

Amba

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William Sanders is a semi-retired author who has been writing speculative fiction professionally since the 1980s. He first wrote a number of well-received novels and then turned to the short story, which he considers his strongest form. Many of his tales have appeared in this magazine, including the recent Nebula finalist "Dry Bones" (May 2003). We are delighted that Will came out of his semi-retirement to write the following story of the all-too-near future.

The client looked at his watch and then at Logan, raising an eyebrow. Logan nodded and spread his hands palm-down in what he hoped was a reassuring gesture. The client shook his head and went back to staring at the clearing below. His face was not happy.

Rather than let his own expression show, Logan turned his head and looked toward the other end of the blind, where Yura, the mixed-blood tracker, sat cross-legged with his old bolt-action Mosin rifle across his lap. Yura gave Logan a ragged steel-capped grin and after a moment Logan grinned back.

When he could trust his face again he turned back to look out the blind window. The sun was high now; yellow light angled down through the trees and dappled the ground. The early morning wind had died down and there was no sound except for the snuffling and shuffling of the half-grown pig tethered on the far side of the clearing.

The client was doing something with his camera. It was quite an expensive-looking camera; Logan didn't recognize the make. Now he was checking his damned watch again. Expensive watch, too. Definitely an upscale client. His name was Steen and he was an asshole.

Actually, Logan told himself without much conviction, Steen wasn't too bad, certainly not as bad as some of the other clients they'd had. He had a superior attitude, but then most of them did. But he was impatient, and that made him a real pain in the ass to have around, especially on a blind sit. All right, it was a little cramped inside the camouflaged tree blind, and you had to keep as still as possible; but all that had been explained to him in advance and if he had a problem with any of it he should have stayed back in Novosibirsk watching wildlife documentaries on television.

They'd been sitting there all morning, now, and maybe Steen thought that was too long. But hell, that was no time at all when you were waiting for a tiger, even on a baited site within the regular territory of a known individual.

Steen's shoulders lifted and fell in what was probably a silent sigh. At least he knew how to be quiet, you had to give him that much. Not like that silly son of a bitch last year, down in the Bikin valley, who made enough noise to scare off everything between Khabarovsk and Vladivostok and then demanded a refund because he hadn't gotten to--

Logan felt a sudden touch on his shoulder. He looked around and saw Yura crouching beside him, holding up a hand. The lips moved beneath the gray-streaked mustache, forming a silent word: "Amba."

Logan looked out the blind window, following Yura's pointing finger, but he saw nothing. Heard nothing, either, nothing at all now; the pig had stopped rooting around and was standing absolutely still, facing in the same direction Yura was pointing.

Steen was peering out the window too, wide-eyed and clutching his camera. He glanced at Logan, who nodded.

And then there it was, padding out into the sunlit clearing in all its great burnt-orange magnificence.

Out of the corner of his eye, Logan saw Steen clap a hand over his mouth, no doubt to stifle a gasp. He didn't blame him; a male Amur tiger, walking free and untamed on his home turf, was a sight to take the breath of any man. As many times as he'd been through this, his own throat still went thick with awe for the first seconds.

The pig took an altogether different view. It began squealing and lunging desperately against its tether, its little terrified eyes fixed on the tiger, which had stopped now to look it over.

The client had his camera up to his face now, pressing the button repeatedly, his face flushed with excitement. Logan wondered if he realized just how lucky he was. This was one hell of a big tiger, the biggest in fact that Logan had ever seen outside a zoo. He guessed it would go as much as seven or eight hundred pounds and pretty close to a dozen feet from nose to tip of tail, though it was hard to be sure about the last now that the tail was rhythmically slashing from side to side as the tiger studied the pig.

If Steen was any good at all with that camera he ought to be getting some fine pictures. A bar of sunlight was falling on the tiger's back, raising glowing highlights on the heavy fur that was browner and more subdued than the flame-orange of a Bengal, the stripes less prominent, somehow making the beast look even bigger.

The tiger took a couple of hesitant, almost mincing steps, the enormous paws making no sound on the leaf mold. It might be the biggest cat in the world, but it was still a cat and it knew something wasn't quite right about this. It couldn't smell the three men hidden nearby, thanks to the mysterious herbal mixture with which Yura had dusted the blind, but it knew that pigs didn't normally show up out in the middle of the woods, tethered to trees.

On the other hand, it was hungry.

It paused, the tail moving faster, and crouched slightly. The massive shoulder muscles bunched and bulged as it readied itself to jump--

Steen sneezed.

It wasn't all that much of a sneeze, really not much more than a snort, and Steen managed to muffle most of it with his hand. But it was more than enough. The tiger spun around, ears coming up, and looked toward the direction of the sound--for an instant Logan had the feeling that the great terrible eyes were looking straight into his--and then it was streaking across the clearing like a brush fire, heading back the way it had come. A moment later it was gone.

Behind him Logan heard Yura mutter, "*Govno.*"

"I'm sorry," Steen said stupidly. "I don't know why--"

"Sure." Logan shrugged. He heaved himself up off the little bench and half-stood, half-crouched in the low-roofed space. "Well, at least you got some pictures, didn't you?"

"I think so." Steen did something to his camera and a little square lit up on the back, showing a tiny colored picture. "Yes." He looked up at Logan, who was moving toward the curtained doorway at the rear of the blind. "Are we leaving now? Can't we wait, see if it comes back?"

"He won't," Logan said. "His kind got hunted almost to extinction, not all that long ago. He knows there are humans around. He's not going to risk it just for a pork dinner. Hell, you saw him. He hasn't been starving."

"Another one, perhaps--"

"No. Tigers are loners and they demand a hell of a lot of territory. A big male like that, he'll have easily fifty, a hundred square miles staked out. Maybe more."

They were speaking English; for some reason it was what Steen seemed to prefer, though his Russian was as good as Logan's.

"Now understand," Logan went on, "you've paid for a day's trip. If you want to stay and watch, you might get to see something else. Wolves for sure, soon as they hear that pig squealing. Maybe even a bear, though that's not likely. But you already saw a couple of bears, day before yesterday, and you said you'd seen wolves before."

"Yes. They are very common around Novosibirsk." Steen sighed. "I suppose you're right. May as well go back."

"All right, then." Logan started down the ladder and paused. The pig was still screaming. "Yura," he said tiredly in Russian, "for God's sake, shoot the damned pig."

* * * *

A little while later they were walking down a narrow trail through the woods, back the way they had come early that morning. Logan brought up the rear, with Steen in front of him and Yura leading the way, the old Mosin cradled in his arms. Steen said, "I suppose he's got the safety on?"

Yura grunted. "Is not safe," he said in thickly accented but clear English, not looking around. "Is gun."

The back of Steen's neck flushed slightly. "Sorry," he said, "Really, I'm glad one of us is armed. With that animal out there somewhere."

Logan suppressed a snort. In fact he was far from sure that Yura would shoot a tiger, even an attacking one. To the Udege and the other Tungus tribes, *Amba* was a powerful and sacred spirit, almost a god, to be revered and under no circumstances to be harmed.

On the other hand, Yura was half Russian--unless you believed his story about his grandfather having been a Krim Tatar political prisoner who escaped from a gulag and took refuge in a remote Nanai village--and there was never any telling which side would prove dominant. Logan had always suspected it would come down to whether the tiger was attacking Yura or someone else.

The gun was mainly for another sort of protection. This was a region where people got up to things: dealers in drugs and stolen goods, animal poachers, army deserters, Chinese and Korean illegals and the people who transported them. You never knew what you might run into out in the back country; tigers were the least of the dangers.

The trail climbed up the side of a low but steep ridge covered with dense second-growth forest. The day was chilly, even with the sun up, and there were still a few small remnant patches of snow here and there under the trees, but even so Logan had to unzip his jacket halfway up the climb and he could feel the sweat starting under his shirt. At the top he called a rest break and he and Steen sat down on a log. Yura went over and leaned against a tree and took out his belt knife and began cleaning the blade on some leaves; despite Logan's order he'd cut the pig's throat rather than waste a valuable cartridge.

Steen looked at Logan. "You're American," he said, not making it a question. "If I may ask, how is it you come to be in this country?"

"I used to be in charge of security for a joint Russian-American pipeline company, up in Siberia."

"This was back before the warmup began?"

No, just before it got bad enough for people to finally admit it was happening. "Yes," Logan said.

"And you haven't been home since?"

"Home," Logan said, his voice coming out a little harsher than he intended, "for me, is a place called Galveston, Texas. It's been underwater for a couple of years now."

"Ah." Steen nodded. "I know how it is. Like you, I have nothing to go back to."

No shit, Logan thought, with a name like Steen. Dutch, or maybe Belgian; and what with the flooding, and the cold that had turned all of northwest Europe into an icebox after the melting polar ice deflected the Gulf Stream, the Low Countries weren't doing so well these days.

Steen would be one of the ones who'd gotten out in time, and who'd had the smarts and the resources and the luck--it would have taken all three--to get in on the Siberian boom as it was starting, before the stream of Western refugees became a flood and the Russians started slamming doors. And he must have been very successful at whatever he did; look at him now, already able to take himself a rich man's holiday in the Far East. Not to mention having the connections to get the required permits for this little adventure.

Logan stood up. "Come on," he said. "We need to get going."

* * * *

The trail dropped down the other side of the ridge, wound along beside a little stream, and came out on an old and disused logging road, its rutted surface already overgrown with weeds and brush. A relic from the bad old days, when outlaw logging outfits ran wild in the country south of the Amur and east of the Ussuri, clearcutting vast areas of supposedly protected forest with no more than token interference from the paid-off authorities, shipping the lumber out to the ever-hungry Chinese and Japanese markets.

It had been a hell of a thing; and yet, in the end, it hadn't made any real difference. The old taiga forest, that had survived so much for so many thousands of years, hadn't been able to handle the rising temperatures; the warmup had killed it off even faster and more comprehensively than the clearcutters had done.

But by then the markets had collapsed, along with the economies of the market countries; and the loggers had moved north to Siberia with its vast forests and its ravenous demand for lumber for the mushrooming new towns. Left alone, the clearcut areas had begun to cover themselves again, beginning with dense ground-hugging brush and then ambitious young saplings.

Which, to the deer population, had meant a jackpot of fresh, easily accessible browse; and pretty soon the deer were multiplying all over the place, to the delight of the tigers and bears and wolves that had been having a pretty thin time of it over the last couple of decades.

On the road there was enough room for Logan and Steen to walk side by side, though Yura continued to stride on ahead. Steen was quiet for a long time, and Logan had begun to hope he was going to stay that way; but then finally he spoke again:

"It was not much."

Startled, Logan said, "What?"

"It was not much," Steen repeated. "You must admit it was not much. A minute only. Not even a minute."

Logan got it then. Christ, he thought, he's been working himself up to this for better than three miles.

He said carefully, "Mr. Steen, you contracted with us to take you around this area and give you a chance to see and photograph wildlife. You'll recall the contract doesn't guarantee that you'll see a tiger. Only that we'll make our best effort to show you one. Which we did, and this morning you did see one."

Steen's face had taken on a stubborn, sullen look. "Legally you are correct," he said. "But still it doesn't seem right. For all I am paying you, it was not much."

"Mr. Steen," Logan said patiently, "you don't seem to know how lucky you've been. Some of our clients spend as much as a week, sitting in a blind every day, before they see a tiger. Some never do."

Steen was shaking his head. "Look," Logan said, "if you think you didn't see enough this morning, if you'd like to try again, we can set you up for another try. Add it onto your original package, shouldn't cost you too much more."

Steen stared at Logan. "I will think about it," he said finally. "Perhaps. Still I don't think I should have to pay more, but perhaps. I will come to the office in the morning and let you know."

"Fine," Logan said. "I'm sure we can work out something reasonable."

Thinking: you son of a bitch. You smug rich son of a bitch with your God-damned fancy camera that someone needs to shove up your ass and your God-damned fancy watch after it. But he shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and kept walking, holding it in. The customer is always right.

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A couple of hours later they came out onto a broad clear area at the top of a hill, where a short stocky man stood beside a big Mi-2 helicopter. He had a Kalashnikov rifle slung over his back.

"Logan," he called, and raised a hand. "*Zdrast'ye*."

"Misha," Logan said. "Anything happening?"

"Nothing here. Just waiting for you, freezing my ass. Where is all this great warming I hear about?"

"Bullshit. Ten years ago, this time of year, you really would have been freezing your ass out here. You'd have been up to it in snow."

"Don't mind me, I'm just bitching," Misha said in English, and then, switching back to Russian, "How did it go? Did he get his tiger?"

Logan nodded, watching Steen climbing aboard the helicopter. Yura was standing nearby, having a lengthy pee against a tree. "So soon?" Misha said. "*Bozhe moi*, that was quick."

"Too quick." Steen was inside now and Logan didn't think he could hear them but he didn't really care anymore. He told Misha what had happened. "Don't laugh," he added quickly, seeing Steen watching them out a cabin window. "He's not very happy just now. Doesn't feel he got his money's worth."

"*Shto za chort?* What did he expect, tigers in a chorus line singing show tunes?" He glanced around.

"What happened to the pig?"

"I had Yura kill it. Too much trouble dragging it all the way back here, and I couldn't very well leave the poor bastard tied there waiting for the wolves."

"Too bad. We could have taken it to Katya's, got her to roast it for us."

He unslung the Kalashnikov and handed it to Logan. "Take charge of this thing, please, and I'll see if I can get this old Mil to carry us home one more time."

* * * *

"So," Misha said, "you think it was the same one? The big one, from last fall?"

"I think so," Logan said, pouring himself another drink. "Of course there's no way to know for sure, but the location's right and I can't imagine two males that big working that near to each other's territory."

It was late evening and they were sitting at a table in Katya's place in Khabarovsk. The room was crowded and noisy and the air was dense with tobacco smoke, but they had a place back in a corner away from the worst of it. There was a liter of vodka on the table between them. Or rather there was a bottle that had once contained a liter of vodka, its contents now substantially reduced.

"In fact," Logan went on, "it's hard for me to imagine two males that big, period. If it's not the same one, if they're all getting that big, then I'm going to start charging more for screwing around with them."

Misha said, "This is good for us, you know. If we know we can find a big fine-looking cat like that, we'll get some business."

He scowled suddenly. "If some bastard doesn't shoot him. A skin that big would bring real money."

"The market's just about dried up," Logan said. "The Chinese have too many problems of their own to have much interest in pretty furs--drought and dust storms, half the country trying to turn into Mongolia--and the rich old men who thought extract of tiger dick would help them get it up again are too busy trying to hang onto what they've got. Or get out."

"All this is true." Misha nodded, his eyes slightly owlish; he had had quite a few by now. "But you know there are still those who have what it takes to get what they want. There always will be, in China or Russia or anywhere else." He grinned crookedly. "And a good thing for us, *da?*"

Logan took a drink and made a grimace of agreement. Misha was right; their most lucrative line of business depended on certain people being able to get what they wanted. Between the restrictions on aviation--Russia might be one of the few countries actually benefiting from atmospheric warming, but enough was enough--and those on travel within what was supposed to be a protected wilderness area, it was theoretically all but impossible to charter a private flight into the Sikhote-Alin country. There were, however, certain obviously necessary exceptions.

Logan said, "Come now, Misha. You know perfectly well all our clients are fully accredited scientific persons on essential scientific missions. It says so in their papers."

"*Konyechno*. I had forgotten. Ah, Russia, Russia." Misha drained his own glass and poured himself another one. "All those years we were poor, so we became corrupt. Now we are the richest country in the world, but the corruption remains. What is that English idiom? â€"Force of hobbit.â€"™"

"Habit."

"Oh, yes. Why do I always--"

He stopped, looking up at the man who was walking toward their table. "*Govno*. Look who comes."

Yevgeny Lavrushin, tall and skinny and beaky of nose, worked his way through the crowd, the tails of his long leather coat flapping about his denim-clad legs. He stopped beside their table and stuck out a hand toward Logan. "Say hey," he said. "Logan, my man. What's happening?"

He spoke English with a curious mixed accent, more Brooklyn than Russian. He had driven a cab in New York for a dozen years before the United States, in its rising mood of xenophobia, decided to terminate nearly all green cards. Now he lived here in Khabarovsk and ran a small fleet of trucks, doing just enough legitimate hauling to cover for his real enterprises. He was reputed to have mafia connections, but probably nothing very heavy.

Logan ignored the hand. "Yevgeny," he said in no particular tone. "Something on your mind?"

"What the hell," Yevgeny said. "You gonna ask me to sit down?"

"No," Logan said. "What did you want?"

Yevgeny glanced theatrically around and then leaned forward and put his hands on the table. "Got a business proposition for you," he said in a lowered voice. "Serious money--"

"No," Logan said again, and then, more sharply as Yevgeny started to speak, "No, God damn it. *Nyet*. Whatever it is, we're not interested."

"Besides," Misha said in Russian, "since when do your usual customers travel by air? Did they get tired of being crammed like herring into the backs of your trucks?"

Yevgeny's coat collar jerked upward on his neck. "Christ, don't talk that shit..." He glanced around again. "Look, it's not Chinks, okay? Well, yeah, in a way it is, but--"

"Yevgeny," Logan said, "it's been a hell of a long day. Go away."

"Hey, I can dig it. I'm gone." He started to move away and then turned back, to lean over the table again. "One other thing. You guys know where there's some big tigers, right? If you ever need to make some quick money, I know where you can get a hell of a good price for a clean skin--"

Logan started to stand up. "Okay, okay." Yevgeny held up both hands and began backing away. "Be cool, man. If you change your mind, you know where to find me."

"Yeah," Logan muttered as he disappeared into the crowd. "Just start turning over rocks ... hand me the bottle, Misha, I need another one now."

"Wonder what he wanted," Misha mused. "As far as I know, his main business is running Chinese illegals. You suppose he's branched out into drugs or something?"

"Doesn't matter." Logan finished pouring and looked around for the cap to the vodka bottle. "I don't even want to know ... well, this has to be my last one. Have to deal with Steen tomorrow," he said, screwing the cap down tightly, "and I definitely don't want to do that with a hangover."

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But Steen didn't show up the following morning.

"He hasn't been here," Lida Shaposhnikova told Logan when he came in. "I came in early, about

eight-thirty, so I could have his account ready, and he never showed up."

Logan checked his watch. "It's not even ten yet. He probably slept late or something. We'll wait."

The office occupied the front room of a run-down little frame house on the outskirts of Khabarovsk, not far from the airport. The office staff consisted entirely of Lida. The back rooms were mostly full of outdoor gear and supplies--camping kit, camouflage fabric for blinds, night-vision equipment, and so on--and various mysterious components with which Misha somehow managed to keep the old helicopter flying. The kitchen was still a kitchen. Logan went back and poured himself a cup of coffee and took it to his desk and sat down to wait, while Lida returned to whatever she was doing on her computer.

But a couple of hours later, with noon approaching and still no sign of Steen, Logan said, "Maybe you should give him a call. Ask him when he's planning to come."

He got up and walked out onto the front porch for a bit of fresh air. When he went back inside, Lida said, "I phoned his hotel. He checked out this morning at nine."

"Shit. You better call--"

"I already did." Lida leaned back in her chair and looked at him with dark oblong eyes, a legacy from her Korean grandmother. "He left on the morning flight to Novosibirsk."

"Son of a bitch," Logan said in English.

"So it would seem," Lida said in the same language.

"Well." Logan rubbed his chin. "Well, go ahead and figure up his bill and charge him. You've already got his credit card number, from when he paid his deposit."

Lida nodded and turned to the computer. A few minutes later she muttered something under her breath and began tapping keys rapidly, as the front door opened and Misha came in.

"*Sukin syn*," he said when Logan told him what was going on. "He's run out on us?"

"It's all right," Logan said. He nodded toward the front desk, where Lida was now talking to someone on the phone. "We'll just charge it to his credit--"

"No we won't." Lida put down the phone and turned around. "The credit card's no good. He's canceled it."

"He can do that?" Misha said. "Just like that?"

"He did it yesterday," Lida said. "He paid his bill at the hotel with a check."

Everyone said bad words in several languages. Misha said, "He can't get away with that, can he?"

"Legally, no. In the real world--" Logan shrugged heavily. "He's got to be connected. You know how hard it is to do anything to someone who's connected. We can try, but I don't think much of our chances."

"At the very best," Lida said, "it's going to take a long time. Which we don't have." She waved a hand at the computer. "I've been looking at the numbers. They're not good."

"Got some more costs coming up, too," Misha put in. "We're overdue on our fuel bill at the airport, and the inspector wants to know why he hasn't gotten his annual present yet. I was just coming to tell you."

"Hell." Logan felt like kicking something. Or someone. "I was counting on that money to get us off the hook. Well, I'll just have to get busy and find us another job."

There was a short silence. Logan and Misha looked at each other.

Misha said, "We could--"

"No we couldn't," Logan said.

But of course they were going to.

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Yevgeny said, "Like I tried to tell you before, it's not Chinks. I mean, it's *Chinamen*, but it's not your regular coolies coming north looking for work and a square meal. These are high-class Chinamen, you know? Some kind of suits. The kind you don't just cram into the back of a truck behind a load of potatoes."

"Sounds political," Logan said. "No way in hell, if it is."

"No, no, nothing like that. This is--" Yevgeny hunched his bony shoulders. "I'll be straight with you guys, I don't really know *what* the fuck it's all about, but it can't be political. The people who want it done, that's just not their thing."

Which meant mafia, which meant Yevgeny was blowing a certain amount of smoke, because in Russia nowadays the concepts of mafia and political were not separable. This was starting to feel even worse.

Misha said, "I'll tell you right now, I'm not flying into Chinese airspace. Money's no good to a man with a heat-seeking missile up his ass."

"That's okay. See, there's this island in the river--"

"The Ussuri?" Logan said skeptically. The Ussuri islands were military and heavily fortified; there had been some border incidents with the Chinese.

"No, man, the Amur. Way to hell west of here, I'll show you on the map, they gave me the coordinates and everything. It's just a little island, not much more than a big sandbar. On the Russian side of the channel, but nobody gives a shit either way, there's nothing much around there, not even any real roads."

His fingers made diagrams on the tabletop. "You guys set down there, there'll be a boat from the Chinese side. Five Chinamen get out, you pick them up and you're outta there. You drop them off at this point on the main highway, out in the middle of nowhere. There'll be some people waiting."

"Sounds like they've got this all worked out," Logan said. "So why do they need us? I'd expect people like that to have their own aircraft."

"They did. They had this chopper lined up for the job, only the pilot made some kind of mistake on the way here and spread himself all over this field near Blagoveshchensk. So they got hold of me and asked could I line up somebody local."

"Yevgeny," Logan said, "if this goes wrong you better hope I don't make it back, because I'm going to be looking for you."

"If this goes wrong, you won't be the only one. These people," Yevgeny said very seriously, "they're not people you want to fuck with. Know what I'm saying?"

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Lida said, "I wish I knew what you're getting mixed up in. Or perhaps I don't. It doesn't matter. You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"Mhmpf," Logan replied, or sounds to that effect. His face was partly buried in his pillow. He was about half asleep and trying to do something about the other half if only Lida would quit talking.

"I talk with Katya, you know," she went on. "We've known each other for years. She's seen you with Yevgeny Lavrushin."

Logan rolled onto his back, looking up into the darkness of the bedroom. "It's nothing. Just a quick little flying job."

"Of course. A quick little flying job for which you will be paid enough to get the company out of debt. You can't help being a fool," she said, "but I wish you wouldn't take me for one."

She moved closer and put out a hand to stroke his chest. "Look at us. You need me more than you love me. I love you more than I need you. Somehow it works out," she said. "I'm not complaining. Only don't lie to me."

There was nothing to say to that.

"So," she said, "at least tell me when this is to happen."

"Tomorrow night. Wha--" he said as her hand moved lower.

"Then I'd better get some use out of you," she said, "before you get yourself killed or imprisoned."

"Lida," he protested, "I'm really tired."

She slid a long smooth leg over him and moved it slowly up and down his body. "No you're not. Maybe you think you are, but you're not. Not yet. See there," she said, rising up, straddling him, fitting herself to him, "you're not tired at all."

Logan's watch said it was almost one in the morning. He shivered slightly as a chilly breeze came in off the river.

Not too many years ago, at this time of year, the river would have carried big floes of ice from the spring thaw; but now there was only the smooth dark water sliding past in the dim light of a low crescent moon, and, away beyond that, a dark smudge that was the distant China shore.

The island was about half a mile long and maybe fifty or sixty feet across. As Yevgeny had said, it wasn't much more than a big sandbar. The upstream end was littered with brush and washed-up dead trees, but the other end was clear and open and flat in the middle, with plenty of room for the Mil.

He dropped his hand to the butt of the Kalashnikov and hefted it slightly, easing the pressure of the sling against his shoulder. Beside him, Misha squatted on the sand, his face grotesquely masked by bulky night goggles. "Nothing yet," Misha said.

"It's not quite time."

"I know. I just don't like this waiting."

Logan knew what was eating Misha. He hadn't wanted to shut down the Mil's engines; he'd wanted to be ready to take off fast if anything went wrong. But it wouldn't have done any good; as Logan had already

pointed out, with those twin Isotov turbines idling they'd never hear a border patrol unit approaching until it was too late to run for it, and, after all, where would they run to?

Somewhere on the Russian side of the river a wolf howled, and was joined by others. Standing in the shadows nearby, Yura said something in a language that wasn't Russian, and chuckled softly.

"Wolves all over the place these days," Misha said. "More than I've ever seen before. I wonder what they're eating. I know, the deer population is up, but I wouldn't think that would be enough."

"It's been enough for the tigers," Logan pointed out.

"True ... speaking of tigers," Misha said, "I've been thinking. Maybe we ought to start giving that big male some special attention, you know? Take a pig or a sheep or something down there every now and then, get him used to visiting that clearing. A tiger that size, he's money in the bank for us if we can count on him showing up for the clients."

"Hm. Not a bad idea."

"Have Yura put out some of his secret tiger bait powder." Misha dropped his voice. "You think that stuff really works?"

"Who knows?" Logan wished Misha would shut up but he realized he was talking from nerves. "Could be."

"Those tribesmen know things," Misha said. "Once I saw--"

He stopped. "Something happening over there." He reached up and made a small adjustment to the night goggles. "Can't really see anything," Misha added. "Something that could be a vehicle, with some people moving around. Can't even be sure how many."

A small red light flashed briefly on the far shore, twice. Logan took the little flashlight from his jacket pocket and pointed it and flicked the switch three times in quick succession.

Misha said, "*Shto za chort?* Oh, all right, they're carrying something down to the river. Maybe a boat."

Logan wished he'd brought a pair of goggles for himself. Or a night scope. He listened but there was no sound but the night breeze and the barely audible susurrus of the current along the sandy shore. Even the wolves had gone quiet.

"Right, it's a boat," Misha said. "Coming this way."

Logan slipped the Kalashnikov's sling off his shoulder, hearing a soft *flunk* as Yura slid a round into the chamber of his rifle.

Misha stood up and slipped off the goggles. "I better go get the Mil warmed up."

A few minutes later Logan saw it, a low black shape moving toward the island. There was still no sound. Electric motor, he guessed. As it neared the bank he saw that two men stood in the bow holding some sort of guns. He reached for the Kalashnikov's safety lever, but then they both slung their guns across their backs and jumped out into the shallows and began pulling the big inflatable up onto the sand.

Several dark figures stood up in the boat and began moving rather awkwardly toward the bow, where the two men gave them a hand climbing down. When the fifth one was ashore the two gunmen pushed the boat back free of the shore and climbed back aboard while the passengers walked slowly across the

sand to where Logan stood.

The first one stopped in front of Logan. He was tall and thin and bespectacled, wearing a light-colored topcoat hanging open over a dark suit. In his left hand he carried a medium-sized travel bag.

"Good evening," he said in accented Russian. "I am Doctor Fong--"

"I don't want to know who you are," Logan told him. "I don't want to know anything I don't need to know. You're in charge of this group?"

"I suppose. In a sense--"

"Good. Get your people on board." Logan jerked the Kalashnikov's muzzle in the direction of the helicopter, which was already emitting a high, whistling whine, the long rotor blades starting to swing.

The tall man nodded and turned and looked back at the boat and said something in Chinese. The boat began to move backward. The tall man spoke again and the others moved quickly to follow him toward the Mil, lugging their bags and bundles.

"Let's go," Logan told Yura. "*Davai poshli.*"

Off down the river the wolves were howling again.

* * * *

The road was a dark streak in the moonlight, running roughly east-west, across open plain and through dense patches of forest. There was no traffic in sight, nor had Logan expected any. This had been one of the last stretches of the Trans-Siberian Highway to be completed, but the pavement was already deteriorating, having been badly done to begin with and rarely maintained since; very few people cared to drive its ruinously potholed surface at night.

"Should be right along here," Logan said, studying the map Yevgeny had given them. "That's the third bridge after the village, isn't it?"

Beside him, Misha glanced out the side window at the ground flickering past beneath. "I think so."

"Better get lower, then."

Misha nodded and eased down on the collective. As the Mil settled gently toward the road Logan felt around the darkened cockpit and found the bag with the night goggles. The next part should be straightforward, but with people like this you couldn't assume anything.

Misha leveled off a little above treetop level. "If there's one thing I hate worse than flying at night," he grumbled, "it's flying low at night ... isn't that something up ahead?"

Logan started to put on the night goggles. As he was slipping them over his head a set of headlights flashed twice down on the highway, maybe a quarter of a mile away.

"That should be them," he told Misha. "Make a low pass, though, and let's have a look."

* * * *

Misha brought the helicopter down even closer to the road, slowing to the speed of a cautiously driven car, while Logan wrestled the window open and stuck his head out. The slipstream caught the bulky goggles and tried to jerk his head around, but he fought the pressure and a few seconds later he saw the car, parked in the middle of the road, facing east. He caught a glimpse of dark upright shapes standing

nearby, and then it all disappeared from view as the Mil fluttered on up the road.

"Well?" Misha said.

Logan started to tell him it was all right, to come around and go back and land; but then something broke surface in his mind and he said, "No, wait. Circle around and come back up the road the same way. Take it slow so I can get a better look."

Misha kicked gently at the pedals and eased the cyclic over, feeding in power and climbing slightly to clear a stand of trees. "*Shto eto?*"

"I'm not sure yet." Something hadn't looked right, something about the scene down on the road that didn't add up, but Logan couldn't get a handle on it yet. Maybe it was just his imagination.

They swung around in a big circle and came clattering back up the road. Again the double headlight flash, this time slower and longer. "Slow, now," Logan said, pulling the goggles down again and leaning out the window. "All right ... that's it, go on."

He pulled off the goggles and closed his eyes, trying to project the scene like a photograph inside his head: the dark shape of a medium-sized car in the middle of the road, flanked by a couple of human figures. Another man--or woman--standing over by the right side of the road.

"Shit," Logan said, and opened his eyes and turned around and looked back between the seats. "Hey. You. Doctor Fong."

"Yes?" The tall Chinese leaned forward. "Something is wrong?"

"These people you're meeting," Logan said. "They know how many of you there are?"

"Oh, yes." Reddish light from the instrument panel glinted off glasses lenses as Fong nodded vigorously. "They know our names and ... everything, really. This is certain."

"What's happening?" Misha wanted to know.

"Three men in sight, back there," Logan said, turning back around. "At least one more in the car, operating the headlights. Five men expected."

"So?"

"So that's not a very big car to hold nine men. You could do it, but it would be a circus act. Which raises some questions."

"Huh." Misha digested this. "What do you think?"

"I think we better find out more." He thought for a moment. "All right, here's how we'll do it. Set her down right up here, past that rise, just long enough for me to get out. Then circle around a little bit, like you're confused, you know? Make some noise to cover me while I move in and have a look."

He tapped the comm unit in the pocket on his left jacket sleeve. "I'll give you a call if it's all right to land. If I send just a single long beep, come in as if you're going to land and then hit the landing lights."

"Got it," Misha said. "Taking Yura?"

"Of course. Right, then." Logan undid the seat harness and levered himself out of the right seat. As he clambered back into the passenger compartment, Doctor Fong said, "Please, what is the matter?"

"I don't know yet." Logan worked his way between the close-spaced seats to the rear of the cabin, where Yura sat next to the door. "Don't worry," he said over his shoulder, hoping Fong couldn't see him getting out the Kalashnikov. "It's probably nothing."

Misha brought the Mil down and held it in a low hover, its wheels a few feet above the pavement, long enough for Logan and Yura to jump out. As Logan's boots hit the cracked asphalt he flexed his knees to absorb the impact and almost immediately heard the rotor pitch change as Misha pulled up on the collective to lift out of there.

Yura came up beside him and Logan made a quick hand signal. Yura nodded and ran soundlessly across the road and disappeared into the shadows beneath the trees on the right side. Logan walked back along the road until he reached the top of the little rise and then moved off the pavement to the left.

The cover was poor on that side, the trees thin and scattered, with patches of brush that made it hard to move quietly. Logan guessed it was about a mile back to where the car was parked. Moving slowly and carefully, holding the Kalashnikov high across his chest, he worked his way along parallel to the road. The night goggles were pushed up on his forehead; they were too clumsy for this sort of thing, and anyway he could see all right now. The moon was higher and the clouds had blown away, and his eyes had adjusted to the weak light.

The Mil came back overhead, turbines blaring and rotor blades clop-clopping, heading back down the road. It swung suddenly off to one side, turned back and crossed the road, did a brief high hover above the trees, and then began zigzagging irregularly along above the highway. Logan grinned to himself; whoever was waiting down the road must be getting pretty baffled by now. Not to mention pissed off.

He thought he must be getting close, and he was about to move over by the road to check; but then here came the Mil again, coming back up the road maybe twenty feet up, and suddenly there was a bright light shining through the trees, closer than he'd expected, as the car headlights flashed again.

He stopped and stood very still. As the sound of the helicopter faded on up the road behind him, he heard a man's voice say quite distinctly, "*Ah, yob tvoiu mat'.*"

He waited until the Mil began to circle back, so its noise would cover any sounds that he made. A few quick steps and he stood beside the road, pressed up against an inadequate pine. He slipped the night goggles down over his eyes and leaned cautiously out, feeling his sphincter pucker.

There they were, just as he remembered: the two men standing on either side of the car, and another one over by the far side of the road. All three of them, he saw now, were holding weapons: some sort of rifles or carbines, he couldn't make out any details.

He pushed the goggles back up, slung the Kalashnikov over his shoulder, and took the comm unit from his pocket and switched it on and pressed a single key. He held it down for a count of five, switched the unit off, slipped it back into his pocket, and unslung the Kalashnikov again.

The Mil came racketing up the road once more, slowing down as the headlights flashed again. Logan stepped out from behind the tree and began moving quickly along next to the road, not trying to be stealthy; by now these bastards wouldn't be paying attention to anything but the helicopter with the impossible pilot.

It was moving now at bicycle speed, and then even slower. When it was no more than twenty feet in front of the parked car it stopped in a low hover. Logan stopped too, and pushed the Kalashnikov's fire selector to full automatic as Misha hit the landing lights.

The sudden glare threw the scene into harsh contrast, like a black-and-white photograph. One of the men beside the car threw a forearm over his face. Someone cursed.

Logan raised the Kalashnikov and took a deep breath. "Everyone stand still!" he shouted over the rotor noise. "Put down the weapons!"

For a second he thought it was going to work. The men on the road froze in place, like so many window dummies. Logan had just enough time to wonder what the hell he was going to do with them, and then it all came apart.

The man over on the far side of the road started to turn, very fast, the gun in his hands coming up and around. There was a deafening *blang* and he jerked slightly, dropped his rifle, and fell to the pavement.

While the sound of Yura's rifle was still rattling off through the trees the two men by the car made their play, moving simultaneously and with purposeful speed. The nearer one took a long step to one side and whirled around, dropping into a crouch, while the other dived to the ground and started to roll toward the cover of the car.

Logan got the farther one in mid-roll and then swung the Kalashnikov toward the remaining one. A red eye winked at him and something popped through the bushes, not very close; the gunman had to be shooting blind, his eyes still trying to catch up to the sudden changes in the light. Backlit by the landing lights, he was an easy-meat target; Logan cut him down with a three-shot burst to the chest.

The car door opened and someone stepped out. Yura's old rifle boomed again from the trees across the road. Four down.

Logan walked slowly toward the car, the Kalashnikov ready. A man lay beside the open door, a machine pistol in one hand. Logan looked in and checked the interior of the car.

He took the comm unit out and flicked it on again. "All right, Misha," he said. "You can set her down now."

He walked over to the body of the last man he had killed and studied the weapon that lay beside the body. A Dragunov sniper rifle, fitted with what looked like a night scope. Definitely some professional talent, whoever they were.

He went back and sat down on the hood of the car, for want of any better place, while Misha set the helicopter down. He noticed with disgust that his hands were starting to tremble slightly.

Yura came up, his rifle over his shoulder and what looked like a Kalashnikov in one hand. "Sorry I was so slow on that last one," he said. He raised the Kalashnikov and gestured with his free hand at the body on the far side of the road. "This is what he had."

"Then for God's sake get rid of it." Remembering, Logan cleared the chamber of his own rifle and slung it over his back. For the first time in a long time he wished he hadn't quit smoking.

The Mil's rotor blades were slowing, the turbine whine dropping to idle. A couple of minutes later Misha came walking toward the car. "*Bozhe moi*," he said, staring. "What--?"

"Reception committee," Logan said. "Had a nice little ambush set up. At least that's how it looks."

Misha was looking around dazedly. "You're sure?"

"About the ambush, not entirely. It's possible they were going to let the passengers disembark and wait

for us to leave before killing them. Hell," Logan said, "just look at the kind of firepower they were carrying. I don't think it was because they were afraid of wolves."

Yura was going over the car. "Couple of shovels in the trunk," he reported. "Some wire, some tape."

"See?" Logan turned his head and spat; his mouth felt very dry. "They weren't planning on taking anyone anywhere. Not any farther than a short walk in the woods."

The Chinese men were getting out of the helicopter now, stopping in front of the nose and staring at the car and the bodies. Misha cursed. "I told them to stay inside--"

"It's all right," Logan said. "Doesn't matter now."

Doctor Fong appeared, walking toward them. He didn't look happy, Logan thought, but he didn't look all that surprised either.

Logan said, "I don't suppose you have any idea what this was all about?"

Fong stopped beside the car and looked around. "Perhaps," he said. "I--let me think."

"Don't think too long," Logan said. "We've got to get out of here."

"Yes." He looked at Logan. "Do you speak English?"

"After a fashion."

"Aha." Fong's mouth quirked in a brief half-smile. "An American. Good. My English is much better than my Russian."

He pushed his glasses up on his nose with the tip of a slender finger. They weren't slipping; Logan guessed it was a nervous habit. He made a gesture that took in the car and the bodies. "Can we perhaps move away from...?"

"Sure." Logan slid off the car and walked with Fong over to the side of the road. "I just need to know," he said, "what kind of trouble this is about. If you guys are anything political--"

"Oh, no." Fong stopped and turned to face him. "No, we're not, as you put it, political at all. Merely a group of harmless scientists."

"Some pretty heavy people trying to stop you," Logan said. "Someone must not think you're so harmless."

"Yes, well...." Fong looked off into the darkness under the trees and then back at Logan. "You saved our lives just now," he said in a different tone. "This is a debt we can hardly repay, but there's something I can give you in return. Some information."

"Scientific information?"

"Yes." If Fong noticed the sarcasm he didn't show it. He pushed his glasses up again. "It's the warming."

It took a moment for Logan to realize what he was talking about. The adrenalin edge had worn off; he felt tired and old.

"It's still getting warmer," Fong said. "I'm sure you already knew that, it's hardly a secret. But--" He paused, his forehead wrinkling. "The curve," he said. "I couldn't remember the word ... the curve is

different from what has been thought."

His forefinger drew an upward-sweeping curve in the air. "The warming is about to accelerate. It's going to start getting warmer at an increasing rate, and--I'm not sure how to say this--the rate of increase will itself increase."

"It's going to get warmer faster?"

Fong nodded. "Oh, you won't notice any real change for some time to come. Perhaps as much as two to five years, no one really knows as yet ... but then," the fingertip began to rise more steeply, "the change will be very rapid indeed."

"You mean--"

"Wait, that's not all. The other part," Fong said, "is that it's likely to go on longer than anyone thought. The assumption has been that the process has all but run its course, that a ceiling will soon be reached. It's not clear, now, just where the ceiling is. Or even if there is one, in any practical sense."

Logan's ears registered the words, but his fatigue-dulled brain was having trouble keeping up. "It's going to keep getting warmer," he said, "it's going to do it faster and faster, and it's going to get a hell of a lot warmer than it is now. That's what you're saying?"

"Even so."

"But that's going to mean ... Christ." Logan shook his head, starting to see it. "Christ," he said again helplessly, stupidly. "Oh, Christ."

"You might well call on him, if you believe in him," Fong said. "If I believed in any gods I would call on them too. Things are going to be very, very bad."

"As if they weren't bad enough already."

"Yes indeed. I don't know how long you've been in this part of the world, but I'm sure you've heard at least some of the news from other regions."

"Pretty bad in China, I hear."

"You have no idea. Believe me, it is much, much worse than anything you can have heard. The government keeps very strict control over the flow of information. Even inside China, it's not always possible to know what's happening in the next province."

Fong put out a hand and touched the rough bark of the nearest pine. "You live in one of the few remaining places that have been relatively unharmed by the global catastrophe. A quiet, pleasant backwater of a large country grown suddenly prosperous--but all that is about to end."

He gave a soft short laugh with absolutely no amusement in it. "You think the Russian Federation has a problem with desperate Chinese coming across the border *now*? Just wait, my friend. Already the level of desperation in my country is almost at the critical point. When people realize that things are getting even worse, they will begin to move and it will take more than border posts and patrols, and even rivers, to stop them."

Logan started to speak, but his throat didn't seem to be working so well.

"Your American journalists and historians," Fong added, "used to write about the Chinese military using

“human wave”™ attacks. This frontier is going to see a human tsunami.”

Logan said, “You’re talking war, aren’t you?”

“Of one kind or another.” Fong fingered his glasses. “I really am not qualified to speculate in that area. All I’m telling you is that this is about to become a very bad place to live.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

“As I say, you saved our lives. In my case, you probably saved me from worse.” Fong turned and looked back at the scene in the middle of the road, where the other Chinese were still milling around the car and the bodies. “I suspect they meant to question me. That would not have been pleasant.”

Logan said, “So what was all this about? Since when is the mafia interested in a bunch of physicists or climatologists or whatever you are?”

“What?” Fong looked startled. He pushed his glasses up again and then he smiled. “Oh, I see. You misunderstand. None of us is that sort of scientist. No, our field is chemistry. Pharmaceutical chemistry,” he said. “Which *is* of interest to ... certain parties.”

Logan nodded. It didn’t take a genius to figure that one out.

“The information I just gave you,” Fong went on, “has nothing to do with my own work. I got it from my elder brother, who was one of the team that made the breakthrough. He told me all about it, showed me the figures--it’s not really difficult, anyone with a background in the physical sciences could understand it--just before they took him away.”

“Took him away? What for? Oh,” Logan said. “This is something the Chinese government wants to keep the lid on.”

“That is a way to put it.”

“And that’s why you decided to get the hell out?”

“Not really. We’ve been working on this for some time. We had already made contact with the, ah, relevant persons. But I admit the news acted as a powerful incentive.”

“And this business here tonight?”

Fong shrugged. “The so-called Russian mafia is no more than a loose confederacy of factions and local organizations. I would assume someone got wind of the plan and, for whatever reason, decided to stop us. Possibly rivals of the ones who were going to employ us. But that’s only a guess.”

He made a face. “I am not happy about being involved with people like this, but I would have done anything to get out of China. And I can’t imagine myself as an underpaid illegal laborer on some construction project along the Lena or the Yenesei.”

Logan nodded again. “Okay, well, we’d better get moving. What do you guys want to do? We can’t very well take you back to Khabarovsk with us, but--”

“Oh, we’ll be all right. The car appears to be undamaged--that really was remarkable shooting--and one of my colleagues is a very expert driver. We have contacts we can call on,” Fong said, “telephone numbers, a safe address in Belogorsk.”

Logan noticed that a couple of the Chinese men were examining the dead men’s weapons, handling them

in quite a knowledgeable way. Some scientists. He wondered what the rest of the story was. Never know, of course. What the hell.

"So you may as well be going." Fong put out a hand. "Thank you again."

Logan took it. "Don't mention it," he said. "A satisfied customer is our best advertisement."

* * * *

"So," Misha said, "you think it's true?"

"Right now," Logan said, "I don't know what the hell I think about anything."

By now they were about three quarters of the way back to Khabarovsk. The moon was well up in the sky and the Trans-Siberian Highway was clearly visible below the Mil's nose. Perfect conditions for IFR navigation: I Follow Roads. Back in the cabin, Yura was sound asleep.

"He could have been making the whole thing up," Misha said. "But why?"

"People don't necessarily need a reason to lie. But," Logan said, "considering the situation, I don't know why he'd want to waste time standing around feeding me a line."

"Those people," Misha said, centuries of prejudice in his voice. "Who can tell?"

"Well, if Fong was right, there's going to be a hell of a lot of those people™ coming north in another couple of years--maybe sooner--and then it's going to get nasty around here. Even if Fong's story was 90 percent bullshit," Logan said, "we're still looking at big trouble. Those poor bastards have got to be pretty close to the edge already, from all I've heard. If things get even a little bit worse--" He turned and looked at Misha. "I think we don't want to be here when it happens."

Misha sighed heavily. "All right. I see what you mean."

In the distance the lights of Khabarovsk had begun to appear. Logan looked at the fuel gauges. They'd cut it a little close tonight; they wouldn't be running on fumes by the time they got home, but they'd certainly be into the reserve.

Misha said, "Where are you going to go, then?"

"Hell, I don't know." Logan rubbed his eyes, wishing they'd brought along a Thermos of coffee. "Back up north, maybe."

"Ever think of going back to America?"

"Not really. Actually I'm not even sure they'd let me back in. I've lived outside the country almost twenty years now, and anything over five automatically gets you on the National Security Risk list. Anyway," Logan said, "things have gone to hell in the States, and not just from the weather and the flooding. It's been crazy back there for a long time. Even before I left."

Misha said, "Canada, then?"

"Canada's harder than this country to get into, these days. Especially for people from the States. Alaska, now," Logan said thoughtfully, "that might be a possibility. They say the secessionists are paying good money for mercenaries. But I'm getting a little old for that."

"You weren't too old tonight." He could just make out the pale flash of Misha's grin in the darkness.

"Man, I'd forgotten how good you are."

"Bullshit. No, I think it's Siberia again, if I decide to pull out. I know some people from the old days, we've kept in touch. You want to come along? Always work for a good pilot."

"Maybe. I'll think about it. We had some pretty good times in Siberia in the old days, didn't we? And now it wouldn't be so damned cold."

Khabarovsk was coming into view now, a sprawl of yellow lights stretching north from the river. Moonlight glinted softly off the surface of the Amur, limning the cluster of islands at the confluence with the Ussuri.

"Going to take Lida with you?" Misha asked.

"I don't know." Logan hadn't thought about it. "Maybe. If she wants to come. Why not?"

He sat upright in his seat and stretched as best he could in the confined space. "You understand," he said, "I haven't made up my mind yet. I'm not going to do anything until I've had time to think this over."

He stared ahead at the lights of Khabarovsk. "Right now I've got more urgent matters to take care of. Starting with a long private talk with Yevgeny."

* * * *

But next day everything got crazy and there was no time to think about Yevgeny or the Chinese or anything else. A perfectly legitimate scientific expedition, some sort of geological survey team, called up from Komsomolsk in urgent need of transportation services, their pilot having gotten drunk and disappeared for parts unknown with their aircraft.

And so, for the next couple of weeks, life was almost unbearably hectic, though profitable. Logan was too preoccupied to pay much attention to anything but the most immediate concerns; he barely listened when Yura came in to say that he was taking off for a few days to check out something he'd heard about.

But at last the job was finished and life began to return to a less lunatic pace; and it was then, just as Logan was starting to think once again about old and new business, that Yura showed up at the office saying he'd found something Logan ought to see.

"You come," he said. "I have to show you."

There was something in his face that forestalled arguments or objections. Logan said, "Will we need the Mil?"

Yura nodded. Logan said, "All right. Let's go find Misha."

* * * *

"Well," Misha said in a strangled voice, "now we know what the wolves have been eating."

Logan didn't reply. He was having too much trouble holding the contents of his stomach down.

"Bears too," Yura said, and pointed at the nearest body with the toe of his boot. "See? Teeth marks too big for wolves."

There were, Logan guessed, between fifteen and twenty bodies lying about the clearing. It was difficult to be sure because some had been dragged over into the edge of the forest and most had been at least partly dismembered.

"Tigers, some places," Yura added. "Not this one, though."

"How many?" Logan managed to get out. "Places, I mean."

"Don't know. Eleven so far, that I found. Probably more. I quit looking." Yura's face wrinkled into a grimace of disgust. "Some places, lots worse than this. Been there too long, you know? Gone rotten, bad smell--"

"Yes, yes," Logan said hastily, feeling his insides lurch again. "I'll take your word for it."

The smell was bad enough here, though the bodies didn't appear to be badly decomposed yet. At least it was still too early in the year for the insects to be out in strength. In a few more weeks--he pushed the picture out of his mind. Or tried to.

"And these places," Misha said, "they're just scattered around the area?"

Yura nodded. "Mostly just off old logging roads, like here. Always about the same number of Chinese."

Logan wondered how he could tell. The bodies he could see were just barely recognizable as human.

"They came up the logging road," Yura said, pointing. "One truck, not very big, don't know what kind. Stopped by those trees and everyone got out. They all walked down the trail to right over there. Chinese all lined up, facing that way, and knelt down. Four men stood a little way behind them and shot them in the back. Kalashnikovs." He held up a discolored cartridge case. "Probably shooting full automatic. Some of the Chinese tried to run. One almost made it to the woods before they got him."

Misha was looking skeptical; probably he wondered if Yura could really tell all that just by looking at the signs on the ground. Logan didn't. He'd seen Yura at work enough times in the past.

"Did it the same way every place," Yura added.

"Same truck too?"

"Couldn't tell for sure. A couple of places, I think so."

"Poor bastards," Misha said. "Packed in the back of a truck, getting slammed around on a dirt road, probably half starved--they'd be dizzy and weak, confused, easy to push around. Tell them to line up and kneel down, they wouldn't give you any trouble."

"One place," Yura said, "looked like some of the Chinese tried to fight back. Didn't do them any good."

"Your people," Logan said, "they knew about this?"

"Someone knew something. Stories going around, that's how I heard. Not many villages left around here," Yura said. "Most of the people moved out back when they started the logging. Or the loggers drove them out."

"Any idea how long it's been going on?"

"From what I heard, from the way the bodies looked at a couple of places," Yura said, "maybe a year."

Logan and Misha looked at each other.

"I think," Logan said, "there's someone we should go see."

* * * *

"Chinks?" Yevgeny Lavrushin said incredulously. "This is about fucking *Chinks*?"

He rubbed the back of his hand against the raw spot on his face, where Yura had peeled the duct tape off his mouth. He did it clumsily; his wrists were still taped together.

Beside him in the back seat of the car, Logan said, "Not entirely. We were already planning to have a talk with you."

"Hey," Yevgeny said, "I don't blame you guys for being pissed off, I'd be pissed off too. I swear I didn't know it was going to get fucked up like that."

His voice was higher than usual and his words came out very fast. There was a rank smell of fear-sweat coming off him, so strong Logan was tempted to open a window despite the chill of the early-morning air.

"There's a *lot* of people pissed off about what happened," he said. "Some pretty *heavy* people. If they thought I had anything to do with what went down that night, I wouldn't be alive right now talking to you guys. Trust me."

"Trust you?" Misha said over his shoulder. "The way those Chinese did?"

"Oh, shit. What's the big deal? Look," Yevgeny said, "you gotta understand how it works. Used to be you could bring in as many Chinks as you could haul and nobody cared, it's a big country and the big shots were glad of the cheap labor and the cops were cool as long as they got their cut."

Misha swerved the old Toyota to miss a pothole. Yevgeny lost his balance and toppled against Yura, who cursed and shoved him away. "God *damn*," Yevgeny cried. "Come on, you guys, can't you at least take this tape off ?

"No," Logan said. "You were saying?"

"Huh? Oh, right. See, everything's tightened up now. You can still bring in a few now and then, like those suits you guys picked up. But if I started running Chinks in any kind of numbers," Yevgeny said, "enough to make a profit, man, the shit would come down on me like you wouldn't believe. A bunch of them get caught, they talk, it's my ass."

"So you take their money," Logan said, "and you load them into the truck and take them out into the woods and shoot them."

"For Chrissake," Yevgeny said. His voice had taken on an aggrieved, impatient note; his facial expression was that of a man trying to explain something so obvious that it shouldn't need explaining. "They're *Chinks!*"

"They're human beings," Misha said.

"The fuck they are. A Chink ain't a man. Anyway," Yevgeny said, looking at Logan, "like you never killed anybody? I heard what you did up in Yakutsk--"

His voice died away. "Sorry," he said almost in a whisper.

Logan looked out the windows. "Almost to the airport," he said. "Now you're not going to give us any trouble, are you, Yevgeny? You're going to go along with us without any noise or fuss, right? Yura, show him."

Yura reached out with one hand and turned Yevgeny's head to face him. With the other hand he held up his big belt knife, grinning.

"Okay, okay. Sure." Yevgeny's face was paler than ever. "No problem ... hey, where are we going?"

"You'll see," Logan told him. "It's a surprise."

* * * *

Going up the logging road, watching Yevgeny lurching along ahead of him, Logan considered that maybe they should have let him put on a jacket or something. He'd come to the door of his apartment, in answer to their knock, wearing only a grubby sweat suit that he'd evidently been sleeping in; and they'd let him put on his shoes, but by the time anyone thought about a coat they'd already taped his wrists and it was too difficult to get one onto him.

Now he was shivering in the cold breeze that blew across the ridge; and Logan didn't really care about that, but he was getting tired of listening to Yevgeny complaining about it. Well, it wouldn't be much longer.

Up ahead, Misha turned off the overgrown road and up the trail toward the crest of the ridge. "That way," Logan said to Yevgeny.

"Shit," Yevgeny whined. "What's all this about? I'm telling you guys, if you found some stiff's or something out here, it's got nothing to do with me. I never operated anywhere near here. I never even *been* anywhere near here."

"Shut up," Logan said, prodding him with the muzzle of the Kalashnikov. "Just follow Misha and shut up."

It was a long slow climb up the ridge and then down the other side. Yevgeny was incredibly clumsy on the trail; he stumbled frequently and fell down several times. At least he had stopped talking, except for occasional curses.

When they finally reached the little clearing he leaned against a tree and groaned. "Jesus," he said. "You guys do this all the time? What are you, crazy?"

Logan looked at him and past him, studying the tree. It wasn't the one he'd had in mind, but it would do just fine. He turned and nodded to the others.

"So," Yevgeny said, "are you gonna tell me now--hey, what the fuuuu--"

His voice rose in a yelp as Logan and Yura moved up alongside him and grabbed him from either side, slamming him back hard against the trunk of the tree. Misha moved in quickly with the roll of duct tape.

"Hey. Hey, what, why--" Yevgeny was fairly gobbling with terror now. "Come on, now--"

"*Harasho*," Misha said, stepping back. "Look at that. Neat, huh?"

Logan walked around the tree, examining the bonds. "Outstanding," he said. "Very professional job."

Misha held up the rest of the roll of tape. "Want me to tape his mouth again?"

Yevgeny was now making a dolorous wordless sound, a kind of drawn-out moan. Logan started to tell Misha to go ahead and gag him, but then he changed his mind and shook his head.

Yura had already disappeared up the narrow game trail on the far side of the clearing. Now he came back, carrying a small cloth bag from which he sprinkled a thick greenish-brown powder along the ground. When he reached the tree where Yevgeny hung in his tape bonds he pulled the mouth of the bag wide open and threw the rest of the contents over Yevgeny's face and body.

"Now you smell good," he told Yevgeny.

Yevgeny had begun to blubber, "Oh God, oh Jesus," first in English and then in Russian, again and again. Logan didn't think he was praying, but who knew?

"All right," Logan said, "let's go."

They made better time going back over the ridge, without Yevgeny to slow them down. They were halfway down the other side when they heard it: a deep, coughing, basso roar, coming from somewhere behind them.

They stopped and looked at each other. Yura said, "*Amba* sounds hungry."

They moved on down the trail, hurrying a little now. Just as they reached the logging road they heard the roar again, and then a high piercing scream that went on and on.

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