

Jez saw jeeps stacked up one behind the other, coming at him. They were equipped for combat with mounted mortar cannon and sub-machine guns rigged on the integral bases behind the front seats. The heads of soldiers bobbed behind mortar blast protectors as the vehicles maneuvered over snowdrifts. He couldn't tell how many vehicles, but seeing them fan out and fire, the number no longer seemed relevant.

He ran. He wanted to drop the ski jacket to quicken his pace, but he'd lose his weapons. The only thing he could do was wind in his head and race flat out. WHUMP! A mortar shell exploded 50 meters forward and to the right of his position. Shrapnel whizzed by, and though he could hear it, he felt nothing. He hadn't been hit. He crouched lower, but the rabbit-skin hat fell off. No time to pick it up. Stop for nothing. With the rifles set to automatic, they traced straight black lines in the snow on either side of him and then swept horizontally across his horizon – Kalashnikov AKMs. They didn't quite have him in their sights, but they would get there soon enough.

Not safe running in a straight line, he zigzagged, sacrificing distance for evasive tactics. Even so, it wouldn't take them long to get a bead on him. He looked ahead for anything that might impede his progress, and saw a murder of crows take to the air on the opposite side of the nearest hill. If only he could join them, he thought. Instead, he ran a short distance to the left and then a longer distance to the right, on occasion reversing the strategy so as not to reveal a pattern.

WHUMP! WHUMP! One after another, mortar shells exploded; and while Jez's evasive actions proved successful, progress slowed. The jeeps occasionally stopped to drop-blast their mortar shells more accurately, but it didn't stop them gaining ground.

Clearly, while the snow slowed him, it had no such effect on the pursuit vehicles. They would catch him before he could get to the hills. He had to make a stand. WHUMP! A shell exploded 30 meters ahead. That would do, fight from the mortar's footprint, die like a soldier. He ran towards it. The jeeps closed in. WHUMP! Another explosion – and it was in the same hollow he was headed for. He ran in the opposite direction to make them realign their weapons.

The aim moved. Shells exploded away from the crater, so he veered back and got close enough to jump. Any other time of year the landing would have been soft, but now solid ground jarred his bones as he made contact with the fissure's base. The earth moved and rumbled, feet banged against brittle crust that cracked and broke beneath him. A thin layer of earth had been all that remained after the two explosions and Jez crashed through the crater into another hole.

He dropped the depth of the first hollow and through into the hole below. But he couldn't see out to shoot. If his life hadn't been about to end he might have laughed. Too low to make a stand, he would have to... but just a minute, what was that? He wasn't in a hole, but a pothole, a chance, a slim chance, but a chance.

He pulled the landfall aside, squeezed through and scrambled along the tunnel in a direction in line with the hills. The cave got bigger. He could stand up straight. He started running again, and half a minute carried him 100 meters in. WHUMP! Grit and soil blasted along the chasm behind him, stung his legs, back and buttocks as fragments struck. They'd realigned a fix on the crater too soon. It had to be Mitrokhin up there. The regular army weren't that good.

With adrenalin pumping, he gave that extra push, but the channel narrowed and lowered. Lack of headroom forced him to his hands and knees. Movement slowed. The ground shook. Tremors shuddered through his arms and legs, and then a blast was followed by a rumble.

The channel collapsed and fallen earth charged towards him. Rapid breathing, his heart raced, but he had to steady his thoughts. He couldn't lose control, but the ground rumbled, ever closer.

Still on his hands and knees, he pushed his back hard against the roof. Earth fell around his feet and legs as the miniature cave fell in. But his body remained rigid, acting as a stanchion. His part of the crown hadn't fallen, but ahead and behind, the rumble continued and the fragile earth crashed down. The structure of the hollow folded, and when it stopped he'd become entombed. Panic engulfed him. There was no way out.