



HARD DRIVE

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The man dove through the door as he heard the guards nearby. He grabbed his foot in pain as he fell to the floor. Dragging himself to his feet, he slammed the door behind him. Dim light streamed through the windows from the surrounding high-rises. A computer terminal sat at the far end of the room. The man hobbled to the computer and fell into the chair. He grabbed the codebreaker from his pocket and inserted it into the computer's terminal. The device whirred away as he tore off strips of his blood-soaked shirt and tied them around his forearm to staunch the blood flow. As the man tied the knot, the codebreaker let out a soft beep and the computer's files began copying onto the device.

The door crashed open as the last file transferred. The man typed one last command, snatched the codebreaker from the terminal and slid off his seat to the ground, watching the doorway. The guards entered the room in single file. They moved towards the computer as the man crawled past them, placing him next to the door. He drew his pistol and rose to his feet, firing three shots. Each shot found its mark and the guards collapsed.

The man holstered his weapon and turned to see two more guards rushing him. Before he could react, a baton slammed into the side of his head and everything went black.

A splash of icy water woke the man with a start. He tried to move his arms but they were pinned behind his back by two guards. The room he woke up in had plastic sheets from floor to ceiling.

'I know it ruins the decorum, but it's an absolute timesaver when it comes to cleaning up.' The man tried to look around to identify the speaker but one of the guards forced his head forward. 'Now, is that really necessary? It's not like he's going anywhere.'

A figure stepped out in front of the man dressed entirely in combat fatigues. He was known only as The Commander, even by his closest allies.

'Nice to see you again, Luke. Been a long time. How's that old wound holding up?'

'Go to hell.' Luke muttered. The Commander pulled out his Desert Eagle and lay it down on the table beside him.

'No need for such open hostility, old friend. So, I killed your father. I killed my father too but you don't hear me whining about it.'

'You son of a bitch!' Luke broke free of the guard's and dove forward. A gunshot rang out and Luke's hand exploded in a red mist. He cried out in pain and slumped to his knees, cradling his arm. The Commander sighed and lowered his gun.

'Look what you've gone and done now,' he shook his head. 'Now, what did you do with the files?'

Luke spat blood onto his shoes.

'Go fuck yourself.' The Commander looked down.

'These were my favourite pair too.' He raised his gun and squeezed the trigger. Luke's head exploded, splattering the plastic sheet behind him with red and grey sludge. The body slumped to the floor, a trickle of blood running down the wound and forming a puddle. The Commander walked over to the desk and pressed the intercom button.

'Sanitation team to my office now please.'

A knock at the door sounded and he turned to see his senior adviser standing in the doorway. He waved him in as he dismissed the guards. They shuffled out as the senior adviser closed the door behind them. The adviser paled as he noticed the dead body. He held out the codebreaker for The Commander, never taking his eyes off the dead body.

'We found this in the room with him. Military-grade. Broke through our firewall in seconds.'

The Commander holstered his gun and smirked as he turned the device over.

'Seconds, you say?' he asked.

His senior adviser looked up.

'Yes sir. Is there a problem?' The Commander pointed to the serial number engraved at the bottom of the device.

'It's one of ours.'

'How is that even possible?'

A glint caught The Commander's eye. It was something next to the corpse. He knelt down and examined the object. It was a security access card. He picked it up flipped it over.

'Oh, I don't know... seems like *someone* left their access card unattended. Of course, it would have to have the highest possible clearance level.' The Commander rose to his feet. 'A card that only two people have. Myself...' He flicked the card at his adviser. It spun through the air catching the light. His adviser caught it in his fingers.

The face staring up at him was the same. It was his card. His face paled as he reached down to his belt for his access card and found it missing.

The Commander stared at his adviser, watching him sweat.

'I-I I can explain this, I assure you.' His adviser stammered.

'I very much know you will.'

His adviser shuffled his feet before looking straight at him.

'I must have used my access card then got distracted by some important business and left it on a table and then just forgot I didn't have it.' The Commander turned away from his adviser looking out the window at the city below.

'You've been working for me how long now?' His adviser paused, caught off guard by the question.

'Going on five years now, sir.' The Commander nodded as he kept looking through the window.

'How many times have you forgotten something?'

His adviser grew silent.

'Never.' he whispered. The Commander sighed.

'That's what I thought.'

He drew his gun, turned and fired. His adviser flew backwards, slamming into the far wall and crumpling to the floor. The Commander dropped his gun and the codebreaker on the desk. He heard a strange sound and walked over to his senior adviser's body. A pager lay, buzzing on the ground nearby. As he picked it up a message appeared.

Data received. Hard Drive located at coordinates: 0.80667° N, -176.6164° E. Assault mission launched at 2100 hours- W

The Commander smiled to himself as he pocketed the device. The sanitation unit arrived and rolled out body bags.

'Get them out of my sight.' he said.

The sniper surveyed the military compound below him through the night vision scope of his silenced rifle. This was where Luke's intel had led them. They hadn't heard anything from him since. The sniper scratched another mark into the ledge with his knife as he spotted another soldier. A voice crackled over his headset.

Matt come in. Matt, are you in position?

Matt spoke into his throat mike. 'I'm in position Wilson. Any word from Luke?'

None. I shouldn't have sent him there in the first place. It was suicide.

'What happened there's out of your control. We had no choice.'

There's always a choice.

Matt was silent. He knew the loss weighed on Wilson. It had taken him years to come to terms with Lexi's death. He'd carry the guilt with him forever.

'So how do you wanna play this?' he asked.

What's the situation down there?

Matt pulled out his tablet and opened the data package Luke sent. It included a holographic model of the compound. He brought that up now and studied the map. A tall building to the northeast housed the soldiers and other on-site personnel as well as the logistics centre. The main security console was attached to the central building. A small aircraft hangar and helipad were in the south-east corner. Two watchtowers were halfway along the western and eastern perimeter walls, their spotlights illuminating the courtyard below. Matt marked the guard's positions on the map as red dots and sent it to Wilson. An AH-64 Apache helicopter came roaring over the top of Matt and landed on the helipad.

Take out the guard at the security console first then weapons free. On my mark.

Matt aimed at the guard closest to the security console, steadied himself and waited for Wilson's call.

Fire.

He fired a single shot. The guard's head exploded, brain matter splattering the wall behind him. Two guards next to them froze as the body hit the floor. Matt drew a bead on them and fired twice. They clutched at their throats and collapsed. Shouts from the watchtower drew his attention

as the spotlights swung over to his position. He ducked behind the ledge as the light passed over him. He popped up from his cover and fired at the spotlights, shattering them. The courtyard was plunged into darkness. Matt activated his night vision goggles, took a running start and leapt off the roof.

Wilson activated his night vision goggles as soon as the courtyard went dark. Through the incandescent green filter, he saw Matt's parachute deploy and watched him land on the wall. Matt's voice whispered over his earpiece.

I'm on the eastern perimeter wall. Holding position.

'Scaling western perimeter wall now.' Wilson said. He pulled out his grappling hook and tossed it onto the top of the wall, tested his weight and began to climb. He reached the top of the wall and rolled onto the parapet. He rose to a crouched position, his F88 Austeyr rifle at the ready. One of the guards turned towards him and Wilson fired, dropping him.

Without warning, floodlights sprang to life all around the compound. Wilson's goggles automatically shut off, leaving him in the dark. Matt's voice shouted over his earpiece.

Shit, they've got me pinned down- Gunfire sounded in the background *-taking heavy fire, need-* the rest was cut off my static.

Wilson tore off his night-vision goggles and shielded his eyes from the harsh light. He saw two guards running at him and fired twice, dropping them both.

'Matt? Matt, are you there?' he shouted into his headset. There was no reply.

The other guards raised their assault rifles at Wilson. He slid in behind some crates and blind fired, forcing the guards to dive for cover. He pulled the pin on a grenade and tossed it over his shoulder. The guards watched as it arced in the air and rolled to a stop at their feet.

The grenade exploded, tearing the guards to pieces. Wilson snapped up from cover, aiming down the gun sight. There were no more guards he could see. He dropped back down into cover.

'Western perimeter wall is secure, heading to the-'

The sound of rending metal caught his attention. Wilson peeked over the crate and saw that the explosion had taken out the watchtowers main support beams. His eyes widened as with a loud groan, the watchtower started to fall.

'Oh shit.' Wilson scrambled to his feet and dove off the side of the wall into the courtyard below. He landed on his side, losing his grip on his rifle. As Wilson got to his feet, he heard the click of a gun's safety being switched off. He froze as multiple guards surrounded him. He raised his hands and two guards stepped forward, lowering their weapons. He looked at the guard to his right as he holstered his weapon.

And then he saw it.

Wilson slammed his shoulder into the guard, knocking him over. He headbutted the second guard and launched himself at the guard on the floor. Two more guards rushed forwards and dragged him away. They took his pistol and cuffed him. The guards marched him towards the hanger. Two more guards followed, their guns trained on him.

On the way to the hanger, another group joined them. Matt appeared next to Wilson.

'Hey boss. Looks like they got you as well.' Blood poured from his mouth. His left eye was swollen shut. Wilson noticed a thin line of blood trickling from a large cut on his right ear. Matt saw it. 'Yeah, one of these fuckers clipped my ear,' One of the guards turned and glared at him. Matt stared him down. 'Got my earpiece as well. Saw the watchtower go down. Thought you were under it.'

'Not the end I'd wish for.'

The guards stopped as they reached the hangar. The door opened to reveal The Commander, Desert Eagle in hand. The pair were dragged inside and forced to their knees. The Commander walked over to them.

'Wilson, been a long time.' He knelt down in front of Wilson. 'Don't worry, I'm not going to torture you. I just want to know one thing.'

Wilson stared straight ahead.

'What?'

'My adviser. How long was he working with you?' Wilson was silent. The Commander sighed. 'It was certainly surprising, I'll give you that. It had a lot of Lexi's signature flair, wouldn't you say? I didn't expect something as subtle from you.' Wilson lunged at The Commander but was held back by the two guards at his side.

'You're a dead man.' he said. The Commander smiled.

'So, tin man has a heart in there after all?' He rose to his feet, walked over to Matt and aimed his gun at him. 'That was clever using one of my own codebreakers to bypass security.' He gestured at Wilson with his gun before moving it back to Matt. 'Now *that's* more like you.' Wilson struggled to reach the field pocket on his leg. Keeping his eyes on The Commander, he slipped a finger into the pocket.

'What did you do to Luke?' he asked, stalling for time.

'Does that really matter now? He's dead, you'll both be dead soon. I sell that precious hard drive you want so much and I disappear, rich and content. The greatest fighting force in the world is crippled and they will rue the day they refused to reinstate me and my men.'

'This is what this has all been about?'

'It has always been about that,' The Commander grip tightened on his gun. 'Serving this country for half my life then being pushed aside to make way for the new and improved model? I was never going to take that lying down.' He turned back to Matt. 'Now old friend, any last requests?' Matt closed his eyes.

'I'll have a cigarette.' Wilson said.

'Those are terrible for your health.'

'It's not like I'm going to live long enough to regret it.' The Commander rolled his eyes and holstered his gun. As he turned to a guard, Wilson pulled out the item in his pocket and wrapped it around his handcuffs.

A guard stepped forward and offered a pack of cigarettes to Wilson. He kept his hands by his sides and used his mouth. The guard held a lighter up to the cigarette and flicked it on. Wilson bumped the guard and he dropped the lighter. The guard recovered and caught it before it hit the ground.

Right in front of Wilson's hands.

'That was a close one.' Wilson said as he thrust his handcuffs over the lighter's flame and shut his eyes. The magnesium cord around his cuffs ignited and blinding light filled the room. Wilson felt the heat on his hands and face as the cord melted through his cuffs and dropped to the floor. He broke free and hit the ground as the guards next to him, blinded by the bright light, sprayed the room with gunfire.

The Commander and Matt had both seen the intense light out of the corner of their eyes and shut their eyes. The Commander was hit in his leg and collapsed. Matt was hit in the shoulder and fell onto his side. The guards around them were not as lucky. They were shredded by the gunfire, dead before they hit the floor. The Commander decided a tactical retreat was the wisest option as the gunfire subsided. With a grunt, he got to his feet and ran for the exit.

Wilson shielded his eyes from the light and crawled over to a weapons crate. He snatched up a discarded pistol and fired twice, dropping the remaining guards as the magnesium cord fizzled out. He vaulted over the cover, gun at the ready. Wilson fired at his outstretched hand. Seeing Matt in a pool of blood he ran over and slid on his knees next to him.

'Jesus! Matt? Matt are you okay?' Matt groaned and opened his eyes.

'What happened?' He noticed the burns on Wilson's face. 'Fuck me. What the hell happened to you?'

'Ignited magnesium cord. Seemed like a good idea at the time.' Matt shook his head.

'I'm not complaining.' Wilson offered his hand and Matt took it. 'Did you get the big guy?' Wilson looked around and noticed a trail of blood leading out of the hanger.

'My guess is that way.' Matt held out his wrists towards Wilson.

'You mind getting me out of these?' Wilson unlocked his cuffs and they clattered to the floor. Matt rubbed his wrists as he cast his gaze around the hangar, taking in the two dead bodies.

'So, what now?' he asked. Wilson checked his weapons clip and supporting Matt with his arm, they both headed to the door.

'I'm getting that fucking hard drive.'

The courtyard was empty as they left the hanger. Wilson set Matt down against the hanger wall behind some cover. As he stood up, sparks pinged off the wall next to Wilson's head.

The Commander stepped out from behind the helicopter, his smoking pistol aimed straight at Wilson. His face was twisted into an ugly snarl.

'None of this would have happened if you had just stopped!' he yelled. Wilson moved to raise his gun.

Another bullet sparked off the wall next to him.

'Don't do anything stupid.' The Commander said.

Wilson tossed his gun to the ground and kicked it away. The Commander steadied his aim.

'No hard feelings... we both know this is how it had to end. Say hi to Lexi for me.'

Wilson dived to his right as he fired. The bullet passed over him as he slid along the ground, grabbed his gun, aimed and fired twice. Both shots found their mark. The Commander stumbled back into the helicopter and slid to the ground, a trail of blood marking the side of the helicopter. His gun fell from his grip as blood spewed from his chest.

Wilson rose to his feet and motioned for Matt to get into the helicopter. Matt struggled to his feet and stepped over The Commander as he got in and started the pre-flight checks.

Wilson walked up to his foe and searched his body. A trickle of blood gurgled out the side of his mouth. The Commander reached up and grabbed Wilson's arm as he found the bloodstained hard drive and slipped it into his pocket.

'There's a line men like us have to cross... If we're lucky, we serve blindly and then we find peace. It's a shame we're not that lucky.' Before Wilson could reply, The Commander closed his eyes and lay still.

Wilson left the corpse, climbed into the helicopter and strapped in. Matt fired up the rotors and the helicopter rose into the air. Wilson keyed in his satellite phone.

'Whiskey Zero to base. Mission accomplished... We're heading home.'

Matt pointed the chopper's nose south and they flew off, leaving the compound ablaze behind them.

THE END