

Aleutian Rogue

WITH

The Amanat

SERIALIZED

Chapter Nineteen

1.

Miserably wet, cold, a stiff wind out of the southwest, driving before it waves of sleet—the day isn't fit for a trash-eating dog. Fatigues soaked, Tanya shivers as she trudges through the knee-high mat of beaten down grass. Is this necessary, this ferrying of supplies to the backside of nowhere, this bivouacking of the double squad? Viktor would say it was; it must be so. She suspects, though, the troops are being deployed as an exercise to persuade GRU Command that Soviet insurgency troops can be projected anywhere. Either that or she, they, are yet to be burned.

She hikes the width of the basin. This south side of Malina Bay is somewhat sheltered by the imposing headland. But in the turbulence above Steep Cape, a pair of ravens tumble in sixty kilometre winds. Such winds will ground her helicopters. The basin is really a poor staging area, but it is her safest choice since it is the only place where her radio traffic won't be intercepted by the Coast Guard's big ear on Chiniak Bay. Under the circumstances, that means the basin is her only choice.

The sleet seems to go right through her pants and shirt. She shivers harder and harder; can't seem to get warm. The tents and stoves haven't arrived yet. So she keeps hiking as she waits for her helicopters.

Removing McPhearson complicated recovering the ivory, but she had no choice, nor much time to prepare. Gradually, with no financial help from Glen Cove, she is taking care of business. Her matter with Littlehaus will only take a couple of hours. Then, she will be free to concentrate on the ivory if the fisherman's vessel doesn't turn up.

Hourly satellite photographs of the Aleutians have been analyzed for the past week. Nothing. The eyes of the Revolution have seen nothing because there is nothing to see. The fisherman was actually lost at sea.

Yes, she knows what Walter told her, but she has been away from him for long enough that her mind has returned to normal. No more visions. No more brightness. No more superstitions. The sounds of her words again produce objects with meanings.

Why, though, couldn't she have been asked for Martian soil? That task would be easier than finding their ivory.

Shivering, but knowing she hasn't the time to spend all day hiking, she begins assembling her directional antenna which must be used within the hour. Assignment to this strike force has placed her a step closer to Mars: instructions will no longer come from Viktor but will be relayed directly from GRU's Southern Ural Command Center via the communications satellite above Severnaya Zemlya.

She glances at her watch. Both helicopters should have rendezvoused with the stern trawler, and be on their way back. Three more trips to the Geese Islands will do it. By morning, weather permitting, the squads should be ready for work, and the factory ship can resume fishing pollock.

Trying to ignore the wet and cold, her shivering and stiff fingers, she works in the midday gloom, and silently curses the blackgray clouds. And command responsibility. How is she to use English-speaking insurgency troops to find ivory? She is certain they are gambit pawns in an international chess game. But if gambit pawns advance far enough, fast enough, they become valuable enough to be supported.

2.

From shooting so many rounds through the unfamiliar .44 Mag, Jay's right wrist aches, hinders him as he throws debris aside, his thoughts of Catherine, his questions ones for which no answers can exist, the vision he had of a son now meaningless. The pram is as he left it. Resurrection Bay is as he left it. Seward is as ugly as ever. And the kicker starts on the second pull.

Despite the surge rolling in from the Pacific, he twists the outboard's throttle wide open. The pram snaps onto step, and planes past the small boat harbor and around the point to the Old Army Dock where the *Coyote*, like the trickster, tugs on her anchor chains, invisible in plain sight.

He kills the kicker as he approaches the *Coyote*, wraps the bowline around a stern cleat, climbs aboard, and feels the deck roll. The weather has rapidly deteriorated. Wind is already forty knots out of the southwest. If he hopes to make Kodiak tomorrow, he will have to pull anchors now, run all night, buck into this blow, and shove that damn ivory down someone's throat.

He checks: the hold has some tusks in it. Three tons worth? that he doesn't know. How heavy are green tusks? Evidently heavier than they look.

Before he drags the pram over the stern, he examines the seagull feather tattletale wedged in the wheelhouse door. It hasn't been disturbed. Either nobody noticed or cared that the boat lay anchored and unattended during the week.

The sun has already disappeared behind the mountains.

The daytank is empty. Stove out. Wheelhouse cold. He starts the main, waits until the recirculating line has carried oil to the daytank, then drops a burning piece of toilet paper into the stove. It lights. And he settles back to wait for the wheelhouse to warm up before he turns on his electronics.

Sleepy, feeling like he's home, like he ought to climb in his bunk, he knows that no sane person would weigh anchor tonight. The same story as at Dutch Harbor a week ago, two weeks ago, whenever he left there. Time has a way of passing without asking permission. But he doesn't give a shit anymore. Just doesn't care. If he makes it, fine. He will have beaten the odds one more time.

His right wrist has stiffened. Wondering if he has developed a flinch, he draws the .44 Mag, empties its cylinder, and dry-fires it, squeezing off pretend round after pretend round at faceless enemies hiding first behind the radar screen, then between the bobbing lights of Seward. His sight picture stays aligned despite which way the *Coyote* rolls as he pulls the trigger again and again.

He pulls the pram aboard, and the anchors up.

His crablights form an eerie, orange-white shell that creeps slowly out to sea like a struggling snail, mostly hidden by blowing fog and the stormy moon. Mountains rising from the beach fill his radar screen; yet to his eye, they appear merely as a dark fold in the black backdrop encompassing the crawling shell. Buffeted by wind, rain, and the driven groundswell, he is alone on the winter sea. And feeling lonely, he switches on both his VHF and single sideband receivers just to listen to the chatter. Skip from crabbers in the Bering five, six, seven hundred miles away flares, then wanes, fading into static. For a second, he hears, "Dist ist Vicmann Command, Vicmann Command," then nothing.

Gore Point shows as an outline of blips on his radar screen when the wind dies suddenly. It is nearly morning, but still dark. To the north, the sky has cleared. The moonlit, snow-covered Kenai Mountains, appearing as white sawteeth silhouetted against a hard black ribbon, seem to step forward, loom massive, cold, then fade as fog again obscures them. But when the fog thins a second time, the whole sky is clear. Stars glitter. Double yellow-green bands of northern lights flicker, flare, form jagged lines above the Kenai Mountains, explode to fill the sky, streaking southward, curving west, illuminating the western horizon, then fading back to the double lines of solid color. They flare again, up, out, arch overhead, then bend west where whitecaps and wind-beaten foam reflect the moonlight.

He listens to the radio chatter and to the swoosh of lapping swells as the auto-pilot holds course for him.

Sunrise comes. The now distant Kenai Mountains turn rosy pink as do the Barren Islands, silhouettes on the horizon ahead. But noon brings low hanging clouds. By two o'clock, the sun is only a spot on the southern horizon. By three, it has set, and dense fog has settled over the Gulf. By five, Shuyak Island is visible on his radar screen, and the wind strengthens. Six, the sea smokes. A force ten gale rages. And the *Coyote* is safely anchored in the hole between Big Fort Island and Shuyak. Little John and the lab will have to wait until tomorrow.

The wind lays down sometime during the night. He weighs anchor before daylight, rides the incoming tide through the rock strewn narrows of Shuyak Strait, bucks into Blue Fox Bay, and ties the ex-troller to the barn's pilings after lining her side with crab bags so she won't pound. He checks to make sure there is a shell in the Ruger's chamber, throws his cartridge belt over his shoulder, slips a box of shells for the Smith into his hip pocket, and finally, climbs the ladder to the barn, the old saltery.

Little John left him a note saying he and Louise would be back in two weeks, that they left to get married.

He puts coffee water on to boil, and wonders how Louise did it. He's glad for John. Marriage might draw John in, away from the social fringe.

The day passes quietly.

But just before sundown, he hears the unmistakable sound of a helicopter approaching fast from the south. He grabs his Ruger and runs! out the backdoor, through the garden, into the gnarled spruce. The chopper circles, then passes directly overhead again as it beats its way south, disappearing in the gap between Red Peak and Devilpaw Mountain. He's been discovered. How, though? By whom?

Perhaps not. Perhaps that is just another seis crew helicopter, changing its mind about where it ought to be.

No, that chopper wasn't exploring for oil. Wrong time of day, wrong speed, wrong flight pattern, and just a feeling. Now that his spirit has returned, so have dark visions—and he remembers that the woman with whom John had his little disagreement had arrived via helicopter. She had been after Catherine, and he hopes that chopper had something to do with Catherine's disappearance; he'll leave them something to remember him by.

With the Ruger at hand, he drags John's aluminum seine skiff across the rough-cut planking of the saltery, bows his back, and slides the heavy skiff to the water's edge. When it floats freely, he ties its bowline to a piling, returns to the rack of outboards, and shunning newer kickers, selects an older forty horse Johnson. He fills and carries eight kicker cans of mixed gas to the skiff. He has to check caches made when he trapped these waters seven years ago. A long time ago. Maybe those caches will now prove worthwhile.

He clumsily paddles the skiff to the *Coyote*'s stern, loads foodstuffs and ammo mostly, and wonders what he is to do with the longliner and the ivory in her hold. The old girl has given him

good service. He hates to put her on the beach, and risk having her pounded to pieces by a storm tide.

Right now, he doesn't have to do anything with her or the ivory.

Darkness slowly smothers the light.

Using a dim two-cell, he continues working in the saltery, and is filling a five-gallon blazo can with kerosene when he hears the returning helicopter.

3.

Finally photographic proof that the meddling fisherman's vessel isn't lost at sea. Tanya fumes. This means that Alden is alive.

But her immediate problem is this demand she has received, a demand for an accounting of her failure to locate the ivory, a demand that must be answered without delay, a demand from, probably, a fuzzy-faced lieutenant. Does some GRU strategist hidden beneath a mountain think she located the Family's errant dealer by checking ID cards at a local train station? In two weeks, she has traveled thousands of kilometres, eliminated McPhearson, taken care of that other matter, and bivouacked two squads that she doesn't need, nor does she want. Now, she has located Shoulders' boat, and probably Alden. How can anyone say she hasn't done anything? And she wads the message and hurls it into the corner.

When she cools, she wonders if their ugly sister isn't again making trouble. Alone in her tent, she curses the *Kontora Grubykh Banditov* and all those who want her to fail. Why? What is to be gained? Who is being protected? When, where will she and the squads be exposed?

There are politicians at home who think that Alaska should again be part of Russia. If she were home, she would agree with them. Here, she isn't so sure, not when she has command of two squads.

What will happen? First two squads here, then two hundred. Then a first-strike nuclear threat made to enforce a world court decision: the United States never lived up to stipulations made in their purchase of the Russian-American Company. Never offered a just settlement to the aborigines. Never fulfilled their contract to purchase. So who knows what is planned?

Enough thinking. She has work to do. The squads need real-life commando raid experience. Only the political officer and one of the sergeants have been on a raiding party, and that was a raid on an Ethiopian library. But the squads are tough and well trained. Already, she likes them. So for her purpose, the location of Shoulders' boat is ideal.

But what of this demand she cannot ignore?

She is needed to lead the raid, but until she answers that demand, she goes nowhere. She sends for the political officer and the sergeant, and wonders if someone isn't already nervous about C.C.C.P. troops in Alaska. Perhaps she is not cooperating with plans to embarrass GRU. She would like to know.

Drafting her response will cause her to miss this opportunity for revenge, for collecting Alden. Can't be helped. She must be content saying a mental goodbye to Mr. Littlehaus, Alden and that meddling fisherman.

4.

Hearing the approaching chopper, its rotor beating as they had in 'Nam, Jay hastily screws the cap on the Blazo can, grabs his Ruger, and runs for the spruce timber. But as he sprints towards the garden, he hears a second chopper—

Two choppers. Closing fast. One ahead of him, one behind. He won't make the timber. Not time. Stops. Starts to turn back to the barn.

The first chopper blasts over the knob. Spotlights flood the chickenhouse, lab, spit.

He's caught in the open.

Jagged orange flashes behind the lights. He dives over the embankment as rotor tips pop and automatic weapons fire rips through willows.

He falls, rolls, tumbles headlong down the bank, bounces once, twice, lands on the gravel beach, instinctively nudges the Ruger's safety OFF.

Sprawled on his back, he swings the singleshot clear of him as the first chopper tops the embankment and swings broadside. He points, catches sight of a man behind the crosshairs, fires. Three feet of flame flies from the muzzle, and the chopper, tipping its rotor perpendicular to the ground, rolls away from him.

The rotor strikes the bank. The chopper cartwheels twice, leaps into the air, catches its tail rotor in the willows, then cartwheels again as it erupts into a fireball.

Clutching the empty Ruger, he jerks the big Smith from its holster as he scrambles to his feet. Willows bow, snap; water boils behind him from fire coming from the second chopper. And he fires three shots at the chopper that is partially hidden above and behind the embankment.

He must have been close: the chopper flares like a startled mallard, and circles out of sight. He jacks the casing from the Ruger, chambers another cartridge, and listens. He can't see the chopper, but he can hear it. It has climbed, and has doused its spotlight. He knows it will be back in a minute—he has to get off this little island and onto Afognak.

He scrambles up the embankment, and pauses to survey the crash. One body lies thirty feet away from the burning hull. Another, draped over its landing skids. He has seen enough. Careful to avoid the firelight, he runs towards the saltery where he grabs the Blazo can. Then hardly touching a rung, he drops onto the *Coyote's* stern deck, jumps into the seine skiff, jerks the forty horse to life, and with the skiff hitting just the tops of the surges, runs around the spit and across the channel.

Running aground at high speed, he lifts the forty's lower unit, and lets the skiff slide far up the gravel beach. And still clutching the Ruger, he is out of the skiff and into the timber before the boat stops.

He hears the helicopter hovering high overhead. Its beating rotors both terrify and hypnotize. As he stares into the darkened heaven, he wonders how they knew Little John was gone, why had they opened fire, why wasn't he hit, why had that cop shot at him so long ago. This all started then. Started with an unanswered question. With the poaching of the king's deer.

The chopper hovers for another few minutes, then circles twice before beating its way south, towards Devilpaw.

Dropping to his knees, with deliberate movements, he replaces the three fired rounds in the Smith, starts to pocket the casings, catches himself and wonders when will he have a chance to reload the brass. He won't. Ever. He won't be returning anywhere. But he is reluctant to part with the cases—and still holds them when he hears the returning chopper.

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At first refusing to believe what happened, then ordering the helicopter to return immediately, Tanya ceases to worry about the demand. She has a greater concern: she can't imagine anything worse than reporting the loss of the machine.

Circling the smoldering remains of the burnt machine, she orders the pilot to land on the end of the spit, away from the buildings, the timber, and a possible ambush. She snaps a magazine into her machinepistol, draws back its block and locks it. Then motioning for Kostlivtsov to spread out his men, she waves everyone forward. And the house, barn, and lab are quickly secured.

The man thrown clear of the crash possesses faint life signs, but his gut is already black and blue from, she suspects, severe internal hemorrhaging. The body slumped over the landing skids is charred and not recognizable. She orders it carried to where the soldier thrown clear lies. Peering into the still hot fuselage, she feels her stomach contract. She swallows hard, but the stench of

burned flesh makes the convulsions stronger. Charred chunks of three sizzled bodies, still burning. She has to look away as she recalls her vision of her body burning. The fire has even scorched bones in dismembered limbs.

Stepping aside, she asks Kostlivtsov to identify the remains. He can't though he grimly studies the pieces. When he finally turns towards her, she demands, "What did this? A rocket?"

He starts to answer in Russian—

"English! Use English. No more slips."

He haltingly says: "Not a rocket. A sporting rifle. Much-velocity rifle. These islands very famous for bear hunting."

"A rifle didn't do this much damage."

"It happened very fast. Tipped machine. Kaboowey." With his hands, he indicates an explosion.

"Who? Littlehaus?"

"One person—"

"Who?"

"It happened very fast."

Seething, wanting to kill him, to kill anybody, most of all Littlehaus, she hisses, in Russian, orders for him to tell her in Russian exactly how this proval happened, and could it happen again. And his explanation doesn't help her mood.

And worse than anything, she hears Walter warning her not to go after the fisherman, that she wouldn't see her beloved mountains again if she did.

"Rig the boat. Use foam. One of the vibrating detonators. I don't want wires found." Two short weapons bursts interrupt her anger. Hoping to find Alden and Shoulders, she catches up with the men converging on the dying doe and her dead fawn. She snarls, "Doe killer," at Samoilov, then, "Disperse," to everyone else.

An explanation for the crash is needed: "Sergeant Kostlivtsov, have Samoilov take care of the boat. I want you to burn the lab. Make it appear that the machine crashed into it."

"The men?"

"Leave two in the machine. Crush their skulls. Make sure they can't be identified."

"The others?"

"Dump them at sea."

"Serebrennikov is alive."

Stepping to where the corporal lies, she draws the PPK, and shoots him in the head.

As she tightens her finger on the PPK's trigger, its sights aligned on the corporal's forehead, something happens inside her: a flash of light slams against the back of her eyes, momentarily blinding her as she again sees the livingroom of the Old Believer's home, the icon on its corner shelf where the household god would have sat before Christianity was laid over, like a table cloth, the ancient customs of the peasants. The flash is unexplainable. It leaves her shaken.

Jay watches the tiny figures, all carrying assault rifles, scurry in and out of the fire's glow. Bright orange flames leap a hundred feet above the burning lab, pierce and singe the black heaven. Sparks swirl upwards and outwards, and are carried towards Shuyak as sporadic drops of rain fall. The surge laps at the gravel beach.

Although it seems like hours before the chopper lifts off again, he knows only minutes have passed. He also knows what will happen next. He breaks the lower branches of the spruce trunk he will use for a rest. He will give then a 200-grain reception.

From a thousand feet or more, the helicopter's spotlight probes the beach, sweeps the timber, and comes to rest on the aluminum skiff which shines like a new coin on a wet sidewalk. He tries to keep the crosshairs on the spotlight, but the light refuses to remain still until the spot lands on the skiff. When it hesitates, he pinches the trigger.

In the soft blackness, the 78-grain charge of IMR 4831 makes the .300 Mag's muzzleflash reach the tops of the stubby spruce. The spotlight goes out, and diving, banking away from him, the chopper becomes a sound hovering low above the beach somewhere towards the head of the bay. Then the sound fades as the chopper streaks south. All is quiet. But in his mind, he sees the men of the firelight coming for him; so with much banging and the grating squeal of metal against stone, he slides the loaded skiff back into the bay, clammers aboard, and jerks the forty's starting rope—

And ducks!

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees jagged bursts of flame. Six, maybe seven hundred yards down the beach, the bursts look like signatures signed with lighted candles. The bullets are wild, scattered, and not particularly close.

He jerks the starting rope again. The forty fires, sputters, clears itself as a second series of bursts both strike nearer and come from nearer on the beach.

Ready to go but wanting to leave a farewell present—the gunmen are now in the .300's range—he lays his hand over the transom, picks out a burst, but the burst dies before he can fire. He did, though, by its light locate another man. When that man opens up a second later, he has the flickering light of the fellow's weapon in the Leupold's crosshairs. He fires! and is momentarily blinded by the muzzle flash.

Bullets zing beside him, ricochet off the water. One strikes the skiff's stern. But he is out the channel a hundred yards before the .300's echo dies. He shivers, not from the cold. Keeping one hand on the tiller, he reloads the Ruger, hits a swell, bounces, and finds the Ruger's muzzle pressed against his stomach. He pushes it away as if it were a deadly viper and sees in his mind GIs firing full automatic weapons fire at pajama-clad Asians. The television war. Part of the culture. He holds course for Shelikof Strait and open sea, but can't shake the images. Or the sight pictures for his hundreds of confirmed kills. But it is the magazine picture of a Vietnamese cop shooting his prisoner with a Smith & Wesson Airweight .38 Special that haunts him, the Airweight designed for shooters with small hands and slighter builds.

In his memories he sees jagged bursts pour from the muzzles of a new weapons system as the Army tests a new combat rifle. Is it as good as the venerable Garand? Only field tests will determine that. He sees babies, lots of babies, some powdered and oiled, some in squalor; sees the babies grow, cut their first teeth, hears them say "Dada"; he watches them take tottering steps, and he protests when they are given guns for play toys, but no one hears his objections. The toddlers practice war before they learn to read and write. Girls bandage wounds. Boys conduct search and destroy missions. And they grow and grow, rich and poor. Their toy guns shoot real bullets as they play a game called *Strategic Containment*. Nattily attired businessmen keep score. Rules are simple: the player with the most rounds-per-kill brings his parents prosperity. Everyone wins. Except the snipers. For the players, there is sex and drugs and lots of shooting. For munition manufacturers, there are profits. For the nation, there is full employment and pride. And he sees his son lying on the pavement, the one Catherine was to bear for him, his tiny body riddled with bullet holes.

The skiff pounds into the great swell of a series. Spray curls around the gunwale, drenches him, snaps him from the trance. And he squeezes the tiller handle as he looks around. The TV images are gone. He is alone on a dark sea.

He runs well north of Hogg Island before circling south. The nearly flat bottomed skiff pounds as it bounces from swell to swell. Shelikof is neither calm nor rough. The swells, though, are steep as the tide works against the wind.

Passing to the west of Alligator Island, he cuts back towards Afognak, being careful to skirt the kelp patches that mark most of the rocks. He slows a little as he passes just south of Grassy Island. Hard rain now. The soft blackness has been replaced by harsh, raw cold. Somewhere ahead in the darkness is Black Point. He can't see it though he knows it's there. He doesn't want to pass it.

The cabin he built a mile beyond the head of Devil's Inlet will be hard to find in the dark even if he can get up the rapids and into the Inlet. Just finding the Inlet's entrance will be tricky tonight. Plus, with the tide falling he fears it might already be too late to enter.

He hears the helicopter return and begin searching for him. Its spotlight pierces the darkness as it passes east and north of him to sweep the coastline of Shuyak Island.

The weather begins to blow. Wind gusts of forty, forty-five knots drive the rain horizontally. And he hunkers on his knees in a vain attempt to get out of the rain and spray.

*

Ruthlessness crowds reason, colors her thinking, even makes her forget about Alden; she knows it does. The political officer is responsible for the escape of one lightly armed civilian and the loss of the helicopter, but Command will lay the blame for this proval on her. The record she has worked so hard compiling will be permanently tainted. She had better learn to like Arctic Siberia if Justice doesn't learn of these special squads being here, on the back side of Afognak Island. If that happens, she will become newspaper headlines everywhere. No, she will bury herself and both squads first. She won't let their ugly sister embarrass GRU.

Wind buffets the helicopter, making its yaw nearly uncontrollable. Weather, though, isn't an excuse Command will accept for failure. But it might acceptably account for the crash, especially if this squall shows on military satellite maps.

They reach the end of Shuyak Island. Nothing. So she orders the pilot to turn the machine south and sweep Afognak's west side—she isn't prepared to see the silver boat when the light finds it adrift just behind the surf. From five hundred metres elevation, she can't determine if the dory is abandoned although it appears to be. She orders the pilot lower, but rescinds the order when he points to the two bullet holes in the floor. These helicopters are civilian models, and aren't designed to be fired upon or to fire from. Yes, she tells him, she is aware she has already lost six men tonight, and can ill afford to lose another.

The boat drifts freely. The falling tide keeps it just out of the surf, and the wind drives it northward. A tarp covers its center section. She must have a closer look so she again orders the pilot lower.

At three hundred metres, the surface wind catches the helicopter, causes it to pitch wildly; its yaw is so bad it almost spins around its rotor shaft. The pilot shakes his head and takes it back up. She says, "Head for camp before we're blown out of sky," and she sees the pilot smile. In all likeliness, the civilian abandoned the dory. But she knows why the smile. That damn rifle. One shot. Five hundred metres. Killed Korovin.

He is down there. Him and his rifle. He won't escape. Not for long.

*

Lying on his back under the tarp, he sees the problem the chopper has navigating so he isn't surprised when the infernal machine flies south. Now he has only to wait for the tide.

Too cold to sleep and fearing the return of the chopper, he shivers as he lies still, wondering if he can avenge Catherine. Is he good enough? He used to be. But that was a lifetime ago. And a singleshot rifle against automatic weapons. Bows, arrows against repeating rifles—Indians, his people, the Rogue of a century ago lost.

He still questions his shooting when the tide turns. The waiting, the wondering will soon be over, will be over as soon as the tide covers the worse of the rocks.

Dawn threatens as he beats and bangs through the rapids and into the narrow Inlet. The wind eases, but the rain only switches from horizontal to vertical. The air holds the feel of an impending storm, a major blow lasting days.

Dark, blue-green spruce. Naked, gray-green alders. Muddy gray willows. The colors of home. He beaches the skiff on the Foul Bay side of the Inlet, and is anxious to hide it before the chopper

passes overhead. Splashing up the mouth of a feeder creek, he caches the forty and kicker cans under a clump of willows, stashes the supplies, and floats the skiff up the creek. Using four dead willow trunks as rollers, he slides it into an alder tangle, flips it over and covers it with fallen leaves and twigs. And he is still admiring his handiwork when the helicopter overflies the coastline.

Spruce boughs rustle as raindrops dash themselves to pieces. Seagulls cry in the distance as the surf laps at stony beaches. A fox barks not too far away. Otherwise, there is no sound...but for the beating of the chopper's rotor.

He knows these hills and draws even though he has been away seven years, and he follows this draw, then that one for a mile, steps over a foot wide creek and into a clump of young spruce, and nearly bumps into the northwest corner of the eight-by-twelve foot cabin. Giving its door a shove, he knocks it open, and the musty odor offends his nose. The air is thick with mold spores. He sneezes repeatedly.

The single window is opaque from layers of dirt, mold, dust from the logs. The Yukon stove is a kettle of rust. Rain has run down the stovepipe, and has turned the pipe into a tube of loosely connected rust flakes. A squirrel has taken up residence inside the stove.

The squirrel has to go: he needs to dry out the cabin.

Removing double handfuls of the squirrel's nest, he saves the driest twigs and moss for future kindling. When most of the nest is gone, he takes a match from a sealed half-pint Kerr jar, lights the debris—and the stove smokes, stinks horribly as rust flakes pop from the expanding stovepipe.

He has to step outside until the smoke clears. Between the smoke and mold, the air inside is too thick to breathe and too soggy to chew.

It is growing dark by the time he has a steady fire burning in the stove. Inside, it is dark. He attempts to light the kerosene lamp, but the oil in the bowl of the lamp is thick, syrupy, and won't climb the dry wick. The lamp smokes and sputters and for a while, appears like it wants to burn as it spits droplets of fire. But after sooting up the chimney, the flame goes out, leaving only a glowing ember on top of the webbing.

Setting aside sealed containers of rice, lentils, and stuff he had thought important years ago, he rummages among rusted tin cans on the shelf behind the stove until he finds the coffee can of candles he knows to be there.

He decides he really doesn't need the candle after lighting it. Fire peeks through dozens of holes in the stovepipe which sags and threatens to collapse. There had been new pipe in the saltery, but he hadn't brought any. Now, he suspects, it is too late to go back for some. And he suddenly feels terribly alone as sheets of rain pound the steel roof. He begins fondling the Ruger without fully realizing what his hands are doing.

5.

Rain comes in torrents, in unrelenting waves, wave after miserable wave. For more than a week, blowing sheets of water drench everything as a gale batters the western side of the islands. And with no relief in sight and cramped inside dripping tents that have been blown down and have been repitched inside the timber, the insurgency squads have grown edgy.

She would like to do something for them, but she has to eat the same cold, soggy food, live with the same inadequate raingear and leaky boots, and wear the same thin fatigues that neither hold in body heat nor slow the wind. The helicopter has been grounded for days. Nothing has happened for a week. And the bloodhounds, so hastily flown in, shiver in weather colder than any they have experienced.

Aboard the helicopter, the magic black box sits unused. Cameras loaded with infrared film lie ready, and a replacement helicopter waits in Anchorage for the weather to break. But all she can do is continue to plot the coordinates of satellite detected *hot spots*. She matches plots to known cabins,

and is certain she has located Shoulders' hideout...Littlehaus left, she learned this week, the laboratory days before the proval. He and his young assistant were married by the Kodiak patriarch even though neither of them are Russian Orthodox. She doesn't understand why, nor does she care. She will take care of them when the time comes.

In order to survive this gale, she assures herself, Shoulders must have a fire, and any fire will make him vulnerable to detection by the all-seeing Razvedka satellite. In its stationary orbit and with its super-sophisticated heat sensors trained on Kodiak, the satellite can *see* a heat speck as small as a campfire. She doesn't know how few calories the satellite can see (probably nobody outside GRU's Southern Ural Command Center does know), but the satellite can see American aircraft that possess radar-blocking capabilities.

Yes, she is benefitting from Soviet space technology. She has to keep reminding herself of that as her moisture-softened charts stick together on the damp chartboard. But the charts and board are no wetter than everything else in her tent.

Her tent is steamy from clothes that never dry, from rain driven through the heavy canvas, from water dripping around the tentjack and falling onto the hot stove, and from the warm mud beneath her tiny oil stove. Her tent is the standard four metre model with a center pole, and while pitched in the open swale, the trampled grass served nicely as a floor. But here under overhanging boughs, the moss quickly turned to mud.

At first, Command had acted as if she were responsible for the weather that caused the loss of the helicopter...the loss of the machine was definitely of greater importance than the loss of the six men aboard; she has covered herself. The men are expendable, and by implication, so is she. She was, though, finally told the reason for the evolution of the mission: Command needs computer knowledge about transporting, garrisoning, and supporting insurgency troops at extended distances. This exercise will be a success even if it is a failure. She, of course, is acting without authority and will bear responsibility for any failure. Command will take credit for successes. The story of women.

Even in the Chukchi, a manhunt's objective is seldom, if ever, indigenous, healthy, armed, and without assistance from the local populace. She has been allowed to continue the manhunt because Shoulders meets all of these criteria. Command's computers need base knowledge to formulate behavior patterns of potential North American guerrilla fighters while they are eluding capture in rural or wilderness areas. In other words, Shoulders' elimination will be analyzed to see how Americans armed with sporting rifles might respond. So she must endure the rain and the damp-cold. But as soon as Shoulders is taken care of, she can return to New York and her position on the U.N. Secretariat General's staff. She no longer has to worry about Alden and the ivory...Alden's whereabouts are known, and a wet squad has been dispatched to Canada to take care of her. The ivory seems not to interest Command at all.

She listens to tent flaps snap in the gale, to the squeaks and groans of the spruce, to the rain hammering the canvas, and wonders if Command actually believes it is doing her a favor by allowing her to continue. True, she won't leave in disgrace if she tracks him down. But she is on trial, and he, not Command, is her judge. The sentence has already been determined for whichever way he rules.

Plotting the recurring heat speck located three kilometres south (202° magnetic) of Red Peak—a heat speck appearing with the regularity of morning and evening cooking fires—she knows the spot belongs to Shoulders. Aerial photos taken prior to the gale show no cabin near the coordinates, but one has to be there. The coordinates haven't varied for eight days. The Razvedka satellite has detected other heat sources, but each can be accounted for. This is the one that can't be. Unfortunately, the satellite can do little to end the gale.

He has seen so many winter storms, has worked out in them for so long that without realizing he doesn't have to, Jay daily dons raingear and hikes a wide arc from the head of Red Fox Bay to Paramanof and back. His legs are toughening. Strides have lengthened, become smoother, easier. The daily hikes are ho-hum, but something to do. They get his mind off himself which he finds impossible setting alone in the cabin, especially now that the visions have returned. And he doesn't mind getting wet. As long as he stays moving, he stays warm.

Deer have holed up, having taken to the heavy timber to get out of the wind. He sees quite a few, but after shooting a small buck, he has ignored them. He can't ignore, though, the sow Brownie that claims the hill above the junction of Paramanof and Foul Bay.

The old sow, accompanied by two yearling cubs, both over four hundred pounds, has a nasty disposition. She is well over twelve hundred pounds, probably would square nine feet, big for a sow, and she ought to be bedded down for the winter. There isn't much to eat this late. And judging from the white showing on her muzzle and jowls, he suspects old age and hunger account for her disagreeable personality. He imagines he will have to shoot her before long. He hopes not, and he has given her a wide berth so he won't have to.

Despite his absence, it didn't take long to put the cabin in shape; it took longer to pack his cache from the beach. The cabin's floor sags, but then, it sagged when new. He had used green logs for joist, and they had warped as they dried. But the cabin is warm, and takes no more heat than is needed to cook a meal and brew coffee—he makes coffee from grounds left in the cabin seven winters ago. It is thick, muddy, without aroma, and no better than spruce tip tea, but there is no running down to the supermarket for more grounds so he drinks it and tells himself it really isn't as bad as it is.

He will have to cover the roof with pitch this coming summer. It leaks around some of the nails holding the flattened steel drums in place. But all in all, the cabin is comfortable.

7.

Eleven days after the gale begins, the southern skies turn squalid yellow. The wind dies as suddenly as it began. The rain lets up, and the storm takes a breather.

Tanya has the helicopter airborne as soon as the wind eases. She wants aerial photos, both high resolution color and infrared, of the recurring heat speck.

With the reappearance of the weak sun and the ending of the rain, her spirits awaken as do the men's. Their bread seems harder. Fatigues drier. The tea tastes better. Even the dogs are on their feet again, some stretching, some sniffing their feces, one baying at the bonfire built between the tents. All are straining their tether lines.

Command thought the CT-11A personnel detector, the black box from Cuba, would be all she needed. But she insisted upon the hounds. Magic boxes in helicopters won't terrify someone like dogs will. She wants Shoulders so rattled, so panic stricken his shooting is affected since she must respect the range of his rifle. She will push him harder than she would a bandit who has escaped from a labor camp. Once they have his trail, they won't let him have any last stands, and she will supply film of his capture to Command's computers.

*

His arms are full of wood when he hears the rapidly approaching chopper. Having just returned to the cabin, tired, cold, hungry, he is in no mood to play games. The fire beckons. But there can be no mistake: if the chopper were going anywhere else, it would be to one side or the other of Red Peak.

He resists the urge to blast away at the devilish machine. Nevertheless, he drops the wood, swings the Ruger off his shoulder, reaches around and slides his thumb over the cartridge heads filling the loops of his shell belt. There are no gaps. He is as ready as he can be.

The cold smoothness of the cartridge heads reassures him. He trusts his shooting more than anything else. He trusted his shooting even before the Army spent valuable training time teaching him how to kill. Shooting is a matter of intersecting lines that exist without faith, without hope, without textual criticism or historical exegesis or divine revelation.

The chopper is definitely flying a grid pattern of sorts above the cabin, which is situated such that overhead spruce boughs disperse the smoke though some whiffs might filter through the treetops. It would be prudent to get a pack together.

As he hurriedly laces the axe, a tin cup and groundcloth to a packboard, he wonders how they know where he is. First, the lab. Now here. It seems like someone attached a tracking device to his spirit. For years he lived peacefully, anonymously, then the flight out of Unalaska and his visionquest aboard the *Coyote*, which brought the return of the spirit he'd lost somewhere in Laos while he was fighting his way out of the country. Ever since he and his spirit have been reunited, someone has known his whereabouts, have set ambushes for him. Maybe he isn't as happy having his spirit back as he thought he would be.

Pain has edges. Without his spirit, those edges, like agates in a rock polisher, were tumbled smooth. Since his spirit's return, those edges have been napped sharp, with even the chipped-away flakes cutting as if they were micro-blades.

The chopper suddenly breaks its pattern and flies south. He pauses. Maybe he ought to cook dinner while he has the chance so he sets the packboard aside.

*

The infrared frames were exposed at 1457 hours—the time is imprinted on the negative strip. To have the film developed by 1600 hours pleases her. And as she studies the negatives, she sees the unmistakable image of a cabin.

She wonders how Shoulders located it, and whether they should attack now or wait until tomorrow. If she waits, will he still be there? Did the helicopter spook him?

There is really no reason to wait. Once he begins running, the black box will find him wherever he goes. His collection will be a matter of technology over instinct. She orders the dogs placed in the helicopter.

*

The orange-yellow of the western sky fades, and the gold coloring is confined to a whisker-thin ribbon barely above the southern horizon. Overhead, the cloudcover is midnight blue and appears threatening.

BOOM!

Jay has just sat down to eat when he hears the explosion. At first, he thinks the distant boom is thunder, but almost instinctively rejects the idea. Then it comes to him—a sick feeling engulfs him. The explosion is distant, about as far away as the lab. Little John will have returned today, this being about the first break in the weather since the fire. Undoubtedly, they booby-trapped the *Coyote*. John probably tried to move her.

*

Only treetops. A sea of green pikes. She needs a landing site that is close to the prey's cabin, but there aren't any. Men can repel, but dogs can't, at least not these dogs. The closest clearing she can find on the aerial photos is 1,58 kilometres away, and if she allows her prey that much of a lead, he will attempt being cute. She smiles. Let it be so. The black box will locate him regardless of what he tries. That clearing will do. She orders the dogs on their way.

Eleven men, a pilot, a Cuban doghandler, six bloodhounds, two attack Shepherds—enough. She wishes, though, she had the four men she sent back to the fishing trawler because of dysentery.

Thinking about what lies ahead makes her smile. The Shepherds will stay with the dogs on the ground, but won't be leashed. Should be fun. Especially if the prey tries an ambush.

Her orders are to film the prey's capture. She hopes he lasts long enough to film. Until daylight would be nice. Open terrain preferably.

*

He doesn't hear the chopper until he steps out to piss—

It isn't close, but in the quiet of early evening sound carries so it seems only yards away. As he listens, he realizes the chopper is stationary with its engine idling. On the ground! That means they're coming for him. And again, he wonders if they really know he's here.

The post storm blackness feels thick, like embalming fluid, and unusually still. He knows where the chopper landed: there's only one opening in that direction that far away. He shot a three-point buck there once. It isn't much of an opening (buck wasn't much either). An acre or so covered with chest-high devil's club. He hopes they have good rainpants. They'll need them. The devil's club will staple their legs together otherwise.

The whir of the helicopter fades, and he hears them. Dogs! No time now. Feels panic. Fights it.

Grabbing the packboard, he adds only ammo and matches to the pack he started earlier. Dons tinpants. *Tinpants?* not since he logged as he called rainpants tinpants. An omen? Hopes so. Takes a step. Stops. Removes the pants and laces them to the packboard. Unlaces them and steps back into them. Then buckles his cartridge belt around his waist, grabs the Ruger, and blows out the lamp. He has no destination in mind, but wherever he's going, he'd better get there fast. And he'd better lose the dogs on the way.

The dogs are in the draw: he can tell by the hollowness of their baying. When he was first married, he kept coonhounds. Wonders now why he did. Better understands Judy's objections. They're noisy. Took all of his time. And they were stupid. He's never been around people-tracking hounds, but they can't be much different. Of course, he killed a lot of raccoons, not a particularly comforting remembrance.

The hounds aren't on his trail yet, but they're already sounding in anticipation of the chase. From their howling, he knows two hounds have picked up stickers in their pads. He corrects himself. Not two hounds. One hound and one dog of another breed.

Another breed? Why would they have a dog of another breed? one that has a sharp howl. Doesn't bay. A killer? A dog trained to take a man down? And he again fights panic.

He knows how to slow down the hounds: he's only ten steps from the cabin so he returns for the half dozen, number four long-spring traps hanging beside the door. The traps are big enough to pinch a few toes, and without the dogs, maybe he can last until he can see to shoot.

How did those long-legged bull coons he never could catch shake his hounds? Once in a while they took to water, but most of the time they just ran. They ignored the creek bottoms, stuck to the ridges, and ran until the dogs tired or went lame.

The dogs are out of the draw, and he sees the reflected light of his pursuers' flashlights. He fights his urge to run; loses, though, when the chopper comes fast, bearing down on him. But after a hundred yards, he regains control of himself.

The chopper's directly overhead. Its engine whine obliterates even the baying of the hounds. He can't see it, can't see through the spruce crowns, but he feels it, feels the pop of the rotor tips, the downdraft.

Then as quickly as it arrived, it climbs. How high, he doesn't know. But high enough it doesn't seem close though it remains overhead.

He can't explain the chopper's strange antics. Doesn't really try to as he puts distance between himself and the dogs. He plans to work his pursuers—they don't behave like cops. No bullhorn or that kind of thing, but they seem as sure of themselves as cops. And he again wonders how they are keeping track of him. Has the government developed some kind of machine to read a person's thoughts? pick up their brainwaves. Or have they really put a tracking device on his spirit. He doubts

there's such a thing as science fiction anymore. But he'll show them some shooting come daybreak. No science fiction about a bullet. That is, he'll show them some shooting if he can lure them above timberline. And he sets a fast pace for the ridge above Paramanof Bay.

*

After skimming the treetops, Tanya orders the pilot to take the helicopter up to "five hundred metres." There's still a gentle breeze at that altitude, but higher, strong winds begin to rip apart the heavy cloud cover. Soon, the moon will rise. When it does, with the clouds gone, there'll be enough light for a low flying helicopter to be a tempting target. But that isn't part of the game plan. The prey won't be allowed any targets. She already knows he can shoot. So does Command: they know who he is, know his rank, know that his kill book is still sealed. There have been other Indians from Siletz who have made international news, but only one who, officially, has never existed since he entered the People's Republic of Cambodia as a young sniper with a chip on his shoulder.

The black box fascinates her. She twists knobs, tunes out the ghosts, and listens to the strong, steady signal coming from the prey. The unfolding drama below her assumes the aspect of a video game. The prey is a moving bleep. The ground party is a white spot crawling over broken, black terrain; appears like a beetle crawling through a shag rug. And she controls the action.

The signal stops, doesn't exist. She jumps, but relaxes when she realizes it's just the black box transmitting to the uplink receiver. The signal returns. Shoulders' initial reactions are on their way to the Urals. By morning she'll know his next move before he does. Already, she notices that the more he sweats, the stronger the signal.

*

Letting the lay of the land lead him wherever it will, he sidehills. He runs, not hard, not panic stricken, but nonetheless, he runs. And the hounds seem to be gaining on him. He wants this to be happening only in his imagination, but knows it isn't; for in the blackness behind him, shadows of light are cast from spruce to spruce. At least he can watch his pursuers overtake him, and they are pushing him hard. Yet he resists the urge to run blindly through the timber.

The hounds bay continuously now, but the sound he fears most is the helicopter hovering high overhead. The chopper seems to hang there in one spot like some kind of giant, mechanical vulture, like some kind of disinterested observer. That detachedness seems to say it doesn't matter what he does, the devilish machine will still be there, waiting. So he runs. Hard. He runs while telling himself not to. But muscles already tired from hiking all day quickly weaken. He isn't as tough as he was when he logged, not as tough as when he was twenty-five.

Staying out of bushy draws and off easily traversed ridgetops, he sidehills. They'll follow where he leads. A deadly version of follow-the-leader that he intends to convert into king-of-the-mountain come morning. That seems so far away. Seems as far away as Laos, as his escape back to American bases, an escape that wasn't expected. But tonight, he doubts he'll ever see the sun again. If there is any hope of another sunrise, he must keep moving. That's all. Just keep moving.

He stumbles over a blowdown, staggers backwards when an unseen limb grabs the packboard, regains his balance, plunges forwards, walking for a while, then running some more. But the dogs, now less than a half mile behind him, continue to gain.

Fallen branches partially covered with moss reach up and trip him. He can't see where he's going or what's ahead of him or where he steps. Only the lights behind him.

Limbs, twigs snap back, slap his face. His cheeks sting. Raised welts at the corners of his eyes are raw.

The faster he runs, the more he falls. The more he falls, the faster he runs. Falls. Runs. Staggers to his feet. Falls again. Wildly. Until he trips over his own feet.

Charley horses grip both calves. A groin muscle cuts him with pain. Yet, he runs. Falls. Picks himself up and runs. His shoulders are bruised. He can't break his falls by extending an arm. The Ruger must be protected; he doesn't dare bump its scope.

He flounders through the brush. Panicking. Knows he is. Can't help it. Can't stop. Can't think. Can't think until he collapses against a spruce, exhausted.

He gulps air. His lungs hurt. Legs hurt. Can't move—

*

This is almost too easy. Tanya smiles. The Indians lose again; the collection of American sportsmen will be no tougher than capturing Russian bandits. Possibly, the bandits are more difficult. They would have already tried to double back, and probably, would have taken to water by now, and wouldn't have panicked so easily.

After running for exactly thirty-three minutes, her prey is now still. The prey has lengthened his lead over the ground party which is to be expected. They are conserving their strength. They are, nonetheless, maintaining a brisk pace as they apply pressure to the prey. If she wished to collect the prey now, taking him would be simply a matter of inserting her reserves, but that isn't the plan. The prey is still on the side of the hill and not in a convenient location to film. Plus, the prey still has a second wind. This is only his first rest stop. But the distance between each succeeding stop will be less and less. She's definitely in control. That excites her. She's in no hurry to affect his collection. She wants to savor being able to project absolute terror in the prey's mind—and she wonders what sort of terror the pilot felt when she placed the plastic bag over his head. She suspects he felt a mind disabling fear that stripped him of all manliness. She hopes so. Oh yes, she hopes so; for she now has that kind of control over the prey on the ground, and she intends to relish it as long as possible, to savor the build up to the kill. He won't be able to defend himself when it comes time to collect himself.

*

Genuinely dismayed by his actions, Jay massages a leg cramp as he curses his stupidity. He's been hiking through timber at night since he was six, seven years old; he knows better than to run through the brush. And he curses the chopper, hovering high overhead like a mechanical god. It gives him the willies, up there, hanging in the sky, looking down on him, judging him.

As he twists to reach around his leg, one trap chain rattles as it bumps against a second chain. He laughs. He'll give them something to judge. *Let's see how you fellas like iron.*

Swinging the packboard off his back, he unloops the #4 Victors. Loops the chains of two traps back over his axe. The other four, he sets. One where he sat. The other three in a semi-circle about a yard out from where he leaned against the tree. He wishes they were Newhouses with toothed jaws, but these smooth-jaws will pinch toes. Maybe even break a few bones. He doesn't attach a drag of any kind. He wants the hounds to wear the traps for a ways, wear them for long enough to let the jaws settle into the small bones of the foot, cutting off circulation, hobbling a dog or dogs, turning their many feet into a single injured foot that prevents pursuit.

With the packboard again on his back, he checks the white shadows bouncing through the spruce crowns. A quarter mile back. They've neither speeded up nor slowed down.

He looks around, doesn't recognize exactly where he is. Behind Paramanof somewhere. He's lost track of direction. Has to listen for the surf. Hears it. Then taking his time, he angles down the hillside and into the creek where he drinks.

Alders grow across the stream in a snarly, twisted, tangled maze that both resists and ensnares him. But by picking his way under, over and through the plaited alders, he slips clutching branches like a shadow boxer. It's because of the alders that he has avoided the creek bottoms. Maybe, though, he shouldn't have, not if they are going to follow him with dogs on leashes.

He climbs the ridge on the other side of the draw. The moon is out. He hadn't noticed it before. If he can work around to where he has the moon behind the chopper, maybe he can get rid of it. At least make life aboard the craft interesting.

He hears a hound yowl in pain, then words in a language he doesn't understand. He smiles. One dog found a trap. That should give them something to think about, and they still have the alders ahead of them. He's pleased with himself. He'll survive the night. He has to.

*

She watches the signal on the black box gain the ridgetop, then doubleback. The games have started. She would've been disappointed if they hadn't. Perhaps he will yet prove worthy.

Plotting his course on her topographical map while the black box transmits to the uplink repeater, she finds a pattern emerging—and resents the interruption of the box sending its data halfway around the world.

And another interruption. From the ground party. "What's happened?" She snaps into the field radio's receiver.

"Kostylev has been bitten. We have not stopped the blood."

Everything said over the radio here is subject to reception by the Coast Guard's big ear on Chiniak Bay. She has to be stingy with her words. She doesn't know what happened but guesses that the prey harmed the dogs. Thus, she orders the men to take a breather, and asks, "How many dogs?"

"One. Front feet bad bruised. Skin not broken. Hind foot not hurt." Kostlivtsov says.

What is said sounds like code, she knows. Can't be helped. "Turn the injured hound loose. Send a Shepherd with it." She wonders what the prey will do with the Shepherd. She's sure he'll think of something.

*

It's growing lighter beneath the timber. A few stars are visible. Chopper isn't yet. Damn machine seems to know where he is regardless of what he does. He doesn't like that.

He hears dogs bang their way through the alders. The hounds are ahead of the light-shadows. Must have broken loose in the commotion.

They're coming fast. The rest haven't reached the alders yet—and he wonders what he'll do with a couple of tag-along bloodhounds. He assumes that's the breed they're trailing him with.

He doesn't want to—his spirit is against it—but he knows he'll have to kill them. He can't just tie them up and leave them for his pursuers though he'd like to just for the fun of it. He can't shoot them: the .44's muzzleflash will give his location away. So he pulls his hunting knife from its sheath as he listens.

TOO LATE! The dog is silent. He doesn't see it until the moonlight reflects from its fangs midair. Instinctively, he raises his arm and braces. The dog hits him. Teeth sink through his raincoat, shirt, into his forearm. He drops the Ruger as he's nearly toppled backwards.

He grits his teeth. The pain.

His right hand is still low from just having pulled his knife. As a reflex action, he drives its blade into the dog's belly. But the dog's muscles are tough. The knife could be sharper. Still, it penetrates. Its handle becomes slick; his hand, wet with blood and body fluids. And the dog twists, spins, jerks the knife from him, but stays locked on his forearm.

He grabs hair on the dog's back, sucks the dog's chest against his in a one-armed bearhug. Its hindfeet kick furiously. Toenails shred his tinpants. But with his right arm around the dog and left arm in its mouth, he falls forward, throwing his left shoulder ahead.

The shepherd's neck snaps. The dog quivers for a moment or two, then relaxes. Dead.

Standing, he sees the other dog, a bloodhound. Obediently sitting fifteen feet away. Job done. Waiting for its reward, he suspects.

He sheds his raincoat to look at his arm. The punctures are clean. Deep. Most bleed freely. One is plugged with white, fatty-type nodules. He picks at it until it also bleeds. They hurt. Not so much now that ninety pounds of dog doesn't have ahold of them. His hand works as do all of his fingers. Should be okay. He will be. The alternative isn't satisfactory.

The bloodhound stands, sniffs the shepherd, then wagging its tail, approaches him.

He doesn't have the heart to kill it.

More stars shine. The night sky has brightened to cold blue. The chopper remains up there somewhere.

The bounced reflections of flashlight beams play across the far edge of the alders.

Unhooking the suspended bib of his tinpants, he steps out of them. They're useless to him now, and he leaves them on the ground, but rolls his raincoat into a tight bundle and straps it to the packboard. And while on his knees fumbling with the packboard, he feels the bloodhound lean against him and nuzzle his neck. *You're so stupid, dog. I feel sorry for you.*

Almost knocking the Smith from its holster, the bloodhound thrusts its nose against his left armpit.

He can't find his knife. Didn't see where it landed, but it has to be close. Feels around on the ground for it. And the bloodhound tries to lick his face. It's just so happy, slobbering all over him.

Unlooping one of the #4 Victors while continuing to search for his knife, he slips the trap chain under the shepherd's collar, then back through one of its springs. Unbuckles the hound's collar, slips one end through the trapchain's ring, rebuckles the collar. Smiles though he still can't find his knife. Gives the hound an affectionate pat. Picks up the Ruger. It appears undamaged. He won't know if its scope's been knocked off, though, until he shoots it. And still, he can't find his knife.

The moss is deep. He could spend hours looking for it, but he hasn't the time. The hounds behind him yelp and bay and are a third of the way through the alders. He hears the cussing, recognizable but not understandable, that filters through the mute timber. He can't look for the knife any longer.

With blood from his left forearm running down the back of his wrist and dripping onto the Ruger, he takes a last look around for the knife—he needs it for everything—but he doesn't see it. Resigning himself to its loss, he heads down the ridge.

The bloodhound tries to follow. Lunges forward, dragging the shepherd until the carcass hangs on a sapling. Even then, the hound lunges, then sniffs the ground, apparently anxious not to lose his scent.

He drops off the ridge. Since his pursuers are having so much fun with the first brush-plugged draw, he'll see if he can locate a second, and maybe, a third. If he's lucky, he'll find one with steep sides. A rock face that the hounds will fall off. He'll ditch these dogs, but doesn't know what to think about the chopper, just hanging up there, watching. The chopper. He sees it. Maybe.

*

She checks her watch. 2041 AST. Still early though it's been dark for six hours, and will remain dark for another eleven hours. She doubts the prey can last that long.

The signal on the black box travels steady. He hasn't panicked again. She'll change that in a little while. For now, she's content to let him run at his pace. The computers need more data. The pattern that was developing hasn't been repeated. She'd expected a reoccurring one to have emerged by now, but he doesn't seem to have any destination in mind or any reason for what he does.

The nearly unbroken timber below looks like a rumpled blanket of coarse, black wool. Individual treetops are indistinguishable. And she sees the same scratchy blackness regardless of whether her eyes are open or shut.

*

He breaks out of the timber, looks skyward, and silently curses the helicopter.

Running again, not hard, not fast, but steady, he crosses this ridge a second time. He's behind Paramanof Bay, and brush slaps his face. He stumbles over a moss-covered blowdown, catches himself, and keeps on running.

Staying on the open ridgeline, following the ridge, he runs. Goes where nature directs him. Is sure he's been here before, but everything looks different in the colorless moonlight. And still, the chopper hovers overhead.

He runs. Spruce boughs jab at him. Like dark, feathered fingers, they grab him. He ducks one, skirts another, sidesteps a third, dodges a fourth, and so on down the ridge.

Pulling up beside a huge spruce growing alone in a clearing, he looks skyward for the mechanical god. And sees it. There, silhouetted. Part of the Big Dipper. Between Mizar and Alcor.

Distance is a problem. Could be anywhere from three hundred to a thousand yards. He can't tell. But it's motionless and can't be too tough a shot.

He sits down, and catches his breath.

*

Kostlivtsov says nothing though his instructions are asinine. *Objective's lead 3600 metres. Decrease to 500 metres.* What does she think that they're doing? Strolling through Rostov University park? She can't see the undergrowth through which their objective leads them.

Of course his men will decrease the objective's lead, but his men are tired. They have covered many kilometres. And when they encounter undergrowth, the dogs go one way and his men have to look for another. Leashes tangle. A mess, everytime.

Thin, needle-like thorns five, six centimetres long rivet their fatigues to their legs. Shorter thorns from dense cane patches scratch hands and faces. Two of his men have ripped their fatigues' crotch seams, only to have the short-thorned berry cane rub the insides of their thighs raw. All of his men, including himself, have blistered feet from hiking in wet leather boots.

Their objective must also be tired. And hurt. He saw the blood on the Shepherd's teeth.

He found the objective's knife. A good one. He'll give it to his son when he returns to Ussuriysk

*

"Wou-off"

The low warning carries across the cold, moonlit clearing. He freezes. Although ready to shoot at the chopper, he dares not move a muscle now.

He feels like two hundred pounds of fresh meat.

The moonlight gives the spruce crowns an eerie silvery sheen. Boughs are dark. The trampled grass is crispy with frost. Shadows are long, black, and look like bears.

He's had Brownies "whoof" at him before. It's always scary. He slowly lowers the Ruger's muzzle.

Twenty feet to his left, a cub, caught in midstep, doesn't move either as it stares. It's big enough to be mean. Four hundred pounds maybe.

He sees another cub sniffing the breeze seventy-five feet away. Now recognizes the cubs. They belong to the cranky sow he's run into before. She has to be close.

The shiny black eyes of the nearest cub bore holes into where he hides his fear. Behind him, the hounds bay. The light-shadows bounce through the spruce timber, and the drone of the helicopter settles like a mist over the ridge.

Movement. The sow seems to materialize like a spirit. She holds her head high, tests the breeze.

Watching the sow through his scope, he knows how to get rid of his pursuit. He waits for the right moment.

She turns to go, to lead her cubs away from the man scent.

He slides the crosshairs just ahead of her hindquarters. He wants to keep the 200-grain slug in her guts. Figures the angle. Apologizes to the sow, telling her that he's sorry he has to do this, that

he wishes he didn't have to, that he respects her but it's either her or him, and he has the rifle. He squeezes the Ruger's trigger.

The blast, muzzle flash, sends the cub streaking into the timber, busting branches downhill to the creek bottom.

The sow explodes. Spinning sharply, she bites her rear leg. Boughs fly. Popping her teeth at this and that, she spins, thrashes in the edge of the timber. Snaps at scrub spruce with trunks the diameter of his leg. Bites them in two. Snaps at her flank again and again. Rips apart bushes. Plows the moss. Then breaks and charges downhill after her cubs.

He loses sight of her. A dark streak of meanness in the blackness of the dense timber, snapping and popping her teeth.

He follows her, shuffling his feet to make sure the dogs have no difficulty trailing him. Entering the timber, he sneaks towards the alder patch that plugs the bottom of this and every other draw, cautiously easing from tree to tree with the Ruger to his shoulder, ready to shoot.

The night's blacker than octopus ink.

The brush busting stops. The only things to be heard are the distant hounds, helicopter, and surf.

She waits for him. He now fears the sow more than he fears the helicopter.

Just before he reaches the alders, he stops, backs up his back trail a hundred feet, turns, leaps off the trail as far as he can, lands on one foot, jumps again. Three more leaps put him twenty feet to the side and many feet below the bears' trail—far enough away that the hounds shouldn't readily follow him.

Resuming his normal gait, he sidehills for a hundred yards, then begins circling the alders where the sow waits. He figures it takes most of an hour to ease around the tangle.

The light-shadows march from spruce to spruce now not three-quarters of a mile behind him, not a quarter of a mile from the alders. The lead he'd worked so hard for is gone.

His legs are stiff. Knees rubbery. Feet feel like gear anchors. Shoulders ache. He'd welcome a cup of coffee from anyone, even from his pursuers.

He makes himself run. Uphill. Admittedly, in slow motion. Nonetheless, he runs, crosses the next ridge, stumbles, crawls on his hands and knees.

*

The black box catches the heat blip of Shoulders' shot, and the computers want the target identified. She missed seeing the muzzleflash, and wonders what he shot at. The helicopter? If he did, he wasn't close.

The ground party appears as light splashes twisting and crawling through the timber below. They are well behind the prey, too far behind to draw fire. She doesn't like not knowing what he shot at. That means she isn't in total control.

Sergeant Kostlivtsov accepts Tanya's speculation that their objective may have sustained a self-inflicted wound, but Kostylev mocks the idea. The shot sounded like a thunderclap; its echo rolled down one ravine and up another, then down that ravine and up still another. And Kostylev argues that any shot from so large a rifle would surely not have wounded.

Where the spruce grow thick, scent-trailing is easier. Less underbrush. But their objective repeatedly crosses ravines where the underbrush is higher than a man's head and nearly impregnable. Plus, he weaves onto and off narrow game trails. The dogs get tangled up following him.

Their objective has been equally effective using the stickery berry cane and devil's club to slow the dogs. They are no longer eager. Kostylev works to keep them trailing.

The two weeks of gale-enforced inactivity have taken their toll. He must drive himself and his men to keep going. He wishes he was home with his wife. His bed is soft and his wife, plump and warm. A good woman. She makes no demands of him, takes whatever he gives her and makes do.

While he is away, she will stay home with the children every night; won't be out looking for a long cock. He thinks he loves her. It's easy to love the long-legged, lean models on Moscow television, but a person doesn't marry them. They don't stay home. Ask Kostylev.

Kostylev leads. His hand still bothers him so he only holds the leashes of two bloodhounds, but he also keeps track of the remaining Shepherd whose whereabouts is unknown to the rest of them most of the time.

Behind Kostylev comes Mylnikov with a hound. Next, Bodisko who walks bowlegged because of his raw groin. He follows Bodisko. And lagging well behind are Govorlivyi with the crippled hound and Zagorskin whose groin bleeds from stickers.

He moves mechanically on weary legs, with heavy eyelids, nearly asleep on his feet, thankful he doesn't hurt like Zagorskin does. His weapon is unfamiliarly heavy. A specially built assault rifle for the NATO T-65 cartridge instead of their own. Tanya, after losing Lev on the beach, has ordered them to carry the longer ranged BRNOs.

Mylinkov and Bodisko think their BRNOs are heavy as does Zagorskin, but Govorlivyi calls the BRNO a toy. He's the squad's machinegunner and a bull, 171 centimetres tall and 110 kilos.

The scent trail abruptly changes directions. Instead of continuing along the ridge, it drops off the side of the hill. He curses. They're headed for another tangle of elderberries and salmonberries, alders and devil's club.

The bloodhounds perk up, virtually drag Kostylev towards the alders.

The moon disappears. Beyond the beams of their electric torches, the hillside is very black. The spruce are the diameter of a man and three metres apart. And as they near the bottom of the hill, Mylnikov's hound pulls away from the trail Kostylev's dogs follow. The hound wants to sniff a patch of moss two metres to the side. Mylnikov curses the hound and pulls him back to the trail. Laughing, Bodisko makes an obscene gesture towards the obstinate dog as he passes Mylnikov.

He chuckles. As tired as his men are, they still laugh. That is good. And he calls to Mylnikov, asking why he doesn't try *it*.

Mylnikov curses him, Bodisko, and most of all, the hound as the Shepherd appears.

Turning to face uphill, Bodisko offers another obscene possibility, a suggestion that is anatomically impossible, as Mylnikov drags the reluctant hound downhill.

With his right hand under the hound's collar, Mylnikov ignores the suggestion as he takes Bodisko's place in line. He hurries to catch up with Kostylev who has reached the alders and is about to enter when his dogs seem to lose the trail, seem confused—

The darkness spews confusion! Kostylev screams! Dogs squeal! KIYI! Bodisko fires. First forward. Then in the air. Then nothing. Mylnikov curses! fires. The Shepherd attacks.

He doesn't see the streak of raging fury until it bats the life from Mylnikov. He fires one magazine, slams in a second, empties it, but the beast keeps coming. He slams in a third magazine...IT HAS HIM! ITS FOUL BREATH BITES INTO HIS SHOULDER. PAIN! PAIN! pain.

*

Jay knows the minute the dogs find the old sow that apparently doubled back to wait for her tormenter. It sounds as if World War Three erupted on the west side of the island.

Brownies are no fun in the daylight. The old sow must seem like a demon bent upon sending men to hell. He hopes he didn't kill her for nothing, and again he feels a need to apologize to her, that need stronger than his pain, his hunger, his tiredness.

He can feel the coming storm. Maybe it'll drive off the helicopter so he can get some sleep.

*

Lights, muzzle flashes point in all directions at once—and she wants to know what's happening. Demands to know. But gets no response.

It's over. As fast as it began, the firefight ends. There isn't even a torch beam in the timber.

Her field radio suddenly speaks: "You'll want to see this. There's a clearing on top of the hill where you can set down."

The voice belongs to Govorlivyi—she wonders why he and not Kostlivtsov has the radio. She tries to raise him, but he doesn't answer.

With the aid of the infrared spotlights, the pilot lands without difficulty. She grabs her machinepistol and a hand lantern, and runs downhill. Sees nothing but thin barked spruce trunks and wonders where her men are.

Her lantern's beam falls on Zagoskin's white face as he hobbles among the shadows where the alders form a lighter colored wall of brush. Grabbing him, she demands, "What happened?"

He babbles nonsense about big bears.

She slaps him.

He passes out, falling on her, and is too heavy for her to support; so he takes both of them to the ground.

The pilot shuts down the helicopter's turbine, and the night suddenly becomes deathly quiet.

She hears the raspy gurgling of blood in a dying throat, then nothing.

Nausea sweeps through her. Nothing has gone right since she arrived on this wretched island. And she again hears Walter's warning not to go after Jay Shoulders, also known as Peter or "Dutch" Keipers. The warning that she wouldn't return.

Her lantern's beam comes to rest on Kostylev—on what's left of Kostylev. Intestines, stomachs, ripped livers, bloody meat. His guts are entwined with organs from the two bloodhounds.

Govorlivyi has retrieved a hand lantern, and checks half a corpse not far from her. She asks, "Who is that?"

"Bodisko. Not much left."

The face has been bitten off, and his left side is gone.

She trips over the Shepherd's carcass. It's ripped open. She kicks it, and gets blood on her fatigues.

Softly, Govorlivyi says: "Over here. Mylnikov's alive."

Badly mauled, having lost lots of blood, Mylnikov hangs onto life. She wonders how.

Govorlivyi suddenly fires three shots, then lets rip, emptying his magazine. She spins around, but sees nothing.

"What is it?"

"The third bear."

She has yet to see any of the bears so she follows him to where it lies. It is neither large nor small. And she trembles a little when she realizes it could've attacked her.

"Where's Kostlivtsov?"

"If you've the stomach, I'll show you."

She wants to slap him; would if her stomach didn't try to turn wrong side out when his lantern's beam lands on the sergeant. At least Kostlivtsov's head is intact even if most of him isn't. She looks away.

With her nose, she locates the largest bear she has ever seen. It stinks like rotten flesh, and comes to her waist as it lies on its stomach. It's fully three times larger than the other bear, and is frightening even in death.

Govorlivyi puts his foot on the bear's rump, lights a cigarette and makes no effort to hide its glowing end. Reaching into his side pocket, he withdraws a knife and hands it to her. "Took it off Kostlivtsov. He was taking it home to his boy. Found it where the fisherman killed the dog."

She understands.

He switches off his lantern. Only the glowing end of his cigarette marks his presence.

The blackness engulfs her. She feels very small. She never told Kostlivtsov that she has known his wife since primary school; he knew they were acquainted is all. She'll have to tell Irena what happened. That is, she'll tell Irena if she makes it off this island alive.

"Willing to wait now? Come back in the morning?"

She should take offense at his presumptuousness, but she feels too sick to reprimand him. She dares not lose Shoulders, but she can't afford additional surprises. Can't afford this surprise. The black box can keep track of the sniper for the remainder of the night. So she says, "Until dawn then."

*

He hears the chopper set down. If he had the energy, he'd circle back and destroy in on the ground. But he can barely move. Wants to, but can't. So when the helicopter lifts off and disappears to the west, taking with it the hounds and light-shadows, he straightens his legs, and lies where he'd been sitting, and sleeps, shivers, and dreams of baying hounds and light-shadows crawling over the hills behind him. He roots for the little light-worm as it wiggles through the distant darkness.

* * *