



ROUGH AIR

JAMES SWALLOW

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ONE: TURBULENCE

Their contact told them that the weather in Bogotá was unseasonably humid for the time of year, and Marc Dane felt it, as if every last percentage point of the moisture in the air was gathering at the small of his back.

His shirt stuck to his skin and the driver's seat of the SUV, and the cool monoxide-laden air of the highway through the open window did nothing to ease his discomfort. He ran a hand through his unkempt dirty-blond hair, pushing it out of his eyes. Marc's expression had a wolfish cast to it, and beneath the plain denim shirt he was whipcord-thin, wound tight with tension.

The road rumbled beneath the wheels of the big Chinese-made Landwind SUV as he kept the vehicle at a steady pace. Marc had expected the temperature to drop once the sun had set, but the cowl of low, dense cloud over the city acted like a dome, locking in the humidity for the duration.

He flicked a glance upward. The sky threatened rain, but he'd been in Colombia for over seventy-two hours and nothing more than a thin drizzle had fallen. His gaze dropped back to the road, and the river of crimson tail lights along the Avenida El Dorado.

Traffic was busy, but it moved swiftly. Cars and motorcycles flowed around long, segmented busses. Everything was heading steadily northwest, along the wide road that bisected the city from the foot of Monserrate to the Bogotá River.

Marc shifted in his seat and glanced at the man in the back of the Landwind. Assim Kader's youthful, unblemished Middle Eastern features were under-lit by the greenish glow of the tablet computer in his hands.

The flat-screen device sat in a cradle with two contoured grips on either side, giving it the look of an expensive hand-held videogame console. The Saudi was lost in the images on the display. The pictures he was seeing were coming back in real time from a camera mounted on the quadrotor drone, flying a few hundred meters ahead of the moving SUV. Kader guided the tiny machine along at rooftop altitude, keeping it in position above a white C-Class Mercedes coupe. They had been following the car all the way from the upmarket Rosales neighbourhood uptown.

'The power-pack is dropping out,' he said, sensing Marc's attention on him. 'I'd say we have five more minutes before I have to reel the drone back in.' Assim spoke with the cut-glass precision of someone with an expensive British public school education. 'There's a bit of a breeze. Its making props work hard.'

‘How long to swap in a fresh battery?’ Marc’s accent, by contrast, was all Estuary English. Both of them were a very long way from home in the close heat of Colombia’s biggest city.

‘Two minutes, tops,’ said Assim.

Marc made a quick decision and flicked his fingers at the air. ‘Get it back. We’re running a risk having it up in the first place . . . I’ll move us up a couple of car-lengths to keep the target in sight.’ He let the Landwind drift over into the right lane and in the middle distance, the white Merc crossed his line of sight.

‘Where is he even going?’ muttered Assim, as he slid open the SUV’s sunroof.

‘We’ll find out soon enough.’

The target of their surveillance mission was Mateo Garza, a man who – on paper at least – appeared to be a successful financial advisor, with little about him to raise suspicions. All that was the legend, however. Garza *was* a money guy, the only bit of the story that was true. It was just that the cash he handled belonged to senior members of a South American criminal cartel known as La Noche.

Marc had crossed paths with the cartel’s people on a couple of occasions. The last time had been at an auction for a stolen nuclear device on an oil rig off the coast of Somalia, and that fact alone spoke volumes as to what kind of aspirations La Noche had.

Not content with making obscene amounts of money from the drug trade, arms dealing and human trafficking, the cartel were working their way toward an end goal of gaining a clandestine kind of nationhood. They wanted to buy their way into the big leagues, to share the rarefied air of mega-rich corporations and national governments.

La Noche were a way off that yet, but the moves they were making had drawn the attention of the organization Marc worked for. A group whose mission was, in the simplest terms, to put a spanner in the works of injustice wherever they could.

Dane and Kader were both 'consultants' for the Special Conditions Division, a team that operated on the fringes of legality, and quite often, beyond it. The SCD was a subset of a multinational called the Rubicon Group, and the duo's job descriptions within it were nicely nebulous.

Enough to conceal that Assim was a genius level grey-hat hacker, and Marc was an ex-Royal Navy officer and former field technician for MI6. Both of them had come to Rubicon for their own reasons, but both stayed because something in the SCD's ethos resonated with them.

Here, they had the chance to push back against all the darkness in the world, in the places where the law couldn't reach.

Mateo Garza was a person of interest to Rubicon. He was a vector, a lightning rod. The financier had made some bad choices in the

last few months that had seen him draw the ire of his masters in the cartel, and now he was on the move, trying to find a way out before La Noche decided he had outlived his usefulness.

Penetrating Garza's personal communications had netted some useful but time-sensitive intelligence. The man was going to meet someone, and he was offering this contact 'material' worth enough to command an asking price of five million US dollars.

But as to the identity of the interested party, and what the nature of the material actually was, they could only speculate. Marc was guessing records of La Noche's off-shore bank transactions, and the most likely buyer for that kind of data was either the Drug Enforcement Agency, or one of the cartel's rivals in Bolivia.

If Rubicon could get hold of that information, it could be turned against one of the largest organized crime groups on the planet; but Garza had already rejected a pass from one of the company's other operatives. So the focus had shifted to surveillance and digital interception.

Marc had taken the assignment to put some distance between himself and Rubicon's offices in Monaco. He was still feeling the after-burn of a situation that had played out in South Korea, stemming from a betrayal by one of his own team that had ended with too many unresolved issues.

A high-pitched buzz sounded above him and he flinched as the camera drone dropped out of the night air and clattered in through the SUV's open sun roof.

Assim caught the thing awkwardly and set it down in the foot well. 'We've been driving around in circles for hours. Do you think Garza suspects something?'

'Bloke's just being careful,' said Marc. 'Considering who he works for, wouldn't you be?'

Garza's driver – one of two Russian bodyguards – had gone halfway around the city before committing to the highway, clearly in the process of "washing" his route to shake off any possible tails. The drone had kept the SCD operatives out of sight, which meant that Garza probably thought he was in the clear.

Assim studied a digital map, the same one Marc had up on the Landwind's dashboard display. 'We just passed the turn off to Los Monjes.'

'Yeah.' Marc kept his eyes on the white Mercedes. From this point onward, the Avenida El Dorado was a straight run that ended at Bogotá International Airport, a few miles up ahead. 'What's he up to?'

'Maybe the meeting is *at* the airport,' offered Assim. 'Garza is there for someone flying in. And once he's inside the terminal building, not

only has he got his own people to look out for him, but the airport security are there too.'

'And the military,' Marc noted, catching on. El Dorado Airport was also the site of a small base for the Fuerza Aérea Colombiana, the Colombian air force. There would be a lot of watchers in place all around the terminals. 'Clever,' he added. 'Even the cartels would think twice about kicking off around there.'

'If we go in, he could make us,' said Assim. 'How do we play this?'

'By ear,' Marc said, with a crooked smile. 'Like I always do.'

Assim jumped out of the SUV in front of the main terminal, and did his best to look casual as he followed Garza and one of the bodyguards inside. Marc put the Landwind in the parking area a short distance away from where the other bodyguard left the Mercedes, and trailed her in.

He kept his battered daypack over one shoulder, pretending to be engrossed in his phone, but maintained a careful pace behind the woman.

Rubicon had no information on the Russians in Garza's employ, so Assim had christened them 'Janet' and 'John', like the titular characters from the old learn-to-read books that had taught him English as a child. At a guess, Marc would have said that they were both ex-military, and

neither looked uncomfortable in the muggy South American climate, which suggested a familiarity with the region.

Janet's light jacket sported no tell-tale bulges where a pistol might be concealed, lending credence to Assim's theory about the airport as the ideal meet site. Anyone foolish enough to bring a weapon into the terminal was taking a serious risk. There were metal detectors everywhere, and the Colombian Policía Nacional were likely to shoot first and not ask any questions.

Marc's own Glock semi-automatic was secure in the SUV's glovebox, but he had a military-spec laptop and few other bits of kit in the backpack that could cause trouble, if it came to it. He donned a set of wireless earbuds and switched the sat-phone in his hand to an encrypted channel. The phone resembled a high-end smart handset, but it was a custom unit made by a Rubicon subsidiary, packed with cutting-edge black ops tech that was far more illegal than any firearm.

'I see you.' Assim's voice sounded in Marc's ear as he entered the terminal. *'I'm at the coffee shop, your three o'clock.'*

From the corner of his eye, Marc saw the other man on a stool, nibbling at a pastry and toying with his tablet computer. To anyone who didn't look twice, Assim could have been just another young tourist waiting for a flight. He'd picked a good spot, from which he could observe most of the terminal's main atrium.

‘Copy.’ Marc kept walking, pacing Janet as she fell in behind her colleague John, and Garza himself. ‘Target in sight.’

Garza approached the entrance to the arrivals area, one hand tight on the strap of a leather bag on his shoulder, and he showed no signs of slowing down.

A nerve in Marc’s jaw jumped, and a split second later Assim was in his ear again. ‘*Where is he going?*’

Their target went straight to an automated check-in kiosk outside the departures area, and Marc had no choice but to do the same or risk drawing attention to himself.

He passed as close as he dared to Garza and the Russians, briefly catching sight of John as the man slid three passports under a scanner on the kiosk. Boarding passes spat out of a slot and Marc saw the same flight number on each of them.

‘Oh, shit.’ Marc pulled out the Canadian passport that was part of his cover identity and dithered in front of another kiosk. ‘We were wrong. Garza’s getting on a plane.’

‘*Where to?*’

‘Avileña Air eight-one-five.’

‘*That’s the redeye flight to Dallas. Is he running?*’ Marc shot a look across the terminal in Assim’s direction. ‘*That’s not right, that doesn’t fit our profile—*’

‘Sod the bloody profile,’ Marc hissed. ‘The target is on the move.’

‘Do we abort?’

They both knew the answer to that should be yes. The safe call to make would be to withdraw, contact the SCD crisis centre and get Rubicon to dispatch someone to Dallas, in hopes of re-acquiring the target there.

But none of that lined up with the twist in Marc’s gut, the instinctive sense that shot through him as he watched Garza walk towards the security barriers. It was late in the day and only a few of the gates were open. A slow-moving line of people had formed, but in a few minutes, the financier would be through them and airside. He would be as good as gone.

‘There’s no guarantee we can pick him up at the other end.’ Marc stepped away and looked back toward Assim. ‘Can you get me a seat on the same flight?’

He saw the other man’s head duck down over his tablet. ‘*Uh. Okay. Give me a minute.*’

‘Faster would be better.’

‘Window or aisle?’

‘Whatever, mate!’ Marc couldn’t stop himself from snarling the retort as he backed away from the kiosk, and he collided with a thickset,

unsmiling Hispanic man. The man glared back at him from under a black and red baseball cap emblazoned with the name AXEL.

‘Scuse me,’ Marc said, with a weak smile.

‘*Pendejo turista,*’ growled the guy in the cap, and he shouldered the Englishman out of the way as he marched toward the gates.

‘*Right, it’s done,*’ reported Assim. ‘*You’re all the way back in cattle class but it’s the best I could get at short notice. The ticket is booked under your cover name.*’

‘Thanks.’ Marc told him, as he scanned the passport and waited for the boarding pass to print off. ‘Get into the airline system, get a manifest for everybody on the flight. And then tell Monaco what I’m doing.’

He snatched the pass from the slot and jogged across to the gates. Up ahead, he could see John going through separately, and caught a glimpse of the back of Garza’s head. Their target was already heading for the metal detectors.

‘*This is way off -book, Marc,*’ said Assim. ‘*It is not going to go down well.*’

‘I reckon,’ he agreed. ‘I’ll contact you again when I can.’ Marc pulled out the earbuds, dumping his phone in his pocket as he pushed through the gates to the detector arches.

Someone jostled him as he slipped his pack off his shoulder, and he half-turned to see the Russian woman – Janet – standing right next to him. She was carrying Garza's leather bag over one arm.

'Pardon,' she said, in thickly-accented English. The bodyguard gave no sign of recognizing him. 'Can I go in front? I am late. I have a flight to catch.'

'Yeah, same here,' Marc said warily, and stepped aside.

TWO: PRESSURE DROP

The lights in the economy class cabin of the Airbus A330-200 dimmed as the night flight settled into its cruising altitude, but the gloom did little for the upset toddler a couple of rows ahead of Marc Dane. The baby had big lungs for kid so small, and she continued to serenade the rest of her fellow passengers with an ululating wail, even as her mother tried fruitlessly to soothe her.

The other people in the cabin seemed to be tuning it out. Almost all the seats in the back third of the airliner were filled, and the people in them were mostly Colombian nationals or American tourists taking the cheap option home to the USA.

The seat next to Marc was filled by an angular elderly gentleman with a leathery, wrinkled face who fidgeted constantly. Despite his thin, bony form, the old guy had elbows that were sharp and jabby, and he kept putting them in Marc's ribs as he tried to colonise all the space around him.

Marc, of course, was far too British to do anything more than return a tight smile and shift in his seat. Fishing his smartphone from an inner

pocket of his jacket, Marc went to the device's file store and tabbed across the data.

Uploaded into a secure partition of the phone's memory were some of the mission intelligence documents for the surveillance operation deployed after Mateo Garza; a dossier containing a briefing on the man, his personal history and long-lens observation photos.

Marc studied Garza's face carefully, re-committing it to his memory. The target was somewhere on the plane, but Marc had lost sight of him during the boarding process. Garza liked his luxuries, so it was highly unlikely the financier was back here in the cattle-car section. He had to be up front in Business Executive class, sandwiched between the cold-eyed bodyguards he'd hired, the ones Marc's hacker colleague Assim had nicknamed Janet and John.

A soft chime sounded and the seat belt light went out, quickly followed by a chorus of metallic clicking as dozens of passengers immediately unfastened themselves, and made for the toilets at the rear of the cabin. Marc released his own belt, eyeing the curtain that partitioned off economy class from the rest of the airliner's interior.

Garza had boarded this flight because he was going to meet someone, and Marc's assumption was that the meeting would take place at the end of the flight, maybe at the airport in Dallas or somewhere nearby. The intelligence the financier had on the criminal cartel known

as La Noche had to be secured, or else this entire operation would be for nothing.

Marc swallowed hard and worked his jaw, trying to equalize the pressure in his head. Usually, it would settle down for him by the time a plane was cruising, but tonight it would not go away. There was a dull, heavy block of lead behind his sinuses, and his eyes ached like they were a size too big for their sockets. The constant screaming of the baby didn't help.

Rolling his neck in a vain attempt to ease the pain, Marc let his gaze rake over the people in the seats around him, and he saw a distinctive red and black AXEL baseball cap two rows back. The surly man he had bumped into at the airport check-in desk didn't notice Marc's attention as he rose, and he pushed aside his neighbouring passengers, ignoring their complaints.

Axel – which was how Marc was now thinking of him – continued to show a complete lack of concern for his fellow travellers and barged past the ones in the aisle to get to the rear galley. He had a sling bag with him, but he hadn't been carrying anything back in the airport.

As the man vanished out of sight, the partition curtain near Marc's seat swished open and shut to let a female flight attendant come through. In the brief instant it was pulled back, he caught a glimpse of

people in the next cabin, up and moving around. There was no sign of Garza or the Russians.

Time to take a walk, Marc told himself. I'm just another bored passenger, stretching his legs, nothing more than that . . .

He was half out of his seat when the old guy slumped over on to Marc's shoulder and one of his spidery, long-fingered hands flopped into his lap. Wincing at a new wave of nausea from the pressure in his head, Marc gently pushed the man back toward the window.

The elderly man sagged, a rag doll figure only held in place by the seat belt across his lap. Marc gasped as the pain in his skull gathered, spiking through his ears like twin ice-picks, but still he tried to gently nudge the old man upright.

That was when he saw the darkening blue tone gathering in the other passenger's lips. He snatched at the man's thin wrist and felt a weakening pulse there.

'Hey,' Marc's whole head hurt when he spoke, ringing like a struck bell. 'I need some . . . Some help . . .'

The invisible vice tightening on him cranked in a few more notches, and it took a real effort to pull himself out of his seat.

All of a sudden, it was hard to catch a breath. He felt dizzy and sick. Without thinking, Marc's hand went to his face, touching his upper lip. His fingers came away marked with blood.

The baby wasn't crying any more. Other passengers were lolling against one another or slumped in their seats, many with nosebleeds just like Marc's. He turned to see a heavy-set man drop in the aisle, slamming hard into the carpeted decking.

At last, a realization came to him, as slow and ponderous as an iceberg drifting out of sea-fog. Marc *knew* this feeling. He had been trained for it, back in his navy service.

Hypoxia. The word floated through his thick, sluggish thoughts. He staggered forward a few steps, his head swimming.

The last time had felt like this, there had been a fair few bottles of vodka involved. *Remember that? The bar near Wong Kei's restaurant in Chinatown—?*

'Focus!' He bit out the word, forcing himself to concentrate.

The jet's cabin was depressurizing, robbing all the passengers of precious oxygen their bodies needed to keep functioning. At cruising altitude, thousands of feet up, the air was way too thin for an unprotected person to remain conscious for more than a few moments.

Those yellow mask thingies, where are they? Marc slapped at a panel above the seats. Why aren't they falling out? In the event of a loss of cabin pressure . . .

The words of the flight safety video played back in his head, echoing down a tunnel of fading awareness. Again, it took a massive

effort to clear the haze from his thoughts for a few seconds. It was a fight to keep his attention on what was important.

Marc could feel himself succumbing, his consciousness crumbling as his brain was starved of vital oxygen. Grey mist clouded the edges of his vision, blurring everything into incoherence. He only had seconds left, and he would be unconscious before he hit the floor.

He fell more than he staggered, over the insensate man, tripping, down to his knees. In front of him, the flight attendant he had seen moments before was already slumped in a heap, her hands caught in the material of a bright yellow emergency pack stowed under a bulkhead. She'd managed to get it half out of its locker before she lost consciousness.

Dimly, Marc registered the pack's contents spilt across the deck. A slim green cylinder trailing a clear pipe to a breather mask. The woman had passed out trying to put it on.

The screaming, sickening pressure in Marc's head forced him down, his legs turning to water. He grabbed at the air tank, dragging it toward him.

Secure your own mask before helping others, he remembered.

Marc jammed the stale plastic cup over his nose and mouth, and managed to take a single breath before, at last, the darkness engulfed him.

It could have been minutes. It might have been hours.

Eventually, the black tide that had swallowed him up retreated, and Marc's awareness came back to him in sickly fits and starts. He felt like a collection of pieces, uncoordinated and broken. Limbs were rubbery and heavy. Hands moved slow and felt numb. Vision was cloudy, making it hard to see.

He was lying on his front, arms wrapped about his chest like he was hugging himself, and that was what had kept the mask from the portable O2 tank from falling away from his face. With care, Marc pressed the breather firmly in place and greedily sucked in gulps of oxygen.

After a while, he felt well enough to move. Marc rolled over and sat up in the exit row. He secured the mask's elastic straps tightly in place, then slung the cylinder over his shoulder. The tank's pressure gauge was already reading a quarter down.

'How long was I out?' Marc asked himself, the words coming out in an arid rasp. His lips and nostrils felt dry.

Everywhere he looked, the cabin was a jumble of silent, unmoving bodies. He reached for the flight attendant and reluctantly touched a finger to the carotid artery in her neck. As before with the old man, he felt a weak pulse.

These people were still alive, but they wouldn't stay that way for long. Slowly suffocating, the hypoxia would end with brain death for each and every one of them. Unless the cabin pressurization was restored or the airliner descended to a lower altitude, two hundred innocent people would perish.

A series of bleak scenarios, each more chilling than the last, went through Marc's mind. If this was some kind of mechanical malfunction, if everyone on board including the flight crew was unconscious, they were doomed. The Airbus would keep flying out over the ocean until it ran out of fuel and fell from the sky.

If the cartel had uncovered the same intelligence as Rubicon, and guessed Mateo Garza's intentions to reveal their secrets, it was right out of La Noche's playbook to cause an atrocity on such a scale. The cartel was run by men who were not satisfied unless they spilled blood over everything they did. The suggestion that they would kill a plane-load of innocent civilians in order to destroy one traitor was all too likely a possibility.

La Noche's masters believed very strongly in sending a message to those who defied them, as graveyards full of assassinated police officers, federal agents, politicians and journalists could attest to.

Marc secured the air tank and made his way up the cabin, picking his way over the bodies of unconscious passengers. His first port of call

had to be the flight deck, and he tried not to think about what might happen if the pilot and co-pilot had succumbed along with the passengers. If they were out cold, and the cockpit's security door was locked from the inside, he would be trapped back here until he ran out of air.

That grim thought made him stop and check the dial on the pressure gauge again. The gradation on the face of the dial gave no indication of time, but Marc had used O2 tanks on countless scuba dives, and by the size of this one he estimated he had an hour at most. He would need to find any other tanks on board at the first opportunity.

'So, no pressure then.' As soon as the words left his mouth, Marc let out a weak chuckle. '*No pressure!* Huh.' The dull, half-drunk sensation still clinging to him nearly sent Marc into a fit of laughter, and he forced it away. 'Not the time, mate,' he reminded himself, quickly sobering.

Passing into the next section of the Airbus's cabin, he was greeted with the same scenes as in economy class. Here, the passengers had been settling down to their in-flight meal, and most of them were slumped face-first in their plates of tiny meat cutlets.

Marc squeezed through a gap between a stalled food trolley and a seat row, and something moved up ahead of him. A shadow passed in

front of the yellow glow spilling from an overhead light in the business class section. He heard a noise that could have been a voice.

He dropped into a crouch and froze, automatically assuming the worst. Marc strained to listen, but it was impossible to pick out anything distinct over the constant rumble of the airliner's engines. It wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that someone else on the plane had been quick enough to grab another portable air cylinder, but some sixth sense stopped Marc from going forward or calling out.

For a second, he wondered if the oxygen loss had affected him worse than the expected. *Are hallucinations a side effect of hypoxia?* He couldn't remember.

Then the shadow moved again, and a voice cried out in agony. Marc peered around the side of the food trolley and saw the man in the baseball cap cross from one side of the cabin to the other.

He was wiping fresh blood off his hands with a napkin. Axel had a plastic mask over his nose and mouth, more like the kinds that paramedics use to give oxygen to emergency victims than the type clamped to Marc's face. A small O2 cylinder hung from his belt. None of the gear looked like airliner issue.

A flurry of connections clicked together in Marc's thoughts. *If he has that, then he got it on board. If he got it on board, someone helped*

him get it past security. If someone helped him this isn't an accident.

This is a targeted attack.

Axel disappeared out of sight and Marc heard the agonized wail again. Keeping low, moving in the shadows of the cabin's dimly lit interior, he got as close as he could to the source of the sound.

Sliding into the cover of a vacant chair, Marc mimicked the slump shouldered appearance of one of the unconscious passengers, covering his face so anyone passing by wouldn't see the mask he wore.

Peeking through the gaps between the wider business class seats, he saw that Axel wasn't alone. The thickset, muscular man was talking to another person in a similar mask. The other guy was pale and skinny, with a thin neck and a nervous, twitchy way about him.

Chicken or beef, he thought.

Before them, still belted into his chair and with his wrists secured to the armrests by cable ties, sat Mateo Garza. Either side of him, Garza's Russian bodyguards were out cold, but the accountant had been given an oxygen mask of his own to keep him awake. There were bright red cuts down his chest, slashes that had gone through his jacket, shirt and deep into the flesh beneath. Garza's head lolled forward, bloody spittle dripping from his mouth.

Axel and his skinny mate were discussing Garza with all the professional disinterest of two butchers sizing up a prize pig. The guy

with the chicken-neck set to work rifling through Garza's pockets, and whatever he was looking for, he didn't find it. He gave Garza a slap in return.

The conversation between the men grew irritable. Marc knew an interrogation when he saw it, and it wasn't much of a leap to figure out that the thugs were looking for Garza's data on La Noche.

The skinny guy rooted around some more, searching in the overhead storage bins, stopping every couple of seconds to check the luggage he found inside against a snapshot on his phone. Marc remembered the shoulder bag he saw the bodyguard carrying in the airport. It was nowhere to be seen.

Axel appeared to come to a decision, tossing a thick bottle napkin to the other man. And then, to Marc's horror, the two of them wrapped the heavy cloths around the faces of the unconscious Russians and smothered the life out of the bodyguards.

Marc dropped back out of sight as the grisly execution concluded. He was appalled by the callous killing, but there was no way to intervene without blowing his only advantage. As long as he remained unseen, there was still a chance to stop this – and there were two hundred other lives still hanging in the balance.

He stayed low as the skinny guy called out to his partner, and watched him set off at a quick pace toward the rear of the jet. With the

two of them in sight of each other, Marc's odds of survival were poor, but one on one it was a different story.

He drew back, away from Axel and Garza, retreating through the partition curtain. From the mid-deck galley, Marc heard the heavy clank of metal on metal, and he made his way up, sticking close to the bulkhead.

Chancing a look around the panel, Marc saw an open hatch in the floor of the cabin, exposing the narrow galley space below. He caught sight of the other man down there, moving forward along the lower deck.

Toward the cargo bay, he thought. Garza's bag will be in there with the rest of the luggage.

He waited until a count of ten, and then followed him down.

THREE: CROSS-CHECK

Diego hated flying.

It went against everything he held sacred. It was unnatural, being forced to sit in a winged tube for hours at a time, among chattering women and screaming children, giving up control of your destiny to some mouthy fly-boy who was probably half-drunk to begin with. Why anyone would willingly agree to get on an airliner was beyond him.

He nervously scratched at the pale skin of his thin neck and glowered at the metal walls and low ceiling. Open air and feet on the ground, that was what he preferred. If it wasn't because *el jefe* had insisted on Diego being on this job, he would have palmed it off on another of La Noche's enforcers. But the cartel's masters were not the kind of men you said no to. Not if you still wanted to be drawing breath by the end of the conversation.

The deck of the airliner shuddered beneath his feet, and he made his way through the narrow gaps between the cargo containers in the ventral bay of the Airbus. Angular plastic boxes built on movable metal frames sat in two rows that ran the length of the jet's lower deck, strapped down with tethers to stop them shifting around during flight.

Through the clear walls of the containers, Diego could see the piles of luggage within. He had a small flashlight that he used to sweep the contents, looking for an elusive dirt-brown leather shoulder bag. That fool Garza up in the passenger cabin hadn't had it with him, which meant it had to be here.

Diego re-adjusted the oxygen mask over his mouth and nose. The small pressure bottle connected to it dangled from his belt, clanking against the metal panels as he moved. Each breath of the canned air tasted oily and unpleasant, and he longed to take off the breather. But the hard, aching sensation in his skull reminded him how foolish that would be. At this altitude, with the jet's cabin depressurized and everyone else aboard unconscious, he would pass out in seconds without the vital oxygen flowing to him.

El jefe's orders were unequivocal: find Garza, find what he stole, but keep him alive. The cartel wanted the traitor in one piece, so that they could personally exercise La Noche's displeasure on the errant fool.

Diego had witnessed the results of that displeasure on more than one occasion. He'd seen terrible things done to the disloyal and the disobedient in the cartel's name, things that gave even the most seasoned killer a moment's pause. Diego had no desire to have that murderous wrath directed toward him.

The beam of his torch flickered off a set of distinctive brass buckles on a carry strap, and he found what he was looking for. Diego drew the long-handled, thin-bladed knife that had been secreted aboard the plane for him, and used it to pry open the cargo container's lid. In a few moments, he had Garza's shoulder bag in his hand, and he sliced open its supple, expensive leather with jagged cutting motions.

The bag's contents spilled out and Diego pawed through them, tossing away anything unnecessary, until his fingers closed around a heavy plastic box the size of a cigarette case. The device had sockets on one side for cables to connect it to a computer, and Diego smiled behind his mask as he pocketed it. *Bueno.*

The constant rumble of the jet engines made it difficult to hear things clearly down on the cramped lower deck, so Diego felt the movement behind him more than he heard it. He spun as one of the angular containers shifted abruptly on its castors and came rolling right at him.

Diego registered the loose tethers on the deck and someone shoving the container forward – he glimpsed a tall Anglo with an air mask over his face and a determined look in his eyes. The jetliner shuddered through a patch of choppy air and Diego half-leapt, half-fell out of the container's way as it slammed into the hull.

A moment slower, and it would have crushed him into the inner wall of the fuselage. Cursing violently, he recovered fast and threw himself toward the unknown man, leading with the long blade in his fighting hand. He slashed wild shapes through the air between them, and it had the desired effect, making the other man back off.

The Anglo didn't have a weapon, no blade, no gun, which meant he wasn't a sky marshal or anything like that. How was he up and around? Maybe he was another bodyguard working for Garza?

None of that mattered; he had to be dealt with. Diego decided to do it quick. He didn't want any complications.

Bringing up the knife until it was level with his head, he aimed the tip of the blade at the Anglo's chest and sighted down it.

'*Adios, cabrón,*' he said, his thumb moving to a switch on the side of the knife's long metal handle.

Marc's plan to trap the skinny guy between the cargo crates had been a good plan, but in the execution it had come apart. Now he found himself facing an armed and angry cartel thug with a six inch long blade and the will to use it.

Marc backed off as far as he could, trying to put things on his terms, but there was scarce room to manoeuvre on the cramped cargo deck. He had some experience of knife-fight drills, the benefit of dozens of training sessions with a spirited Krav Maga instructor, and he knew a

few disarm moves off by heart. But to make those work, the attacker had to close the distance and this guy wasn't doing it. Chicken-neck here was balancing on the balls of his feet, trying to get a good angle.

An angle on what?

And then Marc saw the reason. The dagger with its narrow, slotted blade and over-long handle. The dagger with the slide-switch toggle on the side, beneath the killer's thumb.

With a snap-click, the cartel thug flicked the switch and the entire blade's length shot toward Marc, propelled by the compression of a heavy spring in the weapon's hilt.

Marc twisted away, feeling the cut of the air as it hummed past his ear and buried itself in another of the cargo containers. A couple of centimetres to the left and the dagger would have gone through his cheek.

A pilum blade, he told himself. Ballistic knife, KGB design, named after the ancient Roman javelin. His subconscious had a knee-jerk tech-geek reaction to being confronted by a weapon, the instant recall of every point of data he knew about it coming to the fore – as if that might make it easier to deal with the notion of someone trying to kill him. It didn't.

His first reaction was to grab the knife head embedded in the container and yank it out, but the titanium blade was oily, and it was lodged deep in the flank of some heavyweight rigid-side suitcase.

The other man was fumbling a second blade into the spring-loaded hilt, re-arming himself, so instead Marc went on the offence. He tore a small emergency fire extinguisher from a nearby mount on the wall, the device little bigger than the O2 cylinder slung over his shoulder, and came at the man with the knife. Marc swung the extinguisher back and forth like a club, making clumsy passes that went too wide to connect with the other man's head.

The thug ducked away, skidding into the middle of the cargo bay, where a narrow track led from one end of the compartment to the other.

He was nimble, dodging each one of Marc's telegraphed swipes, but every time he twisted to avoid a hit, gravity made the air tank on his belt swing out on the end of its carabiner loop.

Marc feinted with another wide, swooping motion and the skinny guy side-stepped it. But the extinguisher was already falling out of Marc's hands as he bolted forward, slapping one open palm into the man's chest, grabbing at the green air tank with the other.

The man's dark eyes went wide as he realized what Marc was trying to do and he scrambled to block him. Marc's own O2 cylinder was on his back, out of reach, but that didn't stop the skinny killer from trying

to crane around and grab it. Marc snatched at his attacker's air tank and the two of them went into an awkward, violent spin, fighting to stay clear and stay close all at the same time.

Marc's fingers grasped the neck of the tank and he grabbed blindly at the nozzle. The thug punched him hard in the gut, the handle of the pilum knife still in his hand, adding force to the blow. Marc staggered back, winded, but the air tank came away in his hand.

The skinny man recoiled in shock, grabbing at the disconnected mask on his face in open panic. Marc tossed the air tank away down the cargo bay, and the other man went hurtling after it as it bounced toward the front of the plane.

Desperation in his every motion, the thug fell to his hands and knees, but the tank was out of his reach, and he was already struggling for breath. Marc stood back, sucking in ragged gasps of air from his own supply, and watched the man collapse on the deck and fall still as he lost consciousness.

When he was sure the cartel assassin wasn't faking, Marc dragged the man back down the cargo bay and propped him up against one of the containers. He used the tethers to secure him in place, and left the skinny killer slumped there.

Searching him turned up a portable solid-state hard drive and a replacement blade for the ballistic knife, both of which Marc pocketed.

The hard drive had to be Garza's prize, and Marc considered what the contents might be. If La Noche wanted the man dead this much, it had to be a rich bounty of information in there.

Not the time to dwell on that, he told himself, looking down at the gauge on his oxygen cylinder. His exertions in this thin, barely breathable atmosphere had drained the tank more than he wanted. The needle was dangerously close to the gauge's warning line.

In the tiny neighbouring space of the underfloor galley, there was a folding chair bolted to the bulkhead, and Marc sank on to it, pulling out his Rubicon issue smartphone. The satellite-enabled 'spyPhone' went active, running through encrypted communications protocols to connect him to Assim Kader, back on the ground in Bogotá.

As he waited, Marc reached up to close the hatch leading to the upper cabin. If the skinny guy didn't report back to his pal Axel, sooner or later the other man would come looking. A few seconds warning might be crucial.

After a long minute, the spyPhone vibrated in Marc's hand and the screen illuminated with green icons and the words SIGNAL ACTIVE. He pulled a wireless communications bud from a slot in phone's shell and pressed it into his ear.

'*Marc?*' Assim's voice seemed to be coming to him down a steel tube.

'Hey, man.' He felt weary just speaking out loud. It was a constant effort to breathe evenly.

'You're not supposed to use your phone mid-flight . . .'

'They can sue me,' he snorted.

'Things have turned very dicey here,' said the hacker, the words spilling out of him in haste. *'A group of cartel men arrived at the airport just after you took off. I think they were here to make sure Garza had left. I had to fall back to the vehicle in case they spotted me.'*

'Yeah, about that . . .'

Assim didn't seem to hear him, and continued without losing pace. *'I looped in Monaco on everything that happened,'* he went on, referring to the Rubicon Group's crisis centre on the Mediterranean coast.

'Intel is stacking up and it doesn't paint a pretty picture. So I think—'

'Mate, shut up,' Marc insisted. 'I've got a situation here.'

Assim finally caught up to the tone in Marc's voice and paused.

'Oh. Sorry. Go ahead.'

He gave the hacker the high points, starting with the deliberate depressurization and knock-out of the passengers, the thugs and their work on Garza, and all the grave possibilities those things represented.

Assim was quiet when he was done, to the point that Marc wondered if the sat-phone connection had dropped.

'Shit.' The polite young Saudi didn't often swear. *'Marc, I'm in the airport's computer network right now and there are no alerts of any kind going off, not from Air Traffic Control or the airline's own data hub. No one on the ground has any inkling that something is wrong up there.'*

Marc examined the stolen pilum knife. 'That confirms what I suspected. One or more of the crew are in on this. They'd have their own oxygen up on the flight deck. The pilot and co-pilot are the only ones who'd be able to depressurize the cabin. And they could have messed with the automatic reporting systems too.'

'That tracks with something I've learned,' came the reply. *'I got into Avileña Air's manifest for your flight and had Monaco run a sweep over the names. Something rather alarming popped up against the pilot, a gentleman by the name of Lorenze. I've sent you a still.'*

Marc's phone buzzed, and he saw a scanned image from a Colombian passport on the screen. The broad, blank face of a Hispanic man in his early forties glared back up at him.

'The pilot assigned to this flight didn't report for work this morning. According to Avileña, he called in sick, so Lorenze was bumped up the roster to take that man's place.'

'Convenient,' muttered Marc. 'Let me guess. This Lorenze bloke has some kind of connection to La Noche, yeah?'

'Very likely. He was arrested on drug possession and domestic violence charges a couple of years ago, but the case was thrown out and he walked. Lack of evidence, and possible witness intimidation. Details are sketchy, but it fits a pattern.'

'The cartel did him a solid, and from then on he works for them.'

Assim was silent for another long moment. *'Marc . . . What are we going to do here? You can't have much air left. Maybe I can arrange something from this end? I could call in an anonymous hijack threat for that flight, and put the cat amongst the pigeons . . .'*

Marc shook his head. *'That's not gonna help. It could make things worse and alert these pricks that we're on to them. No, first priority is to get this plane down, get it safe. Every minute we're flying high, the passengers are dying.'*

'Lorenze isn't just going to turn it around because you ask nicely. You can be certain he's more afraid of the cartel than he will be of you.'

The airframe trembled as the jet passed through another pocket of turbulence, drawing Marc's attention away down the cargo bay, past the creaking lines of containers. He grimaced. It was getting hard to think straight.

'Listen, I need you to pull up the specs for this plane, an Airbus A330-200. Specifically, I want data on the avionics, the fuel management system.'

'I don't like the sound of that.'

'Don't care,' said Marc, moving up past the containers toward the forward bulkhead. 'I have to get this thing to descend. If I can't do that, then nothing else matters.'

At the far end of the cargo compartment, a narrow hatch in the bulkhead was decorated with signs in English and Spanish warning not to proceed without authorization. The pilum knife was all the authority Marc needed to force open the lock and get through.

Beyond the hatch lay a cramped space that narrowed toward the nose of the airliner. The walls were dense with layers of foamy pink insulating material that did little to cut down the deep cold, clumps of it gathered around support frames and thick tubes of cabling.

Every available square metre of space was given over to shock-resistant racks of electronic gear, with just enough room between them for a human to squeeze through. Inside, the aircraft noise was constant, a low roar like distant waves. The chill was crisp, and Marc shivered, feeling it through the sleeves of his shirt.

He studied the closest of the computer modules, taking in webs of blinking status lights, a push-button keypad and small LCD display. The hardware was labelled in a kind of truncated tech-dialect, everything cut down to three- and four-letter acronyms that Marc could barely parse.

With the training from his younger years as Royal Navy helicopter crew and some experience with smaller fixed-wing aircraft, Marc knew just enough to know he was out of his depth with this gear. But he understood computers, and modern airliners like the Airbus were largely digitally controlled by on-board mainframes.

Think of it as just another hack, he told himself. Don't dwell on what could go wrong if you screw it up.

A low thud sounded through the deck above his head, and Marc flinched at the noise. Here in the A330's forward avionics bay, he was directly below the airliner's cockpit. There was ladder leading to a hatch in the roof that would take him right up there, but it was impossible to open it from below, a countermeasure put in place against potential hijackers.

He couldn't make out the words, but Marc caught the dull murmur of voices in the compartment above. More heavy, slow footfalls echoed down to him, and he had the sudden mental image of someone moving a body.

Marc picked his way along the lines of the control modules and Assim's tinny voice buzzed in his ear. *'I have what I think you need,'* he said, directing Marc to a particular computer stack. *'The fuel control and monitoring system. This is a critical component,'* he insisted, *'if you mess around with it, it could backfire spectacularly!'*

'Noted.' Marc traced the incoming cluster of wires carrying commands down from the pilot's controls, and sawed through them with the knife, killing any possibility of undoing the sabotage he was about to perform. He gave the control module's keypad an experimental tap.

'What's the command string to open the fuel dump nozzles?'

'Once you start, they'll know up in the cockpit. Jettisoning the fuel will set off alarms.'

Marc gave a grim nod. 'That's the idea.'

'It won't take long for them to figure out where you are.'

'I know.'

He heard Assim swallow hard. *'All right then. Here we go. Type this in exactly as I say . . .'*

FOUR: FINAL APPROACH

Lorenze had his co-pilot's corpse halfway out of the cramped flight deck when the warning alert chimed from the Airbus's instrument panel.

Still wearing that dumb baseball cap of his, Axel – if that was his real name – struggled with the dead man's legs. He shot Lorenze an angry look over his oxygen mask, like it was the pilot's fault this was happening.

Lorenze swore under his breath and dropped Augusto's body where it lay, vaulting back into his chair. He was careful not to put his hand on Augusto's empty seat. The chubby man's blood had soaked into the cushions and material, and he didn't want to get any more of it on him than he already had.

'I can't move him on my own!' called Axel. 'What's that noise?'

Lorenze ignored the other man and adjusted his air mask. It was chafing his face where he hadn't shaved, and he wanted very badly to discard it, but doing so at this altitude would plunge him into unconsciousness in seconds.

He scanned the status screens on the panel in front of him, and a cold ball of dread formed in the pilot's gut. The flight deck's control soft

are registered a disconnection from a computer in the avionics bay, a vital device that managed the movement of fuel around the tanks in the airliner's wings in order to keep it stable in flight.

Lorenze's concern grew as his attempts to reactivate the linkage failed.

He called up the fuel tank levels on another screen. The figures were lower than they should be. Before his eyes, they dropped a few more increments.

The pilot twisted sharply in his chair and leaned toward the portside cockpit window. Looking out into the darkness, he could see the tip of one of the wings. A steady gush of ejected Jet A-1 fuel issued out from the trim tank, the trailing pennant of vapour visible in the airliner's wake in the blinks of the navigation lights.

Lorenze let out long stream of curses. This situation was complex enough without the added complication of some mechanical failure.

'What is going on?' demanded Axel, growing annoyed as his questions went unanswered. He shoved the dead man to one side and tried to press forward into the flight deck, glowering at the instrument screens.

'We're losing fuel,' Lorenze snapped, waving him away. The last thing he wanted was this brute interfering with what he didn't

understand. He ran through the commands on the fuel control and monitoring system, trying and failing to deselect the “jettison” option.

Axel glared. ‘Why?’

‘I don’t know . . . This should not be happening.’ A new possibility occurred to Lorenze. ‘Where’s your friend? If he’s screwed around with something below—’

‘Diego’s not an idiot,’ Axel retorted, but he didn’t seem sure of his own answer. ‘Why would he?’

‘Go down to the galley and check on him,’ snapped Lorenze. ‘Do it now!’

‘You don’t tell me what to do,’ said Axel, gesturing with his ballistic knife. ‘You fly the plane, that’s all.’

‘I can’t fly anything if we don’t have any fuel!’ he shot back.

‘Then fix it!’ Axel gave him a murderous glare and stalked away.

Lorenze went back to the controls and worked through a restart program in a vain attempt to find the problem, but nothing seemed to work. He sat back in his chair and fiddled with his oxygen mask again, thinking it through.

Had Augusto done something in those last seconds before he died, something the pilot hadn’t seen? Lorenze rejected the idea. Augusto was a dullard; such an act would have been beyond him.

Augusto had always been an over-bearing, over-talkative man. Always getting in the way, never knowing when to shut his big mouth. Always complaining that he was stuck as first officer on these passenger runs, always trying to angle for a captaincy of his own. Every time he spoke, he said something that irritated Lorenze, gabbing on and on like a gossiping housewife in that high-pitched voice of his.

So it hadn't been much of a chore for Lorenze to stab his co-pilot through his throat when the opportunity came. He glanced at the crimson-stained seat next to his. The fool had bled out with a cow-eyed look of disbelief on his face while Lorenze masked up and set about decompressing the passenger cabin.

Good riddance, the pilot told himself. *Nobody is going to miss the sound of his whining.*

Augusto had been one of the people who tried to get Lorenze fired after that incident with the flight attendant from Rio, he was certain of it.

But Lorenze had friends in high places. Powerful friends. They made sure he kept his job, in return for certain favours. It worked out well for all parties, as the pilot had expensive and less-than-legal tastes.

Like the others, Augusto had done a poor job of hiding his real feelings about Lorenze. Few people at Avileña Air liked the pilot's company, but no one was going to say that to his face, not when they knew that he had contacts in the cartel.

Lorenze could have let Augusto pass out, of course, but killing him was quicker. And it showed those two thugs La Noche put on the plane that the pilot wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty.

The knife he'd used to stab Augusto had been smuggled on board the Airbus along with Axel and Diego's weapons and air tank rigs.

Lorenze's first job had been to secret the gear bags where the two men could find them. He carried them on board without raising suspicion, just as he had in the past with other packages, other sensitive items that La Noche used him to ferry to the United States. Lorenze knew all the weak points of Avileña's security process like it was second nature. He could have carried a suitcase packed with bricks of raw cocaine all the way to Texas, and no one would ever have known it.

But he was bored with being a small-time courier, and that was why he leapt at this chance when *el jefe's* men offered it. Hijacking his own airliner would be an explosive end to his career as a commercial aviator, but Lorenze didn't care. Such a showy act appealed to his arrogance, and he was sick of the civilian life. He wanted to be a *narcotraficante*, living like a prince.

The cartel could always use a good pilot for their clandestine fleet of drug smuggling planes, he reasoned, and this operation would be his passport into their world.

A new indicator icon flashed into life on a small screen near the manual flight control joystick, an automated query from Avileña Air's control centre over the change in fuel status.

Lorenze dismissed the message with an all-clear, but he knew that lie wouldn't hold for long. If too much fuel was dumped, he would have to deactivate the autopilot and take the jet down to a lower altitude sooner than planned. The moment that happened, Bogotá Air Traffic Control would know that something was wrong.

'Hurry up, idiot,' he growled, glaring out of the cockpit at the deep blue-black of the night sky and chewing on his dilemma.

What reason did Axel's cohort have to interfere with the avionics? He doubted the man was intelligent enough to do such a thing. That notion set off a whole raft of other, unpalatable prospects.

The intercom light blinked and Lorenze tapped a button, keying it to his headset. 'What?'

'Diego is out cold!' Axel's words came machine-gun fast, and he answered the obvious question before Lorenze could ask it. 'He didn't lose his air, someone took it from him!'

'Are you sure?'

'He's tied up down here like an animal! And that's not all, the door to the front of the plane? It's jammed shut. The lock's all messed up!'

Lorenze set the headset aside and swung around, hauling himself out of the chair, dropping to a crouch over a panel in the floor of the flight deck.

Punching in a key code to unlock it, the pilot grabbed the latch and pulled, but it refused to slide open. Something was blocking the mechanism from underneath, stopping him from accessing the avionics bay.

What could do that? Lorenze's throat tightened. Something strong and thin. *A knife blade, maybe. A knife like the ones he had brought on board.*

He grabbed the headset again. 'The hatch here has been jammed as well,' he said. 'We have a problem! Someone else must be up and walking around.'

'Yeah, I figured,' said Axel. *'There's a big orange waterproof bag on the floor in the galley, all the stuff inside is scattered everywhere.'*

'The survival kit,' said Lorenze, recognizing the description. The heavyweight canvas holdall contained emergency gear for use in the event of the aircraft coming down on water, or in some remote area. 'Forget about Diego! Find whoever is out there and deal with them. We don't have time for this!'

'Don't tell me my job,' growled the other man, and the intercom went dead.

'Damn it!' Lorenze turned to grab his knife, still lodged in the back of Augusto's chair where he had left it. Then he noticed the shadow in the open doorway behind him, and froze.

'Careful there, mate,' said the man. He had a British accent muffled by one of the aircrew's breather masks, a narrow-eyed expression on his face framed by a mess of dirty blond hair. He was pointing the wrong end of an emergency flare at Lorenze's chest, one finger holding the taut pull-string that would ignite it. 'No sudden moves.'

'You set that off in here, you'll kill us both!' said the pilot, raising his hands out at shoulder level. 'We'll burn to death!'

Marc made a jabbing motion with the flare and the other man flinched. 'You better do what I tell you then, yeah? Start off by sitting your arse in the chair and taking us down.' The pilot slowly climbed back into his seat, still holding up his hands. 'You're going to put this aircraft in a steady descent down to ten thousand feet, Captain Lorenze. Do it nice and slow.'

'All right . . .'

The man seemed surprised to hear Marc say his name. He switched off the autopilot and put one hand on the sidestick control at his right, the other settling on to the throttles. 'Just take it easy.'

With the darkness outside, it was impossible to see the horizon line move, but Marc felt the motion in the soles of his feet and saw the instruments react.

‘Who are you?’ said Lorenze. ‘You know me?’ He didn’t wait for an answer. ‘Are you DEA?’

Marc decided to keep the pilot guessing. ‘How many have the cartel got on board? Just you and those two meat-heads?’

‘*Si*, they made me do it,’ insisted Lorenze. ‘I didn’t have a choice, it was this or die!’

‘You’re a bad liar,’ Marc told him, watching the altitude numbers drop. He nodded towards the body of the dead co-pilot slumped against the flight deck storage locker. ‘Looks like he fell for it, though. Poor sod.’

The pilot’s eyes flicked toward the empty chair next to his, and Marc saw the knife embedded in the headrest.

‘Oh no you don’t.’ Marc reached for the hilt of the blade before the pilot could think about making a grab for it. The weapon was still slick with blood and wedged in hard.

In that moment, when Marc’s attention was off him, Lorenze wrenched the control stick hard over. The Airbus’s powerful Rolls-Royce engines howled as the jet banked sharply and Marc lost his balance before he could dislodge the knife, unable to stop himself falling toward the pilot’s side of the cabin.

They slammed into one another and Marc lost the flare as Lorenze planted a heavy punch to his shoulder, knocking it from his grasp.

He returned the favour with two fast hits that cracked the pilot across the temple. Lorenze gave a strangled howl and pulled the sidestick the other way.

The airliner pulled level and then pitched over in the opposite direction, causing Marc to stumble back against the starboard side of the tiny cockpit. He fell hard, winded, and clutched at the mask over his face to hold it in place. His breaths were getting short and he was afraid to look at the gauge on his O2 tank.

‘*Qué mierda . . . ?*’ With an angry grunt, the second cartel killer appeared in the doorway, struggling to stay on his feet. Somewhere along the way, he had lost his baseball cap, and he took in the sight of Marc with a savage sneer. ‘*Tourista . . .*’ Axel’s face twisted behind his air mask in sudden recognition.

‘*Mátalo!*’ shouted Lorenze. Marc’s Spanish was good enough to know a kill order when he heard it.

Axel tore his pilum knife from beneath his jacket, and Marc felt the cabin move around him once more. Lorenze gave the flight stick another fierce pull, enough to set off an automated warning that trilled through the cockpit.

Marc was ready this time, grabbing the blood-soaked seat cover on the co-pilot's chair to steady himself. The emergency flare he had lost only moments before rolled out from under the seat and wedged itself near his feet.

He ducked and snatched at it as Axel came storming in, leading with the long blade of the ballistic knife. Lorenze put the jet into a shallow turn once again and Marc's fingers grabbed at empty air as the flare rolled back out of reach. He ducked reflexively, and Axel's knife whispered past his head.

Backed into a corner, the only place for Marc to go was forward. He fought against every instinct to shrink back and pushed up inside Axel's reach, fighting to block his arm, fighting to force the other man away and gain a little room.

Axel landed a glancing punch on the side of Marc's head that knocked his air mask off-kilter. The plastic breather slipped off his nose and he gasped, instinctively clapping a hand to his face to reseat it. The cartel thug seized on the opening and up came the blade at a high angle, the razor-sharp tip aimed down at the bare flesh of Marc's throat.

Lorenze's hand jerked the sidestick again and Marc fell, just as Axel flicked the ballistic knife's trigger switch. The spring-loaded blade shot out, drawing a cry of pain from Marc as it cut a shallow line through his denim shirt and deflected over the top of his shoulder.

The ejected blade missed its intended target and found another, burying itself in the pilot's skull. Lorenze died twitching, collapsing across the sidestick and compressing the controls all the way forward.

The jet reacted with a shuddering groan that vibrated through the airframe. It fell into a steep dive, powering downward at over three hundred knots over the Colombian coastline, toward the shimmering, moonlit ranges of the Caribbean.

In the Airbus's cockpit, gravity went away as if someone had turned it off with a switch. Every loose object in the compartment, including the co-pilot's bloodied corpse, floated upward.

Marc and Axel left the deck, briefly thrown into freefall by the sudden descent, and the two men crashed into the ceiling of the cabin, still locked together in their chaotic fist-fight.

The cartel assassin went wild, punching and clawing. It was all Marc could do to try and deflect the blows, but Axel was fast, and each hit that landed sent a shock through Marc's head that left him dazed.

Axel snatched at Marc's breather mask and ripped it free before he could stop him.

Marc took gulping breaths of too-thin air and felt his lungs stiffen in his chest. The pain and stress he had experienced when the jet cabin had first depressurized rolled back over him, and he felt the terrifying lurch towards unconsciousness begin all over again.

He struck out with his arms and kicked hard, desperate to fight back before everything went black. But Axel wasn't willing to wait for Marc to pass out, and he grabbed at his neck, choking out what faint gasps of air the other man struggled to draw in.

Marc felt his awareness falling away, and his foot connected with something fleshy as he gave a last panicked kick. He struck Lorenze's body and the dead pilot pitched sideways, finally slipping off the control stick.

With no direct manual input, the aircraft controls automatically defaulted back to a neutral setting, and the plane's terminal trajectory evened out into level flight. Gravity came back with a vengeance and the brief moment of weightlessness was over.

Marc and the cartel thug dropped, but Axel's haste to kill the other man had put him in the worst of their positions. His head struck the corner of a console and Marc put all his weight into jamming his arm across Axel's throat, leaning in to give his attacker's neck a vicious twist.

Bone and cartilage snapped as they hit the deck, and a wet crackle escaped Axel's lips. Colour was fading from Marc's vision as he seized the thug's air mask and jammed it over his mouth and nose. Long, dizzying minutes passed as Marc tried to fight the throbbing, echoing headache behind his eyes, clinging to the edge of consciousness.

At length, he hauled himself off the body of the cartel killer and gathered up the other man's air tank and rig. Axel's supply was still in the black, but only barely.

Everything hurt. Marc's chest, his head, his arms. Joints ached and each metallic breath of oxygen he sucked down felt like an iron rasp drawn across the inside of his ribcage. Contusions and cuts from hand-to-hand fighting sang with new pain. All he wanted was to collapse against the wall and let the blackness come. It would be easy to submit.

'*Sod. Off.*' Marc enunciated the words with care, banishing the thought before it could get its claws in him. 'Get up,' he snarled, and with effort, Marc hauled himself to a standing position. Stuck in there with three dead bodies, the flight deck was very small and very cramped.

He peered at the digital displays on the instrument panel. Lorenze's aerobatic antics had sent them way off course, settling into on an easterly heading at fifteen thousand feet, along the coast toward the Gulf of Venezuela. The fuel levels were still dropping rapidly, and Marc could only guess at how much range remained in the Airbus's tanks.

One by one, he dragged the dead men into the galley behind the flight deck, then took the captain's chair and stared out of the cockpit window. The first faint glow of dawn was forming, a line of yellow-pink haze on the far horizon.

With a weary sigh, he used his satellite phone to contact Assim, hoping his colleague on the ground would still be able to hear him. 'This is Dane, on the air.'

'Marc, are you okay?' The hacker's worried voice sounded in his earbud.

'Hostiles neutralized. Aircraft is secure,' he told him. 'Now we just have to land this thing before it runs out of fuel.'

FIVE: HARD LANDING

‘This is Avileña Air eight-one-five, broadcasting on guard.’ Marc Dane spoke as calmly and as clearly as he could into the headset, scanning the digital screens across the instrument panel in front of him. ‘Declaring an emergency.’ He read out the airliner’s fast-diminishing fuel status, then its heading and altitude.

His throat was dry and his chest felt raw, hollowed out. For the first time in what seemed like hours, Marc was breathing without an air mask clamped over his face. He’d managed to ease the Airbus A330-200 down to just below ten thousand feet without any serious issues, low enough that the unconscious passengers and crew in the cabin behind him were no longer in danger of oxygen starvation, but they were still a long way from safety.

He knew with grim certainty that some of the civilians back there would not have survived the rapid-onset hypoxia that had affected them, after the jet’s pilot had deliberately depressurized the cabin to render them all insensible. Marc had barely survived it himself. Luck and a portable air tank had been all that stopped him from joining the others in oblivion. Whomever was left alive needed medical attention as soon as possible.

'Avileña eight-one-five, we copy.' The heavily-accented air traffic controller identified himself as a representative of the Aeronautica Civil, Colombia's aviation authority, and he asked to speak to Captain Lorenze or First Officer Augusto.

'Not gonna happen.' Marc shot a look at the empty chair next to his, the sheepskin cover over it brown with the copper of drying blood, the ballistic knife Lorenze had used to murder Augusto still stuck in the headrest. He hesitated over giving the controller the full truth, then decided it would be better to hold nothing back.

'They're both dead.'

'Say again, over?'

'Lorenze killed Augusto.' Marc sounded out the words so there would be no misunderstanding. 'Lorenze was working with two armed men on board to hijack this aircraft.'

There was a long silence before the ATC voice returned. *'Where are those men now?'*

'One dead, one secured.' Marc blew out a breath and rubbed his eyes. Fatigue was dragging on him. 'Look, mate, can we cut to the chase? I need to land this thing, and soon.'

'Identify yourself.'

He shook his head. 'I'm someone with flying experience on helicopters and light aircraft. That's all I'm willing to say right now.'

Marc's patience was thinning. 'We can have a nice chat about who the hell I am when we're all down and safe, yeah?'

'Stand by. Do not deviate from your current course. Be advised that Air Force interceptors are vectoring to your position at this time.'

'Listen to me!' Marc snarled. 'I'm not the bloody hijacker, I need a runway, not an escort!'

'Maintain your current course and heading,' insisted the ATC officer, and he dropped off the channel.

'Bollocks.' Marc pushed back the radio headset and re-inserted a wireless bud into his ear, the tiny device linked to his Rubicon-issue satellite phone. 'Assim, you heard all that?'

'A predictable reaction,' said the Saudi hacker, his public school accent hazed with static. *'The Colombians have no reason to believe a word you say. Ever since 9/11 they've been terrified of somebody doing the same thing in South America.'*

'Yeah, yeah . . .' Marc reached into the storage bin beside the chair and rooted through the contents of the late Captain Lorenze's chart bag. 'Meanwhile, every minute we're airborne, my little act of sabotage is shortening our flight time.' He glanced at the fuel status. The central tanks were already low, and the ones in the wings were steadily emptying. 'I don't have time for waiting, or go-arounds. I need a coastal

airfield on a north-westerly heading, big enough to accommodate this plane, and I need it before I run out of dirt.'

He sighed. The map screen showed them approaching the Bay of Manaure, following the line of the Colombian coast toward the Uribia region. Past that was nothing but open sea until Puerto Rico.

'I'm running a search now,' said Assim. *'Do you think you could make it to Aruba?'*

'Oh, rum and cocktails, nice.' Marc gave a low chuckle. 'I don't think we can chance it. Find me something closer. It doesn't have to be fancy, just long and flat.' He pored over Lorenze's maps and something caught his eye. The rogue pilot had plotted a modified route based in the airliner's original course to Dallas. Marc described what he was looking at to Assim. 'Seems like he was going to divert well short of American airspace. There's map reference data here for an airstrip in the Panama wilds, but it doesn't look like a commercial or military runway.'

'Rubicon has intelligence from the Drug Enforcement Agency about La Noche facilities all over that region,' noted Assim. *'Landing an airliner, even hiding it, wouldn't be beyond their ability.'*

'No doubt,' agreed Marc. 'My skin crawls when I think about what they were going to do with two hundred unconscious people. That's a lot of bodies to dispose of.'

'The cartel engage in human trafficking . . . And black-market sales of transplant organs.' Assim shivered at his own suggestion. *'All that would be a bonus, though. Mateo Garza was the primary target. It's looking more and more like this whole operation was a play to get the information he has on them, and clean house.'*

While Marc had been out of contact, Assim had learned from the Rubicon Group's contacts of an incident in Dallas, the original destination for the Avileña flight. An agent with the DEA named Camilo had been executed gangland-style just an hour after the flight had left Bogotá. There was little doubt that La Noche were behind the murder.

'The cartel wanted Garza to feel safe, get complacent, so they let him set up his deal.' Marc thought it through. *'But they have to make an example of him, of course. They want him alive. Bad enough to hijack a plane just to get to him.'* He grimaced as he considered what horrors would have awaited Garza at that isolated airstrip in the Panamanian jungle. He shook off the grim thought. *'Too late to worry about that now, though.'*

'Marc . . .' He could hear the frown on Assim's face. *'I have to say this. You've got no flight time on jets like that one. Are you sure you can do this?'*

'No, thanks for reminding me,' he said flatly. *'But some dickhead killed the pilot, so I don't have a lot of options.'*

Marc's military service and his time with the British security services had sharpened his skills on anything with rotor-blades, and he knew his way around single- and twin-engine prop planes. But big jets were a different story. Rubicon's top pilot, a steely-eyed former Israeli Air Force fighter jock named Ari Silber, would have handled this situation with characteristic aplomb. But the veteran aviator was a world away, so Marc concentrated on remembering what Ari had shown him in the few times he had joined him in the cockpit, on long flights between assignments.

He sighed. 'I've got a bloody pounding headache, I'm covered in bruises and my self-confidence has taken some knocks. I don't really want to dwell on the negatives, yeah?'

'Understood. So with that in mind, I have something for you.'

'A landing strip?'

'A private industrial airfield on the Bay of Portete. Puerto Bolívar.

It's next to the Cerrejón coal terminal, it seems to be used only for cargo and worker transportation. But the good news is, it's long enough to handle an Airbus A330 . . . If you don't make any mistakes.'

Marc found the location on the digital map and keyed in details of the runway beacons, plotting a new heading. 'Yeah, all right. This could work. Let's go for it.'

'All right. I'll talk you through the commands you need to input into the Airbus's control computer. The A330 has an automatic landing system that will do most of the work for you, you just need to follow along. Ready?'

Marc found the autopilot keypad and nodded to himself. 'Green for go.'

Over the next few minutes, he doggedly punched in one command after another as Assim read them out. It reminded him of inputting the program lines for some old, primitive first-generation computer, the kind that Marc had played with as a schoolkid. But here the stakes were life and death.

The process seemed to take forever, and it was done Marc took a shaky breath, putting one hand on the sidestick, and the other on the central panel where the jet's trim wheel and throttles were located. The complexity of the airliner's controls was daunting, but Marc ignored everything that wasn't vital to the process of landing. He fixed the locations of the critical switches and dials in his mind – the flaps and the brakes, the undercarriage, the engine telemetry.

'You're ready,' said Assim. *'Good luck, Marc.'*

'Thanks, mate. Talk to you when I'm done.' Marc pulled the earbud and secured the satellite phone, then centred himself.

He checked to be certain that both of the airliner's autopilot computers were running, one covering the other in the event of a failure, and set the program running.

'Moment of truth,' Marc said quietly, then keyed the radio.

'Puerto Bolívar ATC, if you copy this transmission, please respond. This is Avileña Air eight-one-five transmitting on guard frequency, descending from ten thousand feet, heading toward runway zero-nine from the east. Have declared an emergency, coming in for a hot approach. Do you read, over?'

The radio hissed back at him, and when the reply finally came, it was with clipped, military diction. '*Avileña eight-one-five, you have changed course. Climb to angels one-five and return to your previous heading, over.*' Marc knew a fighter pilot when he heard one. The man's terse Aviator English was being spoken through a helmet oxygen mask. '*Divert immediately or we will consider you hostile, understood?*'

He dialled out the radius of the radar screen and found two fast-moving blips coming in from around the Uribia headland, vectoring toward the Airbus's position. They could only be Israeli-made Kfir fighters from the Fuerza Aérea Colombiana, streaking in to intercept the errant airliner and whatever terrorists they suspected had hijacked it. Looking out through the cockpit, Marc thought he saw the distant flash of sunrise off delta wings in the dawn sky.

‘Negative, FAC,’ he replied, keeping his voice steady. ‘I have two hundred souls on board in medical distress. We have to land. It’s not open to negotiation! You want to do something? Alert the locals, get doctors and ambulances out to the runway.’

Were they already locking air-to-air missiles on the Airbus? There was no way to tell. Marc could only hope that the two Kfir pilots would balk at the notion of shooting down an aircraft full of civilians, and that Puerto Bolívar’s air traffic controllers were monitoring the conversation.

One way or another, Avileña eight-one-five was coming down at the remote industrial airstrip.

The Airbus shuddered into a shallow turn as Marc lined up the nose with the runway in the distance. He could make out the lines of highways and railroads leading to the dark smudge of the giant coal terminal on the coastline, where cargo ships made port to take on the ore from the local mine. The runway itself was a long, faded strip of black asphalt on a flat zone of sparse, rust-orange terrain. With every passing second, it grew larger.

Marc saw the two FAC interceptors streak by, one of them coming so close that he got a good look at the aircraft’s dart-like profile. Through the open cockpit door behind him, Marc heard someone call out in panic. He heard a fearful scream as the Kfir’s close pass rattled through the

airliner's slipstream. That could only mean that the surviving passengers and crew had stirred from their hypoxia-induced blackouts.

Marc found and flipped the switch that activated the FASTEN SEATBELTS signs in the main cabin, and the mundanity of the action drew a brittle chuckle from him.

He activated the intercom's public address setting. 'This is the, uh, captain speaking . . . More or less. Assume the brace position and stand by for an emergency landing.' His throat went dry as he contemplated the gravity of his statement. 'Listen, when the aircraft comes to a stop, just get clear as fast as you can.' He struggled to dredge up the right words in Spanish. '*Dejar el avión . . . and, ah, entonces corre!*'

The ripple of panic returned, and Marc silenced the intercom. There was nothing more to be said.

Ahead, the runway was centred directly below the nose of the Airbus and the altitude meter was slowly ticking down, the auto-land system performing as hoped. He felt a surge of self-assurance as the undercarriage dropped and locked into position.

It was working. 'I can do this', he told himself. 'I *will* do this.'

As the nose continued to drop, Marc became aware of something loose rattling around near the rudder pedals. It was the emergency flare from the survival kit, the one he'd used to threaten Lorenze.

He kicked it out of the way and it rolled under his seat.

'Avileña eight-one-five.' The FAC pilot's voice broke through his thoughts. *'We are following you in.'* Marc looked up and glimpsed the two Kfirs pulling in alongside, each a few hundred metres off the Airbus's wing-tips. The unspoken warning in the pilot's words was as clear as bell.

'Eight-one-five copies—'

Marc didn't get to finish the sentence. A shadow moved behind him, the blurry shape of a man reflected in a digital screen on the instrument panel. He twisted in the pilot's chair just as a loop of heavy nylon, one of the cargo tethers from the lower deck, flipped over him and went tight around his throat.

Marc was slammed back into the headrest, choking as the tether cut off his air. He grabbed at the nylon as it sliced into his neck, and the airliner's nose drifted off the runway line as his foot jerked reflexively against a rudder pedal.

The cartel thug Marc had fought in the cargo bay was right behind him, the skinny chicken-neck killer pulling as hard as he could on the tether, intent on throttling the life from him. Dried blood caked the man's nostrils and the capillaries in his wide, furious eyes had burst from the severe pressure changes. Whatever impulse was driving him on could only be pure animal rage, all reason burned away by the need to kill Marc Dane,

no matter if that meant the airliner would crash into the ground or be shot out of the sky by the Colombian Air Force.

He was so close that Marc could feel the thug's hot, stale breath blasting out over his face as he jolted the makeshift garrotte. Twice already on this flight, Marc had been to the edge of asphyxiation, and the third time would mean death.

He slumped down, trying to wriggle free, but the skinny guy had all his weight behind the tether.

'Four hundred.' A monotone male voice came out of nowhere, startling them both. The autopilot's reporting system began to read off the jet's altitude in descending increments. *'Three hundred.'*

There was a momentary slackening in the tether, not enough to pull free, but enough for Marc to make a move. He clasped at the space beneath the pilot's chair, fingers closing around the slim plastic tube that lay there.

'Two hundred,' reported the autopilot, as the white markings at the end of Puerto Bolívar's runway came into view. *'Hundred above. One hundred.'*

Marc jerked the pull-cord dangling from the end of the emergency flare and it ignited with a searing crimson flash, spewing out gushes of chemical smoke. The pressure around his throat went away as the cartel killer screamed.

Blinded by the acrid haze, Marc blindly stabbed backward and jabbed the burning tip of the flare into the thug's chest. He lost his grip on it and the makeshift weapon tumbled away. He heard his would-be murderer collapse behind him, wailing in agony.

The Airbus rocked as the auto-landing program deployed the flaps and reduced speed. '*Fifty*,' called the synthetic voice. '*Forty*.'

Marc hauled the pilot-side sliding window as far open as it would go, in a vain attempt to clear some of the smoke, but it made little difference. Through streaming eyes, he could still see the dark expanse of the airstrip, but the controls were barely readable.

Most pilots fly on guesswork because it's cloudy outside the cockpit, he thought.

'*Thirty. Minimum.*' The warning told Marc he was passing decision height, the point at which he had to commit to the landing or pull back.

Leaning forward, fighting to stifle a racking cough, Marc gripped the sidestick and throttles as the airliner fell the last few metres to the asphalt.

'*Ten. Five.*'

The jet hit the runway hard, sending a shock up through the undercarriage and out through the fuselage, drawing more terrified yelling from the passengers in the main cabin. Marc floundered, trying to find the switch to release the autopilot control, and he felt the aircraft

slowing and skidding. He cut the throttles and deployed the airbrakes, but the landing was off -true.

Even as speed bled away, Marc was pressed into his chair as the jet rumbled off the centreline, over the edge of the asphalt and into the low, gritty ground that paralleled the runway. The slowing Airbus buried its wheels in sandbanks and finally, it came to a juddering, rattling halt.

Every instinct Marc had told him to unbuckle and run like blazes, but he held that impulse down, and with shaking hands he flipped the switches to make the engines safe. Highly flammable aviation fuel was still leaking from the wing tanks, and it wouldn't take much to turn the airliner into a torch, a process he didn't want to speed along with the live flare that lay spitting and fuming on the floor of the flight deck.

Marc waded into the choking cloud of smoke, feeling with his fingertips until he caught the end of the plastic tube. Half-blinded by the brilliant red glow, he found his way back to the open window and hurled the flare out on to the ground, as far from the jet and whatever fuel it was spilling as possible.

The aircraft rocked as the emergency slides were deployed and passengers scrambled to escape. That meant that someone had retained the presence of mind to open the doors and give them a way out, and hopefully save as many lives as possible.

He staggered into the galley, finding the skinny thug collapsed and unconscious in a corner as a stream of terrified, half-dazed people rushed past him and out down the forward escape slide. The bodies of the first officer, the treacherous pilot and the other cartel killer lay nearby, mute witnesses to the ordeal.

Someone was shouting for help in the forward cabin, and Marc recognized Mateo Garza's voice from Rubicon's surveillance tapes. He pushed his way through, and there among the debris sat La Noche's target, his arms still fixed to his seat by thick cable ties.

'*Ay dios mio . . .*' Garza wheezed, as the panicked train of fleeing passengers left him to his fate. 'Someone, please help me! I am trapped!' He struggled fruitlessly to free himself, getting knotted up in the mask, tube and air tank slung around his neck.

Marc went back for the pilum knife in the smoke-hazed cockpit and came to Garza's aid. The financier's gratitude was mingled with raw fear. He had to know that this was all about him, and his need to get off the plane was overwhelming.

'I think this is yours.' Marc croaked, his throat coarse from smoke inhalation. From a pocket he produced the small solid-state hard drive that the skinny man had dug out of Garza's bag. He held it up between them.

Garza's watery eyes widened, and he shrank back into his seat, horribly aware of the two corpses belted into the chairs either side of him. Garza's Russian bodyguards had perished at the hands of La Noche's killers, and he clearly thought that Marc was here to finish the job.

'Your DEA pal Camilo is dead,' Marc told him, growling out the words in a half-cough. 'Cartel did him in.'

'Then . . . Who are you?'

'Rubicon. You know that name?'

Garza gave a wary nod. '*Si*. Big corporation. Private security.'

'And other stuff,' Marc noted, toying with the ballistic knife. 'My boss had an offer for you, Mr. Garza.' He started sawing through the cable ties. 'You refused, but maybe now you want to reconsider? Help us with what's on that hard drive and Rubicon can make you disappear.' Marc paused, frowning. 'We'll make sure everyone thinks you died on this plane.'

'If I say no?' Garza's eyes never strayed from the blood-stained blade in Marc's hand.

'You can go it alone. But how far do you think you'll get without help?'

'That is a very good point.'

Marc cut the final ties and helped Garza to his feet. Moving quickly, they followed the last of the fleeing passengers down the escape slide and out on to the dusty ground. Emergency vehicles were already hurtling toward the milling crowds of injured and fearful survivors, as the two FAC interceptors streaked past overhead.

A buzzing sounded from Marc's jacket and he pulled out his satellite phone.

'Are you all right?' Assim's words came machine-gun fast. 'Hello? Hello? There are medics on the way, help is coming, can you hear me? Are you—?'

'Mate,' said Marc, cutting him off in mid-flow. 'Down and safe. I need an exfiltration package for me and a plus one, yeah? We do it quick, we can get lost before anyone here figures out what's going on.'

'Understood,' said the hacker. 'I had something lined up, just in case.' He hesitated. *'Good work up there. I have to be honest with you, the odds were not in your favour.'*

'Just a little rough air, is all.'

Marc led Garza clear of the jet, and he turned to look back at the grounded Airbus. The airliner had bellied out on the sandbank, clouds of smoke and dust wreathing the white-painted fuselage, but it had survived in one piece.

'Any landing you can walk away from,' Marc muttered, 'is a good one.'

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