

BATTLEGROUND

'Mr Renshaw?'

The desk clerk's voice caught him halfway to the elevator, and Renshaw turned back impatiently, shifting his flight bag from one hand to the other. The envelope in his coat pocket, stuffed with twenties and fifties, crackled heavily. The job had gone well and the pay had been excellent - even - after the Organization's 15 per cent finder's fee had been skimmed off the top. Now all he wanted was a hot shower and a gin and tonic and sleep.

'What is it?'

'Package, sir. Would you sign the slip?'

Renshaw signed and looked thoughtfully at the rectangular package. His name and the building's address were written on the gummed label in a spiky backhand script that seemed familiar. He rocked the package on the imitation-marble surface of the desk, and something clanked faintly inside.

'Should I have that sent up, Mr Renshaw?'

'No, I've got it.' It was about eighteen inches on a side and fitted clumsily under his arm. He put it on the plush carpet that covered the elevator floor and twisted his key in the penthouse slot above the regular rack of buttons. The car rose smoothly and silently. He closed his eyes and let the job replay itself on the dark screen of his mind.

First, as always, a call from Cal Bates: 'You available, Johnny?'

He was available twice a year, minimum fee \$10,000. He was very good, very reliable, but what his customers really paid for was the infallible predator's talent. John Renshaw was a human hawk, constructed by both genetics and environment to do two things superbly: kill and survive.

After Bates's call, a buff-coloured envelope appeared in Renshaw's box. A name, an address, a photograph. All committed to memory; then down the garbage disposal with the ashes of envelope and contents.

This time the face had been that of a sallow Miami businessman named Hans Morris, founder and owner of the Morris Toy Company. Someone had wanted Morris out of the way and had gone to the Organization. The Organization, in the person of Calvin Bates, had talked to John Renshaw. *Pow*. Mourners please omit flowers.

The doors slid open, he picked up his package and stepped out. He unlocked the suite and stepped in. At this time of day, just after 3p.m., the spacious living room was splashed with April sunshine. He paused for a moment, enjoying it, then put the package on the end table by the door and loosened his tie. He dropped the envelope on top of it and walked over to the terrace.

He pushed open the sliding glass door and stepped out. It was cold, and the wind knifed through his thin topcoat. Yet he paused a moment, looking over the city the way a general might survey a captured country. Traffic crawled beetlelike in the streets. Far away, almost buried in the golden afternoon haze, the Bay Bridge glittered like a madman's mirage. To the east, all but lost behind the downtown high rises, the crammed and dirty tenements with their stainless-steel forests of TV aerials. It was better up here. Better than in the gutters.

He went back inside, slid the door closed, and went into the bathroom for a long, hot shower.

When he sat down forty minutes later to regard his package, drink in hand, the shadows had marched halfway across the wine-coloured carpet and the best of the afternoon was past.

It was a bomb.

Of course it wasn't, but one proceeded as if it were. That was why one had remained upright and taking nourishment while so many others had gone to that great unemployment office in the sky.

If it was a bomb, it was clockless. It sat utterly silent; bland and enigmatic. Plastique was more likely these days, anyway. Less temperamental than the clocksprings manufactured by Westclox and Big Ben.

Renshaw looked at the postmark. Miami, 15 April. Five days ago. So the bomb was not time-set. It would have gone off in the hotel safe in that case.

Miami. Yes. And that spiky backhand writing. There had been a framed photograph on the sallow businessman's desk. The photo had been of an even sallower old crone wearing a babushka. The script slanted across the bottom had read: 'Best from your number-one idea girl - Mom.'

What kind of a number-one idea is this, Mom? A do-it-yourself extermination kit?

He regarded the package with complete concentration, not moving, his hands folded. Extraneous questions, such as how Morris's number-one idea girl might - have discovered his address, did not occur to him. They were for later, for Cal Bates. Unimportant now.

With a sudden, almost absent move, he took a small celluloid calendar out of his wallet and inserted it deftly under the twine that crisscrossed the brown paper. He slid it under the Scotch tape that held one end flap. The flap came loose, relaxing against the twine.

He paused for a time, observing, then leaned close and sniffed. Cardboard, paper, string. Nothing more. He walked around the box, squatted easily on his haunches, and repeated the process. Twilight was invading his apartment with grey, shadowy fingers.

One of the flaps popped free of the restraining twine, showing a dull green box beneath. Metal. Hinged. He produced a pocket knife and cut the twine. It fell away, and a few helping prods with the tip of the knife revealed the box.

It was green with black markings, and stenciled on the front in white letters were the words: G.I. JOE VIETNAM FOOTLOCKER. Below that: 20 Infantrymen, 10 Helicopters, 2 BAR Men, 2 Bazooka Men, 2 Medics, 4 Jeeps. Below that:

a flag decal. Below that, in the corner: Morris Toy Company, Miami, Fla.

He reached out to touch it, then withdrew his hand. Something inside the footlocker had moved.

Renshaw stood up, not hurrying, and backed across the room towards the kitchen and the hall. He snapped on the lights.

The Vietnam Footlocker was rocking, making the brown paper beneath it rattle. It suddenly overbalanced and fell to the carpet with a soft thud, landing on one end. The hinged top opened a crack of perhaps two inches.

Tiny foot soldiers, about an inch and a half tall, began to -crawl out. Renshaw watched them, unblinking. His mind made no effort to cope with the real or unreal aspect of what he was seeing - only with the possible consequences for his survival.

The soldiers were wearing minuscule army fatigues, helmets, and field packs. Tiny carbines were slung across their shoulders. Two of them looked briefly across the room at Renshaw. Their eyes, no bigger than pencil points, glittered.

Five, ten, twelve, then all twenty. One of them was gesturing, ordering the others. They lined themselves up -along the crack that the fall had produced and began to push. The crack began to widen.

Renshaw picked one of the large pillows off the couch and began to walk towards them. The commanding officer turned and gestured. The others whirled and unslung their carbines. There were tiny, almost delicate popping sounds, and Renshaw felt suddenly as if he had been stung by bees.

He threw the pillow. It struck them, knocking them sprawling, then hit the box and knocked it wide open. Insectlike, with a faint, high whirring noise like chiggers, a cloud of miniature helicopters, painted jungle green, rose out of the box.

Tiny *phut! phut!* sounds reached Renshaw's ears and he saw pinprick-sized muzzle flashes coming from the open copter doors. Needles pricked his belly, his right arm, the side of his neck. He clawed out and got one - sudden pain in his fingers; blood welling. The whirling blades had chopped them to the bone in diagonal scarlet hash marks. The others whirled out of range, circling him like horseflies. The stricken copter thumped to the rug and lay still.

Sudden excruciating pain in his foot made him cry out. One of the foot soldiers was standing on his shoe and bayoneting his ankle. The tiny face looked up, panting and grinning.

Renshaw kicked at it and the tiny body flew across the room to splatter on the wall. It did not leave blood but a viscid purple smear.

There was a tiny, coughing explosion and blinding agony ripped his thigh. One of the bazooka men had come out of the footlocker. A small curl of smoke rose lazily from his weapon. Renshaw looked down at his leg and saw a blackened, smoking hole in his pants the size of a quarter. The flesh beneath was charred.

The little bastard shot me!

He turned and ran into the hall, then into his bedroom. One of the helicopters buzzed past his cheek, blades whirring busily. The small stutter of a BAR. Then it darted away.

The gun beneath his pillow was a .44 Magnum, big enough to put a hole the size of two fists through anything it hit. Renshaw turned, holding the pistol in both hands. He realized coolly that he would be shooting at a moving target not much bigger than a flying light bulb.

Two of the copters whirred in. Sitting on the bed, Renshaw fired once. One of the helicopters exploded into nothingness. That's two, he thought. He drew a bead on the second. . . squeezed the trigger .

It jiggled! Goddamnit, it jiggled!

The helicopter swooped at him in a sudden deadly arc, fore and aft overhead props whirring with blinding speed. Renshaw caught a glimpse of one of the BAR men crouched at the open bay door, firing his weapon in short, deadly bursts, and then he threw himself to the floor and rolled.

My eyes, the bastard was going for my eyes!

He came up on his back at the far wall, the gun held at chest level. But the copter was retreating. It seemed to pause for a moment, and dip in recognition of Renshaw's superior firepower. Then it was gone, back towards the living room.

Renshaw got up, wincing as his weight came down on the wounded leg. It was bleeding freely. And why not? he thought grimly. It's not everybody who gets hit point-blank with a bazooka shell and lives to tell about it.

So Mom was his number-one idea girl, was she? She was all that and a bit more.

He shook a pillowcase free of the tick and ripped it into a bandage for his leg, then took his shaving mirror from the bureau and went to the hallway door. Kneeling, he shoved it out on to the carpet at an angle and peered in.

They were bivouacking by the footlocker, damned if they weren't. Miniature soldiers ran hither and thither, setting up tents. Jeeps two inches high raced about importantly. A medic was working over the soldier Renshaw had kicked. The remaining eight copters flew in a protective swarm overhead, at coffee-table level.

Suddenly they became aware of the mirror, and three of the foot soldiers dropped to one knee and began firing. Seconds later the mirror was shattered in four places. *Okay, okay, then.*

Renshaw went back to the bureau and got the heavy mahogany odds-and-ends box Linda had given him for Christmas. He hefted it once, nodded, and went to the doorway and lunged through. He wound up and fired like a pitcher throwing a fast ball. The box described a swift, true vector and smashed little men like ninepins. One of the jeeps rolled over twice. Renshaw advanced to the doorway of the living room, sighted on one of the sprawling soldiers, and gave it to him.

Several of the others had recovered. Some were kneeling and firing formally. Others had taken cover. Still others had retreated back into the footlocker.

The bee stings began to pepper his legs and torso, but none reached higher than his rib cage. Perhaps the range was too great. It didn't matter; he had no intention of being turned away. This was it.

He missed with his next shot - they were so goddamn small - but the following one sent another soldier into a broken sprawl.

The copters were buzzing towards him ferociously. Now the tiny bullets began to splat into his face, above and below his eyes. He potted the lead copter, then the second. Jagged streaks of pain silvered his vision.

The remaining six split into two retreating wings. His face was wet with blood and he swiped at it with his forearm. He was ready to

start firing again when he paused. The soldiers who had retreated inside the footlocker were trundling something out. Something that looked like .

There was a blinding sizzle of yellow fire, and a sudden gout of wood and plaster exploded from the wall to his left.

a rocket launcher!

He squeezed off one shot at it, missed, wheeled and ran for the bathroom at the far end of the corridor. He slammed the door and locked it. In the bathroom mirror an Indian was staring back at him with dazed and haunted eyes, a battle-crazed Indian with thin streamers of red paint drawn from holes no bigger than grains of pepper. A ragged flap of skin dangled from one cheek. There was a gouged furrow in his neck.

I'm losing!

He ran a shaking hand through his hair. The front door was cut off. So was the phone and the kitchen extension. They had a god-damn rocket launcher and a direct hit would tear his head off.

Damn it, that wasn't even listed on the box!

He started to draw in a long breath and let it out in a sudden grunt as a fist-sized section of the door blew in with a charred burst of wood. Tiny flames glowed briefly around the ragged edges of the hole, and he saw the brilliant flash as they launched another round. More wood blew inward, scattering burning slivers on the bathroom rug. He stamped them out and two of the copters buzzed angrily through the hole. Minuscule BAR slugs stitched his chest.

With a whining groan of rage he smashed one out of the air barehanded, sustaining a picket fence of deep slashes across his palm. In sudden invention, he slung a heavy bath towel over the other. It fell, writhing to the floor, and he stamped the life out of it. He breath was coming in hoarse whoops. Blood ran into one eye, hot and stinging, and he wiped it away.

There, goddamnit. There. That'll make them think.

Indeed, it did seem to be making them think. There was no movement for fifteen minutes. Renshaw sat on the edge of the tub, thinking feverishly. There had to be a way out of this blind alley. There *had* to be. If there was only a way to flank them...

He suddenly turned and looked at the small window over the tub. There was a way. Of course there was.

His eyes dropped to the can of lighter fluid on top of the medicine cabinet. He was reaching for it when the rustling noise came.

He whirled, bringing the Magnum up. . . but it was only a tiny scrap of paper shoved under the crack of the door. The crack, Renshaw noted grimly, was too narrow for even one of *them* to get through.

There was one tiny word written on the paper:

Surrender

Renshaw smiled grimly and put the lighter fluid in his breast pocket. There was a chewed stub of pencil beside it. He scrawled one word on the paper and shoved it back under the door. The word was:

NUTS

There was a sudden blinding barrage of rocket shells, and Renshaw backed away. They arched through the hole in the door and detonated against the pale blue tiles above the towel rack, turning the elegant wall into a pocket lunar landscape. Renshaw threw a hand over his eyes as plaster flew in a hot rain of shrapnel. Burning holes ripped through his shirt and his back was peppered.

When the barrage stopped, Renshaw moved. He climbed on top of the tub and slid the window open. Cold stars looked in at him. It was a narrow window, and a narrow ledge beyond it. But there was no time to think of that.

He boosted himself through, and the cold air slapped his lacerated face and neck like an open hand. He was leaning over the balance points of his hands, staring straight down. Forty storeys down. From this height the street looked no wider than a child's train track. The bright, winking lights of the city glittered madly below him like thrown jewels.

With the deceptive ease of a trained gymnast, Renshaw brought his knees up to rest on the lower edge of the window. If one of those wasp-sized copters flew through that hole in the door now, one shot in the ass would send him straight down, screaming all the way.

None did.

He twisted, thrust one leg out, and one reaching hand grabbed the overhead cornice and held. A moment later he was standing on the ledge outside the window.

Deliberately not thinking of the horrifying drop below his heels, not thinking of what would happen if one of the helicopters buzzed out after him, Renshaw edged towards the corner of the building.

Fifteen feet . . . ten . There. He paused, he chest pressed against the wall, hands splayed out on the rough surface. He could feel the lighter fluid in his breast pocket and the reassuring weight of the Magnum jammed in his waistband.

Now to get around the goddamn corner.

Gently, he eased one foot around and slid his weight on to it. Now the right angle was pressed razorlike into his chest and gut. There was a smear of bird guano in front of his eyes on the rough stone. Christ, he thought crazily. I didn't know they could fly this high.

His left foot slipped.

For a weird, timeless moment he tottered over the brink, right arm back watering madly for balance, and then he was clutching the two sides of the building in a lover's embrace, face pressed against the hard corner, breath shuddering in and out of his lungs.

A bit at a time, he slid the other foot around.

Thirty feet away, his own living-room terrace jutted out.

He made his way down to it, breath sliding in and out of his lungs with shallow force. Twice he was forced to stop as sharp gusts of wind tried to pick him off the ledge.

Then he was there, gripping the ornamented iron railings.

He hoisted himself over noiselessly. He had left the curtains half drawn across the sliding partition, and now he peered in cautiously. They were just the way he wanted them - ass to.

Four soldiers and one copter had been left to guard the footlocker. The rest would be outside the bathroom door with the rocket launcher.

Okay. In through the opening like gangbusters. Wipe out the ones by the footlocker, then out the door. Then a quick taxi to the airport. Off to Miami to find Morris's number-one idea girl. He thought he might just burn her face off with a flame thrower. That would be poetic justice.

He took off his shirt and ripped a long strip from one sleeve. He dropped the rest to flutter limply by his feet, and bit off the plastic spout on the can of lighter fluid. He stuffed one end of the rag inside, withdrew it, and stuffed the other end in so only a six-inch strip of saturated cotton hung free.

He got out his lighter, took a deep breath, and thumbed the wheel. He tipped it to the cloth and as it sprang alight he rammed open the glass partition and plunged through.

The copter reacted instantly, kamikaze-diving him as he charged across the rug, dripping tiny splatters of liquid fire. Renshaw straight-armed it, hardly noticing the jolt of pain that ran up his arm as the turning blades chopped his flesh open.

The tiny foot soldiers scattered into the footlocker.

After that, it all happened very rapidly.

Renshaw threw the lighter fluid. The can caught, mushrooming into a licking fireball. The next instant he was reversing, running for

the door.

He never knew what hit him.

It was like the thud that a steel safe would make when dropped from a respectable height. Only this thud ran through the entire high-rise apartment building, thrumming in its steel frame like a tuning fork.

The penthouse door blew off its hinges and shattered against the far wall.

A couple who had been walking hand in hand below looked up in time to see a very large white flash, as though a hundred flashguns had gone off at once.

'Somebody blew a fuse,' the man said. 'I guess -'What's that?' his girl asked.

Something was fluttering lazily down towards them; he caught it in one outstretched hand. 'Jesus, some guy's shirt. All full of little holes. Bloody, too.'

'I don't like it,' she said nervously. 'Call a cab, huh, Ralph? We'll have to talk to the cops if something happened up there, and I ain't supposed to be out with you.'

'Sure, yeah.'

He looked around, saw a taxi, and whistled. It's brake lights flared and they ran across to get it.

Behind them, unseen, a tiny scrap of paper floated down and landed near the remains of John Renshaw's shirt. Spiky backhand script read:

Hey, kids! Special in this Vietnam Footlocker!

(For a Limited Time Only)

1 Rocket Launcher

20 Surface-to-Air 'Twister' Missiles

1 Scale-Model Thermonuclear Weapon