

Third Person

Tony Ballantyne

THE STEAM BOMB was a perforated metal shell the size of a tennis ball, filled with water and loaded with an F-Charge. On detonation it squirted needles of pressurized steam that drilled through anything within a radius of half a meter and left anything at a radius of one meter slightly damp. The bomb that landed in the hot street tore apart Bundy's upper thighs, punctured his stomach, and left his forehead covered in a refreshing pink mist. "It came from up there, sergeant," murmured Chapelhow into his headset, pointing to the roof of a nearby house. Mitchell fired his rifle with a muffled crack and an overweight woman slumped forward and fell from the roof. No contest. Mitchell was a regular, she was just a conscript, flushed and confused by the hot Spanish sun. Mitchell lowered his black rifle and resumed his patient scanning of the surrounding area, black gloved hands ready on his gun, black booted feet planted wide.

Bundy was screaming without seeming to notice it. He was fumbling at his rifle with blood-slicked hands, trying to reload. Sergeant Clausen shook his head.

"He's done," he said. "Chapelhow, finish him."

Chapelhow felt his stomach churning; nonetheless he raised his cheap conscript's rifle to his shoulder and shot Bundy through the head, silencing his screams. The brass-bound round the wounded man had been trying to load slipped from his fingers and rolled across the road. Chapelhow was rubbing his shoulder through his thin silk shirt, the kick of the rifle too much for his thin frame.

"Take his gun," chided Sergeant Clausen impatiently, "we're going to need it."

Despite his thick black uniform, Mitchell looked cool. Just like the sergeant. They weren't sweating like the conscripts. They didn't have dark patches beneath their armpits from their exertions, nor did they have beads of moisture on their upper lips. They moved like lazy cats, turning this way and that to scan the dusty street.

"There'll be more, sarge," said Mitchell. "SEA always try for the pincher."

“I know. Chapelhow, Hamblion, go back toward the seafront. Singh, Reed, up toward the town. See if you can spot anyone else.”

Chapelhow knew what it meant, to be paired with Hamblion. Hamblion was grossly over-weight. He was expendable. If Hamblion was going back to the seafront, then that was where the sergeant was expecting the attack to come from.

Most of the buildings were shut up for the mid-day siesta. The only sign of activity came from a man in a white shirt, carrying little round-topped tables and setting them out in the shade just in front of his bar. The expendable Hamblion waddled past him, staying in the shade where he could, his arms burnt bright red from the sun, like sore corned beef, his podgy hand making his rifle look like a stick of liquorice. Chapelhow limped along on the opposite side of the street. The thin soles on his expensive leather slip-on shoes were coming loose, more suitable for a night out clubbing than for a conscripted soldier on a sortie. The sound of the sea and the shouts of the few children left playing on the beach could be heard up ahead. There was a scraping noise as a door opened in a house on the shady side of the street. Chapelhow jumped, he and Hamblion turning their guns toward it. Two middle-aged women walked out, chattering, in Spanish. They wore floral print skirts, their hair permed in short curls. Both carried smart leather handbags.

Chapelhow relaxed, turning his rifle back toward the sea. The two women pulled pistols from their handbags and pointed them up the street at the sergeant. Chapelhow shot the one on the left, grunting as the recoil slammed the rifle into his shoulder again. Hamblion's fat finger caught in the trigger guard and he clumsily fired his rifle up into the air. A third person, a man dressed in the dark green uniform of the Southern European Alliance stepped out from the dark doorway and aimed calmly at the sergeant.

Hamblion paused in the act of loading his rifle, realizing there wasn't time. He dropped the gun to the floor and stepped forward in front of the man in green, his body giving a great hiccup as the enemy fired.

Chapelhow shot the second of the Spanish ladies and calmly reloaded. He could see Hamblion hanging onto the soldier as the enemy emptied his rifle into his fat body, wobbling waves spasming up and down his length with each shot.

Now Chapelhow shot the soldier. Sergeant Clausen's voice sounded in his headset.

“Chapelhow. Get Hamblion’s rifle and fall back to me.”

“Okay, sarge.” Chapelhow scooped up the rifle and limped back up the road.

“What now, sarge?” Mitchell queried through the headset.

“We’re going into the town.”

“Won’t that make us easier to pinpoint?”

“Yes. But there are too many of them around. We’ll use the civilians as cover.”

“We need a drink, sarge,” said Reed from the other end of the street.

“And something to eat,” added Singh.

“We do,” agreed the sergeant. “There’ll be cafes and bars in the town. Shops. We can get something there.”

Chapelhow came limping up to the sergeant and Mitchell, a rifle slung over each shoulder.

“Got any money, Chapelhow?” asked the sergeant. Chapelhow reached awkwardly into the breast pocket of his paisley shirt.

“I’ve got about twenty euros, sarge,” he said, sorting through the bills. There was a yellow piece of notepaper there with the words “You are Andy Chapelhow” scrawled hurriedly across the top.

“I’ve got money,” said Singh.

Chapelhow was unfolding the yellow notepaper, looking to see what else was written there.

“There’ll be time for that later,” said the ser-geant, batting at Chapelhow’s hand. “Come on. We’ll go into town.”

The sergeant touched the pale-green pouch that hung from his belt and looked at Mitchell. “We can round up some more recruits when we get there.”

“We’ll need them,” said Mitchell.

Chapelhow nodded in silent agreement as he looked back at the mound of flesh that had been Hamblion, his hot blood spreading in a pool in the middle of the road, reflecting the scorching sun.

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THE CENTER OF the town was a maze of shady twisting alleys built on a hill. Alleys filled with the hot spicy smells of lunch, with the chatter of conversation that echoed from the tiled and crowded tapas bars, alleys filled with little tables at which couples drank wine and families of tourists ordered sausages and chips and spread out pictures for their children to color.

Chapelhow and the rest walked past all of this, alert and exhausted.

“Where are we going?” asked Reed brightly.

“Right through the town and out the other side,” said Mitchell.

“Why can’t they just send a helicopter or a flier to pick us up?” complained Reed, only just eight-teen, and consequently an expert at everything. Chapelhow envied her for her certainty. More than that though, he envied her for her walking boots, for her light jacket, and shorts. Reed had been out hiking when the sergeant had conscripted her.

“They will send us something,” said Mitchell patiently. “But if we’re too obvious about it, the Europeans will just wait until we are on board and then shoot us down. That’s what an exit strategy is all about. Both us and the helicopter have to rendezvous unnoticed by the enemy.”

“So where are we going?”

“That’s a secret. What if you got captured?”

“Hmm. Is that why you won’t tell us what’s in that package you are carrying?” She pointed to the cylinder the Sergeant had strapped to his belt. “Did you steal it from the SEA? Is that why they are chasing us?”

“You don’t need to know that, Reed,” smiled Mitchell.

There was a crack and Singh span round, raising his rifle and pointing it at a nearby table. The sergeant knocked the gun up into the air.

“Hey, hey, hey,” said the diners at a nearby table. There was some angry shouting in Spanish. Chapelhow’s headset translated the words of a patrician-looking older man for him. “You watch where you’re pointing that thing. We’ll sue you and your army.” The man jabbed a finger angrily in their direction.

“It was just a champagne cork,” said the sergeant.

A mustached waiter smiled as he filled the glasses of the diners. Chapelhow thought it was funny, how quickly people adapted to technology. Only halfway through the Twenty-first century and already people believed in surgical strikes and targeted weapons. They felt safe, even with a war going on around them. Chapelhow grinned to himself. They wouldn’t be so complacent if they knew how old the guns were that he and the other conscripts carried.

“We should hide the rifles,” said Reed. “We stand out carrying them. What if they inform on us?” She pointed to the diners.

“Then they enter the field of combat and we can shoot them,” replied Mitchell in a loud voice. He wanted the smiling waiter to hear.

Sergeant Clausen was getting impatient.

“This is no good. We need to eat and we need more conscripts.” He tapped a finger against his teeth, thinking.

“We’re going to have to split up,” he said suddenly. “Mitchell. You and Singh take the rifles and the package. Get up high where you can watch us. Reed, Chapelhow and I will go eat and get talking with the locals. See if we can press some recruits.”

“What about your uniform, sarge?” asked Reed.

“Good point.” he replied. “You can help me buy some civvies, Reed.”

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SERGEANT CLAUSEN LOOKED different in civilian clothes. Dressed in a white open-necked shirt, a gold chain around his neck, he looked younger and more handsome. But with a dangerous edge to him. Chapelhow could see that Reed had picked up on it. She was only just eighteen and she hadn’t yet learned about men like Clausen, he guessed. “You look good, sarge,” she said, obviously coming on to him.

“It took too long,” complained the sergeant. “Bloody shops shut for lunch.”

“Let’s go here,” said Reed, pointing to a restaurant that backed onto the sea. Behind it they could just see a terrace poking out, white-jacketed waiters moving about in the cool breeze.

“No,” said the sergeant. “We need to get inland. We could be seen from a ship kilometers out on that terrace. Picked off by laser. They could see us back in Africa.”

“Is that where the package comes from, sarge?” asked Reed cheekily.

“Shut up about the package. That’s an order.”

There was a cafe on a corner that gave a good view down the three streets that led to it. The sergeant chose a table and positioned his team so they could watch every approach. He ordered a carafe of red wine and a large bottle of water.

“Don’t drink the wine,” he said. “Don’t get drunk.”

He glanced up at the second-storey window of a nearby building. Chapelhow saw a shadowy movement within and guessed that Mitchell and Singh were up there.

The sergeant was listening to the voices from the tables around him. For the first time since his conscription, Chapelhow missed his headset, he missed being able to understand what the Spanish were saying. And then, in the midst of the hubbub, he heard English voices. A little girl squabbling with her sister. And over there, a young couple, sharing their meals with each other, the woman holding out a forkful of fish to her boyfriend to taste.

Sergeant Clausen smiled.

“I’m just going to the toilet,” he said, clapping his hands on his knees. He stood up and walked off, taking something from his pocket as he did so.

The waiter arrived with their water and their wine.

“Are you ready to order?” he asked in heavily accented English.

“Steak, chips, and salad for all three of us,” said Reed. She shrugged at Chapelhow. That had been Sergeant Clausen’s orders. Plenty of protein and carbohydrate.

“What’s that?” she asked. Chapelhow had taken the yellow piece of paper from his pocket.

“I don’t know,” said Chapelhow. “It says ‘You are Andy Chapelhow. This paper is kept in Andy Chapelhow’s pocket...’”

“What does it mean?”

“I’m not sure.”

Reed was already bored. “What do you suppose is in the package? The one that the sergeant gave to Mitchell?”

“I don’t know. Africa is in the news a lot lately. There’s a lot of technological development going on there and the West doesn’t like it. It doesn’t like being left behind. I think the sergeant’s team was sent there...”

“What team?”

“I’m not sure. There’s only the sarge and Mitchell left now. Look, forget the questions. All that’s important is that we get that package delivered.” And then maybe we can get back to normal, he thought.

Sergeant Clausen reappeared. Chapelhow quickly folded the paper back into his pocket. The sergeant sat down, took a drink of water and leaned back in his chair.

“Hey!” he said, turning to the young couple at the next table. “Is that a north eastern accent?”

“Yes,” said the young man delightedly. “We’re from Darlington.”

“What a coincidence! My grandparents were from Darlington. I used to go there as a child. Is that shop still there on the High Street? The one that sold all those nice sweets?”

“I don’t know which one you mean,” said the young woman suspiciously.

“Hey, it’s probably gone by now. My name’s David by the way. This is Pippa and Andy.”

“I’m Tom and this is Katie,” said the young man. He wore a new yellow shirt with white buttons, new shorts, and new sandals. Chapelhow guessed he had been dressed for his holiday by his girlfriend.

The waiter approached the couple’s table with an ice bucket.

“We didn’t order this,” said Katie.

“Compliments of the house,” said the waiter. “Enjoy your holiday.” He took a white linen-wrapped bottle from the bucket and poured them both a glass of white wine.

“He probably thinks it’s your honeymoon or something,” said the sergeant. “You are an attractive couple.”

He held up his own wine glass. “Cheers.”

They all drank to each others’ health.

“That’s very nice,” said Tom.

“So, David, what are you doing here?” asked Katie, suspiciously.

“Oh. Enjoying the sun and the local food. Relax-ing and forgetting my troubles. The war’s not going so well, is it?”

“I thought as much,” said Katie. “You’re a soldier. I could tell by the way you were sitting to attention.”

David Clausen laughed. “Bright girl. We could do with someone like you in the forces.”

“It’s not going to happen.” She sipped at her wine primly. “I won’t join up.”

“Why not? Don’t you believe Britain has the right to defend its interests?”

“Of course. It’s when Britain starts interfering in other countries’ interests I get uncomfortable. Particularly those who are not as well off as we are. Because your sort of fighting isn’t about defense, is it David? It’s

just about money. Which corporation is bankrolling your regi-ment?"

"I hear it's not going well in Africa," said Tom, frowning at Katie as he changed the subject.

"It's not as bad as you'd think," said David, still smiling at Katie. "The Orange States have split from the Southern European Alliance. The SEA is fighting a war on two fronts now."

"Don't the SEA have some sort of way of con-trolling the animals?" asked Tom. "That's what I heard. That must be nasty."

David Clausen laughed.

"I'd rather be attacked by an elephant than another soldier. At least elephants don't shoot back at you." He lowered his voice and spoke in confidential tones. "Actually, Tom, it's the mos-quitoses that are the worst. You don't get any peace at night."

"I think it's cruel to the animals," said Katie.

"So do I," agreed David. "But it's crueller to the soldiers. It's weird, isn't it, Katie? People are more concerned about animals than humans. They all agree that the war is a just cause, but they are not willing to fight it themselves."

"Just cause? I heard the Orange States have per-fected cold fusion. I wonder how much that would be worth?" She paused, making her point. "Anyway, the soldiers choose to fight. The animals don't."

"Not true anymore," said David. "They've got this drug, you see. They call it Third Person. It sort of detaches you from the scene. Once you've taken it, you lose all sense of identity. It's like you're reading about someone's life, rather than taking part in it. They give it to civilians to press them. Conscripts don't really have a choice whether they fight or not. Look at Pippa and Andy here."

Chapelhow looked across to Reed to see how she was taking it, being spoken about like that. She didn't seem to mind.

"I don't believe it," said Katie. "They'd never allow it. They'd ban it."

Clausen laughed. "You'd think so, wouldn't you? But the government knows which side its bread is buttered on. The big corporations bring in too

much money.” He gave a brilliant white smile. “And,” he tapped his nose at this point, “little secret. Anyone who kicks up too much of a fuss gets put under the influence themselves.”

He yawned and stretched, leant back in his chair, soaking up some rays. “Oh, they’ll outlaw it eventually, I’m sure, but I reckon we’ve got a year or two left yet.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Tom was looking at his glass of wine in horror.

“Katie,” he said.

“No way,” Katie’s eyes widened with horror as she stared at the glass in front of her.

“You don’t get complimentary bottles of wine for being an attractive couple,” said Clausen, suddenly businesslike.

“But why us?”

“Because you’re young, fit, and healthy. And besides, you’re British, unlike just about everyone else here. I do this to the locals, and I get sued from here to dishonorable discharge.”

“What about that family over there?” asked Katie desperately.

“You can’t expect me to take the parents and leave the children to fend for themselves, can you?” said Clausen. “What sort of a monster do you think I am?”

He pulled out two sheets of electro paper from his pocket and spread them on the table before them.

“Just sign these contracts and you’ve enlisted.”

Katie and Tom looked at each other, and then they signed them, as they weren’t “I” anymore but someone else. Just observers.

The waiter turned up again carrying five plates of steak and chips and salad. He placed two before the young couple.

“Eat up your meal,” said the sergeant to Katie and Tom. “You’ll need

all the energy you can get.”

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THE PLATOON REGROUPED under the awning of a modern hotel, set on the edge of a wide road that led inland.

“This is Katie Prentice and Tom Fern.” Sergeant Clausen was introducing the new conscripts to Mitchell.

“They look fit,” said Mitchell, hungrily tearing away at a sandwich the sergeant had brought him. Behind him came the roar of a diesel engine. A blue and white bus pulled away along the road, black smoke spilling over the hot tarmac. Mitchell pinched Fern’s arm with mayonnaise-smearred fingers.

“Nice muscle tone. Do you work out?” he asked.

“Yes,” the couple answered in unison.

“We go to the gym three times a week,” added Prentice.

Mitchell nodded. He hefted the package in his hand. A cylinder, about thirty centimeters long. Chapelhow always thought it looked very heavy. Mitchell passed it to the sergeant.

“Well, Prentice,” he said, “with any luck, you’ll be back there within the week. Not long now, I hope.”

Singh handed them their conscripts’ rifles and showed them how to work the action that loaded and ejected bullets.

“These are ancient,” said Fern.

“They’re good enough,” said the sergeant. “Mitchell. Save these two; they’re the healthiest. Put Reed, Chapelhow, and Singh on point.”

“Got it sarge. What now?”

The sergeant gave a smile.

“We’re headed inland. I thought we’d take the bus. They’re never going to dare open fire with all those civilians around.”

“Good idea.”

“Come on.”

They walked from under the hotel’s awning into the hot sun, Chapelhow blinking as they went. He had never liked direct sunlight. The bus stop was just up the road a little, a small metal awning with several tourists sheltering beneath.

“Just relax on the bus,” said the Sergeant. “Save your energy for later. Reed and Chapelhow at the front. Singh at the back. Prentice next to me. Fern next to Mitchell.”

It wasn’t too long before a bus pulled in. The sign on the front said *Adventureland*. Chapelhow had heard of the place, a big theme park built up in the hills.

“This is the one,” said the sergeant. “Off we go.”

They climbed on board. Chapelhow and Reed sat next to each other at the front.

“Have you any more ideas what this?” asked Reed, looking at the yellow sheet of paper that Chapelhow had taken from his pocket.

“I sort of remember,” said Chapelhow. “I think Chapelhow wrote it when the sergeant pressed him. He was in a bar on the cruise ship; his boyfriend had gone to bed. Too much sun. He was just having a coffee when the sergeant joined him. I think Chapelhow sort of fancied him, as he was flirting with him. He shouldn’t have accepted that brandy...”

Chapelhow frowned.

“I... Chapelhow,” Chapelhow blinked, rubbed his forehead. “...Chapelhow started to write this before the drug could properly take effect...”

Reed took the piece of paper from him and began to read out loud.

“You are Andy Chapelhow. This paper is kept in Andy Chapelhow’s pocket. I am Andy Chapelhow. But already I feel like Andy Chapelhow is someone else. I must remember, you must remember who you are. It’s like a story, Andy. You’ve got to see that all stories are told from one point of view. That point of view, the narrator, he’s you. You’ve got to look out for the

narrator. Find him and you find yourself. Don't lose your identity. You are Andy Chapelhow. Say it now. I am Andy Chapelhow."

"I am Andy Chapelhow'," repeated Reed. "I don't think that's right. What does it mean when it says 'find the narrator'?"

"I think its talking about point of view," said Chapelhow. "Like a story written in the third per-son. One of the characters will have the point of view, the reader will see what they see, they will empathize with them, but they won't really believe that they are there."

Reed looked puzzled. She shook her head.

"Nah. I don't get it."

The bus halted. Four well-dressed women got on. Permed hair and smart leather handbags. They dropped a handful of euros in the tray and made their way to the back of the bus.

The driver gunned the engine and they set off. They had left the town behind, driving into the full glare of the Spanish afternoon, riding along a smooth gray road that was climbing into the dis-tant hills.

Chapelhow felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Hey, how did you pay for the meal, Chapelhow?"

"With my card, Sarge, how else?"

The sergeant's face flushed red and he swore. The well-dressed ladies in the seat opposite pursed their lips. Now that Chapelhow came to think about it, they looked just like the four women who had just boarded the bus.

The sergeant interrupted his thoughts.

"I thought you said you had money!"

"That was Singh. I only had twenty euros!"

"Damn. Look at this!"

He held up Chapelhow's mobile, confiscated from him when Chapelhow had been pressed. There was a text message displayed.

Hello there, Sergeant Clausen. Chapelhow's bank is part-owned by the SEA, didn't you know? Nice of you to pinpoint yourself like that.

We have a proposition for you. Just leave the package on the bus, get off at the next stop, and we'll let you go unharmed. We won't even track you to your rendezvous point.

Do we have a deal?

"It sounds like a good deal to me, sarge," said Reed.

"Like you have a say in things. I've punched for an emergency extraction. It will cost a fortune, it will risk the lives of the extraction team, but we need to do it. Get ready to move. Shit."

Chapelhow turned to follow his gaze.

Four more well-dressed ladies stood by the side of the road. There was a bus stop there, right in the middle of nowhere. Nothing but scrubby land could be seen, baking in the hot sun. The driver was already decelerating.

"All that permed hair," muttered the sergeant in disbelief. "Did they conscript a Spanish townswomen's guild or something?" He pulled a grenade from his pocket.

"There are greenhouses over there, sarge," said Reed. She pointed to the low, steamy plastic shapes that glinted oddly in the distance. "They could be workers from those?"

"Dressed like that?" said the sergeant. He clicked a thumb down on the button and called out to the driver.

"Hey, Pedro. You stop this bus and I let go of the button, got it?"

The bus driver let off a rapid stream of angry Spanish. Chapelhow's headset translated. "You threaten me, señor, and I'll sue your ass off."

"This isn't a threat," said the Sergeant easily. "It's a suicide attempt. I just can't bear the thought of you stopping here. You compendre?"

Reed giggled.

“Sarge, what’s the use of speaking in Spanish when your headset’s translating everything?”

The driver stamped down on the accelerator, causing the bus to jerk violently and the sergeant to nearly lose his balance. The women by the bus stop pulled pistols from their handbags and took aim. They didn’t fire. There were too many civil-ians on the bus. Chapelhow held the gaze of one of them as they drove past. She smiled at him and shrugged.

“Who did that?” asked Reed. She was pointing across the aisle. The two well-dressed women opposite were slumped forward in their seats, their eyes closed.

“Mitchell and Prentice shot them while you were distracted,” said the sergeant. “I tell you, that girl shows promise. It’s a shame she didn’t enlist voluntarily. Now, watch the road, you two. See if you can do as well as Prentice and spot any other spies before they pull their guns.” He turned to the driv-er. “Pedro, open the bus door.”

“Stop calling me Pedro.”

The driver opened the door anyway. The sergeant took hold of the nearest of the dead women by the collar of her silk blouse. He rolled her out of her seat and through the door, then sat in her place. Chapelhow turned to watch the body tumbling along the road, limbs flailing like a rag doll. There was a shout of indignation from further up the bus.

“Do you mind? We have children with us!” Chapelhow’s headset spoke with a German accent.

“Something behind us, sarge!” That was Singh’s voice. “Long green thing. Coming up fast.”

“Troop car,” said Mitchell. “Get down fast, Singh. It will have a laser targeting turret...”

There was a tinkle of glass and sudden burst of static that was quickly killed.

“They got Singh,” said Mitchell. “How much longer, sarge?”

“Pickup craft is coming in now,” said the ser-geant. “Approaching from the right-hand side of the bus, the side with the door.”

Reed and Chapelhow were calm.

“Think we’re going to make it, Chapelhow?”

“I don’t know. Does it matter? The mission is the important thing. As long as we get the package on the pickup...”

A low rumble sounded, followed by a supersonic boom off to their right. Then another one, then another.

“Stop here, Pedro,” shouted the sergeant.

A roar of diesel and they were all thrown back-ward as the driver accelerated again. There was a popping noise and the driver began to scream. Red blood was spurting from his right hand.

“I’ll sue you, you and your fucking army, señor!”

“Sue us for a million. We’ll pay. This is more important.” He swung his gun to the driver’s head. “Now, are you going to stop the bus?”

There was a squeal of brakes and they were all thrown forward. A child started to cry. There was a series of popping sounds as the sergeant fired his gun in the air. Lines of sunlight shafted down from the roof, one after the other. He spoke, his headset translating into Spanish.

“Okay, my name is Sergeant David Clausen. I am part of the Naghani Associates regiment of the UK army. Any claims for compensation should be made to Naghani Associates in the first instance. Listen up now. This is a grenade.” He held a dark egg shape up in the air. “I have set a motion sensor on it. If you remove it from its place here on the luggage rack it will explode.” Carefully he placed the grenade on the rack. “Further,” he added, “I have set the timer for ten minutes. More than enough time for us to get safely off this bus.”

His words were repeated in German and English.

There was a low rumble of indignation, but already the passengers were moving from their seats.

“Chapelhow, Reed. Wait for three people to get off, and then you follow them out. I’ll send out Prentice in the middle of the crowd, then me. Fern and Mitchell can bring up the rear. The civilians should provide us with

enough cover. Okay, go!”

Chapelhow and Reed waited for three young men in shorts to climb off the bus. They smelled of old aftershave and alcohol and seemed quite excited by their adventure. They were pointing to a rapidly growing dot on the horizon.

“That must be the pickup,” said Reed. “It doesn’t look that big. Do you think we can all get on board?”

“Probably not,” said Chapelhow. “Probably just enough space for the sergeant and Mitchell.”

“Maybe he’ll try and squeeze Prentice on too,” said Reed. Behind her the driver was whimpering as he stared at his hand. “Okay,” said Reed. “Our turn.”

They both got off the bus, rifles held at the ready. The afternoon sun beat down on their heads. Chapelhow felt the uneven ground through the thin soles of his shoes.

“Keep moving, Reed,” he said. “Come away from the door.”

A dusty wind blew up. The pickup ship was descending. Not much bigger than a large car, it was little more than a silver wing with a large transparent canopy on top. Chapelhow saw the pilot scanning the skies through a large pair of dark goggles as she descended.

More passengers were spilling out into the sun. Three wheels dropped down from the pickup just as it was about to hit the ground. It bounced once on its undercarriage. The pilot slid back the canopy with a whirr.

“Come on,” she called. “Get on board.”

The sergeant was pushing his way forward.

“Out of my way,” he called. Mitchell and Prentice followed behind. “Prentice on first,” shouted the sergeant, handing her the package.

“Told you,” said Reed. “There’s not enough seats for all of us. I wonder what will happen when that thing takes off? Who is carrying the point of view for this story?”

“What do you mean?” asked Chapelhow.

“Like it said on that sheet of paper in your pock-et. Who has the point of view? You, or me, or the sergeant? Will the story follow the pickup, or stay here on the ground?”

But Chapelhow didn't answer. An olive-colored arrow had slid to a halt on the road behind the bus. A hatch opened in its side and soldiers came tumbling out. Real soldiers, dressed in the green of the SEA and carrying state-of-the-art, limited radius weapons. The sort that were safe to use when civilians were around. One swung a tube in the direction of the sergeant.

“You're closest,” said Reed to Chapelhow. Something was fired from the tube. Steam bomb. Lazily it flew through the air toward the sergeant, about to follow Prentice on board the pickup craft. Chapelhow flung himself forward into its path and

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