

# BLACK FLAG: A special-ops technothriller of the 9/11 years

Pages: 477

Format: pdf, epub

Language: English

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## STIRRING STUFF

"Pooh, SIS, MI6, whatever," said Daisy dismissively. "Those fat-bottomed bureaucrats sitting in their embassies with their nice safe diplomatic immunity, bribing sordid little generals and politicians? They're not James Bond." She gave him the hundred-watt smile. "You are."

"I should bloody well cocoa," said Rivers happily. "After all, I have just made a daring escape in a mini-submarine, accompanied by a gorgeous girl in a slutty outfit."

"It is rather slutty, isn't it?"

"Oh yes."

Rivers got out of his seat and moved to the back of the mini-submarine's small cabin. There was a miniature fridge/freezer mounted on the bulkhead, along with a small sink and various cabinets. He took a bottle of Grey Goose vodka and a pair of martini glasses from the freezer.

"Keep an eye on the sonar," he said over his shoulder. "And if you need to alter course, take it easy. Don't want to spill the drinks."

A month's practice had made Daisy a competent sub pilot: it wasn't too difficult.

Rivers put lots of ice into a large mixing tumbler, and covered it with vodka. A small splash of Noilly Prat vermouth followed. A quick stir with a silver swizzle stick, just enough to take the edge off the savagery of the vodka with some ice water, and the drinks were ready. He strained the martinis into the chilled glasses, and spiked pimento olives out of their brine jar with cocktail sticks and put them in. A martini without the little bit of salt from an olive was devil's work.

"Here we go," he said, passing Daisy her glass. "Dry vodka martini. But stirred, not shaken. Bond was wrong about that, as well as his choice of employer. Shaking makes 'em too watery." He opened a can of smokehouse almonds and slipped back into his seat, taking a sip of his drink. Perfection.

"Mmm," said Daisy, trying hers. "Lovely. But surely James Bond would have laid on champagne on ice, for entertaining a lady friend in a submarine. I saw it in one of the movies. Dom Perignon '55,

or something.”

“Well, maybe he had a one-atmosphere boat,” replied Rivers. “But we're under pressure here, about two and a half bar. The champagne would still fizz a bit, I suppose – the pressure in a bottle of bubbly is around six bar, everyone knows that – but a lot of the bubbles would stay in it, and only come out once we surfaced. By which time it would be inside us. About the best thing that could happen then would be a massive burping and flatulence attack. If you were unlucky, your gut might rupture.”

Rivers raised his glass and pointed at it. “That's why the international master criminal in the know always insists on non-sparkling drinks, when fleeing by mini-sub.” He ate some almonds.

“You really are a mine of information, darling.”

“Well, it's important to get these things right.”

BLACK FLAG

by Lewis Page

Every normal man must be tempted at times to spit on his hands, hoist the black flag, and begin slitting throats

H. L. Mencken

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. The people described here do not exist, and most of the events never happened. This book is a special-forces opera, entertainment. In it, the arms of a single man affect great events in a way that seldom if ever really happens.

That said, all the weapons, equipment, gadgets and vehicles genuinely exist as they are portrayed. The paramilitary and intelligence organisations are real, too, though their parent governments would often deny this. The techniques and methods used by the characters are as authentic as the author can make them. That is, entirely authentic in the case of those things he has done himself; and otherwise closely corresponding to the descriptions of people who should know.

Some of the things which happen in the story are closely or loosely based on real-life incidents. Interested readers may wish to look up the various publicly-available accounts of the So San interception, the boarding of the MV Nisha, and the pirating of the Petro Ranger among many others. Signals intelligence operations against Pablo Escobar and Qa'ed Sunyan al-Harethi have also provided background.

Just as a tale of swords and sorcery might tell of a magic ring, stories of this type usually feature some sort of doomsday weapon which must not be allowed to pass into the control of dark forces. The weapon is there, of course. If any reader should doubt the description in these pages of just how potent and deadly such things really are – how serious their possession by evil regimes actually is – it may be relevant that the author has personally made safe dozens of related devices.

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NORTH-CENTRAL AFGHANISTAN    NOVEMBER 2001

Riding in helicopters never got any more comfortable.

Jack Rivers was used to it. He had travelled a lot of miles in whirlybirds, and could put up with most of their faults. The undoubted danger, for example. Helicopters weren't a safe way to fly even without people shooting at them, and hostile or just random fire was all too common an occurrence in these parts. If personal safety had been his top priority, though, he'd surely made a whole string of stupid decisions in his life. If risk was that big a deal he wouldn't be here, just barely scraping over the Afghan mountaintops in a beaten-up ex-Soviet Mil which was almost certainly overdue for major maintenance. He wouldn't be in the Stans at all, come to that; he wouldn't have gone into the special forces either. He wouldn't have done a lot of things.

In particular, he wouldn't be going where he was going now.

But it was still bloody uncomfortable. The old aircraft vibrated horribly, to the extent that Rivers' teeth rattled unless he clenched them or held his mouth open. Last time he had looked into the cockpit the Ukrainian pilot had been chain-smoking: God knew how the man managed it. Occasionally the helicopter would punch into a worse-than-usual patch of turbulence or wind shear, and the whole aircraft would jolt violently. Rivers had fastened his seat's frayed lapstrap but

the rifle he held between his knees had already jabbed him painfully in the face during a particularly sickening downward lurch. It was cold, too. The Mil's big cargo bay was jammed with auxiliary fuel tanks, cases of weapons and ammo, field rations and blankets, but the freezing mountain wind seemed to be leaking in nonetheless.

At least the view's nice, Rivers thought, looking out through the round porthole next to his seat. Nice if you like rugged, anyway.

Ahead of the helicopter the snowy peaks of the Hindu Kush reared skywards, and there were ridges of naked rock rising on either hand, also capped a dazzling white with snow. The sky was clear and aching blue, and the harsh terrain had the knife-edge clarity you often got on sunny days at high altitude. Every surface was either brilliantly sunlit or deep in shadow. Down on the slopes below lay sparse forests of pine and deodar, interspersed with a few high alpine pastures. They too were deep in snow this late in the year; the herdsmen would all be down in the villages with their beasts.

Hard country, thought Rivers, for hard men. Not many people lived this far into the central highlands of Afghanistan, and they would have had a hardscrabble existence if they'd been supported solely by their fields and flocks. It took a lot of this country to feed a sheep or a goat, and there wasn't much land worth cultivating. So the mountain men found means to supplement their income, as they had for thousands of years. Robbery and warfare were as much a way of life in these hills as farming.

And business is booming. It wasn't two months since the twin towers had fallen in New York, but already American thirst for vengeance had brought war back to Afghanistan yet again. The Taliban hardliners in Kabul had refused to hand over Osama bin Laden, so the Yanks were coming to take him by force. With a little help from their friends.

Which is where UK covert ops comes in, mused Rivers. And where I come in. And, of course, our noble local allies of the Northern Alliance. Hard men all.

The organisation Rivers was working for at the moment had been hastily assembled a bit over a month ago, and was called the Crisis Response Council. The Council was ostensibly a humanitarian aid outfit. It operated out of the old Soviet airbase at Kalai Mor, just across the Turkmen border to the northwest. Most of the Coalition war effort was going through Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan, which was now a massive air hub bustling with Green Berets, Rangers, SAS, SEALs and god knew what other exotic special-ops super-troopers from half a dozen nations. The forward mounting base there was already home to thousands of ordinary military personnel, too, and more than a few reporters were in the area. Karshi-Khanabad – “K2,” to the Western troops in-theatre – had already been visited by American politicians as well. The people Rivers was working with now disliked such limelight. They preferred the obscurity and seclusion of Kalai Mor, hundreds of miles away in a different country.

Rivers and a couple of his colleagues were seconded from the British military, but they were officially separated from the service and certainly not in uniform. Rivers' boss on the ground was a man known as Armitage. He was an officer of Her Majesty's Secret Intelligence Service, SIS - what the newspapers insisted on calling MI6. Rivers had very little confidence that his name was actually Armitage: very little confidence in him at all, truth be told.

Armitage controlled a small fleet of aircraft, mostly helicopters chartered from the Ukraine like this one and painted dirty white. The colour would suggest to casual observers that they were operated by the UN, though Armitage had stopped short of actually putting UN markings on them. Apart from the air and ground crews, there were other private contractors. Some were

locally hired interpreters, drivers and so on. Others were Westerners, often men whom Rivers recognised or knew of as former special-forces types. It was these mercenaries who actually went into Afghan territory with Armitage's shipments of weaponry and supplies.

Rivers himself, along with the other two British officers at Kalai Mor, had spent the last few weeks assigned to communications and liaison, making sure that the Crisis Response Council helicopters didn't conflict with the swarming special-ops missions out of K2 and Tajikistan, or get shot down by American fighters. Until today, he hadn't personally been into Afghanistan at all: he had spent most of his time in the improvised operations room back at the base.

That kind of rear-echelon employment was normal for a special-forces officer like Rivers. Spec-ops troops were supposed to operate in small groups, usually led by a sergeant. Officers typically stayed back in the rear, doing paperwork and giving briefings; they weren't usually field operators, though they did the same insanely rigorous training as their men. Rivers was on his second tour with the special forces: he had sat in secret forward mounting bases all over the world, looking at maps and talking on satellite phones. He hadn't been much in harm's way himself since the early 90s.

But now he was headed into trouble again. The helicopter began to climb, labouring in the thin air to clear a high ridge with only a few hundred feet to spare. It staggered again as it lifted over the crest and hit the winds which were blowing long feathers of powdery snow off the drifts at the top. Rivers looked down at the icy plumes just below and shivered as the aircraft began to descend into the valley beyond.

Here at last, he thought. Better get ready. He checked the light rucksack and webbing harness strapped down beside him one more time, then took out a magazine which he locked home in the receiver of his rifle. Finally he checked the safety and worked the action, cocking the weapon and chambering a round. The movements had the smoothness of long practice, though the rifle was a folding-stock AK rather than any normal British issue. Rivers may not have been in a lot of firefights compared to some, but few had ever criticised his personal-weapons skills.

He wasn't normally the sort of person who would fly in a helicopter with a round up the spout, especially not on a bumpy ride like this one. Even the relaxed Ukrainian up front might object if he knew what his passenger was doing. Rivers was perfectly well aware of the risk that he might accidentally loose off a shot which could kill him or the pilot, or even wreck the aircraft. He just didn't think it was as big a risk as getting out after this particular landing without being ready to shoot.

The Mil was descending steadily towards the landing zone now. The wind was strong enough that the pilot was having to steer well off his actual line of travel to compensate, which gave Rivers an excellent view of the craft's destination through his side window.

Halfway up the side of the valley lay the local village. It was typical of the region, more like a fortress than a group of dwellings, with flat-roofed houses around courtyards inside a high stone wall. A track ran down from the gates into the fields below, covered with patchy snow. There were groves of cultivated trees, too, mulberry and walnut, with a thin scatter of pine and pasture higher up to relieve the stony terrain. The comparative fertility of the valley floor was obviously due to the river running between the fields. It was probably fed by glacier runoff, which would account for the recent three-year drought not having affected things here so much. This was a rich village by local standards, although it probably wasn't home to more than a few score people.

Today, though, there were visitors. A small crowd had assembled to meet the helicopter as it came in to land, down where the track from the village reached the river. There looked to be a ford

there, and an open flattish area which was presumably the landing zone. The pilot evidently wasn't sure about that: he brought the helicopter in on a low pass over the crowd, but didn't commit to a landing. The Mil probably didn't have the power to hover at this altitude until it had "ground effect," from being only just off the deck: Rivers didn't blame the Ukrainian for keeping his airspeed up until he knew exactly where he was supposed to set down. The aircraft swung in a wide circle, giving Rivers a good look at the people below.

The crowd by the ford was divided into two groups. The first was of armed men, fifteen to twenty of them as near as Rivers could estimate. All were dressed in a mixture of western and local-style clothes, with shapeless woolly hats or turbans, scarves, quilted or sheepskin coats and jackets, and heavy boots against the cold. Most of them looked to be Hazara mountaineers, from the village above or ones just like it. The Hazara were Mongol in appearance, and Rivers had read that they were descended from a garrison left in these mountains by Genghis Khan on his way to Persia. He had no idea if that was true, but from all he'd heard these modern Hazara would have been right at home riding with Genghis in the old days. They were bristling with weapons, mostly AKs and RPG rocket-launchers. Several were leading strings of pack mules, which would receive the helicopter's load of supplies and ammo and carry it over the high passes to the fighting.

Four of the group were obvious Westerners, white men. Their exposed skin was burned dark enough by sun and wind that it didn't stand out especially, but unlike the locals they wore sunglasses against the mountain glare. There were other differences, too. They had body armour, which the locals didn't, and military-style equipment vests. These were Armitage's team on the ground. As Rivers watched from the circling helicopter, one of them stepped forward into the open area by the ford and threw a smoke grenade. The coloured smoke blew out in a thin stream, marking the landing zone and giving the pilot a precise idea of the surface winds. He responded at once, swinging the big helo out and around to approach upwind.

As the aircraft turned, Rivers got a clear look at the other group waiting by the river. This one was made up of local women, sitting on the ground and numbering twenty or so. They were dressed in a variety of different clothing, and sat in cowed or dejected attitudes, several not even looking up at the helicopter. Rivers' mouth set in a thin line as he saw them. Just as I thought. Wouldn't have minded being wrong, all the same.

The Ukrainian had got lined up now, and was coming in to land. Despite the gusty conditions the approach was reasonably smooth: he obviously knew what he was doing. Wish I bloody did.

The helicopter swung in over the landing zone, still moving fast to maintain lift in the thin mountain air. As it neared the ground the pilot flared hard and pulled in power, skilfully halting the aircraft just as it achieved ground effect. The rotor wash whipped the smoke trail from the grenade into a brief vortex. A sudden lull between gusts robbed the Ukrainian of his neat landing even though he pulled in more lift almost instantly. The helicopter dropped the last five feet like a stone, crashing down onto its rear wheels with scarcely less of a jolt than a car falling from the same height. The rotors hammering at full power blew a massive doughnut of grit, powdery snow and gravel all around the helicopter, pelting the crowd ahead and causing them to duck and shield their eyes, or struggle to restrain agitated mules.

By the time the reviving wind and slowing rotors had cleared the air and the commotion had started to die down, Rivers was out of the Mil's side door and walking toward the group by the ford.

Jack Rivers was a big man, just over six feet tall, broad shouldered and deep chested. The amount of muscle on his long arms wasn't obvious, especially now wearing a sheepskin coat, but his wrists were thick, a sure sign of massive upper-body strength. Below the heavy shoulders and chest he

was slim built, though he appeared bulky at the moment from the body armour under the thick coat and the webbing equipment belt and shoulder harness he had buckled over it. Like the mercenaries awaiting him by the river, his pale blue eyes were covered by dark impact-proof sunglasses. Only fools wore mirrored or breakable shades in their trade: getting shot in the head was easy enough without a pair of reflective aiming points, and nobody needed an eyeful of glass if there was an explosion nearby. Rivers' hair was dead black, and he had stopped shaving and getting haircuts as soon as he got orders for the Stans. Collar length hair and a six-weeks beard was a much more normal look in these hills than a military crop and a close shave, and most of the locals tended to get funny ideas about men with smooth faces. These Hazara probably weren't as weird about that as most; they ran more to moustaches or relatively minor chin-beards than the massive privet-hedges favoured by the Taliban and their friends.

Rivers strode quickly toward the armed men, his rifle tucked under one arm and the other through the straps of his rucksack. The Hazara gunmen were still in disarray, cursing in Dari and struggling to get their mules under control. The four mercenaries, thoroughly accustomed to helicopters, awaited him unperturbed. He was close enough to recognise them now.

Pryor, he thought. So here we are.

Dave Pryor had been a veteran sergeant in the SAS when Rivers had first served with special forces back in the early '90s. Officers would usually do only short tours in the special-ops units, but NCOs like Pryor could stay until their careers ended. Quite a few of them regarded their superiors as annoying encumbrances at best, to be ignored or worked around. An officer, a 'rupert' to them, wasn't always shown even outward respect.

Jack Rivers wasn't concerned with formalities, but he did care whether men under his command obeyed his orders. He had as little time for officers who put up with that kind of attitude as he did for the bolshy soldiers.

Not that he was in command of anyone here today.

Pryor must have been out of the army for a few years now. Rivers had never had to work with him closely, but he knew the man: insubordinate even by SAS standards, ruthless even by SAS standards. He had left corpses on both sides of the Irish border back before the ceasefire, and this wasn't his first time in these hills either. A cold-blooded killer, and a dangerous man even in this company. Pryor had to be well into his forties now, but he didn't look to have slowed down much: he was heavy-set and near Rivers' height, made even bulkier by the armour and ammo vest, but evidently in good hard shape. He was carrying two weapons – a long sniper rifle across his back and a rotary grenade launcher, stock folded, hanging from a fighting rig by his side – but showed no sign that the weight bothered him. He had gone for the big-moustache-and-heavy-stubble look. His features above the grey-shot face fungus were set in a dead, emotionless stare. The menace radiating from him was palpable, like the heat from an oven. Rivers had to fight hard against a bone-deep inclination to keep away from him, the instinctive fear and repulsion he would have felt for a poisonous snake or a mad dog.

The other three mercs were men he knew slightly from Kalai Mor. Two were white South Africans, of an age with Pryor. He had heard that they were former Recce commandos, although Rivers had seldom met an Afrikaner mercenary who didn't claim that status. They were old enough that they would have been soldiers of the apartheid regime, and by the look of them they'd probably had plenty to confess at the Truth & Reconciliation Commission to get their amnesty afterwards.

The fourth man was a hulking blond in his early thirties, Rivers' own age. There was no way he was going to blend in among the locals so he hadn't tried, keeping scalp and face shaved to light

stubble. He had a massive, haggled half-moon-shaped scar across his nose and one cheek: not a nice glamorous line that you might get from a knife slash, but a messy and disfiguring wound probably caused by a broken glass or bottle being rammed into his face. Rivers didn't suppose the encounter had turned out well for whoever had done it to him: he looked every bit as dangerous as his comrades. On the one occasion Rivers had dealt with him before he had spoken English with a thick Middle-European accent. Rumour around the base was that he had done time in the French Foreign Legion.

The gusty winds which had made the helicopter's landing so difficult were dying away, even as the pilot shut his engines down. The smoke from the marker grenade now lifted in a thick column a few feet to Rivers' left. In the sudden silence as the rotors wound to a halt, the braying of the mules and the curses of their drivers became audible. The four mercenaries stood silent, slightly separated from the Hazara gunmen and the mule train.

The group of women off to one side were silent too, though a few had lifted their heads to watch. They didn't look hopeful; nothing that had happened to them lately had been good news. As Rivers had expected, they were all very young and good looking, most in their early teens. Now that he was closer, he could see that the group also included a few pubescent boys. He supposed he should have expected that too.

Rivers came to halt twenty feet from the mercs and let his rucksack slide off his shoulder to the ground. He didn't want to ratchet up an already tense situation, so he pointedly didn't take a two-handed grip on his AK, leaving the extended buttstock tucked under his right arm and putting his free hand in his pocket. The Hazara were noticing that there was something unusual happening: they were quieting down and looking towards Pryor for cues, and some handled their weapons nervously. The mules were settling, too, and with the helicopter now completely still and the wind temporarily stopped, the loudest sounds were the ripple of water over the ford and the steady hiss of the expiring smoke grenade. The breath of men and beasts puffed white in the chilly air.

"Afternoon, Dave," called Rivers. He was amazed at how calm his own voice sounded. "What's the story with the women?" Might as well get things out in the open. He ambled casually toward the females, nodding in their direction.

"If you don't know what the story is with them, Mister Rivers, maybe you don't bloody need to." Pryor spoke almost completely without affect, apart from the slight contemptuous emphasis on 'Mister.'

Rivers turned to look at the other man squarely. When most people wear sunglasses, it makes them more intimidating, not less. In Pryor's case, it actually made him easier to face, covering the dead eyes that Rivers remembered so well. Rivers wasn't especially interested in a psychological stare-out, anyway. He used his own shades to give the impression that he was locking gazes with Pryor. His head remained motionless, but his eyes flicked from man to man, noting weapons and positions.

"I think I may've got the idea," he responded evenly. "This is a self-financing operation, isn't it? These girls are for selling. They look like prime stuff, not too scuffed up – ought to get top dollar." You dirty pimp, he thought but didn't say.

The business was as old as the surrounding hills. The Hazara and Pashtun tribesmen, and everybody else around here, had been raiding and stealing from each other for millennia. They didn't have a whole lot to steal, though. Livestock was worth taking, of course, although the scrawny sheep and goats were only valuable to the locals. Slaves, though: that was a different

story. Slaves were export goods. Long ago, the raiders might have taken prisoners to use or sell for labouring, but that market was pretty much gone these days. Factories and farms weren't buying any more, certainly not at prices that might make it worthwhile to ship from here.

But brothels and private harems were still in the business, more so than ever. Attractive virgin girls and young boys like these could fetch good money from private and commercial buyers all over central Asia, and they were worth an absolute fortune in Europe. It was like having a big cargo of heroin, but better: forced prostitutes were capital assets, not product. Each one of the captives in front of Rivers could earn large sums in the right market before they died or got too old or mad or diseased. They would theoretically be worth hundreds of thousands per head in Germany or Italy. Or Britain, for that matter.

Of course, that would usually be a bit like the fictitious 'street value' price tags that drug-enforcement people liked to stick on their seizures. You couldn't shift a hundred kilos of heroin for its so-called 'street value' unless you were willing to stand on corners in London or Washington for years and flog it yourself, which would be impossible for many reasons. No more could these Hazara expect to get anything like a hundred grand US for their captives in any market they could reach, picked merchandise or not.

But Armitage could do better – a lot better. The Crisis Response Council helicopters could leapfrog over the north Afghan warlords and the border, cutting out at least a half-dozen tolls and tariffs at a stroke. He might be offloading his goods at that point, still in the Stans: that would be simplest, but it wouldn't maximise his receipts. And the Council had transport planes bringing in arms from Eastern Europe and other supplies all the way from the EU, which would otherwise be empty on their return flights. As a government agent, Armitage could most likely laugh at the EU border. It was pretty porous anyway, even in normal circumstances, and live bodies were a lot less intrinsically suspicious than heroin or guns.

The Crisis Response Council was a self-financing operation, as Rivers had said, shipping weapons into the Afghan warzone and slaves out again to cover expenses. Indeed, the operation might be showing a profit.

This bit of the Northern Alliance get weapons and supplies and a chance to settle old scores, thought Rivers. The Americans get their New York score settled too, or at least a down payment. Us Brits get to be friends with them. Her Majesty's Treasury doesn't have to sign any cheques. Nobody even gets their hands dirty, apart from some deniable Ukrainians and the likes of Pryor.

Everyone's a fucking winner. Except these poor little cows who'll live short and shitty lives looking at ceilings: and I don't even want to think about the boys.

He found he wasn't frightened any more. He could listen to Pryor quite calmly and remotely, as though he was on a TV screen.

“Stop, you're making me cry,” the burly ex-NCO was saying, still without visible emotion. “Big boys' rules in these parts, Mister Rivers. If you don't like it, you should have stayed back in the office and done your bit like a good little rupert. Leave the nasty messy stuff to horrible old us, I should. Accidents can happen.”

And there it was: the naked threat. Shut up and go along with it or you don't get out of this alive, Rivers translated to himself. Be a dead goody-goody or a live pimp and slave trafficker. The question is, where do you draw the line? I didn't mind so much when I thought Armitage was just running heroin.

Jack Rivers wasn't a stranger to the concept of 'big boys' rules'; no veteran of the Northern Irish troubles could be. He genuinely wouldn't be all that bothered if Armitage was importing heroin into Europe to finance his operations, as he'd assumed when he first took stock of the operation at Kalai Mor. Rivers reckoned that if people back in the West actually wanted to do heroin they could go to hell their own way, the more so as there seemed to be no realistic prospect of stopping them. Addicts in Europe might as well pay for the Taliban to get done over on their way to prison, hospital and the graveyard. It was better than letting all their money go to ordinary criminals, as it otherwise would.

As to Armitage's slave-trafficking operation, if Rivers was willing to actually kill teenagers who had done nothing much worse than get born in the wrong time and place – and he was, that was largely what combat soldiers did – why not sell others into brothels? Presumably these girls' families were already dead or scattered. Nothing good was going to happen to them, no matter what he did.

Sure. It's just the cost of doing business. And I don't particularly fancy going up against Pryor on his own in a straight-up firefight, let alone with all the backup he's got today.

But if Rivers was going to take a stand, now was his best and only opportunity. His chances of coming out on top here weren't good, but they were much better than they would be at Kalai Mor. Even if he acquiesced with Pryor now, Rivers suspected that the likelihood of making it back to the UK alive would be slim. He'd never been supposed to find out about the slave-trading, money-making side of the Crisis Response Council. Now that he'd confirmed his suspicions he would be a marked man.

Decision time.

Just for a moment, Rivers himself couldn't tell what he was going to do. The odd sense of detachment increased. He felt his own mental viewpoint pulling back. There's Jack Rivers, he thought, one guy standing in a valley. Which way will he jump? In a remote way, his consciousness was interested in what he would do, but he had no sense of control.

The part of Jack Rivers that did his complex thinking felt a mild surprise when he found his mouth opening again. He ought to be doing now, not talking: but even Pryor deserved a chance.

"Dave," he said. He couldn't help it: the corners of his mouth were turning up in a mad smirk. This was like the moment of pushing off at the top of a bobsleigh run, or clearing the ramp on a parachute jump. He could feel the adrenaline rush. "Dave, listen. I think we should hand the girls over to the UN refugees people."

Pryor temporarily lost his Mr-Scary sergeant stare. He looked frankly bemused. "You wot?" he asked. The other mercs were looking at each other in puzzlement.

"Seriously, Dave. The UN."

"That's what you reckon, is it?" Pryor was regaining his balance. "Well, fuck me. Another Rupert with no idea what's going on." He shook his head. "I suggest you just go and have a little chat with Mister Armitage when we get back, I really do. Seeing as you've decided to stick your beak in where it didn't need to be. Get the facts of life explained to you, maybe. Meanwhile, some of us have work to do."

Nobody moved, however.

Rivers was openly grinning now. "Dave. Look, if you won't help me out here, I'm going to have to kill the lot of you." He was past the point of no return now; it felt like flying.

Pryor began to laugh. It was a pretty good joke, when you thought about it. After a heartbeat's hesitation, the other mercenaries joined in. The blond Legion type was especially struck; he actually bent over forward, shaking with mirth. The Hazara looked on in total incomprehension.

Gradually the four men had their laugh out. Pryor recovered first, calming down and shaking his head again before he spoke.

"You always were a joker, Mister Rivers. I haven't had a laugh like that in a long time."

"I'll take that as a no, then." Here we go . . .

"You're bloody well told it's a no," snarled the big veteran, angry now.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," said Rivers.

And we're off. His left thumb pressed the switch on the transmitter in his pocket, detonating the directional mines in the pack he had dropped ten feet away. He had put a lot of planning into this moment. Once Rivers had decided to hitch a lift into Afghanistan and find out what the helicopters carried on their return journeys, he'd thought through what might happen next and made certain preparations. He hadn't been certain, until he saw the captive girls, that his preparations were necessary. He hadn't been sure until the very moment itself that he would actually execute his plan.

The rucksack contained two MON-50s, the Soviet equivalent of American Claymores. They were curved slabs of explosive, covered on the outer face with steel shot and cased in plastic. The mines were designed to be triggered using a pull wire, but Rivers had replaced the striker units with detcord and boosters linked to a radio initiator. He had fixed the whole package together with tape, and fastened it to the pack frame so that he could aim the weapons crudely by placing the sack. He had done his best to get the whole group of armed men in the kill zone when he set it down, but he hadn't been able to align it carefully and he'd been worried about hitting the women. The local gunmen were smack in the middle of the danger trace, but Pryor and the other mercs were on the edge at best.

The improvised device went off with the flat, stunning BAM of high explosives detonating in the open. The mines blasted spreading clouds of high-velocity shrapnel into the crowded Hazara and mules like a gigantic sawn-off shotgun, chopping them into dogmeat. Rivers' mind recorded a single still image of the group in the instant before the rolling dust blotted out his view, one he would never forget. There were actual clouds of blood spray, ten feet high and glittering in the sun, and a single human arm pinwheeling away above the slaughterhouse mess.

Meanwhile, he had his own problems. He had known the blast was coming, but he hadn't wanted to tip his hand by dropping flat or even bracing himself: and if you were going to fire a directional mine from this close, even if it wasn't pointed at you, you really wanted to be in a trench or a bunker. Long experience had made him open his mouth just before the explosion – that would minimise permanent damage to his hearing, and reduce the shock effect of the blast. Despite that, the explosion hit hard, making him stagger. A pebble struck him in the side with enough force to break ribs if it hadn't been for the body armour, and a piece of flying grit scored a bloody line across his forehead. His vision blurred.

Even so, Rivers was carrying out pre-planned moves with frantic but tightly-controlled haste. The

stagger turned into a drop down onto one knee, and the AK snapped up and into his shoulder. His left hand hit the forestock with a smack. He blinked rapidly and shook his head slightly. His right eye came clear, though the left was still watering too much to be useable. Rivers glared furiously through the sunlit smoke and dust, desperate to orient himself on the four mercenaries.

As he had feared, they'd been on the edge of the mines' shot cones. One of the Afrikaners was on his knees clutching his throat, coughing bright arterial blood down his chest and with more spurting between his fingers. The other had either not been hit, or his armour had prevented any serious injury. He seemed to have decided that this was an ambush situation and he was point man. Like most special-ops soldiers, he had learned a range of pre-planned contact drills so thoroughly that they were almost reflexes, in the way that a martial artist practices his kata. The South African's subconscious mind had made a reasonable selection in this case, and he was very fast. His weapon was up and pointing in Rivers' direction, and he was already firing as he began to charge forward. He wasn't taking time to aim, he just wanted to put some fire down in the direction of the enemy and break through the ambush. Rivers could hear nothing but a dull ringing at the moment, but he could see the muzzle flashes and the spent brass spitting from the rifle's ejection port.

Unfortunately for the mercenary, Rivers was also operating unhesitatingly to a rehearsed plan. Before he triggered the bomb he had picked the Afrikaner as his first target, and he hadn't had to cock his weapon. He was aiming properly, and his target was only fifteen feet away. Rivers' AK cracked out two shots; that was training rather than necessity, as the first round had punched through the mercenary's front teeth and blown out the back of his head in a pinkish-grey spatter of brains. The dead man had barely begun to fall as Rivers put another two bullets through the skull of his compatriot, already choking to death on his own blood. Theoretically it would have been better to ignore him – he was almost certainly out of play – but it was actually faster to work through the sequence than try to change it on the fly.

The scarred ex-Legionnaire was Rivers' next target, and he was very nearly as quick as the Afrikaner. He was responding differently: his instinct had been to find cover before looking for a target. The blond had already dashed nearly to the ford when Rivers' sights swung onto him, and as the AK lined up he dropped into a dive which would take him safely behind some boulders at the river's edge.

This was a more difficult shot altogether: the massive merc was moving away from Rivers and to the side. His head was obscured and the target was moving. Rivers' trigger finger twitched three times, so fast that the result was almost indistinguishable from automatic fire. Almost but not quite: a shooter could always put more rounds on target using semi-auto. Rivers had never selected full auto during a real firefight in his life, and he wasn't about to start spraying and praying now. He was aiming for the general area of the 'sniper triangle', the head and upper chest; it was the best he could do in the situation. All three shots hit the back plate of the mercenary's armour.

Modern rigid-plate body armour was quite sufficient to stop light rifle bullets like those from Rivers' AK, even at short range; that was why he had been at pains to shoot the first two mercs in the head. He couldn't manage that now. What he could do was group the rounds as tightly as possible. Against paper targets as close as this Jack Rivers could put AK bullets almost through the same hole, despite the weapon's rough-and-ready accuracy. Here and now there was no chance of equalling his range performance, but nonetheless the three shots hit within an area that could have been covered with a teacup. Even then the armour might not have failed to ordinary jacketed slugs, but Rivers didn't trust to luck when he could avoid it. Knowing that he might be facing fully-equipped opponents, he had loaded his magazines with black-and-red-tipped armour piercing cartridges. The first two steel-cored slugs destroyed the plate's cohesion though they

didn't penetrate; the third punched through and tumbled, exiting through the base of the mercenary's throat and leaving a crater the size of a soup bowl. The Soviet designers had intended the rounds for use against vehicles, and so they had a phosphor-incendiary tip. Puffs of white smoke lifted from the ex-Legionnaire's back as the dying man flopped bonelessly into the ford. A dark red cloud bloomed in the slower water downstream as the corpse bled out.

Rivers was still in his choreographed sequence: his rifle twitched sideways to where Pryor had been standing when the mines detonated. But the veteran NCO was no longer there. The seconds it had taken to kill his three companions had been quite enough time for Pryor to react, and if he had taken any shrapnel it evidently hadn't bothered him much. Rivers didn't waste time looking for him: he was kneeling in the open, and he could almost feel Pryor's sights swinging onto him. He rolled sideways into the dust cloud from the mine explosion, scrabbling desperately to get himself away from where he'd been.

The dust was hanging still for the moment, thick and choking. As Rivers scuttled through it on his knees and one elbow, his good eye started to water furiously again. His shades had fallen off at some point. Gasping with effort, he drew in a double lungful of dust and combustion products from the explosive: it felt as though he'd reamed out his throat and nose with a steel brush, and his stomach lurched. His hand came down on a piece of rucksack frame heated to baking temperature in the explosion, and he could feel his flesh sizzle as it burned.

Rivers was still temporarily deaf from the mine blast when Pryor's first 40mm grenade detonated a dozen feet to his left. He noticed the explosion only as a slapping pressure and a white flash through the fog of dust and tears, but he knew what it was. Pryor would have to be bloody lucky to hit him by firing bullets blind into the clag, but grenades were a different matter altogether. He rose up from his semi-crawling progress, turned to the direction he thought was directly away from Pryor, and ran as fast as he could.

As Rivers exited the back of the dust and smoke cloud, a second grenade went off, this time much closer behind him. The ringing in his ears escalated to a dull, white-noise roar. He felt fragments smacking into the back of his armour, and a tugging sensation in his right thigh. He staggered and nearly fell flat, but got his left leg under him and lurched forward. Each time he put weight on his injured leg his vision flicked into monochrome red, but the limb itself seemed to be working well enough. He took his left hand off his rifle and knuckled his streaming eyes. The left seemed to be gummed shut with blood from the forehead cut, but the right cleared. He was almost back at the helicopter; out of a corner of his eye he could see the pilot, fifty feet away and getting to cover.

Sensible chap. The Mil was still half fuelled and much of its cargo was munitions. With a firefight taking place practically next to it, there was an excellent chance it would burn and then explode, and you certainly didn't want to be nearby if it did. Despite that, Rivers got his left boot onto the sill of the side door and heaved himself aboard the aircraft. He crashed painfully into the jamb as he entered; the punishment he'd taken during the past minute had shot his coordination to hell. Looking down at himself he could see an ugly tear in his trouser leg, with blood soaking the cloth below. He had no time for that now, however; he threw his rifle down on the seats to one side and grabbed a heavy folding knife from his coat pocket, flicking open the blade one-handed as he bent over the piled cargo. Two quick cuts severed the ratchet straps securing the long, olive-drab case he wanted: he dropped the knife and fumbled with the case latches, swearing at the pain in his burnt hand. Seconds later, he had snatched up his rifle and a heavy armload of gear, turned and struggled out of the door again. He paused to pull a white-phosphorus smoke grenade from his webbing and hurl it into the thinning dust and smoke cloud, and followed it with a second. Fresh, turgid coils of white smoke boiled up. Even if Pryor had a thermal imager he'd have trouble seeing through that witches' brew, at least as long as the wind held off.

Now to get away from the immediate vicinity and scope things out. If Pryor wanted to play heavy weapons, that was the game they'd bloody well play. Rivers gritted his teeth against the pain in his leg and set himself to sprint to the river bed, the nearest cover he could move on from.

He was in excellent hard condition; or rather, he had been two minutes ago. Now he had a nasty shrapnel puncture in one leg, half-a-dozen superficial wounds and a fairly bad case of blast concussion. He was burdened with body armour, a heavy awkward load and a thick coat. On the other hand, if he didn't get to cover before the smoke and dust lifted and Pryor localised him, he was dead.

Rivers put his head down and charged. The skin-crawling sensation of being in the open under an enemy gun made him want to hunch over, but he forced himself to simply run. Within five strides the muscles of his legs were burning: within ten, each racking breath of freezing, oxygen-poor mountain air was hitting like an icy spear through his chest, even as his body poured with sweat. He still couldn't hear anything but a crackly hiss, but he could feel the blood pounding in his head like a bass amp. Twice his injured leg buckled under him and he fell agonisingly onto the rocky ground: both times he had levered himself up again within seconds, using his AK like a walking stick. As he finally stumbled over the lip of the river bed, he simply let himself fall out of sight, collapsing sideways into the water-slick boulders and falling flat to lie in the stream up to his waist. The reaction from the effort he had just made was so intense that he vomited painfully onto the rocks.

The convulsions passed, and he lay still for a moment, fighting to control his breathing. He was blowing massive clouds of white condensation at the moment, enough to give away his position; he stuffed his face into the neck of his coat until the shuddering gasps subsided. There wasn't much time to hang about, though. Now he needed to move a good bit of distance, and he needed to do it without being seen. Pryor had probably gone to earth, somewhere he could observe the whole landing zone area. He'd be prepared to wait as long as it took for Rivers to pop up like a silly rupert, and then shoot him.

Although he might not quite be thinking 'silly rupert' any more, Rivers thought with a glimmer of grim satisfaction. Then: come on. No prizes for second best in this game. He rinsed his mouth out with icy river water and spat, then took a big drink. He used more river water to clean up his gummed eye socket: he was relieved to find that the eye was undamaged. Blood was still dribbling from his torn-up leg, so he took a moment to slap on a dressing and wind some heavy duct tape round to hold it in place. He rearranged his kit as best he could, then began to make time up the river bed.

It was some of the hardest yardage he'd ever done. The rocky sides of the bed only hid him if he stayed almost flat, just about the most taxing way to move. He was seldom less than a few inches deep in freezing water, and several times almost fully immersed. The cold struck bone deep; only the heat of hard physical labour was preventing the onset of hypothermia, and even so he could feel himself stiffening up. His hands and fingers quickly went numb and lost most of their strength. He slipped painfully several times, battering his already bruised knees and elbows. Not as young as I used to be.

Half an hour later and a full kilometre up the valley Rivers judged that he was now masked from the landing zone by an outcrop of rock. If Pryor had lain doggo as Rivers was hoping and praying he had, he wouldn't have this area under observation. Of course, he might have moved across the valley, and as soon as I stick my head out of cover he'll blow it off. He was a sniper in the SAS, and he's got a high-powered rifle.

On the other hand, if I stay in this bloody river much longer he won't need to shoot me, I'll die on

my own. Rivers' teeth had been chattering with the cold for the last ten minutes. Now they had stopped, a bad sign, and he could feel his thoughts becoming thick and disconnected. He dragged himself shivering out of the river bed and moved as fast as he could up the reverse slope of the outcrop. A degree of hearing was returning; he was registering the sound of the river again, but other than that the valley seemed quiet. The load of gear was as heavy and awkward as an anvil. The sweating effort of climbing fast up the back of the outcrop got Rivers' blood moving again and pushed back the chilly numbness, but he still felt dreadful: nauseous, dry-mouthed and with the hot-irons pain of returning circulation in his hands to add to his other woes. His leg hurt unbelievably badly.

But you should see the other guys. Rivers cackled manically to himself, which turned into a racking coughing fit. He leant against a pine trunk while that passed, then spat to clear the phlegm and moved forward and up onto the crest, ploughing through a small snowdrift which had built up against the rocks at the top. Putting down most of his burden just before the skyline, he set up the gear he'd brought, checked it and placed it ready to hand. The brief respite let him get his breathing under control again. Keeping the AK across his right forearm, he pulled a set of light binoculars from their webbing pouch with his left hand. Moving slowly, he squirmed forward into a notch between rocks and scanned the area he had just left with such effort.

Not a lot seemed to have changed. The helicopter still sat on the landing zone, with the blackened blast marks left by the mines and grenades a little beyond it. Thin, expiring white trails still dribbled fitfully from the two WPs that Rivers had thrown to cover his retreat, but most of the smoke and dust had cleared. The shattered group of mules and Hazara mostly lay where the shrapnel had cut them down, though a few bodies were still thrashing feebly and Rivers thought he could hear thin, wordless screaming. A couple of badly wounded locals seemed to have dragged themselves to the river, leaving dark trails of blood. They had probably wanted water; one of the worst things about blood loss was the thirst. Those two had needed more than water, however. Both were lying still now. Several of the mules, tougher than their masters, were still up and moving about, though all seemed hurt in some way. Another was struggling and slipping in a mess of its own guts, steaming in the cold air. The three dead mercenaries lay where Rivers had dropped them. Several vultures had already landed nearby, and looking up Rivers could see more circling overhead. They hadn't begun to feed yet, no doubt put off by the moving wounded, but it wouldn't be long. Rivers swallowed cold saliva as he looked at the hungry, patient birds.

The captive women and boys looked to have gone to ground in one of the groves not far from the landing zone. They had no idea how to hide properly and he could see them easily with the binoculars. Rivers would have expected them to make for the village, but for whatever reason they hadn't. The villagers themselves seemed determined not to get involved. The gate was shut, which it hadn't been when the helicopter landed. Rivers couldn't even see movement on the walls.

There was no sign of either the pilot or Pryor. The Ukrainian was probably waiting to see who came out on top. Pryor was most likely waiting for Rivers to break cover, though it was possible he was brewing some kind of more active mischief. If it came to a lurking and sneaking-about contest, Rivers was done for: he was in no shape to lie up in these temperatures for even a couple of hours, much less through the night.

If this goes right, that won't be necessary. Actually, if this goes wrong it won't be necessary either: I'll be dead. Always a silver lining somewhere. Rivers' clothes were soaked, and he was already starting to shiver again in the chilly air. If he'd had the right gear, he could have sorted himself out quickly enough and played sneaky buggers all night, but he didn't have it, and anyway Pryor was entirely too good at that sort of game. The sun was touching the western peaks, and there were already long shadows in that direction. The valley would be deep in twilight very soon, though it

wouldn't be properly dark for a while.

Satisfied that he had seen all he was going to see, Rivers struggled arthritically to his feet. It felt all wrong; he was skylining himself. Years of conditioned instinct cried out against it. Even so, nobody seemed to notice him.

Rivers raised the binoculars as though he was scanning the valley bottom but held them slightly away from his face, masking the subterfuge as best he could with his hand. He continued to watch the landing area with his naked eyes, so as to keep the widest possible area under observation.

At first he thought Pryor still wouldn't take the bait. A slow minute passed; and then the big ex-NCO made his move.

Rivers just caught the muzzle flash, a silent blink of light against the spreading shadows below. It came from a clump of trees a few hundred yards up slope from the helicopter, better than a thousand metres away. He dropped flat at once. Pryor must have a very powerful weapon or he wouldn't even be trying a shot at that range, SAS sniper or no. Rivers hadn't been able to precisely identify the other man's rifle down at the ford. He'd guess it was an AI Super Magnum chambered in .338 Lapua, able to achieve very long range shots without being as cripplingly cumbersome as a cal-fifty weapon. If Pryor had one of those he would be quite capable of scoring a first-shot kill even at this distance in these windless conditions, especially given the length of time Rivers had stood still on the crest like an arse.

What even Pryor couldn't do, thank God, was make bullets fly faster than normal. The light of the muzzle flash reached Rivers' eye instantaneously; the actual slug would take two seconds to cover the same distance. Rivers flopped gratefully into cover, dropping the binoculars, and sure enough he heard the wicked crack of a supersonic round passing just overhead. Pryor had obviously kept his hand in: if Rivers hadn't seen the flash he'd be dead now. The risk had been worth it, though, to find out where the ex-SAS man was hiding.

Right, you fucker. My turn. The faint, echoing crash of the rifle's muzzle blast was just arriving as Rivers heaved the weapon he had brought from the helicopter into the notch between the rocks.

Essentially, it was an updated version of the old Soviet AT-7 anti-tank missile. This was the latest export model, what the Russians called a Metis-M. It was meant to be fired from a small tripod, but Rivers had thrown that away halfway up the river bed as his strength flagged. No great loss; it would have been unusably awkward among these rocks anyway. He braced the main body of the weapon in the notch with the rear end on his shoulder, aiming it roughly where Pryor's gunflash had come from, and pressed his face into the padded eyepiece of the sighting unit. He had powered it up previously: the thermal image jumped out sharp and clear. Pryor – ever the true professional – was evidently using an infrared-proof poncho: there was no white, glowing human figure to be seen among the grainy sepia trees. But there was a small, faint, drifting hotspot, disappearing even as Rivers looked at it. That would be the cooling muzzle gas from the high-powered magnum cartridge. It only gave a rough notion of where Pryor might be, not much better than Rivers already had from the flash. With a sniper rifle, or even a normal anti-tank missile, it wouldn't be worth wasting his one and only shot.

But Rivers had made his selection from the helicopter's cargo with care. He could handle a scope-sighted rifle adequately, but he wasn't a real artist like Pryor. In an evenly-matched sniping contest he would lose, so he'd decided to cheat. The fat green tube above the guidance unit on his shoulder didn't contain a regular anti-armour weapon, with shaped charges for drilling neat little holes in tanks. This was a fuel-air bunker buster, quite adequate to obliterate the entire copse and

Pryor with it. You didn't need to hit someone's sniper triangle with one of these; anywhere in the same postcode would do. Nor did you have to fiddle about compensating for the wind, and the air temperature, and the phase of the bloody moon; nor shoot between the beats of your heart for ultimate zen-like accuracy. This was a guided weapon, and would steer itself onto target. The combined missile, tracker system and old-fashioned gas cooled thermal imager weighed a good seventy pounds. Getting it up here had damned near ruined him. Nonetheless, Rivers considered it effort well spent. His only real worry as he triggered the launcher was that it wouldn't work.

But Armitage's shadowy suppliers sold good equipment, and the splashings and battering Rivers had given the unit on his way up here hadn't affected it noticeably. The initial booster went off with an earsplitting crash, throwing the missile out of the tube with minimal backblast. Even so, Rivers' sodden sheepskin sizzled on his back and a pine tree just behind him began to burn. His abused hearing faded out again as the main rocket motor activated a few metres in front of him and the fat, stubby missile howled away down the darkling valley. Rivers held his sight picture steady on the copse, despite the jolt and flare and shattering noise. The missile was wire guided from the system on his shoulder, and would fly to wherever the tracker sight was pointed. It would take at least six seconds to reach the target. If he let his aim wander off during that time, so would the missile.

Pryor must have been watching the ridge line, and seen the missile launch. He assessed the situation instantly and made a good tactical decision, taking a second shot. If he could hit Rivers, or even put him off his aim, the missile would fly wide; and the rifle slug was much faster than the Metis-M. It would reach the crest before the plunging rocket was halfway to its target. In his thermal scope Rivers saw the muzzle gases flare, and knew a bullet was on the way.

No flies on that bastard. Just have to hope he can't make the shot. Rivers gritted his teeth and adjusted his reticule onto the fading heat signature, even as the other man threw off his thermal poncho, dropped his rifle and began to sprint away. Pryor had evidently chosen his hide for concealment rather than protection; he didn't fancy his chances there against an explosive warhead, and he was getting as far away as he could.

The .338 magnum slug struck a rock obliquely two feet to Rivers' left and ricocheted away into the sky. Even Pryor the super-sniper hadn't been able to make a headshot under pressure from over a kilometre away. The bullet's impact sprayed chips of rock and dust across Rivers' position. One fragment smacked him painfully in the mouth, but he was focused so intently on his task that he barely noticed it. Everything he had was going into holding the blurred white man-figure of his racing adversary in the centre of his tracking scope. The flare pot on the rear of the missile was visible in the display now, spiralling in towards the middle. Rivers' shivering had stopped. His shoulders and hands moved smoothly, like a greased bearing, pivoting the the tracker slowly and precisely to hold it centred on the running man far below. To someone next to him the motion would have been imperceptible; such an observer would have thought him unnaturally still.

Pryor had actually managed to run nearly thirty metres when the missile hit, a feat that would have done credit to a champion athlete under the circumstances. Had the weapon struck his original hide, he would probably have survived. But Rivers' reticule was still on him, and the missile's flightpath curved slightly to follow as it swept down the valley. The footprint of its thermobaric warhead was centred just five feet behind the fleeing mercenary.

The bursting charge popped, spreading an atomised spray of liquid droplets which mixed with air to become an explosive. A light-grey cloud snapped into being, engulfing the former NCO and part of the copse behind him. When the main trigger went off fractions of a second later, the entire volume of fuel-air mixture detonated as one gigantic bomb, incinerating everything within it. The globe of deadly vapour flashed actinic white, momentarily lighting the whole valley like a

flashbulb in a dim room; then it flowered into an orange-yellow fireball. A pulse of hellish heat seared out, flash-boiling the water in the nearest tree-trunks to steam so that they blew apart from within. Pines further away merely burst into flame. The massive overpressure blast wave that followed smashed the burning vegetation to kindling and kicked up an expanding disc of dust, even as the roiling fireball at the centre lifted from the crater it had scooped on a flame-shot pillar of smoke.

Up on the crest, Rivers' thermal display blanked out in a white glare. He rose from his crouching brace, lowering the launcher, in time to watch the blast wave's expanding circle flick outward and dissipate in seeming silence across the valley wall below. As the fireball lifted, its orange light glinted momentarily on the hair-fine control wire trailing down the valley from the front of the launcher. Seconds later, he felt the deep thud of the pressure pulse, as much in his chest cavity as his still-deafened ears. The echoes battered back and forth down the valley; here and there, small rockslides and avalanches slipped down its sides. Snow pattered down from the pines behind him.

Fuck me. Rivers turned the launcher in his hands and looked at it. The Russian exporters advertised these bunker busters as being similar in effect to heavy artillery: that clearly wasn't just marketing hype. He'd fired similar guided weapons in the past, but they'd all had conventional anti-tank warheads, far less viscerally impressive. Rivers had known in technical terms what fuel-air weapons could do, but that wasn't the same as using them yourself. Or being on the receiving end.

He set the heavy launcher on the rocks and looked down the valley, where the massive smoke and dust cloud churned and fires flickered in the gloaming.

That's what you get for banging heads with me, Dave Pryor. Hope you like it in hell; I'll see you there soon enough, no doubt. Rivers shrugged, settling his webbing on his shoulders. Meanwhile, I'd better get down there before that pilot decides to bugger off. Don't fancy walking out of here.

He picked up the AK and checked it, then began picking his way down the slope. The sky above was still bright, and the upper slopes of the eastern valley wall still in daylight, but it was full dusk down here. He moved as fast as seemed safe: he was in a hurry and the exercise would hold off the onset of hypothermia. Even so, the rocks and the darkness called for care, the adrenaline boost of combat had left him, and his wounded leg was stiffening badly. Rivers took almost an hour to reach the helicopter.

When he got there he found the pilot sitting on the sill of the side door smoking a cigarette, shivering slightly in the deepening chill. It was a sensible enough decision on his part. The fighting was clearly over, but only a madman would try to take off without the permission of whoever had won. The helicopter could be destroyed in a heartbeat by several of the weapons that had been in use this afternoon.

The Ukrainian got to his feet as Rivers approached, dropping the cigarette and stepping on it. There was some light from the pine trees still burning further up the slope, and Rivers could see the man flinch slightly as he got a clear look at his erstwhile passenger. That wasn't surprising. Rivers was a daunting sight, bloody and battered, and he had just slaughtered at least fifteen armed men single-handed. The pilot would be taking some comfort from the fact that he was the only person who could get Rivers out of this valley again, but still extremely apprehensive about his personal future. He obviously wasn't nursing any illusions about his chances in a gunfight with the man who had put down Pryor's entire force: he opened his coat as he stood, showing an empty shoulder holster worn over the flight overalls beneath, and placed his hands on his head.

Rivers limped toward him with the AK cradled in his arms. He hadn't even spoken to the pilot on the outward flight: he'd boarded unannounced at the last minute back at Kalai Mor, while the rotors were already spinning. If the Mil had facilities for passengers to connect to the pilot's intercom he hadn't found them, and that made conversation impossible in the noisy helicopter. He'd seen the Ukrainian around the base before that, though, and spoken to him regarding flight plans and the like.

"Bohdan Aleksandrovich Kokhan, isn't it?" he said. He'd meant to sound calm and normal, but his throat was raw and the words came out with a rasp. The pilot didn't look reassured.

"Yes," the man responded, cautiously. The slavic accent was thick, but he was quite comprehensible. Almost all pilots could get by in English.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to shoot you unless I have to." Rivers tucked the AK under his armpit to back this up. "You can put your hands down, do your coat up, you'll freeze." As the Ukrainian gratefully complied, he went on. "Now, if you do what I say, no mucking about, everything will be fine."

"That is good," the Ukrainian said thoughtfully, eyeing Rivers while getting out another cigarette and lighting it. "We go now, yes? Perhaps, I think, you don't want return to Kalai?"

Rivers laughed harshly. "Too right, my friend. But before we go, there's work to do. First I want you to get up there and round up those women. I didn't do all this just to have them freeze or get sold again by that lot up in the village."

"I don't argue," said the pilot dubiously. "We take the women, okay. You want to deliver them as normal?" He was clearly puzzled.

"No." Rivers shook his head. "Look, Bohdan Aleksandrovich, understand me. I'm not a pink and fluffy western journalist, or an aid worker, or a UN guy. I am not a fucking softy."

The other man's eyes flicked in the direction of the bodies by the river, then to the burning woods uphill. "No, Kapitan, you are not. This I have seen." He drew heavily on his cigarette and looked down, blowing smoke and refusing to meet Rivers' glare.

"Good. Now understand this too. I do most things which I must do, to get the job done, you follow me; not being a softy. But I will not sell little girls and boys to be gang raped, nor stand by and watch others do it." Rivers found he was leaning forward on his toes. The emotional stresses on his voice had deepened it to a grating snarl which would have sounded unexpectedly bestial coming from the throat of a Rottweiler. Unconsciously, he had taken a two-handed grip on the AK, ready to bring it up and shoot.

The Ukrainian's hands were shaking so badly he could barely get the cigarette to his lips for the next drag. He was frightened; so he should be. The bastard was just as guilty as Pryor and the rest. He'd been carrying slaves into hell with his eyes open.

But Rivers needed the pilot alive. He got a grip on his temper, and let go of the rifle's forestock again. The Ukrainian airman was looking deeply puzzled, underneath the fear.

He can't understand what I'm so upset about, Rivers knew. I'm a killer. I'm obviously happy to run guns to the Northern Alliance, many of whom aren't much better than murderous bandits. Why aren't I happy to buy slaves from them?

It was a normal enough viewpoint in these parts. Normal for far too much of the world, Rivers supposed. Even back in the West, he'd found that his own code of morals was strangely out of step with most people's. It amazed him, for instance, that anyone thought drug dealing was a serious crime in a world which had slavers in it. Both types of criminal ruined people's lives, but the drug pusher's victims usually volunteered. Slaves didn't choose to be slaves.

Nice and simple, thought Rivers, slowly calming down. But then there're the grey areas, like gunrunning and mass murder. The sort of things that sometimes aren't even crimes, if a government does them. The sort of things I do. Maybe I should cut this flyboy a little bit of slack. Pryor and the rest would have killed me if I hadn't done them first, but this guy isn't a threat.

I'm not a judge, nor a jury – even if I am an executioner.

It wouldn't be a good idea for Jack Rivers to start shooting people just because he didn't like some of the things they'd done, or been party to. That road might end a little too close to home.

“No, Bohdan Aleksandrovich,” he said, tiredly now. “We don't deliver the girls as normal. We throw out all the blankets and medical gear, all that. We keep the weapons and ammo. We take the girls. You've burned half your fuel getting here, right? You can still get airborne with that load?”

“It is more than half gone,” the pilot said. “You understand, aircraft is heavy at start, needs more power, more fuel on outward journey. Yes, we can fly with girls and weapons, we use ground effect to gain speed, no problem.” He looked at Rivers nervously. “But, Kapitan, you must know, we keep the weapons we don't go so far as we would have.”

“Sure, I know that,” said Rivers. He reached into his coat and came out with an air chart, pre-folded to show the north half of Afghanistan and some of the adjacent former-soviet republics. The chart was in a transparent plastic map case, and had survived the afternoon well enough. The light from the dying fires above wasn't sufficient to read it, but Rivers had a finger-sized waterproof torch in the map case's pen pocket. He turned it on and shone it on the chart so that the pilot could see. There was a position marked with a circle of red ink, sixty miles to the northeast of the valley where the two men stood.

“We can get the weapons to there,” Rivers said, pointing, “and then the girls go to Termez. You can do that, right?” He was pretty sure the Mil was capable of the task. You didn't have to be a pilot to do fuel-load-distance calculations.

The Ukrainian bent to study the chart and orient himself, puffing fiercely on the last of his cigarette. He took the map case from Rivers and measured off distances with his thumb and forefinger, then nodded and looked up.

“Yes, Kapitan, this we can do.” The man was looking less worried. He knew that there was a large UN and aid-agency presence at Termez, just inside Uzbek territory on the far bank of the Amu Darya, the Oxus River of the ancients. The international community was there en masse, held up by wrangling between the Uzbek government and the Northern Alliance, waiting to move into Afghanistan and deal with the humanitarian catastrophe that had followed the fighting. Termez airport was effectively under UN control, backed up by French paratroops. The pilot was much more confident now that Rivers didn't plan to kill him as soon as the journey was over.

He had better sense than to ask who might be waiting to receive the munitions, and Rivers didn't intend to tell him. The circle on the chart marked the stronghold of a minor warlord who had, until lately, controlled an important stretch of road. The mountain citadel had been captured six days

ago by a group of Chahar Aimak cavalry affiliated to the Northern Alliance. Whether or not the warlord had really been an ally of the Taliban was now rather a moot point: he had been killed when US airstrikes smashed his defences and the Chahar horsemen overran his forces.

What had never been in doubt was the size of the massive hoard of cash which the dead robber baron had built up from road tolls and trafficking in heroin. The money was now in the hands of his conquerors and their US advisor, a Green Beret major of Rivers' acquaintance. The two men had met a couple of years back in Albania, and got memorably drunk together several times.

The Chahars were now apparently in urgent need of weapons and ammo resupply before they could move on. However, it seemed that logistics command at Karshi-Khanabad had more urgent priorities, and the nomad riders had been left to cool their heels. This didn't sit well with Rivers' fire-eating American friend, who was keen not to miss the march on Kabul. He was happy to split his take from the warlord's treasury with an old drinking buddy who could arrange a load of 7.62mm, RPGs and Metis M bunker-busters in a hurry. Rivers suspected that he wouldn't actually be getting half: he and the American weren't that close, and the man had ex-wives to support. Nonetheless the sums they had provisionally agreed by satellite phone that morning would give Rivers a chance to get clear of the Stans and lie low for a while. He suspected that he might not be able to rely on his service pension any longer. Not once Armitage found out what had happened, anyway, and got in touch with his superiors in London.

Still, mused Rivers, at least I'm alive. And not part of a trafficking ring any more. He didn't expect that Armitage's slave pipeline was explicitly sanctioned even within the SIS, let alone the British government as a whole. He was fairly certain that only a few people even at Kalai Mor knew the whole story; mostly pilots and the field teams who went into Afghanistan. The slaves weren't shipped through there. If Rivers had tried blowing the whistle back at the airbase – and he had been far from sure of his facts until he saw the slaves with his own eyes this afternoon – he was pretty sure he'd never have seen another sunrise. He'd have been just another ex-forces aid worker killed overseas, perhaps in an unfortunate traffic accident or landmine explosion.

Rivers supposed he could have stayed at Kalai Mor and bided his time until he was back in the UK; but in that case he'd never have found out for sure if he was right. Unfounded suspicions regarding an operation which officially hadn't happened would never be listened to in government circles. Rivers had no faith at all that the media would be able to help, even if they believed him. Anyway, a public inquisition would do massive damage to British prestige and covert-ops capability. Rivers didn't think it was his job to undermine either of those things; like most servicemen he had a strong distrust of the press. He had a big problem with the method Armitage had chosen to fund this operation, but not with the general idea of British operatives breaking foreign laws.

On a more personal level, Rivers was entirely confident that he'd wind up in jail for breaking the Official Secrets Act if he so much as whispered to anyone outside the government.

What would I say, anyway? he thought wryly to himself. Her Majesty's Secret Service have been committing crimes overseas? Of course they were, by definition. It's their job, for god's sake. I just happen to disagree with this particular crime of slave trading. I was fine with the gun-running and killing and flouting of diplomatic convention.

No: there had to be a smarter way than going public. Now that he'd confirmed his suspicions and managed to get clear alive, Rivers could shift this lot of girls to safety and derail the slaving operation - that was something the media could help with. Then he could see about his own future, and that of Mister Armitage of the SIS.

Once he'd offloaded the weapons and got the cash, he'd have the Ukrainian pilot drop him just outside Termez so that he could fade away quietly. By that point the helicopter would be very low on fuel; he was confident that the pilot would take the captives on to the airport. There would be western troops, UN types and aid people there, who should see that the teenagers were looked after. As well as they were ever likely to be, anyway. Rivers wasn't all that sanguine about the life choices on offer in an Uzbek refugee camp, but it was the best he could manage.

Bohdan Aleksandrovich could tell the UN and the Uzbeks any story he liked, likewise his Ukrainian charter bosses and Armitage once he got in touch with them. Once the international press got wind of the helicopter's arrival they'd want to know whose it was and where it was based – Rivers planned to tip them off anonymously once he was on his way. He wouldn't blow the whole thing wide open, however. The Crisis Response Council cover story would probably hold up, provided Armitage shut down the arms-and-slaves traffic quickly enough and put on a good show for the reporters. The spook might have to expend his ill-gotten slush funds actually delivering humanitarian aid for a while: that would piss him off. Rivers grinned evilly at the thought.

One more job to do here first, however. Though I really don't want to do it. "Go and round up those girls, then," he said to the pilot, "before they freeze to death. If any of them really don't want to come that's their look-out, but make a proper effort."

"Okay," the relieved man responded, pulling on gloves and a heavy Russian-style fur hat against the cold. "Do you come also, Kapitan?"

"No," said Rivers wearily. "I have my own job." He turned towards the dead and wounded by the ford, disengaging the AK's safety. Faint moans and pleas were still audible from that direction if you listened carefully, and there would be some who made no sound but were still in pain. The pilot looked at Rivers curiously, and then, catching sight of his expression, turned and departed hastily.

Checking bodies was dangerous work. There was often some clever bugger shamming, or who'd found time to pull the pin on a grenade and tuck it beneath himself as he died. When you lifted the body the arming spoon would be released, and you were dead too. Standard drill was to have at least two men on a job like this, one covering the bodies from close by and the other dropping to lie on top of them one by one and roll them to one side. That way, if there was a grenade, the corpse would function as a shield.

Of course, that assumed that you wanted to take live prisoners or at least search the bodies, neither of which were part of Rivers' plan tonight. He didn't have the helicopter lift or trained personnel to evacuate the wounded here for medical treatment, and the dead could lie where they were. He did want to eliminate any remaining chance of a dying Hazara shooting him or the pilot, or perhaps taking out the helicopter. But he didn't think there was any great danger of that by now.

Mainly, he was here to end the wounded men's suffering. The gunmen hadn't deserved to live, in Rivers' opinion; certainly not as much as he did, and that had been the choice. But he didn't think they'd earned a terrible, agonising, helpless death from wounds and cold and carrion eaters not concerned whether their food was dead before they ate it. Rivers could give the wounded a quick finish at least, slavers and rapists and murderous robbers though they had surely been.

He could clean up his own mess.

The rifle shots crashed out in staccato pairs as Rivers moved from man to man. He tried not to look at the bodies too closely, or even get too near them. The last of the sunlight was gone from the

valley's eastern ramparts, and the darkness was a mercy to Rivers as his bullets were to the gunmen still living.

Even so, once or twice, Rivers caught a glimpse of faces lit up in the muzzle flashes. The faces were the worst part. Some of the Hazara had been very young, barely into their teens. By the time he had finished, Rivers found he was weeping, though he would have sworn he felt no emotion and he made no sound. Nevertheless the tears flowed down his bloody face, freezing in his beard and making his cut lip sting.

CABINET OFFICE BUILDING WHITEHALL, LONDON THIRTY HOURS LATER SEVEN PM LOCAL TIME

Samantha Black wasn't pleased to be present, though unlike most of the others in the room she made some effort not to show it. The rest of the people gathered around one end of the long, polished conference table under the dusty chandeliers looked very pissed off indeed. The general discontent was understandable enough. Seven o'clock on a Friday evening was definitely not the time to be calling an interdepartmental meeting, especially not this Friday.

Many of those here were from government departments with an interest in the Afghan fighting, now moving towards its climax. Some of them, the keen ones, would be dying to get back to their ministries and offices. Even if they actually had no real duties in connection to the war, they would want to be in the thick of the Whitehall action, burning the midnight oil, looking important – even if only to themselves.

Others, less keen, would normally have left for the weekend hours ago, perhaps before lunch. Or yesterday, in not a few cases. They were even less thrilled to be here.

Black herself had a foot in both camps. She did have real duties to do with the Afghan invasion, which had sent her workload through the roof. She liked her job, and found it stimulating and interesting. But she also had other priorities in life, and had worked hard to clear her desk and get away for a weekend in the country. She looked down momentarily at the engagement ring on her left hand; it still caught her eye now and then, although she'd been wearing it for some time. It held a solitaire diamond of impressive size.

Now, however, her weekend seemed likely to disappear without trace. Just as she had been leaving the office, her boss had suddenly despatched her without a word of explanation to this meeting. God knew what all the flap was about, but to merit an after-hours discussion on a Friday at the Cabinet Office it must be serious.

Or someone thinks it's serious, anyway, Black mused to herself. Or, of course, they just want someone else to think that they're treating whatever-it-is seriously. She didn't know anyone here particularly well. The others were mostly sunk in morose silence, though a few were chatting quietly to each other by the curtained windows. Everyone was waiting for the major players to arrive.

Finally they did. The doors at one end of the meeting room opened, and a group of four people came in. The first was a middle-aged, dumpy woman whom Black knew well by reputation, Viscountess Henrietta Slade. She was a former senior officer of the Secret Intelligence Service, the SIS, which the newspapers still insisted on calling MI6 though the title was long obsolete. Slade

had been a highly successful career spy, rising almost to the top. On retirement she had taken up her family's seat in the House of Lords as a hereditary peer. When most of the hereditary lords had been compelled to give up their Parliamentary seats two years ago, she had been one of the ninety chosen to remain.

Slade was nowadays a member of the Intelligence and Security Select Committee, the Parliamentary body which was supposed to exercise oversight over the entire British intelligence apparatus. As the only committee member with any real knowledge in the area – the others were all fairly ordinary MPs – she drew a lot of water. Black noticed a ripple of interest throughout the room as people recognised the older woman. Slade seemed to have adopted a relaxed dress code on retirement, or perhaps she'd always had one. She was dressed in a loose knitted cardigan rather than a jacket, wore her silver hair in an untidy bun and had a pair of half-moon reading spectacles hanging on her chest by a ribbon. The contrast with the regulation-issue sober suits worn by everyone else in the room was striking, emphasising the impression of an amiable aunt or college tutor.

With Slade were three men in their forties. Black knew one of them slightly, Clive Bettany, a colourless but important Cabinet Office mandarin. She had met the second one too, George Mercer, a senior SIS officer. She'd never met the third man, though he and Mercer looked to be from the same mould. Both wore dark suits with a certain something suggesting Savile Row tailoring, and both were public-school and Oxford educated. Well, Mercer was, to Black's certain knowledge; and the other man was wearing a Balliol tie.

Mercer, Slade and the Balliol man all took seats at the head of the table along with Bettany, and there was a general scramble as everyone else tried to work out precedence and seat themselves properly. Most of them had finely-tuned Whitehall status antennae, and they instinctively arranged themselves according to pecking order. Black found herself sitting about halfway down the table.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Mercer, at last. "First let me thank Clive for kindly hosting us here. The Cabinet Office, of course, is the appropriate place to raise an inter-departmental matter. I quite understand that most of you have important duties just now, and I very much appreciate your presence. Especially given this anti-social timing." He tried an apologetic grin, but got no answering smiles or chuckles and pressed on. "Most of you will already know Lady Slade, of course, representing our political masters. I'd also like to introduce Charles Hanson, a colleague of mine at SIS." Here he gestured towards Balliol Tie.

Samantha craned her neck interestedly. She'd never met or even heard of Hanson. That was mildly unusual, given his age – he looked to be well into his forties. He ought to have made enough of a mark to be known by now, unless he'd joined the SIS quite late. There were only a few hundred actual intelligence officers in the whole Service, and an Oxbridge type like Hanson would surely be a proper spy if he worked there at all. He looked an ordinary enough example of his kind, however: well groomed, receding dark-brown hair, florid boozier's face, overweight.

Mercer was still speaking. "Charles has had something of a problem with an ongoing operation of ours. Frankly, we're concerned. We may need a bit of help in setting matters right, and of course in cases such as this we do everything possible to keep people in the loop – hence this meeting. Charles, why don't you fill everyone in." With that, Mercer sat back in his chair. Hanson leaned forward, his hands on the tabletop.

"Thanks, George," he said, in a smooth and plummy baritone.

Christ, thought Black to herself. They must be cloning them in a vat, down there at Vauxhall Cross.

Can't really criticise him for being Oxbridge, but some of these public schoolboys . . .

Black wasn't being fair, she knew. Her own undergraduate days had been spent at Cambridge University, and her middle-class parents had probably spent as much indirectly on her education as Hanson's ever had on his – her mother and father had paid an immense premium to buy a house within the catchment area of a successful state-run secondary school. Come to that, she had plenty of friends with accents every bit as fruity as Hanson's.

She still didn't like him.

Hanson was going on, looking down at his folded, well-manicured hands.

"I've been developing a long-term operation at SIS," he said, "the full details of which are restricted to a very tight indoctrination list indeed. Lady Slade, I believe, is briefed in?" He looked across at her, receiving a brisk nod, and went on, addressing the full meeting once more.

"I'm not authorised to give anyone else details of the main operation. However, the problem lies more with a sub-operation which relates to it, and this isn't particularly sensitive in this context. I should emphasise that what I'm about to tell you is still codeword classified information and potentially hugely embarrassing for HMG." He paused weightily, looking up and down the table and meeting eyes.

Yeah, yeah, thought Samantha Black, poker-faced. We're all hugely impressed and gratified that the big bad spooks are letting us have a glimpse into their glamorous lives. Get on with it.

"In essence, this sub-operation has involved the supply of weapons and materiel to elements of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan over the last few weeks. Nothing particularly special about that, of course – it's no more than the whole Coalition has been doing – but the significant thing is that we've been able to use a supply route through Turkmen territory, rather than the usual pipelines via the other Stans. As you are all, ah, no doubt well aware, the Turkmen government has stated that it will only allow humanitarian aid to pass its borders."

It was clear that Hanson very much did doubt that they were all aware of that, and judging by the owlish looks on some of the faces further down the table he was quite correct. He looked around again, hrrumphed, and went on.

"However, despite the public prohibition on military aid, we've been able to declare the operation to our opposite numbers in Turkmenistan. They were happy for it to proceed on an unavowable basis, for certain considerations."

That was common enough. SIS were regarded with tremendous awe by the world's lesser intelligence agencies. They could often secure all kinds of cooperation from star-struck foreign officials merely by making friendly overtures and hinting at a close relationship in future. The syndrome wasn't limited to overseas secret policemen, either. British officials, politicians, even (perhaps especially) British journalists, all tended to be fascinated by the legend of James Bond.

"The supplies," Hanson continued, "naturally have had to be delivered by helicopter into Afghanistan itself, and this has of course necessitated close military liaison with our American cousins, and specialised planning skills. This type of thing isn't really our bag in SIS, of course, but as is usual in these cases, A-Block were able to find us a few suitable people." Hanson inclined his head ever so gracefully in the direction of the two men sitting opposite Black, and all eyes swung onto them.

The pair were both in their thirties, and not especially noteworthy. They wore unexceptional suits, a little crumpled perhaps. They both looked very tired indeed, with dark rings under their eyes, but so did a few others at the table. The only really different thing about them was that they were both, clearly, very physically fit; unusually so in a gathering of unhealthy office workers. Samantha was probably the only other person there in comparable shape.

The two men were military officers from the Directorate of Special Forces HQ at Regents Park Barracks, the organisation in charge of all British special-operations forces. The headquarters was often referred to by its low-profile postal address as 'MoD A Block', in a rather futile attempt at anonymity.

Samantha thought she'd met the older special-ops officer briefly, years ago in Northern Ireland; he'd been a captain in the SAS then. The other was wearing a Parachute Regiment tie, so he was almost certainly SAS too. Over half the SAS began their military careers as paratroopers.

The two weary staff officers stared emotionlessly back at Hanson. They knew he wasn't there to do them any favours.

"Regrettably," said Hanson, with a sidelong glance at Slade and Mercer, "our little problem stems from one of these people whom A-Block were good enough to find for us." He paused. The people sitting to either side of the two special-forces officers didn't actually withdraw the hems of their garments, but they might as well have. The rest of the meeting regarded the two soldiers with commiseration, or simply relaxed, relieved to discover that their department was not the one under the spotlight.

The SAS men maintained their stony silence, and Hanson carried on.

"We were running the operation under cover as a charitable aid effort," he said. "We called it the Crisis Response Council. Naturally, to maintain deniability we were sourcing Soviet-pattern weapons, and getting the other supplies mainly in continental Europe. The actual aircraft were mostly chartered from the Ukraine." He drank some water from the carafe in front of him, and looked up and down the table to make sure everyone was following him before continuing.

"In the inevitable course of events, we had helicopters coming back empty from Afghanistan, and transport planes going back empty from Turkmenistan to Europe, to pick up new loads. Unfortunately, it appears that one of our A Block people on the ground saw this as an opportunity." Hanson took a deep breath. "In short, it appears that this individual, no doubt with the collusion of some of our various contractors and local allies, was using the empty flights to smuggle certain commodities into Europe."

"What commodities?" said the older SAS officer, speaking for the first time.

"Well, put simply . . . slaves." Hanson looked embarrassed. "Sex slaves, to be precise. I know it sounds fanciful, but young girls are one of the few cash crops in Afghanistan. Heroin is the other obvious one, but the poppy areas are mostly far south of where we were operating. For whatever reason, anyway, that's what your man was shipping on the planes. The girls were being sold to gangmasters in Europe for large sums."

"Oh come on," scoffed the younger special-ops officer, the one with the Para tie. "Those guys we sent you, they were all officers, because of what you wanted done – basically staff work, you said. You're not telling us that a British officer has gone into the white-slave trade?"

"A former British officer, John," his colleague added hastily. "They were all separated from service

for this op.”

Samantha Black smiled wryly to herself. Presumably if it was a noncom you'd believe it all too easily, she thought. I suppose there's some basis for that. She'd heard of at least one case where SAS troopers had moonlighted as bank robbers while still serving, for instance. Wouldn't have thought pimping was quite their style, however. Though you'd never know it by the moustaches.

Hanson stretched out his hands in front of him, examining his immaculate nails. “Not exactly the white slave trade in this case,” he murmured smoothly, “but one quite takes your point. Of course it would be highly unusual for a holder of the Queen's commission to stoop so low. Still, there have been instances in the past . . . Charlotte?” He raised an eyebrow at one of the junior types down at the bottom of the table, presumably an SIS lackey of some sort. Eyes turned on the plump, blonde young woman, who had a notepad at the ready.

“Ah, final entries on a list of what happened to graduates from the British Army staff college course of 1896 . . . one officer shot his mother-in-law and her lawyer and then committed suicide . . . one officer last heard of running a brothel in Turkey. The list was compiled by General Sir James Edmonds, the British Army official historian.” She blushed slightly and closed her notebook. A few chuckles ran up and down the table.

Hanson cleared his throat again in a self-satisfied way. “Of course, every organisation has the odd bad apple; we're certainly not immune from that at SIS, as all the world knows. But it isn't impossible even for a British Army officer to, ah, yield to temptation. And in fact, in this case, the chap in question wasn't even Army, as I understand it . . . John, did you bring those files I asked for? The relevant one is for a Captain Jack Rivers. A Marine, I believe. One of the gentlemen from Poole.”

The relief of the two SAS men was palpable. A-Block were still very much in the frame for supplying a rogue operative, but at least the actual SAS seemed to be in the clear. Rivers was an officer from the Special Boat Service, the SBS. The SBS, based at Poole on the south Dorset coast, was almost entirely drawn from the ranks of the Royal Marines. As such it was a naval organisation rather than an army one. Disputes and turf wars between the two elite secret units were rife. The SAS would be internally jubilant at such a blow to the reputation of their rivals. In this gathering of outsiders, the soldiers maintained some show of special-forces solidarity, refraining from any unguarded comments. Nonetheless, the army officers' expressions lightened perceptibly, and the older man sat back in his chair.

John, the younger one, delved briskly in his briefcase and pulled out a fat file folder, which he opened and began to flip through, reading out highlights.

“Jack Rivers,” he said. “I've met him, I think. Couldn't say I know him well. Born 1968, he's, hmm, thirty-three now. Modern-languages degree from University College London . . . qualified to Interpreter in French, Spanish and Portuguese . . . joined the Bootnecks in '89. Interests listed as paragliding and sailing.” He turned over a page.

'Bootnecks' was service slang for the Royal Marines. 'Interpreter' was a military language qualification, meaning that Rivers actually could speak those languages quite fluently; unlike the more basic grades such as 'colloquial', which were handed out freely to anyone who could manage to order a beer in the relevant countries. But Samantha Black didn't need anyone to tell her all that.

John was going on. “First stop after training was a troop commander's tour with Four-Five

Commando. Did the Arctic-warfare bit, and a four-month NI roulement later. A spell in northern Iraq on the Kurdish safe haven business in '91. Seems to have done reasonably well as a regular officer, but not seen as a rising star or anything . . . volunteered for Special Duties on completion of that, passed selection and training successfully. Eighteen months in the Province as an operator with South Det, pre-ceasefire."

Most of the people in the room had the background to know what that meant. Rivers had done his initial posting in the Marine Commandos, including a spell under fire in Ulster and the brutal arctic exercises in Norway. Evidently that had merely whetted his appetite; he had then undergone tough selection and training to join the fabled 14 Intelligence Company, the third arm of the UK's special forces along with the SAS and SBS.

'Fourteen Int' were a secret undercover surveillance unit formed in the 1970s for operations in Northern Ireland. They did basically the same sort of work as other plainclothes surveillance teams. This meant following suspects, watching homes and weapons caches, carrying out stealthy break-ins, bugging and so forth. Unlike their colleagues on the mainland, however, Fourteen Int did all this in the hard republican areas of Northern Ireland, where armed roadblocks were often set up by the Provisional IRA rather than the British forces and the slightest suspicion could draw a violent lynch mob or a heavily-armed IRA reaction team in minutes.

Fourteen Int operators spent a lot of time alone – 'one up', they called it – deep in the hard areas, in plain clothes driving unmarked cars. They carried an arsenal of concealed weapons, and stayed in constant radio contact with their bases and fellow operators. Even so it was lonely and often terrifying work, as Samantha Black knew all too well. Many operators were killed over the long decades of warfare, lured into ambushes or exposed by unlucky accident. On other occasions, the Fourteen Int people used their advanced close-combat and driving skills to shoot their way out, more than once taking a fearsome toll of the opposing gunmen.

The whole business became somewhat tamer with the ceasefire in 1994; but operators who had done tours while the Province was still ablaze had immense kudos. There was a concerned mutter up and down the long table.

John turned over another page. "Finished his tour with 14 Int, and went back to the bootnecks as per usual. Didn't fancy any of the regular options on offer, by the look of it, didn't fancy civvy street either . . . so they sent him as OC of the Marine detachment on HMS Endurance. Did eighteen months down south, got his bridge watchkeeping ticket. Captain of the Endurance thought him an odd fish by the look of it, but seems to have been happy enough with him."

HMS Endurance was the Navy's one and only 'ice patrol ship,' a converted civilian vessel used mainly for charting and surveying work in the Antarctic waters south of the Falkland Islands. She was also meant to bolster the UK's naval presence in the region, and so help to discourage Argentina from any renewed attempt to seize the Falklands. To that end she carried a small party of Marines, which was unusual for a warship these days. Rivers had evidently made use of his spell at sea, qualifying as a bridge watch officer able to con the ship unsupervised. This time the people round the table were less well-informed. A few looked puzzled, but nobody was perplexed enough to ask a question, and John-from-MoD-A-Block was ploughing on.

"By this point his Marine career was well off the beaten track and going nowhere fast. The bootnecks tried hard to get him to straighten up a bit, but he seems not to have been interested. They had something a bit more conventional in mind after the spell at sea, but he stymied that by going for the SBS. Nobody's allowed to prevent their people from trying for special forces, of course, or we'd never get any decent applicants . . . not that he seems to have turned out all that decent . . .

"Anyway, he got through Selection okay, then the rest of it, and did his spell with the Shakies . . ." Shakies was the nickname for SBS. "Specialised in swimmer-delivery vehicles, mini-sub, you know, and got about in the usual way, but nothing terribly exciting at first . . . spent a bit of time in East Timor in '99. Hmm – doesn't have especially good writeups at this stage. Not all that popular with his bosses . . . bit of a maverick, reading between the lines. Doesn't seem to have really fitted in. We didn't see much of him at A-Block; he's something of an unknown to us . . ."

"Of course there isn't any long-term career for officers with the operational teams, and soon enough they turfed him out, at the back end of '99. Regular Marines had pretty much written him off as a no-hoper by then, I'd imagine – he hadn't ticked off any boxes to speak of, not so much as a junior staff course – but he still had a few years left to serve. He then managed to wangle himself an extended adventurous-training junket as skipper of one of the Global Challenge yachts in 2000. Mad keen yachtsman apparently – I never met a bootneck officer who wasn't, mind. Sailed round the world with crews of service personnel – did quite well in the race according to this. All Greek to me. After that he was in a temporary holding attachment down at Poole, doing admin, when this whole current flap kicked off. Got left behind there cooling his heels when most of the other Shakies went to the Stans, none too pleased obviously." John closed the file and looked up.

"He almost bit our arm off when we trawled round and asked if any officers wanted to help out Mister Hanson here with his little caper. We did all the usual, you know, separated him from service, and sent him off. And that's the last we know about Jack Rivers," said John belligerently, looking at Hanson. "If he's been a naughty boy it isn't our fault. But I think it's safe to say he's quite formidable, with a background like that."

You might say that, thought Samantha Black. Indeed you might.

"Yes, of course," replied Hanson. "All your people are frightfully, um, active. Very good thing too, normally."

"Anyway, getting on. From what we've been able to work out, Rivers must have guessed we were onto him. He hitched a ride on one of our helicopters into the Hindu Kush, where it was supposed to be dropping off a load of stuff to our local allies. They had one of my liaison teams on the ground with with them, contract personnel rather than your people, but not without their own formidable qualities – if you follow me."

The two SAS men nodded.

"Rivers wiped them all out single-handed, four contractors and twelve locals, which does tend to confirm your assessment of his capabilities."

The senior SAS man frowned and replied. "How the hell did he do that? Nobody's that bloody good. And anyway, why did he bother?"

"As to how," said Hanson, referring to a sheet of paper in front of him, "it seems he used an improvised bomb of some sort to, ah, take most of them out, and finished off the remainder by surprise. We think some or all of the group may have been involved in the slave trafficking scam with him, and perhaps he wanted to silence them. Certainly there seems to have been a group of slaves waiting to be shipped out. Whatever his motivation, he evidently didn't want to hand over the weapons."

"We know that, because Rivers then loaded the slaves onto the helicopter and kept the weapons. He forced the pilot to take him to another location where a friend of his from the US Special Forces

was encamped, along with his own group of local auxiliaries. It seems that this friend had outrun his own logistic backup, and was willing to offer Rivers a substantial sum of money for the weaponry he had stolen from us. The American had no idea of the source, of course." Hanson looked down at his notes again. "Our preliminary contacts with Karshi-Khanabad suggest that this money may have been, ah, gleaned, so to speak, by the American and his party in the course of their operations."

"Looted, you mean," said the junior SAS man. "Wouldn't put it past the Yanks."

Wouldn't put it past you either, chummy, thought Samantha Black, looking at him. Not if you thought you could get away with it.

Hanson had clearly had the same thought. "Quite," he said, dryly. "In any case, Rivers then made for Termez. Obviously, he couldn't hope to sell the girls there, but it was the best place for him to escape from. He seems to have used the helicopter and the girls as a diversion: we think he must have tipped off the press that they were coming, and slipped into the airport on foot during all the kerfuffle that led to."

A languid, elderly civil servant, lounging half-asleep in his seat next to Lady Slade, suddenly sat up. "Press?" he exclaimed, looking at Mercer. "Press, George?" There were murmurs of alarm all down the table, and accusing looks aimed at the two SIS officers.

"Calm down, Eric," said Mercer. "Don't worry. I'm happy to say that Charles was able to manage a rather effective bit of damage limitation. His Nibs won't find himself facing any awkward questions on this one. Charlotte, please, if you would . . .?" He looked down the table.

At the foot of the table there was a large television on a trolley, with a video recorder mounted below it. The SIS junior had already swivelled the screen round to face the group and inserted a cassette. Now she pressed a button on the remote control. A clip from the Sky rolling news channel began to play.

The segment opened with footage of a big Soviet-style helicopter descending out of the night sky onto a brightly-lit airport dispersal. In the background were rows of transport planes in UN and military markings, and city lights. According to the commentary, this was Termez airport, and the helicopter was operated by a well-known Swiss-based charitable organisation, the Crisis Response Council. Seemingly, aid workers from the Council had rescued a group of young women who had been kidnapped by the Taliban but then managed to escape. After a bit of mindless chuntering from the studio anchors, the view cut back to Termez, this time in front of the airport building, where a round-faced man in a fleece top was giving a press conference, in English but with a thick Mittel-European accent. He was subtitled "Heine Schmitt, Regional Director of the Crisis Response Council." It seemed that Schmitt was immensely gratified at the rescue and was sure that the girls would be well cared for in the hands of the UN High Commission for Refugees. Charlotte switched the set off.

"That first went out on Sky at half-past ten last night," said Mercer, "about half an hour after the helicopter reached Termez. It was two in the morning there. Sky have repeated it since, and the other services have all picked it up. Fortunately the helicopter pilot had the wit to contact Charles in Turkmenistan as soon as Rivers released him, and even more fortunately Charles had a few contacts among the press corps in Termez. He was able to get the right story out before they started poking around. Frankly I think congratulations are in order." He beamed at Hanson.

Eric – Samantha knew him, he worked next door at Number Ten Downing Street, on the Prime Minister's personal staff – relaxed visibly, and gave an approving nod. An admiring murmur went

up and down the table.

“Yes, well, simple enough,” said Hanson complacently. “If you save the Fourth Estate the necessity of doing any work they can generally be persuaded to see sense, I find. That Swiss chap actually is in the aid business, a consultant of some sort. We've had him on our books for some time, and luckily he was able to step in at short notice. He's now running the base in Turkmenistan as a real humanitarian operation. Fortunately we already had plenty of blankets and medicine and so forth on hand. The other A-block officers have got all the military hardware out of there now, with a bit of help from our local opposite numbers, and all the more, er, robust contractors were mostly in Afghanistan already. I'm told the first party of reporters is expected tomorrow, and we think we'll be more than ready for them.”

There was another ripple of subdued applause, and a chuckle or two. The people round the table mostly hated and feared the media as they did no other thing, and loved to see reporters hoodwinked.

“Yes, well, that's all very gratifying and clever I'm sure,” said the senior SAS man. He obviously hadn't cared much for Hanson's 'frightfully active' dig. “What happened to Rivers, though? And how much cash did he get away with?”

“Ah,” said Hanson. “Yes. Well, he seems to have arranged for an executive jet to collect him from Termez while all that flap was going on.” He was examining his fingernails again.

“An executive jet?” exclaimed the SAS man. “How the hell did he manage that? And how do you know about it?”

“Well, the fact is, the Crisis Response Council has an open account with a charter-jet company here in Britain,” said Hanson. Some of his cocksure bearing had evaporated. “The aircraft was one of theirs, that's how we found out. Rivers was actually authorised to book jets as part of his normal duties. He'd done so several times, in fact, and the charter people saw nothing particularly odd about this latest occasion.”

John with the Para tie was puzzled. “What, you were letting him fly about in private jets?” he said. “What the hell for?”

“No, no,” said Hanson. “He wasn't flying in the jets, not until now that is. He was just booking them.” The SIS man looked distinctly uncomfortable now.

Lady Slade gave a dry cough. “How did you travel back to London for this meeting, Charles?” she asked, coolly.

“Ah. Well, by chartered jet, in fact. You see, there aren't many scheduled services . . . it was a matter of urgency.”

“Hmmpf,” said Slade, looking at Hanson severely over her reading glasses. “Perhaps, Charles, you shouldn't be making your work trips by private jet. Even our political masters can occasionally get in hot water for that, you know. I'm sure George agrees with me.” She turned her gaze on Mercer.

“Quite so,” said Mercer, hastily. “Quite so, Charles. Scheduled flights, please, from now on – absolutely whenever possible.” A few of the toadies and lackeys at the bottom of the table were looking grave, now. Others were smirking to see the swashbuckling secret agents discomfited.

The senior SAS man gave a thin smile. "After Rivers had borrowed your private jet, then," he asked, "where did he go in it? And what sort of money has he got to play with?"

"He went to Taiwan," said Hanson. "He landed at Chiang-Kai-Shek at about half-past two this morning London time, while we were still sorting matters out in the Stans. It was ten-thirty a.m. in Taipei. He entered the country on his own passport, we've been able to establish that, but I'm sorry to say that the trail goes cold at that point. As for money, we're not able to specify an exact amount. The American originally paid him the equivalent of about fifty thousand pounds, but it seems that Rivers then waited at the Americans' encampment while the jet was in transit from Britain to Termez. There was apparently a lengthy card game, during which, we're told, he was rather successful. He might have as much as a quarter of a million with him, in negotiables of various kinds."

"Wot abaht bank accounts, and dosh from the trafficking?" This came from a burly, thuggish-looking individual just down from Black, balding and with his remaining hair cropped close. His suit was slightly too shiny and its pinstripes slightly too obvious. With that suit and accent, he gave a strong impression of being an East End villain, or perhaps a wide-boy futures trader. In this setting, it was clear that he was a policeman of some kind.

"Well," responded Hanson, "we haven't had time to do a thorough investigation. However, it so happens that we know a chap quite high up in Rivers' high street bank here in the UK. He's been able to have a bit of a look at Rivers' account for us unofficially, just while the correct authorisations come through, you understand. There have been a couple of large transfers from offshore banks. Our man will also let us know if Rivers tries to draw on his funds here, again just until we can get the right official mechanisms in place. As for other offshore funds, I'm afraid we haven't any information yet, but the trafficking operation was quite lucrative in scope. Rivers may conceivably have access to substantial funds, perhaps millions."

Viscountess Slade regarded Hanson levelly, then turned to Mercer. "Mmm. That's all very well, George, but we really can't have this sort of thing proceeding much further, poking about unofficially like this. This business needs to be put onto some sort of proper footing. We need to decide what we want here and put together a plan."

"Absolutely," said Mercer. "Absolutely. That's very much why we've asked for this meeting. We were particularly glad you were able to attend, in fact, ah, Henrietta, because we're feeling a bit exposed, to be quite blunt, without any political oversight. After all, this is Britain, we quite understand that." He had put on an earnest, churchgoing expression, which Hanson was doing his best to copy. Samantha Black felt as though she was listening to a pair of poisonous snakes explaining that they lived on lettuce.

That's really rich, she thought. Briefing in a peer – not even a politically-appointed peer – who used to be one of yours – that hardly qualifies as putting yourself under political oversight. And having this meeting at the Cabinet Office conveniently ensures that nobody elected is ever likely to hear the details, unless someone wants to tell them. The Cabinet Office didn't really have a politician in charge of it; it was effectively a ministry without a minister.

Hanson had the ball again now. "In fact we do have a suggested way to move forward here, quite above board. If NIS are willing," he nodded in the direction of the burly, zoot-suited enforcer, "we'd like them to initiate the UK end of the investigation. After all, the reason we're upset with Rivers, trafficking, is very much their province. And of course, as a Customs operation we'll have a significantly reduced warrantry requirement, which is so useful in keeping a low profile."

The National Investigative Service of HM Customs had the most wide-ranging powers of any

law-enforcement agency in Britain. In particular, they held a blanket permission to enter any UK premises they saw fit, which was valid for the reign of the current monarch. They didn't need to apply for search or entry warrants.

"Quite 'appy," said the Customs man. "We'll kick off with a report from you then, will we?"

"Noo, I don't think so," said Hanson, with a sidelong glance at Mercer and Slade. "We rather thought we'd get our opposite numbers in Turkmenistan to start the ball rolling. That's only correct, as Rivers was in their jurisdiction when he committed his crimes. They should be quite prepared to issue a request for assistance and extradition."

There was a pregnant silence. The lesser breeds at the bottom of the table didn't know where to look. Hanson stared straight ahead; Mercer looked down at his hands on the tabletop. Samantha Black checked everyone in turn, noting their reaction to the SIS men's plan for Rivers – that he be quietly handed over to the secret police of the Turkmen dictatorship. Lady Slade, interestingly, was watching Black herself.

The two special-forces officers from A Block were looking at each other. John, the junior, was wearing a very clear you're the boss – you have to say something expression. The senior SAS man stirred uncomfortably, and turned to face the spooks at the head of the table.

"I don't think DSF will be happy to simply render him up to the Turkmens," he said. "Not if the result's quite as cut and dried as you seem to be suggesting. He might just vanish, you know. Rivers may not be our favourite chap, and he seems to have gone wrong in a big way, but he ought to get a trial. Put his side of things." There was a very subdued mutter of agreement. Even Mercer had the grace to look a bit uncomfortable.

Hanson was unfazed. He raised both hands and assumed an injured expression.

"Perish the thought," he exclaimed. "Who do you think we are? We wouldn't dream of simply handing him over on the quiet to be, er, handled off-book, so to speak. But surely everyone can see that we don't want some endless nightmare in the British courts? Dear Lord, we'd have to shut down everything related to the whole operation. Even then, disclosure rules, my god, there's no telling what might come out. We wouldn't have a prayer – we'd have to drop it, let him go, scot-free. Happened more than once already. Remember the Matrix Churchill business. That simply won't do, I'm afraid."

"Well, what do you suggest?" said the SAS man.

"We'll make every effort to apprehend Rivers overseas," said Hanson. "We have a lot of contacts in the relevant foreign agencies. We can easily get him put on the watch lists at all the airports and borders, making it clear that he's frightfully dangerous and so on. Where we think the locals'll be happy to send him on to Turkmenistan, we'll let them do so; if not, we might expedite matters a trifle ourselves. The Americans will probably lend us a hand there – they're very practiced at this sort of thing these days, and I gather they're rather embarrassed about their special-forces chap's role in this. Not to mention that they don't really want any discussion of skulduggery by elements of the Northern Alliance just now. Those fellows have a murky enough reputation as it is.

"Once Rivers is safely en route to Turkmenistan we can make a leak to some suitable journalists – we know a few people, we can make sure the right story comes out – and perhaps Amnesty International as well. Get the FCO involved on the ground, you know. That will create enough of a rumpus that the Turkmens can't simply bump him off – and of course, behind the scenes, we'll be making sure that they don't, anyway. They'll give him a trial, he'll get every chance to put his own

side of things, but the business will naturally be under proper control. His defence won't be able to call inconvenient witnesses or request information in a malicious way, as they might here, and we can be sure of the right result."

"Sounds a bit noisy, Charles," protested Eric from Number Ten. "Bound to make the mainstream media."

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Eric. Shady Brits in trouble abroad are always claiming they were being run by us – it never does them a bit of good. He'll be just another ex-forces black sheep. Her Majesty's government can ride that sort of thing out easily enough. The press will soon get bored."

"What if he comes back to Blighty?" That was the thuggish Customs man. "Extradition to bleeding Turkmenistan, that won't be simple, will it? His brief'll 'ave a field day."

Both the intelligence officers winced. "Quite," said Hanson. "I doubt he will come back – he must know we'd pick him up, and he can't be wanting to spend ages on remand in Belmarsh, which we could manage without any bother at all. If he does, though, we've got a contingency plan. Rather than extradite him to Turkmenistan directly, we'll get the Swiss to request him – some of the gangmasters he was selling to were based there, and we're on tolerable terms with their federal police. Switzerland, of course, is a nice civilised country, so it should be comparatively easy to get him handed over to them; nobody can claim he wouldn't get a fair trial. We wouldn't appear in the matter at all.

"Once he's in Switzerland, though, we'd start the main process of getting him extradited to Turkmenistan. The Swiss courts' power to make our lives miserable is basically nonexistent compared to the ones here, the Swiss not being EU members, and we'd be able to cause him significant problems in getting legal representation and so on. He hasn't any right of residence there, which will weaken his position. And there are a few tricks we can use – the Turkmens will be happy to retroactively make him a dual-nationality naturalised citizen of theirs, for instance, which will make him look shadier and give them more legitimacy in asking for him. It'll be a struggle, but we ought to be able to get him moved on in the end, without any actual trial in Switzerland at all if all goes well. We can certainly make sure he stays under lock and key for years, no matter what. And there you are – justice is done, and we don't need to scrap a major operation."

There was another thoughtful pause at this. Chins were rubbed and heads scratched.

"Well," said the senior SAS man, "I can't say it sounds wonderful. I'm pretty sure the boss will want to send someone to have a chat with him once he's in custody, though god knows where we'll find anyone just now, we're run off our feet. But I suppose if there's been any mistake, handling it as you suggest, we can always sort matters out afterwards. You'll keep us fully informed, of course."

"Of course," said Mercer, relieved. "Goes without saying, my dear chap, naturally."

"Orright," said the Customs heavy, rubbing his hands together. "We'll get a team together, open a file."

"Excellent," said Hanson suavely. "We've got one open on the hunt for Rivers already, of course. Our Minister is splendidly cooperative on warrants – we'll still need a few, even for an NIS investigation. We may as well sort those out. May I suggest a joint designator? We're calling it Operation WOLVERINE."

"Luv-ley," said the Customs man, scribbling in a notebook. "WOLVERINE. J'fink we should get Thames House in?" \*

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