

OXYGEN

Addison found the ceiling panel, pushed the release catch. In the next minute she was climbing into the rope harness. Her thoughts were calm, the steady mantra of task-oriented instructions that she'd learned to apply the instant things became stressful.

Secure the rope.

Grab hold of something.

Turn on the water.

Get down on the ground. Find Paul. Get him on his feet. Activate the jetpack. Fly back to the chopper.

The vagueness of the final two steps was disconcerting. But right now, it was all she had. With one hand, she gripped a handle next to the HAZMAT panel. She turned to Ben. 'OK, now.'

He activated the fire hose. A powerful stream leapt across GF Three's cabin, as solid as a sword. In two seconds, Addison was utterly drenched.

'OK, enough! Julia, drop the rope. Make it fast!'

Holding onto the rope from which she was now suspended, Addison stepped out of the helicopter. The familiar feeling of controlled falling was almost a comfort. She realised that once again, her entire body was in thrall to blood and adrenaline pumping through her system. It was, as always, like waking from a dream of everyday life.

Now she was alive.

Over the radio in GF Three's cockpit she heard a harried male voice speaking in heavily accented Spanish; 'Civilian helicopter, this is ANPECO Control. Thank you for your assistance. Can you direct water to the ISOM tower? Temperature readings increasing again. Over.'

'ANPECO Control, copy that. We need to retrieve our man first. Will comply in two minutes.'

'Civilian helicopter, we *don't have* two minutes!' erupted the voice. 'The tower could go critical any second! We've got to cool it down!'

There was a brief crackle of dead air. Addison tried to put the conversation out of her mind. She considered turning off her headset. But she couldn't risk being out of communication. Anyway, it was wireless, designed for use within GF Three. For all she knew, by the time she was on the ground she'd be out of range.

‘*Capricorn*. Please respond. Over.’

Nothing.

Julia’s frustration was evident even over the airwaves. ‘Addison, are you on the ground yet?’

Addison felt her sodden trainers touch the ground with a squelch. The air was a maelstrom of smoke. She stepped out of the harness. ‘*Scorpio* you’re clear to move. Can you spray the water over on the other side of the ISOM? We gotta try to keep the jetpack dry.’

‘Roger. Find *Capricorn*, Addison. Please.’

The air above her stirred into a whirlwind as GF Three swooped upwards and around to the other side of the towering ISOM, which was almost invisible through the pallor of smoke.

She took a step. The nearest fire was raging about twenty metres away but the heat, even at this distance, was startling. She doubted she’d be able to handle it for more than a minute or so.

It was a close, imposing darkness. A cascade of sounds almost as terrifying as the heat. She couldn’t see anything but the cores of each fire, in every direction. All else was oily black smoke.

‘*Scorpio*, can you give me a position for *Capricorn*? I can’t see a damn thing down here.’

‘According to the infrared he’s no more than five metres away from you, at about two o’clock. But I’m getting mad signal bounce from the fires. So that could be wrong.’

Addison didn’t even know what Julia thought was her own twelve o’clock. She stepped forwards and counted enough paces for five metres. She began to walk to her right, along what she hoped desperately was the circumference of a circle.

Ten steps away, the hazy shape of Paul’s barely responsive form appeared through the smoke.

Addison stood behind Paul’s head, lifted his fire hood. Inside his helmet, she could just see that his eyes were closed. He looked to be unconscious.

A steady spray of water began to cascade around them. A tremendous hissing sound seemed to explode from somewhere close. Addison looked up, realised that the ISOM tower was less than three metres away. It was sheltering them from the direct stream of water from GF Three’s cannon.

Addison took a huge breath, then held it. She ripped off her own breathing mask and then Paul's. Her eyes began instantly to water. She had to blink hard and fast. She dragged his mask over her head, and then placed her mask over Paul's. She opened her mouth, exhaled, then tried to breathe. The air that filled her lungs seemed painfully thin.

Paul's breathing mask was faulty. She glanced at him. Cold anxiety gripped her throat.

Was he already dead?

She took another breath through the new mask, as deep as she could manage, then pulled off the mask. She turned it over, trying to find an obvious fault. There was nothing visible. She put it back on. There was no other choice. A couple of lungfuls of the noxious smoke and vapours that were swirling around them would be toxic enough to kill her. The breathing mask was obstructed, somehow. But thin, clean air was better than poisonous fumes.

Talking to Julia over the radio, however, was going to have to take a back seat. She simply couldn't spare the oxygen.

Addison's breaths came unsteadily now. Every gulp of air was an effort. She tried not to think about how light-headed she was already feeling. Tried to remember that she'd once survived a training mission in which the cockpit had been deprived of oxygen, to simulate a submerged landing. Of all the trainees, she had been the last one to pass out.

She crouched over Paul's prone body. There wasn't time to check if he was still alive, nor to try CPR. She simply couldn't risk exposing him to the air. It was filling up with hot steam that was billowing around from the other side of the ISOM unit. Addison could feel her skin stinging all over. It was like reaching your limit in a sauna, only to realise that you couldn't open the door.

She put her hands under Paul's arms, gripped him to her from behind his shoulders. She leaned his head on her shoulder, and tried to rise to her feet. The weight felt intense. At least one hundred and eighty pounds, she guessed. She felt herself bending backwards under the strain.

This is where the kid could have helped. But the jetpack probably could carry three people. Plus, there was no safe position except where she was, in front of Paul.

When she'd managed to get Paul to his feet, supporting his weight almost entirely, Addison wrapped one leg around his, above the ankle jet. She released her right arm enough to get a hand on his left inside arm. There was the control panel for the jetpack, just as Julia had described. She pressed the up arrow.

The suit bolted about ten metres into the air. On her thighs, she felt the heat of the rear jetpack's flame. The trajectory was so rapid that Addison released the button. Instantly, they began to fall. Wild panic. She pressed it again, a little less vigorously.

'The jetpack control responds to pressure!' screamed Julia, over the radio.

Addison couldn't risk the breath to respond. She wrapped her still-loose right left around Paul's own legs and felt the suit shoot them both upwards. They were flying blind now. She couldn't see the timer either – it was on his right arm, which flopped uselessly over her own left shoulder.

Finally, the suit carried them above the smoke. They burst into the sunlight. Addison spotted GF Three – *Scorpio* – about thirty metres away, a white line of water still directed at the ISOM. She leaned hard to her right, reduced the pressure on the jets. The speed of response sent a jolt of fear right through her core.

They began to fall.

She hit the jets. They fired upwards again. The door of the helicopter was directly ahead, twenty metres, fifteen, ten, five.

'Addison, cut your speed!' yelled Julia.

She released the button. It was too late – they were going to overshoot. She felt the air around her shift as GF Three pitched sideways. As they began the arc of descent, *Scorpio* hovered ahead, in their path.

They were going to miss the opening.

She released the jetpack control, reached out with her right hand. Her fingers managed to close around the tubular landing skid. She felt an immediate pull. Paul's and her own combined weight sent a shockwave through her arm. Her fingers began to slip as her muscles resisted the extreme stress. Addison released Paul's shoulder. She used her second hand to grab hold of the landing skid. Now Paul was trapped between her and the metal tube. But she wouldn't be able to hold on forever.

The oxygen deprivation was beginning to overwhelm her. She couldn't think of anything now. Her thoughts felt woolly. She felt her grip begin to falter. Addison's eyes closed.

She was about to let go when a voice surprisingly close said, 'I'm going to take your hand. Addi, trust me.' A hand, solid as a rock, grabbed hold of hers. She felt herself pulled horizontal.

'Wrap your legs around the skids' he urged. 'Hold on!'

Eyes tightly shut, Addison obeyed, then opened her eyes to see Ben beside her, sitting on the landing skid.

The three of them clung on for what seemed like ages. GF Three flew down to a car park. There were fire engines and ambulances everywhere. As they neared the ground, Ben jumped off the landing skid. GF Three hovered, just one metre off the ground. Ben's outstretched arms pulled Paul to safety.

Barely conscious now, Addison rolled off the skid, fell heavily to the ground. With slow, clumsy movements, she pulled off her mask. Her lungs filled, slowly, with sweet, oxygenated air. She glanced across at Ben. He'd removed his mask and Paul's, was staring intently at Paul's face. She saw him put his fingers to the pilot's neck, locating the jugular.

Ben pulled back. He turned to Addison, stunned, relieved.

'Paul's breathing!'

Despite her exhaustion, Addison grinned. 'Kid, the only reason either of us is breathing is *you*.'