scanning the outer walls of the cavern, taking rock samples to study using portable test equipment. Many cables had been installed to the outside for computer signals, and connected to solar power supplies. The equipment was mounted on rows of small tables with laptop computers setup next to each one, and underneath each table were containers full of chemical testing liquids. It was a very professional operation. Chang could not help being impressed by the clinical efficiency of the team at his

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disposal. As he slowly stepped off the rope ladder onto the cavern floor, one of the experts came over, welcomed him, and gave him an appraisal of the work so far.

‘Sir, we have carried out some initial research and so far, we have found; deposits of super large polygenic REE-Fe-Nb, containing a vast amount of fluorite; the latter is also the main host rock. The ore bodies are stratiform and lenticular, with masses, bands, layers, veins, and disseminations.

Besides clear features of hot water sedimentation, the deposit also exhibits Mg, Fe, Na and F metasomatism. Sm-Nd monazite isochron age for bastnaesite and riebeckite is 1200 to 1300 Ma, whereas Th-Pb and Sm-Nd age of Ba-REE-F carbonates and the aeschynite is 474 to 402 Ma...’ The expert rambled on, but was halted in his tracks.

‘STOP!’

Chang shouted, and held his hands up to the man.

‘Enough with the science rubbish...Where is the gold?’ The expert was shocked, took a couple of steps backwards, and realised he should cut to the chase.

‘Sir, we have found several large deposits of gold in the walls near the underground lake over there.’

He said, pointing towards the far side of the cavern.

‘We thought we should inspect the rest of the area before starting any mining works on the walls.’

Chang looked at his watch, and realised it was getting late.

‘No!... Do not look any further. We have to start mining now! Get the explosives out and start blasting at once.’

He turned away from the man, and then paced up and down shouting to his men.

‘Prepare the explosives! Prepare the explosives!’

The mining experts, assisted by Chang’s henchmen prepared the walls for blasting. More portable generators were brought in as men drilled bore holes into the walls for the explosives. Each detonator was armed with an electronic trigger so the charges could be set off in a specific order

from a remote location. Chang returned to the surface and sat back in a chair that was very well sheltered from the hot sun, and where a cool breeze wafted across from the valley below. He waited, and lit cigarette after cigarette, looking at his watch all the time. He had sent men onto the nearest road tracks to watch for any troops, either by road or air, and kept in contact using two-way radios.

Soon the first of the explosive charges were ready, and the cavern was evacuated. The charges were only small to test the strength of the walls and to take larger samples for analysis. A few minutes later a loud explosion echoed throughout the cavern, and a grey cloud was pushed out of the entrance. The resident bats also flew out of the cavern, disturbed by the noise and pollution of their environment. This caused mild panic among the mining crew as they were startled by the size of them. When the dust had settled, the team wore masks and breathing equipment as they entered the cavern to collect the deposits. When the samples were categorised, Chang was shown the results. He was amazed to see several samples containing large veins of high-quality gold. The experts informed him that they had struck a small seam, which led to a much larger seam over the lake. The lead mining expert advised Chang.

‘We will have to set up a platform over the water’s edge to install the charges, but it will take time.’

Chang was becoming more and more agitated.

‘We do not have time.’

Chang insisted.

‘Blast out the rock above the seam and it will fill in that part of the lake. We can then dig out the gold from the wall. ... ***It should be simple!***’

The lead mining expert was appalled.

‘But that could bring down the whole roof.’

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He said, tapping out the calculations on his laptop. Chang replied.

‘You are the experts. Make sure you only bring down enough rock so we can dig out the gold.’

He then dismissed the man, ordered the samples to be taken to his vehicle, and relaxed in his seat. He then contacted the lookouts on the tracks using the radio.

‘Any sign of the troops yet?’

‘No Sir, nothing as yet boss.’

Each lookout replied in turn, and knew how important it was to keep their boss informed. A dinghy was launched onto the cavern lake, lighting, power supplies and drilling equipment were set up at the water’s edge. Then a team of three men boarded the dinghy and one of them started the small outboard motor. A few minutes later, with all the equipment on board, they were drilling into the rock face along the side of the lake. During the drilling, one of the men slipped when the drill bit snagged on a particularly hard piece of rock, causing him to cut his exposed wrist on the jagged rock face. Blood from the cut dropped into the lake and billowed into a crimson cloud. The man took out a handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it around the wound, then carried on working. They soon completed the work to install explosives above the gold seam, set the detonators, and set off for the shore. The dinghy had only just turned around to head back to the shore when the waters of the lake began to ripple and swirl, which were highlighted by the floodlights shining across the water. The men on the bank, who were watching the drilling operation, began to notice movement in the water. They stepped closer to the water’s edge to get a better view, and began pointing into the water, beckoning others to come and look at the strange shapes. The surface of the lake burst open with a loud splash, as giant jaws snapped shut on the injured man, wrenching him out of the dinghy. He disappeared under the

water without making a sound, it was so quick. The lake then turned into a boiling mass as blood spilled from the victim attracting more crocodiles. Two of the creatures launched out of the water and onto the dinghy, submerging the vessel and its crew, a few seconds later, the dinghy emerged empty. Crocodiles could be seen spinning in death rolls as they ripped the flesh from their victims. Limbs popping up to the surface were quickly swallowed as other beasts entered the fray. Chang's men grabbed their weapons and began firing into the water, wounding some of the creatures, which were then set upon by others. Three of the creatures leapt onto the shore of the lake and attacked the men firing the weapons. With unbelievable speed the creatures ran across the ground scattering the men, causing further confusion and pandemonium. Bodies littered the cavern floor of both crocodiles and triads in a very short space of time. Floodlights and equipment were scattered everywhere.

At the same time, the helicopter arrived at the mountain just as the sun was setting, and began several searches for Chang and his men. One of Captain Shao's men, using powerful binoculars, sighted something.

'Sir, over there! There is a small clearing at the side of the mountain, and I can see what appears to be a hole. There is a lot of equipment around it and men are climbing inside the mountain.'

The helicopter hovered above the location, and both Captain Shao and Inspector Ning looked closely.

'Yes!'

They said in unison, and Captain Shao asked the helicopter pilot to land, but the pilot could not.

'Captain, there is not enough clearance for me there, we will have to find a bigger clearing.'

The arrival of the helicopter to the mountain was reported by Chang's lookouts on the forest tracks, and several

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gunmen were waiting for it at the cavern entrance. As soon as the triads saw the helicopter, they began firing at it. An RPG was also launched at the helicopter, and the pilot took evasive action, and veered off to search for a safer landing zone. The pilot immediately reported the attack.

‘Bravo-Charlie one to Harbin HQ – come in – over.’

‘Harbin HQ to Bravo-Charlie one – receiving you loud and clear – over.’

‘Harbin HQ – we have just been attacked by the triads using RPGs and automatic weapons... We are going to make a landing at a clearing close by. Suggest you send the troops back to the area as quickly as possible – over.’

‘Bravo-Charlie one – copy your last message, and we will deploy the troops immediately – over and out.’

Captain Shao listened in to the call, and instructed the pilot to land as close as possible.

Chang, heard the gunshots and then saw the helicopter. He got out of his chair, and was about to head to the entrance of the cavern, when he tripped and accidentally pressed the button on one of the remote controls. It detonated the explosives in the rock above the lake. An ear-splitting bang echoed across the cavern, followed swiftly by a huge cloud of dust as tons of rock blew out from the wall. The echo seemed to reverberate for a long time before it subsided, but then came a second blast, that was not expected. Larger rocks tumbled into the lake and cavern, initially from the first explosive, but then more came down from the second blast. The primary explosion created a fissure which spread through the walls of the cavern, weakening the structure, until the whole section of roof gave way with a crash. Rocks from the roof of the cavern began to fall into the lake, some of which smashed onto the creatures, killing them instantly. This was followed by more rocks falling in the cavern, spreading as a chain reaction that loosened more of the

supporting structure. The whole cavern roof was collapsing, and anyone or anything inside would soon be crushed to death. The noise, dust, and chaos left escaping very difficult, if not impossible. Chang was brushed aside by fleeing men, and the ground around the entrance began to crumble and disintegrate. He got to his feet and began running as fast as he could down the mountain, but neither man nor beast could survive the devastation that ensued. Clouds of thick, grey dust billowed out of every orifice around the cavern, which included all the escape routes that were used by Dylan and his team, and others not yet discovered. A chain reaction of blasts set off more earth tremors, which collapsed every tunnel and cavern in the surrounding area. The land above the cavern dropped, as the once large cavern below was filled with rocks and trees. From above it looked as if crop circles had emerged into the landscape, which spread over hundreds of metres.

Even though they were out of range, Inspector Ning and Captain Shao heard the explosions and saw the plumes of dust rising into the sky. Inspector Ning became concerned.

‘Captain, those are not natural explosions from earth tremors like the last time.... Those are man-made explosions.’

Captain Shao was using his binoculars to inspect the area as the helicopter hovered before landing.

‘Looks like you were right inspector... Chang led us away from the mountain on purpose, and hoped to come back for whatever is in the mountain.’

‘Yes, captain... there looked to be a lot of equipment there, and by the sound of the explosions, they were determined to blast the rocks to get whatever it was the professor had found... which makes me think there is gold or something just as valuable.’

Captain Shao agreed.

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‘That makes much more sense... When we land, my men will lead the way and you and your men can follow at a safer distance until we are certain the area is clear.’

‘Copy that captain.’

The helicopter landed and the Special Forces men formed quickly to search the area. At the same time, Chang’s lookouts on the road tracks, jumped into their vehicles and drove as fast as they could away from the mountain, as the ground beneath them shook and collapsed. They called many times to Chang.

‘Boss! Boss! Come in...are you safe?’

There was no reply, and they raced along the track avoiding many falling trees, until they finally reached the end of the track. That was where they met with Captain Shao’s men, who quickly disarmed the panicking triads and secured them. Captain Shao asked one of them what they were doing.

‘We were trying to get the gold from the mountain... but were attacked by huge beasts... and the earth exploded... we ran... we ran... save us please!’

The man was not making much sense to the captain, and he decided to wait and see for himself. Chang’s men were searched, and following a search of their vehicles, the troops found radios, sat-phones, weapons, and several bags of rock samples, many of which contained seams of gold. As they got closer to the cavern, they could feel that the ground was still trembling, and they decided to remain at a safe distance until it had settled. When it was deemed safe to continue, Captain Shao’s men arrived at the cavern first, and could not believe how much of the mountain side was blown apart. The special forces team slowly picked their way around the debris, and dead bodies on the surface, but the edge of the collapsed cavern seemed too fragile to venture near it. They decided to wait until further advise and instructions could be given. A few minutes later, Captain Shao and Inspector Ning arrived at the scene.

‘From the look of this Inspector Ning, I cannot see there being any survivors.’

‘I think you are correct captain, and when your men have completed a full search, then we will arrange for specialists to come and assess the damage. Also, to see if we can get into that hole.’

‘I will alert HQ at once.’

There was a lot of dust in the air, so Captain Shao had to go to a clear area to make contact with his headquarters.

‘Bravo-Charlie two to Harbin HQ – over.’

There was a long pause, so, he tried again.

‘Bravo-Charlie two to Harbin HQ – over.’

‘Harbin HQ to Bravo-Charlie two – come in – over.’

‘Harbin HQ – we are now at the side of the Baikal Shan Mountain, and there is now a huge hole where the side of the mountain should be. There are bodies everywhere and an unbelievable amount of debris from the triads operation. As yet we are not sure what it was they were after. We cannot get close to the edge of the crater, and need specialist help to assist us – over.’

‘Very well Bravo-Charlie two – we will get a team to you as soon as possible – over and out.’

Captain Shao discussed their next move with Inspector Ning.

‘I cannot see anyone getting out alive from all that inspector.’

‘I agree, and we shall have to wait until the specialists arrive to ensure it is safe to continue... meanwhile, we should search the area around the crater that is safe, but don’t take any risks.’

‘Copy that inspector.’

As it was dark, Captain Shao decided to set up camp at the helicopter LZ, and wait for the other troops to arrive. Three hours later troops arrived by helicopter and landed at the same LZ. Captain Shao gave the officer in charge a full

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report, and they decided to wait until morning before continuing the search. Inspector Ning realised that there was not much he could do to help.

‘Captain. Could you arrange for the helicopter to take me and my men to Harbin? I want to interview the geologists before returning back here.’

‘Of course, inspector, and I will come with you as I want to meet Captain Masters.’

Harbin

Four hours later the train pulled into Harbin station, where they were met by James Thornton, several police cars and an ambulance. Brad and Dylan were taken to hospital in the ambulance, whilst James and Jenny followed behind in a police car. At the hospital in Harbin, the Chinese government ensured that armed guards would be positioned to watch over the trio, and to watch for possible triad attacks. Then, following overnight hospital treatment Jenny was deemed well enough to leave. She only had minor cuts and bruises, and Dylan’s bullet wound in his thigh had passed through flesh only, which was treated with no major damage, and given morphine for the pain. The rest of his wounds were treated, and it was possible that he would be given permission to leave later that day. As James and Jenny waited in one of the hospital lounges, James informed her of Brads injuries.

‘An operation was required to remove the bullet in his shoulder, which was quite close to an artery, but it all went well and he is recovering. He should be allowed to leave the hospital soon.’

James had followed their progress whilst they were in hospital, and taken care of everything, providing toiletries, new clothes, and even a good malt whisky for Dylan, to make sure they were ready to face the world again. Jenny

updated James of the triad involvement, and their findings in the cavern. She was sure that Chang would be going after the gold in the cavern, and that he could destroy the environment for the creatures living there. She pleaded with James to get the Chinese authorities to act quickly. James reassured Jenny that he would take care of it, and began making some phone calls. A message was sent to Captain Shao and Inspector Ning, that the geologists were safe and had been taken to Harbin hospital. The men were keen to meet, and talk with Captain Masters, as they felt he had a lot of information about Chang and his gunmen. When they arrived at Harbin military base, a police car was waiting for them, and soon, with lights flashing and sirens blazing, the police car arrived at the hospital. More police were waiting for them at the entrance, and took Captain Shao and Inspector Ning to see the geologists.

Jenny was talking with James Thornton in the corridor when Captain Shao and Inspector Ning arrived. He spoke in Chinese and introduced themselves.

‘Hello! I am Inspector Yan Ning from the police anti-crime unit, and this is Captain Shao from the military.’ James answered, as he was fluent in Mandarin.

‘Greetings to you both... Let me introduce ourselves... I am James Thornton from the British embassy in Beijing, and this is...’

He did not get the chance to finish his sentence, as Inspector Ning interrupted him, and he shook Jenny’s hand firmly, and spoke in clear English.

‘This is Jennifer Brambles from the British Geological Research team.... I know all about you, and it has been very interesting following your journey. This is Captain Shao from the Chinese Special Forces Unit.’

Jenny was taken aback a little, but politely smiled and acknowledged the men, before replying.

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‘We knew that your government were trying to help us, but it has been very difficult trying to evade the triads.’
Inspector Ning continued.

‘Did you meet their leader? If so, what was his name?’

‘Yes, we were his prisoners, until we managed to escape...His name is Chang.’

Inspector Ning clapped his hands in euphoria as he knew that it was Chang behind all this.

‘I have been trying to capture Chang and his gang for years, but each time, he has eluded me.... I am pleased that he is dead.’

Jenny grimaced.

‘We are not sure that he is dead... until you find his body that is... You had better talk with Dylan.’

Captain Shao entered the conversation, and also spoke in clear English.

‘Ah! Yes! Captain Dylan Masters... is he alright, and can we talk with him?’

James Thornton spoke to a passing doctor.

‘Excuse me, but can these gentlemen speak with Dylan Masters? ... He is in that room over there.’

The doctor looked at the chart outside the room, and opened the door to see if Dylan was awake. He was, and sitting on the bed trying get his clothes on. The doctor beckoned the men over to him, and opened the door fully.

‘As you can see...Mr Masters is getting ready to leave. So, it will be fine for you to talk to him.’

Jenny was first in the room and ran to give Dylan a big hug.

‘Oh! Dylan. I am so pleased that you are awake... but you should not be getting dressed! Please stay in bed until you have been given a thorough examination.’

Dylan laughed.

‘It will take more than one bullet to keep me in hospital... I am fine Jenny, and I want to leave as soon as possible.’

Jenny turned and introduced the two men.

'Dylan! This is Inspector Ning from the police anti-crime unit, and this is Captain Shao from the Chinese Special Forces unit... They want to speak with you... and they both speak good English.'

The men shook Dylan's hand carefully, as they did not want to cause him any pain, even though he was pumped up with morphine. Captain Shao spoke first.

'You are Captain Dylan Masters, formerly of the British Army SAS unit... is that correct?'

Dylan listened, and was amazed that he knew all about him. He replied.

'Woah! Steady on... I have been retired from active duty for a long time, and I only train soldiers now.'

Captain Shao continued.

'Captain Masters, I am also a special-forces commander, and it is a privilege to meet you. I have been following your trail across the mountain and through the forest, and you always managed to evade the triads chasing you... Not to mention leaving a trail of several bodies along the way.'

Dylan smiled as he was not used to such praise.

'Thank you, Captain, but as you know very well... when your life is in danger, then you either do something about it... or you die.'

Inspector Ning asked.

'Mr Masters. You seem to have learned a lot about Chang and his men... What is your assessment of the situation now that it seems to be over?'

Dylan squirmed a little as he sat on the edge of the bed, as Jenny was trying to help him to button-up his shirt.

'Inspector... Chang is a very clever and devious man, and I never trusted him for one moment. He is utterly ruthless, and if it wasn't for the fact that we knew where the gold was... he would have killed us.'

Inspector Ning listened carefully to Dylan's words.

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‘Mr Masters. You said that Chang is a clever and devious man... Does that mean you think he might still be alive?’

‘I do inspector... Until I see his body, then I think that man could escape from a nuclear bomb.’

Inspector Ning smiled, as he realised that he and Dylan were on the same wavelength.

‘I agree with you Mr Masters, as I too have had many dealings with Chang, and he has always eluded us too.... I would like you to join forces with us to ensure this particular triad order has been eliminated... Is that OK with you?’

‘It is Inspector Ning... because, if he is alive, then he will continue to chase us until we are all dead, as I think that is part of their code of honour.’

‘You are correct Mr Masters, and I think it will be safer for you to work with us until we are certain.... I will arrange a police escort to be with you at all times. When you get to your hotel, we will come and discuss tactics together.’

Dylan shook Ning’s hand.

‘Very good inspector, that suits me perfectly.’

Captain Shao and Inspector Ning left the hospital, to make their arrangements.

When they finished changing into new clothes, Dylan and Jenny were driven by James, back to the city centre where they were booked into a hotel and given time to freshen up. At all times they were followed by armed police, which made Dylan feel more conspicuous, as he would much rather blend into the background. Later that evening, during dinner in the hotel restaurant, the atmosphere became more relaxed. The stresses and strains of the past few days had finally begun to ease as Jenny, looking at the menu, and jokingly said

‘I could eat anything except beans and stew.’

Dylan was still concerned about the triads, and the fact that armed police were watching over them, which didn’t give

him much reassurance. James tried his best to alleviate his concern, but he could tell he was waiting his time. The meal was eaten mostly in silence, and then Jenny turned to James and frowned.

‘James. Has Jung’s family been told?’

‘Yes, they were informed immediately we found out. However, we did not fully explain how he died, only that the earth tremors caused his death.’

‘What about Jenkins family? Are they safe?’

James replied.

‘Yes! They are all safe and well... A Special Forces unit went in and rescued them... They killed two of them, but there was one woman who was forced to help them as her own family in China was being used to force her to work for them.’

Jenny was disgusted.

‘That is terrible, and there seems to be no depths that these triads would sink to get what they want.’

She paused.

‘Is her family in China safe now?’

James replied.

‘Inspector Ning has given me an update. They are safe, and been taken to another part of China, and if the woman cooperates with the Chinese government, she may well be released too.’

Dylan was concerned.

‘Yeah! But they won’t stop looking for her and her family until they are dead... Some triad groups will not be put off, and will not accept defeat in any form.’

Jenny thought about Dylan’s words very carefully, and he could see from her expression the result. She then looked at him.

‘You know! Don’t you!’

James could see the expression on their faces and wondered.

‘What are you two on about?’

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Dylan was quiet and allowed Jenny to explain.

‘Dylan thinks that the triads, and specifically Chang, have been chasing us for a reason, and they will not give up until we are dead.... No matter where we travel to.’

James did not agree.

‘No! All the triads that came after you are dead... They must be!’

Dylan was convinced that was not the case.

‘Have you found Chang’s body? He is the one with the personal vendetta against us, and until we know he is dead.... Then our lives are at risk.’

James tried to ease their doubts.

‘Armed guards will be with you the whole time you are in China, and I shall inform MI6 in the UK of your fears, and they will provide a security detachment.’

Jenny seemed happier knowing that, but Dylan was not, and began to formulate a plan.

When they finished dinner, Dylan and Jenny both decided to return to their rooms, as the events of the last few days had begun to catch up with them. James bid them goodnight and they were each followed to their rooms by armed police. A knowing glance from Jenny advised Dylan that they should stay in their own rooms, for tonight at least.

‘Goodnight!’

Jenny said as she entered her room, looking over her shoulder towards Dylan.

‘Goodnight Jenny... Bang on the wall if you have a problem.’

Jenny got undressed, showered and went to bed, where she fell into a deep sleep very quickly. Dylan, though could not sleep, and took a couple of whiskies from the bottle James had brought him. He then lay on the bed fully clothed, but his body needed time to recover, and eventually he drifted off. James stayed in the restaurant and made a phone call to

update the British Embassy of the latest situation. He was told that following the investigation at the cavern, they were to return to Beijing for a de-briefing with the Chinese government. After the phone call, he made the flight reservations, and then went to his room. Armed police kept watch throughout the night, but there were no incidents.

Next morning after breakfast, they were met at the hotel by Inspector Ning and four of his team.

‘Good morning, Captain Masters.’

Dylan did not like formalities.

‘Please, call me Dylan... Are you coming along to the cavern site today?’

‘Yes. I am Dylan, as I am interested to see what was so special about it. Captain Shao has gone on ahead, and there is a team of specialists with him that will assess if it is safe to enter the cavern crater... It seemed to be too dangerous when I was there last.’

Jenny seemed concerned.

‘I only hope that some of the creatures were saved, as they have been there a long time undisturbed.’

Inspector Ning was shocked.

‘What do you mean...creatures? We did not see anything other than a few triad bodies.’

Jenny explained.

‘The place was a perfect environment for large, freshwater crocodiles, that lived close to the hot springs. Yes, they killed people, but only because they intruded on them.... But I fear the explosion will have killed them.’

‘Oh! I see... I am sure a team will be able to get into parts of the cavern during their investigations.’

Jenny gave a warning.

‘Then they had better be careful, because they are twice the size of normal crocs’ and very fast.’

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Police escort vehicles took them to Harbin airport, where they were flown by helicopter to the cavern by the Chinese military, sent to assist the investigation team. Dylan and Jenny knew the area well, and it would save time helping the authorities to piece together what had happened. As they approached the area from the air, they could see the devastation caused by the explosions, as there were many areas where the ground had sunk, with fallen trees everywhere for almost a mile. Once they had landed, they were greeted by the officer in charge, taken to a large military tent and shown a map of the area. One of the Chinese officials took them to a military field laboratory, and a military scientist explained their findings.

‘The recovered rock samples from the cavern are very valuable, not just for the seams of gold in them, but we believe there are traces of other minerals and rare earth elements in the samples.’

The scientist laid out some of the samples onto the table.

‘I shall be recommending to our government that we should begin more detailed research of the area, but from a safer part of the mountain next summer. We feel it is not safe at the moment, and want to leave the ground to settle before we investigate further.’

Jenny asked the official.

‘Did you find anything else...survivors... human or animal?’

The official looked quizzically at Jenny and replied.

‘No...nothing could have survived those explosions and earth tremors, and if there are any bodies, then they are buried under tons of rock... come and see for yourself, the volume of destruction to the forest and part of the mountain is immense.’

They followed the man out of the tent, and spent time looking around the area, which was unrecognizable from the last time they were there. Dylan and Jenny assisted the

government officials, trying to pinpoint the exact location of the cavern and river exit, but it was impossible to be sure, as the whole landscape had altered. Dylan made his way to the steep cliffs and looked down to the river which was still flowing out of the mountain. Jenny picked up pieces of paper blowing across the ground. When she looked at them more closely, she saw they were pages from Jenkins note book, and part of a cigarette packet. The cigarettes were the brand Chang smoked and she wondered if he was in the cavern when it imploded. Dylan wondered the same, and scanned the horizon. Then stopped to look at one point where he was convinced he saw a glint of sunlight reflecting off a pair of binoculars.

‘Someone is watching us!’

Dylan said to himself, but did not want to stress Jenny. She was looking at Jenkins diagrams and notes, and recalled the moments in the cavern they shared with Professor Jenkins. A tear trickled down her cheek as she placed the notes into her pocket. Her mind then drifted to the creatures who, although they killed a lot of people, should have been allowed to live in their own peaceful environment. She shared her thoughts with Dylan.

‘Those creatures should never have been disturbed Dylan... They should’ve been kept a secret.’

Dylan agreed and could see how much it affected Jenny.

‘Yes! Jenny, but someone would have found them eventually. Maybe, now that the government are aware of such creatures, they will investigate other mountains and set up private sanctuaries for them.’

This seemed to please Jenny.

‘I never thought there could be others! ... I hope you are right Dylan, and that some good will come out of all of this.’ Dylan continued.

‘I am sure, that if there are any valuable assets, the scientist will surely discover them next summer. It will help fund

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further research and provide protection for whatever is out there.’

At the edge of the forest, the man with the binoculars looking at Dylan and Jenny, slowly lowered them and lit a cigarette. Chang had somehow survived, and was more determined than ever that he would kill Dylan and Jenny. As he ran away from the explosions, Chang fell and rolled quite quickly down the grassy mountain into deep bushes that broke his fall, and fortunately, were not far from his vehicle. His driver was about to leave when he saw his boss, and they sped away as fast as they could before the cavern, and surrounding mountainside collapsed. The only injury Chang sustained, were minor cuts and bruises, mainly because of the bulk of fat that protected his skeletal body. It did not take him long to communicate with his headquarters in Beijing who, although were very disappointed with the outcome, allowed him to complete his vendetta. However, he told them that the gold was definitely there, and that he had several large samples of rock in his vehicle with gold in them. He further told them, that his spies had found out that they had a year before the government would begin to excavate the site again. This pleased his bosses, and Chang was allocated more men, money and equipment to complete his work. One of which, was to kill the westerners.

A few hours later at the disaster site, when they had searched almost every square inch and found nothing more than fragments of equipment, clothing and scraps of paper, they went back to the helicopter to return to Harbin. As it climbed into the air, they looked out of the helicopter windows down to the ground below. The devastation looked worse leaving than it did when they arrived, and they wondered how long it would take nature to restore the countryside. The journey back to Harbin was carried out in

silence, only interrupted by flight instructions between the pilot and air traffic control. Upon arrival at Harbin Airport a car was ready to take them to the hospital to see Brad. When they got to the hospital, the bed Brad had occupied was empty and freshly made up. As Dylan and Jenny stood puzzled as to his whereabouts, Brad suddenly came bursting through the door.

‘Hi guys! Where’ve you been? I’ve been discharged for ages waiting for you to pick me up.’

Brad said with a big grin, dressed in only a thin theatre gown.

‘I’ve had to keep myself amused in the meantime, with some cultural liaising.’

He added, patting one of the trim Chinese nurses on the bottom, and she scurried away giggling. Jenny gave him a withering look.

‘But you were having surgery Brad, so we thought you would be in here for days.’

Then she rushed up to give him a great big hug.

‘Naw...I’m fine. I can rest just as well in a hotel as I can here...mind you the scenery is not too bad.’

Brad looked to see if the nurse had returned. Then James Thornton stepped forward and took out new clothes from a shopping bag.

‘Here Brad, I got these for you...put them on and let’s get out of here.’

Whilst Brad put on the fresh clothes behind a screen, they updated him of the explosions and tremors in the cavern, and the rock samples. They left the hospital and went on to the hotel, though Brad did manage to get a phone number from the pretty nurse before leaving.

As they arrived at the hotel in Harbin, Dylan’s eyes were everywhere, and kept looking for escape routes and anyone that looked suspicious. As James booked them into the

hotel, Dylan asked one of the other receptionists all about the hotel, its location and access to transport links. He was not going to take any chances should the triad gangs decide to pay them a visit. The female receptionist was used to tourists asking strange questions and seemed to have a prepared speech ready for them. She spoke with quite a clear English accent.

‘The hotel is called Shangri-La, Harbin, and is located on the banks of the Songhua River, near the Central Business District, overlooking the beautiful Songhua River scenery and urban scenery. The hotel has direct access to high-speed railway stations and is about 30 minutes’ drive from Harbin Taiping International Airport. If you need to go into the city, then a hotel bus is available for you.’

Dylan was pleased for the thorough appraisal, and thanked her in his best Mandarin that Jenny had taught him.

‘Xièxiè’

That evening after dinner, James spoke to them.

‘In two days, you will be flying to Beijing for another debriefing at the British Embassy, and then the Chinese Governments Office...When that’s finished, we should be able to get you home...How does that sound?’

The three of them looked at him, raised up their wine glasses and toasted to the best news they’d had all day. Dylan however, could still not resist peering over his shoulder at the police guards, and anyone else in the restaurant that looked suspicious. When they were leaving the hotel restaurant to go to their rooms, Dylan held back James Thornton.

‘James, I need a weapon, as whilst we are in China, we are more vulnerable than in England...Can you get me something?’

James frowned and did not really want to get into trouble with the Chinese authorities.

Donald Wraith

'I am not sure Dylan... I will make some discrete enquiries and see what I can do.'

Dylan patted James on the shoulder.

'Good man James... but make it soon, as I have a very uneasy feeling.'

Jenny saw Dylan talking to James, and approached him cautiously.

'Dylan... your conversation with James looked serious. Is there anything Brad and I should know?'

Dylan took hold of Jenny's arm and wore a false smile as he led her to the elevator.

'I just informed him that I want a little more insurance until we fly to Beijing.'

Jenny frowned.

'You mean that you want a gun!'

Dylan put a finger to her lips.

'Walls have ears everywhere in China.... Be careful Jenny. Now. Try and get a good night's sleep.'

CHAPTER 16

Head of the Snake

Chang arrived at Harbin and was provided with a luxurious house to stay in for a few days, as the owners were... on holiday. He immediately began organising his men.

‘Find out which hotel they are staying in, and I want to know how many men are guarding them.’

His lead henchman acknowledged and scurried off. Then Chang was shown to a large ensuite bedroom where a beautiful Chinese doctor and two maids were ready to attend to his injuries, bathe him and ensure he was comfortable. He further demanded.

‘Get me some food! I’m starving.’

Chang was determined to find the westerners, and spent several hours looking at the hotels on a map. He deduced that they would be staying in one of the bigger hotels near the Songhua River, and that there should be a significant police presence at the hotel. He didn’t doubt that his men would find the hotel eventually, but he also knew that they didn’t have a sharp and analytical mind as his. Chang made a phone call to them.

‘Go to the hotels along the Songhua River first, and look for police, as they will be guarding the westerners. When you

have found the hotel, let me know everything about it and their room numbers.'

The triad leader in Harbin, Li Jie, was most put out by Chang's orders, as he knew where to look too, and wanted to prove his worth. He had great ambitions and intended to work in Beijing, and eventually become a big triad boss himself. He was only twenty-five years old, and knew he had a lot to learn before he could gain a respected reputation within the organisation. However, until then he had to wait, but this was a good opportunity for him. He answered Chang with forced humility, as he knew that Chang had a lot of powerful connections in Beijing.

'Very good boss, we shall go there at once and report back later today.'

Chang lit a cigarette.

'Be sure that you do that.'

A little later that evening, James knocked on Dylan's door, and once Dylan viewed him through the door spyglass, he let him in. James was carrying a black attaché case, which he laid on the bed. Upon opening it, he produced a Walther P99 hand gun complete with six clips and a silencer.

'I managed to obtain this from one of our MI6 agents... the UK government have sent a couple of agents over to ensure that you and your team are kept safe until you return to the UK... They are in the hotel already, and I am sure you will find them when you need them.'

Dylan smiled and stripped down the gun to check that all the parts were satisfactory.

'Wow! I didn't think that we were that important James... What did you tell them.'

James smiled too.

'I didn't really tell them anything they didn't already know. They think that it would enhance political relationships if you were all safely taken back to the UK.'

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Dylan assessed what he really meant.

‘So, what you are saying is... that the Chinese authorities do not want me to have any running street battles with the triads, and for us to go away nice and quietly.’

James grimaced a little at the simple, but correct assessment.

‘Exactly! Dylan.’

Dylan looked out of the window in his room on the fourteenth floor, and could see the hotel entrance, Songhua River, where a variety of boats moored up along the banks, and a large leisure park close by. Also, he could just see an overhead railway that ran from the city centre to the other side of the river. He turned to James.

‘All we can do now James, is watch and wait... I will keep the others in the hotel until it is time to leave for the airport.’ James folded up the attaché case and left the room.

‘I will see you at dinner tonight, Dylan.’

Following Chang’s instincts, Li Jie and his men soon located the hotel. They remained in their car and drove past the hotel several times, to ensure it was the correct one, before they reported back to Chang. They noted several policemen were positioned front and back of the hotel, which was enough for Li Jie to investigate further. An hour later, Li Jie arranged for a woman to pose as a maid and befriend one of the hotel maids, until she found out which rooms the westerners were staying in. The hotel maid was keen to tell all as she thought it all very intriguing, and nothing like it had ever happened in the hotel before.

‘It is all very mysterious, and the police have been here all day.’

The female triad encouraged her to say more.

‘It must be very interesting, and I wonder who they are looking for?’

The maid corrected her.

'Oh! No! They are not looking for anyone... I was told that they are protecting three westerners until they leave for the airport in a day or so.'

'So, which rooms are they in? I would like to see them... As they must be very interesting people.'

The maid thought for a few seconds.

'Oh! That's easy... they are on the fourteenth floor in three adjacent rooms... I know that because I saw a policeman outside their rooms when I was cleaning.'

The female triad did not stay for anymore gossip, and reported back to Li Jie. He was pleased with the information, and wanted to take care of the westerners immediately, but he knew that Chang would want to be informed first. When he finished his report, Chang paced up and down the room smoking a cigarette and pondering what to do next. Li Jie interrupted his train of thought.

'Boss, let me and my men go in there and take them out... ***it should be simple!***

Chang was angry at the interruption.

'Shut up! Let me think... Stupid boy! There are too many police, and we have to be more.... more subtle.'

Li Jie was not happy at being called a stupid boy, but he kept quiet.'

After quite a few minutes had passed, Chang had thought of a plan.

'You say that they will be leaving for the airport tomorrow, or the next day?'

'Yes boss.'

'OK! Here's what we will do...'

Chang and Li Jie sat around a table and discussed Chang's plan, although Chang did all the talking. Two hours later, Li Jie set off to implement the plan, and was to keep in constant communication with Chang at all times.

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At the hotel, Dylan, Jenny and Brad were getting ready for dinner in their rooms. Brad was most upset that he was not allowed out of the hotel, as he had been texting his nurse all afternoon, but she was not allowed to visit him. Jenny used the hotel facilities to enjoy a spa, massage and to have her hair and nails done. Dylan meantime, kept looking out of his window for any unusual occurrences, but there were none. However, by late afternoon a dark limousine arrived at the hotel, which was not unusual for a 5-star hotel, and Dylan noted that it was a newlywed couple. The woman was in her white bridal gown, and the man wore a dark suit with a large button hole flower. They were covered in confetti, and as they got out of the car, they paused for photographs, taken by two men and a woman, who were in a second car. A knock came to Dylan's door and he observed that it was Jenny before he opened the door. She rushed in and went to his window.

'Dylan! Come and see...a bride and groom have just arrived at the hotel, and she looks wonderful.... Come! We must go and see them.'

Jenny grabbed Dylan's hand and tried to drag him out of the room, but he pulled her back.

'Wait Jenny! Don't you think this is a bit strange? ... For me, a little too coincidental.'

Jenny seemed perplexed.

'Why would you say that... it is just an ordinary young couple on their wedding day.'

'Yes! But it is only Wednesday, and normally, honeymooners would arrive at the weekend... I am just trying to be careful of anything out of the ordinary.'

Jenny thought for a few seconds, then decided.

'Well, I think there are enough security people in the hotel to protect us, and I just want a peek at her dress... it's what every woman wants to do.'

Dylan let her go and replied.

‘Go ahead, but I am staying here, and I shall be watching very closely Jenny... Just be careful.’

In the hotel lobby a small crowd had gathered, mostly by staff and hotel guests, as the couple came into the hotel. They paused for more photographs, and one of the photographers went to the reception desk to book them in. The female receptionist was very taken by the event and admired the bride, who looked radiant and very beautiful. The photographer gave their names.

‘Mr and Mrs Li Jie are the names you are looking for.’ The receptionist stopped looking at the bride and began to look through the register.

‘I am sorry, but I cannot see a booking under Li Jie?’ The man leaned forward.

‘It was a telephone booking made late this afternoon, so it may not be in the register yet.’

The hotel manager appeared, and interrupted the receptionist.

‘I will take care of this.... I know all about it, and I took the booking myself today.’

The manager brushed the girl aside and completed the registration. Then he handed a keycard over to the photographer, who continued taking photos.’

The receptionist tried to make sense of the late booking for the bridal suite, as she was told it had to be booked months in advance.

‘Sir? I cannot see this booking for the bridal suite anywhere. Is it all correct?’

The manager returned to his office, and scolded the girl for asking too many questions.

‘Leave it...I have taken care of everything.’

Jenny arrived at the hotel lobby and moved round to get the best location to see the bride’s dress. She took several photos on her phone, and smiled broadly as the bride enjoyed the attention. Jenny stood next to an American

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woman, who was staying at the hotel for a vacation. Jenny began a conversation with her, and the woman was pleased to hear an English voice. The woman admired the dress.

‘The bride is very beautiful, and her dress is to die for.’ Jenny laughed and replied.

‘I hope it doesn’t come to that, but yes, I agree with you... she looks gorgeous.’

The American woman paused as she looked at the groom.

‘The guy doesn’t seem too happy though...he keeps looking everywhere except at his beautiful bride.’

Jenny remembered Dylan’s words, and began to take a closer look at the couple, and also at the photographers.

‘Maybe he is just a little overawed by the whole occasion...some men are like that.’

The American woman seemed sceptical.

‘Mmmm! Not the men I know... they would not stop looking at her... The guy has not kissed her once during this photo session.... Very strange, if you ask me.’

Jenny was pleased to have been woken to her senses by the American woman’s observations. Jenny thought.

‘She would make a good detective.’

Jenny continued taking more photographs, but focussed on their faces, expressions and more of the three photographers. She went back to Dylan’s room.

‘Dylan! I hate to say it... but you were right. I think that wedding party is a sham, and I have taken photos of everyone. Maybe it will give us clues as to what we can do to prove it. They looked closely at the photos, and Dylan agreed with Jenny.

‘Something is definitely not right about this, and we have to be very careful over the next few hours.... I will talk to James, and you wait in your room... Let Brad know what’s happening too.’

At dinner that evening, Dylan Brad and Jenny met James in the cocktail bar and chatted. They noticed that the wedding party was already there, and appeared to be enjoying several bottles of champagne. The wedding party did not make eye contact with anyone, and acted as if they were enjoying themselves. Dylan noticed large bags that the photographers had at their feet.

There were quite a few other hotel guests in the room, and there were a lot of conversations going on. The wedding party were sat at a lounge table next to an open French door. Everything seemed to be normal as Dylan and the others chatted. After about thirty minutes, many of the guests had finished their cocktails and were heading for the dining room. Dylan laughed into Jenny's ear, but also whispered to her.

'Now Jenny! Take Brads arm and go into the dining room.' Jenny gave a false laugh and then gently grabbed Brads arm, who seemed a little bemused. Jenny looked sternly into his eyes, but held her smile.

'Bradley darling! Take me to the dining room I am absolutely famished.'

They walked slowly out of the room, and had just got out, when two of the photographers went for their bags to take out semi-automatic weapons. However, before they had chance to use them, the two MI6 agents came through the open French doors and pointed their guns at the faces of all the men. At the same time, four armed police came into the room and quickly pointed their guns at all the triads. Li Jie, who acted as the groom, was fuming and went for his handgun, but one of the MI6 agents hit Li Jie's hand with his gun, and broke his thumb. Li Jie winced in agony, but was then taken to the floor by police, and the other triads were handcuffed.

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Dylan and James stood quietly at the cocktail bar sipping their drinks as if nothing had happened. Dylan moved to look into Li Jie's face as he passed... then a shot rang out.

'! Bang!'

A bullet came through a window and hit James in the side of his body. Everyone dived for cover as more shots were fired. Dylan grabbed hold of Li Jie and took cover away from the window. He glanced quickly to see where the shots were fired from and shouted to the MI6 agents.

'Sniper! On the next building...he is on the roof... see if you can get to him.'

The agents nodded, and went stealthily out of the hotel to inform the security police where the sniper was. They immediately deployed men to surround the building next to the hotel. Dylan held on to Li Jie, as the others were taken away by the police. James was made comfortable until an ambulance arrived. Brad saw Dylan and asked.

'We heard breaking glass... is everything alright?'

Jenny saw James had been shot and went over to him.

'James? What on earth happened to you?'

James was in pain, but was alert and trying to stem the blood with a bar towel. He replied.

'Dylan said there was a sniper on the roof of the next building, and the police have gone to get him... You were right to warn us of these people.'

Jenny replied, whilst looking over to Dylan.

'Dylan was the one who was concerned that it looked out of place, and warned me. Ha! But it was an American woman who convinced me that it was a sham wedding.'

Dylan took Li Jie out of the room and into the manager's office, Brad followed. The manager was sat at his desk shaking with fear. Dylan asked him.

'What is the problem? We have them in handcuffs now.'

The manager's voice was trembling as he replied.

'I had to do what they told me... They have my family, and said they would kill them if I did not accept the wedding booking.'

Dylan issued one word.

'Chang!'

Dylan informed James just as he was being taken away by the ambulance crew.

'James, it's Chang... this is his work, and he has the hotel manager's family... probably at the manager's own house... can you arrange for the police to rescue them?'

James felt more comfortable after being given some morphine.

'Of course, Dylan, but what will you do now?'

Dylan put on a determined expression.

'I am going to end this and cut off the head of the snake.'

Dylan went back to Brad, who was holding Li Jie, and took him up to his room. Inside, Dylan tied Li Jie to a chair, ensuring his hands were visible. Li Jie moaned and groaned the whole time, but Dylan ignored his acting. He grabbed his greasy hair and pulled his face back.

'You are going to tell me where Chang is hiding.'

Li Jie pretended that he did not understand.

'No English! No English!'

At that moment Jenny knocked on his door, and Brad let her in. When she saw Li Jie tied up, she wanted to know more.

'Why is he here Dylan... He should have been taken away by the police.'

Dylan, who was still holding Li Jie's hair said calmly.

'This guy is going to tell me where Chang is hiding. He says he does not speak English.... But you speak Chinese, so, tell him.'

Jenny could see how determined Dylan was and spoke to Li Jie.

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'You had better tell him what he wants to know... Where is Chang?'

Li Jie shook his head negatively. Dylan grabbed hold of Li Jie's broken thumb and bent it back.

'Aargh!'

He winced in agony, and Dylan did it again.

'Aargh!'

Dylan said to Jenny.

'Tell him that I will keep doing this until he tells me everything.'

Jenny did not have to interpret as Li Jie answered in clear English.

'I will take you to him. But he will kill us all.'

'Not if I kill him first.'

Dylan answered. Then he took out a map of the city from the tourist information rack in the room. When he opened it up, he asked Li Jie to point to the exact location of Chang.

'I will kill you very slowly if you do not tell me the truth.'

Li Jie pointed to a wealthy residential area on the edge of the city, and Dylan assessed it to be about twenty minutes away by car.

'Good, here's what we are going to do.'

Dylan contacted Inspector Ning, updated him, and he arrived at the hotel within fifteen minutes. They all met in the hotel manager's office, and Inspector Ning was not surprised to see the condition Li Jie was in.

'I assume you must have obtained some important information from this man.'

Dylan was grim faced and thinking rapidly.

'Yes, inspector, and we now have a chance to finish this once and for all... do you understand?'

'I do Dylan, and I can see from your expression that you already have a plan.'

Dylan laid out the map of the city, and pointed to the location where Li Jie said the house was that Chang was using.

‘I would prefer to use the two UK special agents sent to protect us, but as this is as much your problem as it is mine, then we should work together.’

Inspector Ning smiled.

‘I agree... explain your plan, then my men will follow.’

It was getting late and very dark, by the time Dylan had updated Inspector Ning, then two plain police cars took them to the location of Chang’s house. Dylan, Inspector Ning, and one of Ning’s men were in the lead car, whilst the second car contained Li Jie being guarded by three of Ning’s men. They parked the cars about a block away from the house, then Dylan spoke to Inspector Ning.

‘Have your men wait in the car and keep an eye on Li Jie whilst you and I reconnoitre the house.’

Dylan gave Inspector Ning, Li Jie’s hand gun and winked.

‘He is still handcuffed, and here is his gun... any trouble from him and you can shoot him... But I would bend his broken thumb again first before I shot him.’

Inspector Ning went over to the second car, and informed the detective sitting next to Li Jie, and the man grabbed hold of Li Jie’s thumb.

‘Do you mean this thumb, Inspector?’

Li Jie screamed in agony, and Dylan smiled.

‘Nice one Inspector. Your men are quick learners.’

Inspector Ning opened the trunk of his car and took out several bullet-proof vests. He handed one to Dylan.

‘You had better put this on, just in case Chang is ready for us.’

‘Very well inspector.’

All the men screwed silencers onto their handguns, and slowly made their way to the house where Li Jie said Chang

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was using as a base. Dylan was surprised that Inspector Ning didn't say something about him having a gun, which made Dylan smile. It was a big house with large open gardens, and a six-foot perimeter wall all the way round. One of the detectives had a set of night vision field binoculars, and he could clearly see the guards outside the house. He spoke good English as he updated them.

'There are eight men around the house as far as I can tell, and they are all spread out across the grounds. One is at the front door, and I assume another will be at the rear, and three each side of the house. Dylan took a look to confirm the same. He pointed to the detective and Inspector Ning.

'OK, we will get to the perimeter wall and on my count take out the three nearest guards, you take the left, inspector take the centre and I will take the right-hand guard. Then we will go to the house and take out the others.... Inspector, your men can take out the three guards on the other side of the house.'

The detective and Inspector Ning nodded that they understood. Each one went to a suitable location by the wall, and positioned themselves to wait for Dylan's signal.

Dylan nodded, and the silenced guns dropped three of the nearest guards.

'Phut! Phut! Phut!'

Then they scaled the wall and ran towards the house. Chang did not have time to install total cctv coverage, and there was only one external camera at the front door. Dylan signalled for the other detectives to take out the guard at the rear of the house and three on the other side, whilst he dealt with the guard at the front door. As the detectives disappeared, Dylan gave a low whistle, which alerted the guard at the front door, and the triad stepped closer to see where the noise was coming from. Dylan, used his knife and the man was dead in an instant. He then went back to the car to fetch Li Jie, ensured he was tied and gagged, then

hurled him over the wall. By the time they reached the house, all the external guards were dead, and the detectives waited for Dylan. Li Jie's gag was removed, and was taken to the front door, where Dylan rang the bell and waited. The guard inside looked at the cctv monitor and saw it was Li Jie. Dylan crouched low behind Li Jie as a guard opened the door.

'Phut! Phut!'

As two silenced rounds from Dylan's gun killed the guard instantly. At the same time, Inspector Ning entered the rear door to the kitchen and took out two other guards who were watching TV. Dylan waited for the detectives to check that all ground floor rooms were empty.

'Clear!'

They whispered to him, and Dylan placed the gag in Li Jie's mouth, then went up the stairs, with Inspector Ning, and the detectives close behind. They stopped, as they could hear music and laughter coming from the bathroom. The detectives checked the other rooms, and returned.

'Clear!'

They whispered.

Dylan held Li Jie in front of him and went to the bathroom door. Inside the bathroom, Chang was enjoying a deep and soapy bath in a large stand-alone bath tub in the middle of the room, and facing the door. Two naked Chinese girls were bathing him, and feeding him grapes from a bowl placed on a table on the left-hand side of the bathtub. A soft Chinese ballad played from Chang's mobile phone, also on the table. When the bathroom door opened, Dylan stepped forward with Li Jie in front of him. Chang was very calm.

'Ah! Mr Dylan... So nice to see you again.'

Dylan quickly scanned the room, but there were no other men there.

'I wish I could say the same Chang.'

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Dylan replied with scorn. The girls screamed as they each picked up a towel and ran out of the room. Chang was smoking a cigarette and grinned at Dylan.

‘You have been a thorn in my side for too long Mr Dylan, but each time I try to remove it... you evade me. We both seem to be able to understand each other’s movements, and that.... it is the little details that are important.... Do you not agree?’

Dylan smiled.

‘I do, and it is those little details that will finish you.’

Dylan fired two quick rounds into Chang’s big belly, and another into his forehead. Chang managed to fire one round from a pistol hidden by the soapsuds into Li Jie, which killed him instantly. However, the bullet passed through Li Jie’s body and hit Dylan, dropping him to the floor. Inspector Ning fired three more shots into Chang and went to the aid of Dylan. The detectives also went to help Dylan, who gave out a big sigh.

‘Ooogh! That stung’

Dylan said as he rose to his feet, and pulled the slug out of his bullet-proof vest.

‘Thanks for the vest inspector... you saved me from a lot of pain.’

Inspector Ning saw the whole thing and wondered how Dylan knew about the hidden gun.

‘Dylan! That was amazing, but... but how, why did you...’ Dylan grinned and explained.

‘Chang said it himself... it is the little details that are important, and I noticed straight away that Chang was too calm, and was using his left hand to smoke his cigarette. I was with him long enough at the cavern to know that he enjoyed a cigarette using his right hand... and so, I assumed he held a gun in his right hand... I just shot him first.’

All Inspector Ning could say was.

‘Wow!’

Inspector Ning's men were amazed how Dylan reacted when he went into the bathroom.

'Dylan, you must have known that Chang would not give up so easily, but you didn't give him a chance.'

Dylan smiled.

'Inspector. You and I both know how devious he could be, and I decided not to give him a chance to squirm his way out... It was either him or me.... Besides, if you look on that table next to the bath tub, you will see a remote-control device... I think that he set charges throughout the house as a security measure.'

Inspector Ning grinned.

'So, he would have shot you, and then set off the explosives to escape yet again.'

'Correct inspector. He would have carefully planned everything.'

'It's a pity, as I would have liked to have taken him alive... we could have gained more information from him, but I am pleased that I was here to witness you killing him... Well done Captain Masters.'

'Please inspector... Dylan is fine., and even if you put Chang in prison, you know he would have escaped with all the contacts he had.'

'You are probably right.'

The local police were alerted by the detectives, and soon the house was full of police. Inspector Ning had a quiet word in Dylan's ear.

'Dylan. You had better give me your gun, then no awkward questions will be asked.'

Dylan just smiled and handed the gun over to him. An hour later, Dylan, Inspector Ning, and the detectives were taken to the main police station for a de-brief before being allowed to return to the hotel. The owners of the house that Chang used were notified, but had to wait until all the explosives were carefully removed from the house, and repairs

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completed before they could move back in. The hotel manager's family were found safe and well with all their captors either killed or arrested. It was the early hours of the morning when they arrived at the hotel, Jenny couldn't sleep, and was pacing up and down in the hotel lobby, and Brad was the same as he kept looking at his phone to see if there were any messages from Dylan. As soon as they stepped out of the cars, Jenny rushed up to Dylan and wrapped her arms around him.

'Dylan! Oh! Dylan! I was so worried... You have been gone a long time...I...I thought... Chang!'

Dylan hugged Jenny, then they walked into the hotel where they met Brad, and he explained everything to them.

'You can rest easy now, as Chang will never look for us again.'

Brad wanted to know more.

'Dylan...Are you sure that Chang is dead? We all know how tricky he can be.'

Inspector Ning heard him.

'Don't worry Brad...Dylan put three bullets into him, and I put another two in... just to be certain he was dead.'

They all managed to had a relaxing evening, and the hotel manager insisted that the detectives stayed in the hotel and he would foot the bill.

'You saved me and my family, and I shall be forever grateful... Please, enjoy your stay.'

The next day, after a very good breakfast, Dylan, Brad, Jenny and the detectives were taken to Harbin airport for their flight to Beijing. They were met at Beijing airport by James Thornton, who had an arm in a sling, but looked well.

'I am pleased to see such happy faces, and I am very pleased of the outcome... Harbin police have sent me a full report.'

Jenny gave him a hug.

‘How are you James, I thought you were still in Harbin hospital?’

‘I managed to use my influence to get me transferred to Beijing last night, and the wound was not serious, but I have to keep my arm immobilised for a day or so.’

Inspector Ning and his men went back to their office, while James took the others to a hotel until their flight back to the UK was confirmed. During the de-briefing in Beijing, the team were thanked for their help, and that a lot of the triad organisation involved, had been arrested both in China and in the UK. They also tracked the phone calls made to Jenkins and his family and with the help of one of the captors, they had made many arrests. The woman, who helped them, Meili Ling, along with her family, were given new identities and relocated to another part of China.

Back at the cavern, the Chinese government had sealed off the area, and the site was declared too dangerous to carry out any internal research. A conservation order was also placed on the area, and only logging activities could take place by government approved companies that were thoroughly vetted. Regular patrols were to take place to ensure the general public were kept well away from the mountain. Scientists began analysing the rock samples taken from Chang, although they agreed to wait until further access could be granted after one year. The government were further convinced, that all large amphibians within the cavern had been destroyed. However, a few days later, when the last of the government troops had left the area, a small cavern remained untouched by the destruction. Inside was a solitary pile of grass and leaves. On closer inspection a tiny sound came from within it, similar to a bird’s chirp, which was quickly followed by another, and another. Eventually the leaves began to move as a small snout emerged from the warm nest. The baby crocs instinctively made for the water,

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as a rivulet trickled close by, heading to a newly formed river out of the mountain. Other babies soon followed, and they all swam towards a sheltered pool in the main river to await a passing meal. There was no hurry, as they had plenty of time.

Meanwhile, Brad returned to the USA, but managed to contact his nurse friend to arrange a meeting. Dylan and Jenny returned to London and promised to keep in touch. Following a tearful farewell, Jenny drove to Derbyshire to inform Emma Jenkins how her husband Allan had died, and that he had drowned, and his body was washed away without trace. She could not describe to her the horrible death he actually suffered, and wanted to protect her from any more trauma. On her journey back to London Jenny received a text from Dylan saying he had purchased two tickets to Cyprus, and was she at all interested. A smile beamed over Jenny's face as she texted back.

'YES'.

They arranged to meet in a London hotel, and over dinner they shared what hopefully were their plans for a life together.

'I understand Dylan, that you have been scarred after losing your family in a car crash travelling to see you. That it caused you to have worked all over the world, never settling in one place for long.'

She paused.

'But are you ready to settle down now? Can you share that time with me?'

Dylan took his time to answer, and then looked deep into her eyes, his face was completely devoid of any emotion. Jenny frowned and waited for his answer. Dylan eventually replied, with a huge grin on his face.

'Hey! We make a good team, but let's just see how it goes Jenny.'

“Typical!”

Jenny responded.

“You men are all the same!”

The mood was softened as they began to discuss the trip to Cyprus, both not really sure if they were doing the right thing. The subject was brought up about the China expedition. Dylan thought long and hard about all the events that had occurred, he then turned to Jenny.

‘I remember the professor telling us at the beginning, that the expedition *should be simple*.... The one thing we found out later was... That it was never **SIMPLE!**’

THE END

It Should be Simple!

Books by Donald Wraith.

