

Cursing steadily, creatively and in total silence, Jason Swedborg followed the mist-wreathed shape of his partner through the stinking, murky water. Sweat poured off him. Even over the reek of the swamp, he could smell them both, acrid and sour, the awful pace of the last two days leaching every last ounce of the toxins of civilian existence from their bodies.

Life was good.

He slogged on, his feet clad in waterproof boots. He lifted them out of the thick soup and replaced them carefully as Daniel had taught him, still amazed that the trick allowed them to move through water and make absolutely no sound at all. Not even the Army Rangers had been able to train people to do that this well. Here in the sauna heat and humidity and predatory nightmare of the swamp and jungle, his partner was truly king.

Of course four months ago when they'd been dropped just a few clicks south of the North Pole, Jason's skills had kept them alive. Funny how they'd meshed. What one knew, the other needed and vice versa. They were, beyond question, a good team.

Ahead of him, a misty Daniel raised one elbow, an unmistakable signal to halt.

Jason obeyed, slowing his heart rate and respiration and letting his senses reach out into the steaming air to find what had brought Daniel up short. At first he couldn't see or hear anything out of the ordinary.

Then there it was. The triangular head cut a path toward him through the amber water, hardly a ripple evident. Jason stopped breathing.

Daniel moved, more silent than the reptile. His hand flashed out and he grabbed the snake behind its head. He flicked his wrist, breaking the water moccasin's neck. That done, he took another step and hung the limp body over a low branch.

Then he looked at Jason. "No blood," he mouthed.

Jason nodded. What didn't bear thinking about was why Reilly wanted to avoid blood in the water. His imagination, always his worst enemy, immediately conjured up images of gigantic man-devouring alligators and huge wild boars with tusks big enough to disembowel with one swipe, saliva dripping from rubbery lips. Predators of the northern climes didn't trigger imaginary horrors since he was used to them, but the denizens of the tropics gave him the creeps. He repressed a shudder and set off after his partner.

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Daniel Reilly moved on, pleased at the way Swedborg was adapting. The man was astonishingly quick to pick up terrain skills in territory he'd never explored before. And his physical strength and endurance seemed to have no bounds. He moved with a grace that defied his size and bone structure, particularly under the conditions imposed by the swamp. Doing a damn sight better than he had when they'd been cast by their sadistic training instructor into that Norse hell four months ago. He resisted the urge to rub his hand over the short beard he'd kept even after they'd returned to warmer climes. If Jason hadn't known how to tackle sub-zero cold, Daniel was sure he'd have died out on the arctic ice, an unhappy man with frozen balls and toes.

And then there was the polar bear, an encounter he'd rather never think about again. The monster's skin had kept them from freezing to death, but the image of Jason killing with nothing but his bare hands and a spear made of ice would stay with him for the rest of his life. Violent and primitive, the experience had been like going back to the Ice Age and being companion to a mammoth hunter.

To their left something splashed heavily in the dark water, causing Daniel to stop breathing until he'd determined it was only a blue heron after a frog. Behind him, he heard no noise at all from Swedborg. Not a ripple in the water gave him away. He knew if he turned to look, Swedborg would be as still as one of the huge cypress trees that sheltered them from the worst of the tropical sun. The man was uncannily skilled, especially since he was in what was, for him, an alien environment and was totally dependent on Daniel.

On Daniel who was allowing himself to indulge in conscious thought and speculation on matters that had nothing whatever to do with surviving and therefore might bring them both to an abrupt and messy end. Time to stop thinking, he warned himself. As pleasant as dwelling on his partner's fine qualities was, to continue to do so might lose him not only that partner but his own life as well.

Concentrate on the place. Nothing else. Putting all cognitive matters into a dark place in his mind and letting the vestigial reptile take over, he moved on through the familiar treachery of swamp.

Silent as a ghost, his partner followed.

The next few hours were physically horrendous but uneventful and they managed to cover a great deal of territory, their pace slow but steady. When the brutal summer sunlight began to slant at a sharp angle through the cypress branches and hanging drifts of Spanish moss, Daniel stopped and sniffed the air. He turned and mouthed "over there" to Jason and set out again. It wasn't until after he'd gone several yards that he realized Jason had been looking in the same direction.

Hell of a partner. They'd met just over half a year ago, and here they were, so in sync and working so well together Daniel found it difficult to believe.

Afraid to believe. During his months in 'Nam, he'd known pairs of men who'd operated that way. He'd found it both fascinating and terrible.

Fascinating because he'd realized even then in his callow youth that to be so linked up with another human must be an amazing experience. Better than love, better than most sex. Such a relationship was a potent lure. But there was the flip side of the fascination: terror.

Terror, because when one partner in such a warrior-pairing died, the other partner fell soon after. He'd seen it happen. It was as if they were too close, their life forces joined in a way that was damn near supernatural and therefore fatal in the long run. He suppressed a shudder.

Thanks, but no thanks. He'd work with Swedborg, be friends and all up to a point, but he'd keep his distance. In spite of his wonderful and extensive family, he was a loner and intended to stay that way. It would keep him alive. He shut down thought again and slogged on.

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They reached the islet, a low hummock of land covered with pine trees and rising less than a yard above the water. Daniel signaled a halt and Jason waited, watching Reilly. Strange guy, Daniel. Yet very, very good at his job. Jason had been unsure at first of Reilly's physical abilities but the six weeks of amplified 'basic' they'd suffered together getting back into fighting trim had convinced him the wiry Cajun was as fine a fighter and soldier as anyone he'd ever served with.

Reilly had been a SEAL. No doubting the training he'd had and still called on. His body was shaped like a long, lean triangle. Not much in the way of muscle mass. When he was fully clothed, he looked kind of skinny and nerdy, especially since he'd adopted that Van Dyke beard as a personal pet.

Jason had and would continue to give Reilly grief about the face-fuzz but, to be honest, he liked it. Made for interesting contrasts. With the beard, the longish black hair, golden eyes and sun-browned skin, he had a devilish look at odds with his polite behavior and unexpectedly gentle and generous ways.

Daniel signaled, indicating the hump of land was safe. He moved toward the bank and stepped out of the water, not making a single noise. Jason followed, sure the water dripping off him sounded like a waterfall. But when Daniel looked back at him, approval was etched on his face. Jason grinned then sobered immediately as his partner held a hand flat, moving it down.

They held position, frozen and vulnerable for what might have been five minutes but felt more like fifty. Then Daniel relaxed again and straightened up, breath blowing out in relief. He pointed to himself and mouthed "jumpy" to Jason, who nodded, but made no attempt to reply. He'd gotten good at lip-reading Reilly but felt no need to try carrying on a conversation that way.

They moved over the sand and started into the bush. They were now in piney woods, the tall trees surrounding them. The carpet of dead leaves and shed needles and the thick foliage of living

vegetation made it almost impossible not to make some rustling noises. But Daniel moved silently and easily and didn't seem bothered by the small racket Jason caused. More to the point, the insects and birds kept on chittering, chirping and humming, sounds that would have ceased had the local creatures sensed any potential danger to themselves.

They were doing okay.

After a bit more exploring, they reached a sizable section of relatively clear ground and Daniel stopped. "Camp here," he said, soundlessly. Jason nodded and began to quarter the space, an area roughly twelve feet square around a huge tree whose overhanging branches prevented sunshine from encouraging lower growth. Nothing struck Jason as particularly dangerous, so he relaxed and returned to the base of the tree where Daniel was industriously digging at something under one of the roots.

Jason sat down, stomach rumbling. He knew what was coming, but hell, it was protein. Daniel looked at him and grinned, a dark devil's grin with white teeth. He scooped up a handful of writhing things.

Then he held out dinner to his partner.

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Pleased anew at Jason's cheerful adaptability, Daniel munched his share of grubs. They ate as the setting sun turned the scene reddish gold. An endless cacophony of sounds echoed across the swamp: frogs, birds, bugs and the occasional chilling reminder that boar and puma still roamed the region along with more than a few Jurassic-quality alligators and, since they were far enough south, even the rarer crocodile. The hide hunters hadn't made it this deep into the swamp, Daniel reckoned. He glanced over at Jason, wondering if his partner had seen some of the signs of gigantic 'gators.

Jason's Viking ancestors had bequeathed him a muscled body built around a heavy-boned skeleton. His wrists were as big around as Daniel's forearms. Like Daniel, he was also a mix, Sioux on his mother's side. Those genes had given him many attributes including endurance beyond anything Dan had seen in a large guy and, more important, a sense of his surroundings that seemed almost supernatural at times.

Daniel studied his partner.

The ruddy light of the setting sun shone on Swedborg, turning his hair into a bronze cap and his sun-tanned skin to gold. For a moment, Daniel allowed himself to imagine the man naked, clean and god-like in form and color.

He looked away. Don't get too fond of him, he reminded himself. That way lies trouble and pain. Their boss had been clear on their potential life expectancy. It wasn't good and the generous pay-off to their families if they died in the line of duty was an unnerving indication of the kind of jobs they'd be given.

Pretty much Missions Impossible. Deniable.

Just the two of them depending on one another.

Daniel shuddered a little in spite of the sweatbox heat. This really was one of those catch-22 situations only the military seemed capable of devising. How could he not get close to Jason? The man was the only other human on the planet that might pull his ass out of the fire if ...

He felt a touch of ice on his spine. The birds had shut up. Not one insect trilled or chattered. Slowly he let his senses reach out. Turning his head a fraction of an inch at a time, he saw Jason sitting like a statue, not even breathing.

Ten feet from them an Everglades puma regarded them out of lazy golden eyes.