



I.F.R.I.T. BLACK BOX



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- FOR THOSE MILLIONS -

Mills gave a look at his tactical wristwatch once again.

- ETA¹ 4 minutes, do you want to go to the bathroom or something Mills?
- Shut up Jager!

The Antonov's² landing gear was big enough, but it definetly turned smaller when five people with heavy weapons and parachuting equipment were squeezed together in it.

- He hates small and confined places. You should have seen him in the trunk of that car in Beijing.
- The pay was good Mills tried to justify.
- This one is even better, one million in advance, five million for the objective's retrieval and five extra if we all make it out alive. That doubles Beijing's pay.
- Great, you better don't die Jager. If you cost me five millions I swear to raise you from the dead just to kill you myself.

Everybody burst in laughter.

¹ ETA, acronym for Estimated Time of Arrival.

² One of the largest cargo airplanes in the world.

The General extended his hand asking for silence.

- Quick briefing.
- Yes sir! they replied in unison.
- We will parachute to reach the mountains taking advantage of the

following wind to shorten our walk and enter the Business District through the mountains. If there's anyone alive they will surely not be shopping nor working.

- Orders regarding civilian contact?
- Everybody is supposedly dead and disappeared without a trace. Satellite information has not reported activity since the object fell from the sky. The orders are to fire at will.
- So basically, are we to execute every civilian we find?
- Peng, if you're willing to go to them, put your arm over their shoulders and ask them if they have looted any of the two military warehouses in the city, you are welcome to do so – the General replied sarcastically.
- If there's anybody alive it's sure a pretty tough bastard and will probably want us for lunch Jepsen said imitating the gestures and sounds of a cannibal.

They burst in laughter again.

- Gentlemen... the General interrupted ...after entering the Business District we will approach the crash site where we will retrieve the objective.
- Do we have any additional info on it?
- Negative, the information will be disclosed one mile away from the centre.

Mills, Peng and Jepsen nodded. Jager gave his two thumbs up.

- ETA two minutes. Check your equipment.
- This bastard'd better be punctual to open the compartement, six hours in this place have been enough... Mills said.
- This bastard'd better be punctual because if with the obscene bribe we paid him to fly us here I have to walk two extra blocks to get to Norilsk, he'll regret it Jepsen replied.
- One ready!
- Two ready!
- Three ready!

Jager opened the zipper on top of his cut off gloves and took a small Swiss chocolate bar, putting it into his mouth. After a few movements, he spat the package and gave a thumb up. - Everything's ready gentlemen! - the General said while pressing the switch on his headset - Radio on?

Everybody nodded.

- Let's go for those millions then!

Jepsen put his closed fist in the middle of the circle.

- Skull and crosshair!
- Skull and crosshair! they answered hitting their fists.

They looked at each other, waiting for the landing gear doors to open.

The smell of fuel, grease and cold metal was their farewell ode. The General seemed to be paying attention to something in particular with his headset.

- I will be changing frequencies for a few seconds – he clarified to the rest of the team.

Tapping the plane's radio frequency, he was able to listen to the pilot's conversation.

- ANE-96 he continued interrupted by the interference Open!
- Received ANE-96, base.
- *Spakoi*! the pilot exclaimed.

The password had been given. The General signalled them lowering his open hand and beginning a finger countdown.

When the doors were completely open they would have ten seconds to jump. Otherwise, the landing gear system would launch an opening detection alarm.

Three... two... one... Just as the General closed his hand the doors started to open. A freezing blizzard came in whistling through the opening.

They put their oxygen masks on at once.

The pressure was such that they wouldn't have been able to jump even if they wanted to until the doors were fully open.

The General signalled once again and they jumped. The wind was strong, the free fall had begun.

- Woohoo, this is the best part! Jager said on the radio.
- The best part is being outside the car trunk Mills replied.

There was the city, the protector of the objective. They were seeing more than any satellite could see and more than what any plane could have seen.

Since the incident, the satellite pictures showed a black patch over the city and the few planes that tried to fly over it disappeared without a trace.

But their eyes could see it. The streets, the roads, and even though they could see them far away, it was more than what any piece of cutting-edge technology could achieve.

The sight was amazing, the curvature of the horizon showed nothing but snowy plains and frozen rivers.

As they opened their parachutes they hovered taking advantage of the tailwind.

The mission had been scheduled for summer, avoiding extreme temperatures and granting them months of daylight.

Even though the wind was strong, Jager could use his sight enhancement equipment. For a few seconds he was able to see the heart of the crash site.

- Holy mother...! Does everybody read?

Everybody gave a positive response.

- I could have a quick look at the objective, there's a massive crater in the city centre! General? he asked.
- Do not insist, the information will remain classified until we are a mile away from there.
- Understood.

Jager took advantage and continued to scout the surroundings. An unusual tree formation, dense as a forest, covered part of the plains.

It was of public knowledge that due to the city's pollution and acid rain there was not a single living tree in an area of 30 square miles.

The incident had taken place a year ago, but that was not even enough to grow a whole forest of such density. Enhancing his vision, he tried at least to identify the tree species, but something more caught his attention.

- It can't...

- Jager, I didn't get the last part, repeat he heard Peng on the radio.
- It... it doesn't matter, I was just looking at the city, my bad.
- Do not use the channel for chatter gentlemen, if you want to pray or count sheep do it with your mouth shut – the General interrupted irritated – Focus!

- Sorry sir, understood!

Whichever way it was, Jager could not believe what he was seeing. Whatever thing that impacted in the city centre had probably split in parts or got destroyed crashing a small part of it in the woods.

An almost 100 yards black trail that crossed throughout the West side of it ended up in a clearing.

- The objective is most likely a meteor but none of us is bringing anti-radiation containers — he thought.

As they got close to the ground, they prepared to set foot in the surroundings of the city of death, the infamous city of Norilsk.

- NOBODY TO BLAME -

- I can't believe what I'm seeing! Jepsen exclaimed trying to touch the floor.
- Are the measurements ready? the General asked.
- Anytime sir Peng answered.

The landing had been successful and the favorable wind welcomed them, saving almost three miles of walking distance.

Even though they had no hurry to reach the crash site, the exhaustion of the long flight plus the descent and walk encouraged them to move as fast as possible to establish a camp and rest for a while.

- It's 100 degrees Fahrenheit sir... That's impossible, the snow should be melting but it's hot!
- As if that was the only problem Mills said, extending his hand towards the plains.

What once had been an empty sterile field, was now full of dried grass of almost one metre and a half tall.

- Sir, what are we going to do? – Jager asked.

The General lowered his rifle horizontally to rest his hands and arms on it.

After looking around and evaluating for a minute, he answered.

- If we had to go around this we would lose at least five hours of walking time, and I know nobody wants that. We are going through – he said, giving the sign to regroup.
- Jager, you're up front, Peng, you've got the Dragonfly. We'll advance in V formation with ten metres of separation from each other. Come on! the General indicated.

Peng opened a wide pocket on the side of his backpack. Pulling out four discs with blades inside and seven aluminium bars he quickly assembled a Quadcopter³. Lowering a monocle with a small screen from the set of visors he had in his helmet and pressing a blue button, the Dragonfly's start procedure was ready.

- I need a few seconds to make sure the retinal calibration and voice command are working fine.

As part of a ritual, Peng held the Dragonfly in the palm of his hands.

- Engine, on!

The blades began to rotate and the machine hovered until it got to a static position in the air in a matter of seconds.

Peng moved his eyes to his left and right and the Dragonfly reacted without delay.

- Land!

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³ Four-blade small helicopter for military or recreational use, featuring great stability.

While it lost altitude, Peng contradicted the order.

- Up thirteen!

The response was immediate. Everybody carefully watched the machine as it floated exactly thirteen feet above the ground.

- Sensors and response working better than ever sir!
- Excellent Peng the General replied take care of that baby, if you break it again the two million will come out of your paycheck this time.
- Understood!
- Let's go, V, you lead Jager!

The squad formed up quickly while the Dragonfly scouted the ground ahead.

Even though the grass was dry, it felt tender, as if its only anomaly was the decoloration.

The team advanced quickly, seeing only their heads and shoulders over the pasture.

- Jager, status report?
- The area is clear sir, no threats in sight.
- Dragonfly?
- Safe forward, with clear visibility. No water, holes or uneven terrain.

Jager signalled to march forward. They advanced almost forty yards with their guns raised and aiming.

- Halt! Peng shouted from the top of his lungs.
- What's wrong Peng?! the General replied asking for a report.
- I'm having handling problems with the Dragonfly, it's as if something is trying to take control of it.
- Darn it Peng, it could perfectly be an abnormal magnetic field!
- Visuals are fine General, I'm switching to thermal.

The General nodded.

- Activate thermal! – Peng ordered while the screen made an immediate switch to a different light spectrum.

Manouvering left and right seemed safe and was enough to scout the area surrounding them without losing control of the machine.

- No readings in thermal sir, it's just us.
- Good it's most likely a magnetic abnormality. Jager, clear up twenty yards ahead.
- Yes sir! Peng, you're my eyes!
- I've gotcha!

The Dragonfly hovered statically following Jager's movements still in thermal vision mode.

With slow steps, cracking the base of the dried grass, he advanced making his way through.

His heartbeat accelerated. It didn't matter how many missions were accomplished or how many risks had been sorted out, the one thing you couldn't control was how the adrenaline flowed into the bloodstream with the strength of a broken hydrant.

It was unavoidable, uncomfortable in the beginning, but once tasted it was the ambrosia of the warrior.

He held his gun with perfect pulse and aim, as if he was a machine rather than a human.

The whistling wind and buzzing of the Dragonfly completed the excitement cocktail.

The uncomfortable, tense silence was broken with Peng's frantic alert.

- Sir he... he has disappeared!
- What?!
- He is not there sir! I don't have readings not in thermal nor standard vison, what the...!
- Circle cover formation! the General ordered.

They all obeyed swiftly forming a circle back to back.

- Jager! Where are you?! – he shouted.

The plains of Norilsk replied with an eerie dead silence.

Jepsen aimed towards the pasture where Jager had disappeared.

- Look! Something is moving! Can you see it?!
- It must be something that crawls, be careful!

A thick trail moved across the grass and stopped by moments.

- I don't have readings from the Dragonfly sir!
- Let's shoot at that thing, whatever it is! Jepsen yelled.
- Jager could be there, don't shoot! the General said, extending his arm aside.

The movement stopped, bringing down part of the grass into an homogeneous surface.

- He's not answering General! The thing that made him disappear has killed him and is crawling down there! – Jepsen tried to make the team come into their senses.

Everybody aimed towards the grassless circle, ready to shoot.

Unexpectedly, the circle started to retreat slowly.

- Sir – Jepsen whispered – we have to kill it. What will happen if it calls more of whatever it is? Jager couldn't even scream and he was no rookie!

The General looked at the circle as it kept retreating and then to Jepsen again.

Extending his hand forward with his fingers stretched, he gave the fire at will order.

As soon as he did, the circle rushed towards them.

The incessant fire lasted for almost a minute.

While the 200 rounds ammunition box of Jepsen's M240 heavy machinegun got depleted, the rest of the team emptied their primary and secondary weapon clips as if it was a mob settling business.

The circle suddenly stopped and extended back forming an irregular oval shape.

- May... looks... I ca...! everybody received the choppy and low quality signal in their radio equipment.
- I... I think it's Jager sir! Mills said.
- Stop... something... you can't see! the transmission kept going. Jager's voice was now clearly identifiable.
- He is alive sir!
- I've got signal in thermal! Peng said being able to fly the Dragonfly as he walked towards the oval.

Bone-chilling screaming filled the radio channel.

- Dam... Can't you hear me?! Oh, no, don't do it!

rest once again in his open hands.

- Stay away from there Peng! – the General ordered.

Peng disobeyed, reaching the oval. He signalled, indicating it was safe and that they were to approach. As the team got closer, the Dragonfly descended slowly to

Peng then raised the visor screen back to its place.

The sight was repulsive. Jepsen turned back raging. Jager's body laid upside down in the ground with his helmet and bulletproof jacket almost disintegrated.

- We tore him apart sir... Peng said while he disassembled the Dragonfly – but, how is it possible that we received the radio signal if he was dead already?
- Come back here Jepsen! the General ordered.
- I'm not going to go and look at my mess sir! he furiously replied.
- Come back here, it's an order!

He obeyed muttering, advancing with violent steps through clenched teeth.

Before he could get to the spot, the General extended his index finger depriving him to have the first word.

- This is nobody's mess! You get that Jepsen?!
- Of course it's my mess, I wanted to kill that thing no matter what!
- Are you listening to me?! Not yours, not mine, not anybody's! Not even his! We all took the risk and we knew things could happen!
- But sir...! Mills tried to interrupt.
- No buts! We are not paid eleven million Pounds to sell Girl Scout cookies door by door, take it, it could have been

anyone of us! – the General was even more furious than Jepsen.

- Sir, I couldn't see either in normal nor in thermal vision Peng complained this is not a normal mission... this is... I don't know what the hell is this.
- This is impossible, that's what it is! If this happened here, miles away from the objective, who knows what's there! Mills added.
- Gentlemen, we have to look for shelter the General interrupted the argument a storm is coming towards us.

The horizon showed the threatening advance of a storm that would probably affect only part of the trail to the city.

- Proceed with the protocol and burn the body – he continued – then you can pray to whatever you worship, don't take much time.

He departed towards what seemed to be a cave Northeast from their position.

Standing by the side of Jager's body, Peng looked for three incense sticks in the pockets of his tactical vest.

He carefully placed them around Jager forming a triangle, turned them on and offered a prayer in Nepali.

Mills finished his own prayer and asked Peng to finish his ceremony and proceed with the exhumation placing a small aluminium coloured bag which read "flammable" outside of the triangle.

After some minutes, a white smoke column filled the air while Mills and Peng caught up with the rest of the team.

END OF SAMPLE