The canopy was high, but a second canopy of hanging mists formed a false sky just overhead. The trunks of ceibo and care tigre faded into a close distance, shadows against a grey wall just beyond reach, sheets of moss and ropes of lianas draped from their branches like voluminous sleeves and excessive jewellery, all corrosion green. Monteverde, Costa Rica.

Anxo walked with a slow, steady and all but silent pace. With periodic glances at the ground before him, he noted patches of undergrowth or fallen wood lurking in the humus, anything that might give him away with unwanted noise at a careless footfall; but mostly his gaze was up, scanning the cloud forest for signs of movement other than the slow drift of the thick atmosphere all around.

He was above average height for a Portuguese, which made him tall for Costa Rica. Broad across the shoulders but lean in profile, when he dropped into a crouch it was like a sheet of paper curving and dipping beneath its own weight. Unlike the smooth flexibility of his body, his face was hard and flat, angular, immobile.

His fingers traced a distinctive print in a patch of bare soil: the hind pad of a jaguar, the biggest cat of the Americas. One of the last. An adult, female, four years old, somehow at the peak of her health. He did not know this from the print. He knew it from the file, and many months of stalking.

Anxo paused to urinate, a brief exposure, into a tube that led through the same charcoal filters that strained clean the sweat wicked away by his undergarments, and the moisture his backpack drew into itself from the humid air. He sucked on his collar tube, drinking from the two litre reservoir he’d just started to refill.

Pushing up beneath a tight, matt-black rubberised sleeve on his left forearm was the oblong bulk of his tracking computer, featureless to the eye, worth a fortune. A field of nodules on its underside patterned a simple map against his skin. It had demanded eight months of constant use before he gradually began to visualise its touch, another sixteen before it became second nature. Tactile sight, utterly indecipherable to anyone but him.

Now its rippling pressure traced a topographic image, showed the jaguar’s direction and the distance between them. He knew without thinking, without looking, that the broadcast tag was four hundred metres away to his one o’clock, moving south-southwest at walking speed.

Adequate distance, just. But time was running out.

Ahead the forest floor sloped upwards, formed a short level ridge before a sharp decline. He unslung the SVU-DS sniper rifle from his pack as he lay along the ridge's edge, touch-checking the safety as he watched the mist for his target.

His hands paused as the tracking computer pulsed for attention—the jaguar had stopped. It resumed movement heading east-west, the same line as the small valley below him.

He pondered.

Then the target ghosted out of the mist.

Anxo settled the bullpup rifle's timber-camo stock into his shoulder, hunched up on his elbows, the toes of his boots braced into the tangle of plant life that broke up his silhouette, finishing the work his digitally-designed camouflage began.

Two more targets appeared, ten and twelve metres further back from the first, which came on with appropriate caution. Anxo grudgingly acknowledged it, for what that was worth, but it didn't change anything.

He zeroed in on the target's head, recognised the blank, watchful features. This was the one.

He waited long enough to be certain that there were just these three and not more still further behind, then momentarily clenched his left hand against the body of the weapon, pumping his forearm beneath the tracking comp, long and short. Morse code: VC. 3T. PP.

On a screen, eight thousand kilometres away, would appear the words Visual Confirmation. Three Targets. Permission to Proceed?

He tracked his aim back to the second and third targets, marking each of the three in relation to the others, hovering on the last. Five seconds later, the tickling map on his forearm was replaced by a series of light pats, as silent a communication as his own had been. PG. SI. AD.

Permission Granted. Support Inbound. Agent's Discretion.

He slid his finger over the trigger and squeezed, shifted, squeezed, shifted, squeezed again.

The only sound added to those of the forest was a muted, plastic click and the whup of displaced air, repeated, repeated. His aim ended back on the original target, which flinched, staggered and toppled, rag-dolling down the slope in a tangled flop of limbs.

Anxo scanned back to confirm the same of the two who had followed. A perfect take-down from back to front, none of them aware anything was wrong until it was their turn.

He rose, slung the rifle and descended, flexing Objective Successful, Zero Fatalities, Agent Unharmed. Between sending and receiving the AOK reply, his skinmap reconfirmed the jaguar's location for him. Still well over three hundred metres out. Plenty of time.

He went down on one knee beside the first target and rolled him over. Wide eyes, a line of drool stringy from a slack mouth. A dart lodged in the meat just above his clavicle. Anxo plucked it and lightly slapped the man's cheek, provoking a blink before the wild gaze focused on him.

"Hello, Mister Rolland Garnett," Anxo said, using the target's native English. "You and your friends are under arrest."

Anxo tethered the three poachers together, back to back, each one staring daggers at him as he knotted them in place. Garnett's gaze in particular dripped vitriol, as much as his stroke-slack features could muster, but the only thing passing his lips was spittle. The neurotoxin in the darts put paid to any backtalk as effectively as it did getaways. The other two looked more resigned than anything else.

In the process of divorcing them from their firearms and anything they might use to free themselves (multiple blades of one sort or another, only one that would have dealt with the woven-monofibre cord now binding them at ankle and wrist, then to each other elbow-to-elbow) he also collected their means of communicating with the wider world: three satellite radios, three obvious emergency one-click broadcasters, and one not so obvious built into an external hearing aid behind Roche's left ear. Like an ex-combat merc wouldn't have an implant if he was impaired.

He dug through his pack and withdrew a small quad-rotor drone, unfolding it and checking the battery. When he turned it on, it synced with his tracking computer and he issued a few basic commands to its simple AI, then he tossed it and it whirred to life, stabilising in mid-air at chest height.

The confiscated comms went into a fine-mesh net bag which he attached to the hovering flyer. It bobbed as it compensated for the extra weight, then abruptly rose into the mist, a small laser visibly flicking upward as it searched for a route through the canopy. Once it was out, it would track west and then north at a human pace,

periodically stopping and perching on the treetops to recharge its solar cells. If anyone was keeping tabs on Roche through them, they would have no idea he wasn't where he appeared to be until he was safely in custody.

When the flyer was out of sight, Anxo withdrew a telescoping aerial from the pack, extended it to its two-metre length, and speared it into the ground in the gap between the three men's backs. Its emitter would, eventually, bring the pick-up team, but in the meantime it would support an ambient IV, the same tech his pack used to suck water from the heavy air. He plugged three snaking tubes into it, snapping off the needle covers from each.

"This will keep you hydrated for the next couple of days," he said, popping a vein on Garnett's arm and spiking it. "Tops up the tranquiliser as well, I'm afraid," he added, then repeated it for the locals in Spanish as he did them too.

Almost done. Just one more, nasty thing.

"I'm a little sorry to do this to you, chicos," he said, "but you come poaching big cat territory, I can't just leave you here. Might get you eaten. And that I don't want to happen, even though in my opinion you all are worthless shits. I'm not having one of the last jaguars killed for a man-eater because you gave him the taste."

He took a step back, brandishing a spray canister as he did. "This is going to keep anything bigger than a mosquito well clear, so don't you worry." He pulled a transparent breathe-sheet up from the front of his camo-vest, over his head, pressing it down across his shoulders and folding it around his throat to temporarily seal himself in. "Afraid you're not going to like this much," he said, then popped the cap and sprayed them down.

It was a sign of just how disgustingly strong the chemical repellent was that all three men managed to emit grunts and moans of nausea, even shifting against their restraints a little. Garnett blasted a gloop of snot from his nose, eyes running with thick tears, but Anxo was already collecting his pack and gun. The poachers themselves were someone else's problem now.

He went through the pile of his captive's gear and claimed some of the fresher foodstuffs to liven up his own supplies, all high-density military rations. What had originally been a three kilogram block of nutrient- and vitamin-infused artificial protein (able to keep a single, disciplined man both alive and miserable for six months) was now two-thirds gone. The sight of grain-and-raisin biscuits made his mouth water, even with the stinging stink in the air.

After a momentary check on the jaguar's location—it had veered south again, probably catching the edge of the repellent and driven well wide—Anxo headed back along the

route Garnett had approached from, watchful for any unwanted surprises. He found and destroyed a couple of remote cameras that had been spiked into trees a half-metre or so off the ground, and treated the damage to the trunks with an infection-neutralising sealant.

He called a halt three kilometres on, dusk falling rapidly across the invisible sky above. He climbed a tree with a strong, comfortable-looking forked limb on it about twelve metres up, anchored his web-hammock across the gap and got settled. Drank some piss-sweat-mist water, ate two of his new biscuits. Dozed.

Garnett had been a nice catch. It felt personal. Ex-private military, fought in the futile African Caliphate Action. Just like Anxo. Only difference was, when they went out-of-contract, Garnett had stayed merc and Anxo had meandered, disillusioned with the work until he somehow found his way into the Global Ecological Organisation's "green marines". Traded two-klick head shots in desert towns for half-klick non-lethals in the last of the jungles.

They'd never served together directly, not that Anxo was aware of, but he'd come to know Garnett by rep since. While Anxo was wasting time on spiritual uncertainty, Garnett had done a handful of years in corporate special ops—what the practitioners called "customer services" with euphemistic glee—before going independent. His premium client list left him legally untouchable, despite countless rumours of his perpetrating this assassination, that incursion, the other coup, etc.

And, of course, a side-line in protected biological acquisitions which he essentially treated as a hobby, albeit one that probably exceeded all his other earnings combined. There was a lot of money in rarity, and things were only getting rarer.

All slander, of course, or so his lawyers decried, with charges tied up in courts all around the world, likely forever, leaving him free to hunt again another day. As far as GEO was concerned, Garnett was one of the most reviled human beings on the planet.

Quite the trophy. Anxo closed his eyes with a smile. Not a bad day. The answer to the bonus question—How the hell did Garnett know where to go hunting?—would have to wait for someone else to answer. Still, there was more than one former merc in the green marines, more than one set of skills worth having around. Apply the right pressure, maybe Garnett would tell them himself.

It was four a.m. when the silent alarm of the tracker began beating at his inner arm with what could only be described as spastic panic. He passed from sleep to full consciousness with the abruptness of a flicked switch, the dart rifle pulled tight into his shoulder as he scanned the forest floor for threats, of which he found none.

It took several more seconds before comprehension of exactly what the tracker was

alerting him to sank in.

The jaguar—his jaguar—

—was gone.

Anxo double-timed it back to where he'd left Garnett, not really believing that he and his men could have escaped, nor that anyone could have arrived quickly enough to effect a pickup—even GEO couldn't get here in so little time. He slowed as he caught the acrid edge of the repellent, and then spotted the three bodies exactly as he'd left them.

So not Garnett. Something else.

He turned south and trotted on, heading for the point at which the jaguar's signal had ceased. When he switched it from compass mode to the skinmap, the comp provided him with the route the jaguar had taken during the night. Its end was marked by a quivering vibration high on his forearm, right where a junky would needle the flesh and flood the system.

As he moved, the vibration slowly crept down towards his wrist, a fatal blockage shifting. He tried to put expectation from his mind. Or, rather, dread.

The green marines—more formally known as the CAF or Conservation Armed Forces—were ostensibly an anti-poaching operation. GEO, non-political in a way that the UN wholly failed to be, had won remarkable cooperation from governments around the world. The combination of absolute neutrality and their policy of non-lethal action made them a benign presence within a nation's borders, not to mention a frequent source of prestigious employment. The reformed hunters, poachers and ex-military personnel which made up their numbers on the ground were always teamed with local consultants, scientists and conservationists, who could share their expertise with the CAF platoons that rotated between projects each year.

That this service came free, and removed the expensive necessity of policing whatever endangered animal life a state might have dominion over—and, in the process, excused each government from any failure to do so—made giving permission an easy choice to make. As a result, even in regions where allowing international organisations access was anathema, it was common to see wildlife watched over by CAF operatives. Even the African Caliphate permitted them to oversee what remained of the great herds of the Masai Mara.

However, just like any other army, the CAF had both a public face and a more secret one. In those territories where their operations were prohibited, covert preservation initiatives were undertaken to provide backup (or to watchdog) whatever efforts the

state made itself. Argentina, China and Russia were the most notable hold-outs, and GEO's suspected presence in each was a subject of both sabre-rattling and global rumour.

But there was another side to these covert ops, even in countries where GEO was welcomed with open arms. One about which no rumours circulated, even amongst the green marines themselves. Anxo's side.

With human expansion persisting (in spite of any lip service paid by the world's political and financial leaders to notions of global sustainability), the impact upon the natural world was relentless, and escalating. As vital habitats were eroded by the attendant need for more space for people to fill or to use—or, as across South America, were simply ruined into non-existence—confirmed and suspected extinctions began to escalate. Larger, low population species were most at risk, and their scarcity only increased their value to the unscrupulous.

Mammals were the primary targets, especially the big cats. There were only five known wild jaguars still at large in the Americas. Each of them, once, had been trapped or tranq'd, then tagged with a unique tracker. Each tracker was paired to a portable computer whose output could be interpreted by one agent alone—even the operatives back at GEO's monitoring headquarters were ignorant of the subject animals' exact locations.

These agents formed a protective bottleneck: the sole permitted point of contact between their charges and the human world, with complete discretion to act in defence of the animal their service was devoted to. Each jaguar now had a bodyguard.

Anxo's was one of only two females.

And now he had lost her.

When he reached the approximate location where the signal ended, Anxo found nothing to indicate either a capture or a kill. The tracking system guided him to within what he could call with confidence fifty metres of the jaguar's last known position, but he turned up no tracks, no blood, nothing.

This was barely more encouraging than the alternative. It had taken him hours of hard hiking to arrive, enough time for a diligent clean-team to erase any trace of themselves, though it was hard to imagine anyone bothering in an environment like this. Just as Garnett had not, they would have no reason to anticipate his presence. And how much evidence could someone leave behind in a jungle anyway?

He marked the projected direction the jaguar had been heading, but the skinmap was no use to him any more. He switched the tracking comp to full watch mode, its

reception boosted to respond and direct him to the slightest signal from the jaguar's implant… still nothing.

Rifle in hand he headed south, trailing a route that wasn't there.

The terrain was rougher even than it had been before Garnett, rising and falling in sharp, brief crests, brackish water pooling in the troughs. His pace slowed to a crawl as he edged higher, slinging the gun to free his hands for the climb. The canopy seemed to draw closer as though the ground rose to meet it, but he was simply above the heavier mists, seeing the foliage more directly than before.

When the ground finally began to level out, he bowed to the inevitable and Morsed a message to GEO: Target Dark, Drone Request—a risk, since drone-dropping a communications array could pin-point his location for anyone seeking to get to the jaguar through him. On the other hand, he didn't have the jaguar to give up right now, did he?

The level ground appeared to be a small plateau, the hills continuing to rise to the east, raising the canopy with them. Above it was solid, the only glimpse of blue beyond breaking through in distant slices that seemed to keep pace with him. Though the foliage was still a good fifteen metres overhead, it seemed almost claustrophobically close after being so long half-hidden by drifting mists. When he hopped across a small stream flowing westward he had to fight the urge to duck his head.

He wondered why he'd received no response from GEO, flexed for a refresh, then paused in surprise when he felt nothing in response. He lifted his hand, stared dumbly at his arm as he flexed again—the tracking comp was inactive.

A thought crossed his mind, and he brought his arm up fast for the rifle on his back.

"Touch the weapon, we will fire," said a voice—and, recognising its type, Anxo froze.

He interlaced his fingers above his head, extended his arms straight up, turned his palms to the hidden sky; stepped his feet outwards, widening his stance until his centre of gravity was too low for easy balance, forcing him to strain his toes, his calves, the small of his back to maintain stability; all at the order of the voice.

It was amplified and split into two tones, one rumbling base, the other a weirdly high pitch designed to cut through any degree of background noise straight to the audio nerves. Disturbing to listen to, impossible to ignore. Not a mere person's voice, but that of someone expensively augmented for crowd control. The kind of someone capable of responding vigorously when disobeyed.

An unseen figure—not the speaker—approached him from behind, lifted the pack and

rifle away from his back and, with three effortless strokes of a blade, cut their straps. He didn't even feel a tug. A blade that sharp would sink into granite if dropped point first.

While all this went on Anxo had time to look, not at the merc behind him, but at the jungle in front. He finally spotted the speaker, totally motionless and obscured by a thick snarl of roots, gun motionless too. He was indeed augmented, a metal band mounted across his face with two black holes where the eyes should be, the bridge of his nose surgically modified to fit below the implant like a fleshy pigeon beak. The only difference between the twin holes of his eyes and those in the muzzle of his weapon was that they were horizontal, not vertical.

Smart-plastic restraint cuffs were squeezed around his raised wrists, which were then forced behind his back by two huge fists, gripping him by the elbows with astonishing strength and twisting until his threaded fingers parted—resistance would only have torn his shoulder muscles. He didn't turn, but he could feel from the angles of pressure that whoever was behind him was taller than he was, and the hands suggested gross size in general.

Behind his back, the cuffs were pressed into brief contact. When they parted they were linked by a short, liquid string of iridescent plastic, already solidifying between them. Anxo was careful not to pull against it, re-lacing his hands together palm-to-palm. Best to use all his advantages when he would have at least a chance—in an aug-sniper's crosshairs he had none.

Anxo sensed the looming presence behind him nod, then the gunman stood and approached, his passage shifting the plant life less than the sluggish air—he recognised the movement of a skilled stalker. At a closer range, Anxo corrected himself: the aug was a woman. He cast his mind back to the few female snipers he'd met or seen reported on, but none of their faces or descriptions clicked with what he could still make out of this one.

"Start walking," she said in that same, off-putting synthesized voice, and he wondered what other modifications she might be carrying, less obvious than the face-mount. His captor pushed him firmly in the back and Anxo took the opportunity to stumble and twist as he began to walk, catching a fleeting glimpse of a close-combat steroid-junky clutching his pack and gun in one giant hand like they were a child's toys. Male. Probably.

The augs kept a few strides behind him, just far enough to attack or defend more effectively than he might manage to. They followed the course of the stream. After perhaps ten minutes walk across the relatively easy ground of the plateau, the stream met an animal path and he was diverted along that.

Shortly after, the path crossed a tree line into a wide, circular clearing, the dark humus of the forest floor giving way to shin-high grass, even a few flowers—artificially unlikely to Anxo's eye. It was occupied by several cabins, at first glance appearing to be ranger stations like those that dotted the rest of Monteverde, plus the Osa Penisula, Cocos Island, and other key locations of Costa Rica's conservation reserves. Good cover for a poaching operation.

Three figures appeared from behind the central cabin, two of them bulletsponges to judge by their sloping, muscular bulk—bodyguards densely layered with their own vat-grown muscle-tissue, grafted onto frames that made even the merc behind Anxo look diminutive. Client-slaved to ensure nothing but the most self-sacrificing of service, their extortionate fees paid directly to nominated relatives ahead of termination pay-off of one kind or another.

That client was more than a full head shorter, could vanish behind them at a moment's notice. He was young, twenties, with an athlete's build, dressed in a charcoal-sheen suit totally inappropriate for the heavy moisture of the cloud forest. Although, now he thought about it, Anxo noticed that the air in the clearing was noticeably—well, clearer.

A steady, comfortable breeze drifting towards him from the buildings. They appeared to be the typical prefab-refab structures that comprised ranger stations, but instead of perching on bamboo stilts these woodchip walls had oddly heavy foundations: thick syncrete, sinking into the ground as though they went very much deeper than would be necessary, or even helpful.

Ideal for constructing something below ground, though. And the overhanging cabin roofs would obscure all sight of them from anything—drone, plane, satellite—passing over the clearing.

Whatever else had happened here, whatever they had done to his jaguar, Anxo realised that he'd walked into something major. Nothing like this was permitted on Monteverde, nor any other of Costa Rica's protected ecological zones. This smelled like illegal research.

When they stopped, the two trios separated by five or six meters, Anxo had a perfectly good view of the well-dressed man's face, which didn't bode well for his own longevity. He looked vaguely familiar, the way the close relative of a celebrity might, but Anxo couldn't place him.

The man signalled one of his bulletsponges. "Tell Dr. Reider, everything that can fit goes, emergency speed." He spoke Portuguese, except— "Tell the research team to prioritise samples A through G in order, but lock everything down when they go back for D."

The bodyguard trotted towards the furthest cabin without a word, and the man gave Anxo a thin smile. “Good afternoon,” he continued, in unaccented English. “I am not pleased to have an uninvited guest, though I must grudgingly admire the fact that you have found us here at all.

“I understand that your employers no doubt demand confidentiality of the utmost degree, but in exchange for total compliance with all my imminent questions, an unparalleled legal team will go to work on your contract, neutralising any and all binding clauses. I can assure you of complete freedom from liability in the future.

“I’m also certain a person of your capabilities could be extremely useful to my organisation, and might anticipate significant rewards for being so. As you have discovered for yourself, we do seek out exemplary staff.” The young man indicated Anxo’s captors, who were maintaining a strategic position behind him. “Or perhaps you would enjoy an extended vacation, all costs absorbed. Either can be arranged.”

He withdrew a palmpad from his jacket, swept a finger across it, then looked up expectantly. “You have, therefore, no reason not to spare yourself an unpleasant end to the day. I will consider a truthful answer now an acceptance of terms: what is your name, and who do you work for?”

Anxo could have provided that information, but he suspected it wouldn’t be considered a satisfactory response. The man was corporate—and a Brazilian, to judge by his Portuguese, though that didn’t mean his employer was—and he assumed Anxo to be the same. Claiming to work for GEO would sound like a cover story. But telling an actual lie would only buy him a matter of minutes before it was confirmed as such.

Brazilian. Anxo frowned. The man looked a little like the founder of RdS BioPharma, but he was about forty years too young to even be the son, and current CEO, Jeferson Roche da Silva. There was no younger family, at least none that Anxo had ever read of. And he had read everything he could, of course.

The man sighed at Anxo’s continued silence. “Very well. Any voluntary last words at all?”

Anxo found he had to ask. “Did you kill it?”

The man studied him for a moment, then said, “Yes.”

Anxo’s pulse began throbbing in his temples. He tried to swallow, his throat dragging against itself like textured rubber, breath sucked through flaring nostrils. He was suddenly filled with body memory, sensations he’d not felt since Africa. Urges he’d thought well behind him, but which were suddenly welcome.

The augs who had brought him in tensed, but their owner shook his head. “Be calm, I haven’t killed anything. I can only presume that you’re either a hunter or a… whatever the opposite of hunter is. In this case, ‘a coincidence’.” He cocked his head to one side. “But, if not my operation here, I wonder if you would tell me what you were looking for, exactly.”

Anxo’s teeth locked together—there was nothing that would force that information from him, let them try. But at the same time he wondered, Could he be telling the truth? Could the jaguar be alive?

“It doesn’t matter,” the man said, “one reason is as problematic as another. I suppose someone is aware of your presence, at least up until you found your way to the edge of the suppression field. There’s always someone watching, isn’t there? So now we’re going to have to move on.”

An expression of angry distaste tugged at the smooth features, aging the youthful face significantly. Anxo almost shook his head in disbelief. Not possible, surely…

“We were doing something vital here,” the man said, “something to benefit the world, even if we didn’t have permission. You’ve cost me a great deal today. More than you can imagine, most likely. So I suppose I should have said, I’ve not killed anything yet.”

“BioPharma killed plenty, Mr. Roche,” Anxo said in Portuguese, suspicion confirmed in the way Roche’s face slackened back into its young, handsome mask—a fairly spectacular bit of rejuvenation on a man past sixty. “You’re not going to get the chance to do to Costa Rica what you did back home.”

Roche studied him coldly, then grunted. “Well, as you say, I’m familiar with unfortunate wastage.” He jerked his head at the two mercs who had brought Anxo in. “Take our guest to number one, leave him inside when you’re done,” he said, then turned and stalked towards the cabins, his second bodyguard eclipsing him from view.

“Last cabin on the right, now,” said the sniper, her voice rumble-screeching, and Anxo obeyed, her close-combat partner falling in behind.

It was a matter of thirty metres to the cabins. Not much time and space for planning in—unless the person doing the planning was loaded with military-grade augmentation and skipped the decommissioning ceremony when he walked away from the service.

For just a moment, Anxo allowed the old familiar feeling Roche had provoked to spool up a little, his nervous system pinging, steps seeming to slow as his perception started to speed—then he dialled down again, well aware that if either of the augs escorting him were running fast as well the subtle effects upon his gait would become

increasingly noticeable.

To his left he saw the bulletsponge follow his client out of sight between the other cabins, and in their place one thought took hold: If that really was Jeferson Roche da Silva, then maybe even the loss of a jaguar had to take second place to capturing the man responsible for the Brazilian ecocide. Maybe.

They came around the side of the final cabin, and that strangely even breeze Anxo had noticed earlier picked up slightly. As he stepped into the other side of the clearing, he found the source: a smoothly bulky helicopter, low-friction rotors maintaining near-silent rest rotation under power from a solar cell deployed above them, ready for the main engine to boost them to takeoff-speed at a second’s notice.

Roche was approaching the chopper, his bulletsponge falling back to observe Anxo’s final march. A woman in laboratory whites stood in its gaping cargo bay, checking off sealed crates loaded onto racks that telescoped their loads inside as she pressed them one by one. Roche beckoned to her, and as she joined him the bulletsponge moved to the bay, initiated its closing mechanism. The woman—did Roche say 'Doctor Rider'?—seemed surprised, then agitated.

“Get in there,” the sniper barked. Her partner pushed Anxo towards the three short steps to the cabin entrance, which the other bulletsponge was descending, circling wide as Anxo climbed them and stepped inside, the male merc right behind him.

His eyes took a moment to adjust to the dimness after the unobstructed sunlight of the clearing. No ranger cabin, not by a long shot. It looked more like a clean-lab, bare plastic walls and floor tiles, a few computers—and in one wall a pressure-sealed metal door, practically an airlock. Two new faces were crowding its window: young men in lab coats, slapping their palms against the other side and frantically shouting, making not a sound. Not a good sign.

Anxo turned and through the cabin entrance caught a glimpse of one bulletsponge bundling the doctor onto the chopper after Roche, the other thundering towards them—then a big hand clamped down on Anxo’s shoulder, the merc pushing him to his knees. Time running out.

The sniper climbed the steps and blocked his view, weapon at the ready, coming through the doorway—and her aim shifted as she came inside the frame.

Anxo jacked his nervous system to its maximum capacity—and the world slowed.

He wrenched his wrists apart, and the smart-plastic cuffs viciously tightened in response to the sudden force, crushing the skin—directly across the sub-dermal ceramic razors nestled within his wrists. They split their artificial cartilage sheathes,

broke the skin of his wrists and sliced through the cuffs, his hands swinging free in a dreamy spray of bloody droplets.

Above her ocular implant, the sniper's eyebrows pulled taut with surprise.

He wrapped his right arm around the back of the merc's knee and wrenched the blade back—heard the popping of ligaments and hamstring—felt the man's weight bear down on his shoulder as his balance went and he started to tip like a felled tree.

The sniper's gun began to rise.

Anxo twisted, breaking the merc's grip on him and striking out with the rigid fingers of his left hand—deep under the chin—the windpipe cracked and flattened—then even as the falling man's eyes widened in pain and shock, Anxo swung behind his bulk, falling with him, their pace steadily building as his nervous system scaled back the intensity to avoid burning out.

A series of drawn out roars filled the cabin and a hot line tore between Anxo's arm and chest, then he and the merc hit the deck and he made himself as small as possible while bullets smacked into his human shield—and he found his tranq rifle, its cut strap knotted through the merc's belt, right in front of his face.

He levered the gun up against the pull of the strap, pointed it over the dying man's hip at the doorway and pulled the trigger, aiming blind—his senses were still hyped enough for him to see the dart emerge, blurred, accelerating. Gone.

There was an aching pause, no more bullet impacts. He peeked over the merc's body, slow as the rising sun.

The sniper aug was down.

Anxo dialled back to normal and reclaimed his rifle, chambered another dart—three left, assuming. He glanced down at the merc, didn't wince at the sight, then crept around to the left side of the doorway, pressing himself against the wall as he peered out.

Only seconds had passed, but the chopper's rotors were invisible at full speed, landing gear flexing as it left the ground. The second bulletsponge filled its still open door, obscuring all view of those inside as he climbed on board. Anxo settled his gun upon his knee and fired. The giant man sagged, dropped backwards into thin air, landing badly even for a mountain of hyper-dense muscle, the chopper lurching at the sudden loss of weight.

And Anxo had a clear view—past the shocked, turning faces in the passenger

compartment—past Roche's face, staring back at him in fury—into the cabin. At the pilot.

One chance, to cut short their escape, and maybe catch the man who killed the last tree in Brazil.

He blipped his perceptions once more, slowed the erratic swinging of the chopper to a comprehensible drift, aimed, fired.

The dart dwindled into a black point, leaping the gap to the chopper. Anxo could track it, zeroing in on the pilot's undefended neck. His aim was true. And then he was forced to watch as Roche slowly moved into its path, his arms rising, spread wide in a desperate attempt to block the shot.

Desperate. Successful.

Anxo's perceptions accelerated again as Roche slumped through the open door, but hands—the doctor's, the other massive bodyguard's—gripped him, dragged him back even as the chopper veered upwards, through the break in the canopy, away across the trees, was gone.

Anxo sighed and stood, scanning for threats, finding none. The fallen bodyguard was an unmoving mound in the clearing, the sniper aug likewise at his feet. He looked around the cabin again, the only movement the blood seeping from her bullet-riddled partner.

He looked through the window in the pressure door. The two scientists sat on the floor beside a ladder-hatch leading downwards, their body language despondent. He tried the handle but found it locked. One of the men inside looked up, but this time didn't even try to shout, just waved a hand as if to ward him away.

"How do I open?" Anxo mouthed, exaggerated, choosing English.

The man pointed past him, a look of resignation on his face. Anxo turned. On the computer screen, double digits falling in red. He looked back. Trapped inside, the scientist mimed exploding hands, then turned away, crying.

Anxo fled, gun gripped in one hand. He sprinted between the cabins, back towards the tree line where he'd been marched in, through air grown still in the helicopter's absence.

In his mind, the numbers counted down.

He crossed into shadow, between the first trees, feet flying over the even ground, his

sole thought of the weak, shallow stream he had jumped across before his capture, the one they'd followed this way.

The air was heavy around him again.

And then it was all light.

Sky: the last thing you expect to see when lying on the cloud forest floor.

Anxo blinked, rolled onto his front and pushed himself to his feet. His ears were ringing, his skull tight with a pressure headache, but he was in one piece. Well, except for the bullet scoring along his left ribs and bicep. He checked his rifle, found it good, wondered if he'd ever see his pack again. Or the…

It was hard to keep a wave of depression from washing over him. The one thing he was here to protect, gone. And the other prize escaped.

Around him the forest was pushed flat, the clearing freshly extended sixty metres in diameter. The trees nearer the site—correction, where the site had been—were shredded, their trunks rising barely a metre before offering only a mess of toothpick splinters. Further out, whole trees had toppled against those still standing, suspended by the canopy's tangle, their roots half exposed. He'd been lucky to be on the edge of it, lucky to have seen the stream, its trench just deep enough that he could prostrate himself below the blast wave. Lucky.

He headed towards the epicentre. What he found waiting for him was… effective. Whatever Roche had used to cover his tracks here had done the job and then some. The heart of the clearing was a bowl crater, the ground burned black and cracked by exposure to a brief but fearsome heat, the remnant of which he could feel through his boot soles. The nearest trees were smouldering stumps. Nothing remained of the underground facility, or of the bodies.

Anxo squatted, arms across his knees to check the wounds outside both wrists, and only then saw a ragged tear through the protective sleeve of his tracker. He peeled it back, anticipating the worst—irreparable damage, forcing him to hike out to the nearest community and hope they had some means of contacting GEO—but it was seemingly intact, if non-responsive.

Except this complex was gone. And their suppression field?

He dug his thumb tip under the computer's edge, found the hard-reset and felt it click against his nail. A dead moment, then he smiled with relief as the tactile skinscreen vibrated familiar boot-up patterns against his arm.

He began mentally composing an emergency signal message, forcing himself to catalogue the mess he was going to have to report on: his loss of the jaguar, of course; but also the unbelievable sighting of Roche da Silva, here to do who only knows what; engaging in combat with unidentified corporate mercs; an explosion in the heart of one of Costa Rica's priceless reserves—

He broke off as the skinscreen began pulsing again. It was a rhythm that triggered an instinctive response in him even before his mind caught up—his body hair tingling, standing on end, the breath catching in his throat—and then the skinmap displayed, zeroing in on…

…the jaguar.

A grin swept over his face as the data confirmed it moving at normal walking speed, perhaps five kilometres away, heading southward. He stood and circled the crater, kicking up a cloud of sooty particles that clung to his trousers and boots.

The jaguar had led him into the zone of the suppression field, but even if it had left the area of effect before the action started there was no way for him to know when his own system was disrupted and shut itself down. Now, of course, whatever had suppressed the tracker's signal was as gone as the facility it had disguised.

As he picked his way through the mess of trees at the far edge of the clearing, Anxo began signalling GEO, requesting a drone fly-by to deliver a secure voice-com system (and a replacement for his vaporised backpack and supplies—shame about the biscuits) so he could provide a preliminary debrief, update them on the events of the last twenty-four hours.

When they heard who he'd seen no doubt they'd want to bring him in, if only to see if he'd gone completely crazy. Jeferson Roche da Silva, the Jungle Killer, alive after all.

And free.

But at least his charge was still safe. A small mercy. Anxo smiled again.

Monteverde closed around him.

A tree falls in the forest. Perhaps no-one hears. Its passing tears a hole in the once ceaseless canopy. The sun shines unimpeded on the forest floor for the first time in decades.

But a clearing is not a natural zone of the forest. Not for long. After waiting in the shadows of their towering parents, young shoots break through the mulchy, fertile ground and stretch into the warmth, race each other to claim the light, and life. The

fallen giant is slowly wreathed in moss and fungi, its death a transformation, feeding the soil that once made it strong.

At last, years later, the first amongst those little equals towers amidst its new peers, denying the light to those below, and the canopy is made complete again. The clearing is no more.

When Anxo departed the clearing, the crater was a blackened pit in the earth's crust. As night fell, it was hidden beneath a thick carpet of new moss. Only a small, almost perfect circle of black-scorched earth remained exposed at its centre, the fringe of growth creeping inward just fast enough to be detected by the naked eye, were there anyone present to see.

All around, infant care tigre and ceibo trees were rising, some already as tall as children, thronging a space entirely empty just seven hours before. The edge of the clearing was still a ring of fallen trees, but at its south-most point—the point at which Anxo had crossed into the old, slow jungle, black particles falling from him with every step—the moss lay thick, overlapping between his footprints, small shoots struggling, but rising, even in the shadow.

Clusters of fungi layered the fallen trunks like scales, their caps broad and thick, their spores already preparing to release—carrying with them an alteration.

Anxo did not know what was happening in his wake. But after he found a place to rest, after he gave himself over to the utter unconsciousness that followed the hours of stress—an unconsciousness he'd not known since his last experience of true combat, years before—in the morning when he woke, then he'd see.

Jungle was returning.