

When Eagles Burn

Maddox, #1

by Jack Hayes,

Published: 2015



Table of Contents

Dedication



Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 51



*For my son, Edward.
Dad loves you.
Let me tell you a story...*

Chapter 1

Rupert Schmitz came out of the London underground and looked both ways. To his right, diagonally across the road, was the small street that led to the target. Naturally, he turned left.

It wasn't so much that he was worried he was being followed—he'd been careful and, if they'd had any idea of his existence, he was sure they'd have picked him up already. It was more that, even if the Helix device worked as expected, he wanted to put it somewhere surreptitious.

After all, if you've got an edge—flaunting it simply causes your enemies to adapt and grow stronger. Better in his mind that the British put the next few weeks down to simple bad luck. They'd become aware of the gravity of their deficit soon enough.

The package under his arm shifted uncomfortably against his suit as he walked. It was weightier than it looked and, although he was no weakling, an hour of carrying it carefully was beginning to take its toll on his muscles.

It was amazing what science could accomplish these days.

"Miniaturization," he muttered to himself. "It is certainly the future."

Scarcely a decade ago, had the technology he carried in this container even been possible, it might have filled a decent-sized room. Now, everything was different. All those components, clicking and working away in unison, slotted neatly into a parcel little bigger than a shoe box.

National Socialism had brought amazing advances to the world.

A woman bumped into his shoulder, almost sending him into a spin. Her first thought was to apologise. His was to immediately bring the box in to his chest to protect it.

Stable, it had to be kept stable.

"Here!" she called. "What kind of a man are you that you don't apologise?"

He pulled the brim of his hat down lower and continued on his way, ignoring her.

A man in a tweed jacket turned in sympathy with the woman: "Oi! You need to watch where you're going."

Schmitz walked faster.

He didn't have time to engage in witless banter with the natives of London. He had a place to be. He had procedures to follow.

And time was ticking.

He weaved through the gap between a nanny, out with a baby in a pram, and a kid playing hooky from school. He crossed the street and disappeared down another side road.

Schmitz knew little of mechanics or engineering. Before the war, he had been a history lecturer. When the hostilities began, he had discovered a new talent—and with it, a new career.

He became a spy for Nazi Germany.

The Fatherland had been ridiculously inept in placing quality men behind enemy lines.

Some turned themselves in. Others swapped sides. One idiot was even captured shortly after arrival by parachute because he walked into a country pub and ordered a beer. When he opened his wallet, the landlord could see that he had a ludicrous amount of cash inside—far more than anyone in England would carry for legitimate purposes.

The police were called immediately.

Schmitz had several advantages over these men.

Although his father had been German, his mother was English. Naturally, he had been brought up speaking both languages. But, for his current profession, there was something about the way he spoke that was far more important than being fluent and accent free: he used English colloquially.

In addition, his background in history meant that he had plenty to talk about that could act as common touchstones with the local people; he knew the shibboleths that so regularly tripped his colleagues.

For all the power of German education, it could never fully cover those basics that being from Albion, every local took for granted: who won the Battle of Hastings? When was it? Which King George had been mad? Why is the Battle of Agincourt so deeply ingrained in the national psyche...?

“A pathetic skirmish of no interest near the end of a long, grinding, attritional war that lasted 136 years,” he mumbled.

The English had a patchwork history, from which they chose to emphasize only the best parts. Never mind that the Hundred Years War was a de facto defeat for the country—ask any Englishman to name two of its battles and Agincourt & Crecy would immediately issue forth.

He shook his head.

His knowledge helped him to blend in.

It didn't hurt that he'd picked up his degree from a London university too.

That gave him the ability to casually mention place names, streets, night spots and even join in discussions about the best place to get breakfast on a Sunday morning.

Moving through a set of gates, Schmitz entered a small garden square. The September sun was dropping low in the sky. Soon it would be dusk—and with it would come a bombing raid the likes of which London had never seen before.

It was not simply that the attack would be any more or less devastating than those of the Blitz—regrettably, the war had been going poorly for the Fatherland since the middle of the year.

Its deadliness lay in another field: proof of concept.

And for that, a very particular target had been chosen.

A few more twists and turns and he had reached his destination.

The Cabinet War Rooms.

Schmitz smiled as he glanced across the street at its entrance. Policemen and guards strolled up and down. Sandbags were piled high around the outer walls, protecting it from a mortar attack.

But the roof—now that was a weak spot.

If you could get a large enough explosive onto it you could kill everyone inside.

Oh, how they'd debated attacking this one godforsaken bastion—thorn in Germany's side—for five years.

But now, finally, they had a means to destroy it for good.

The key was precision targeting.

No one had the technology for that.

No one, until now.

Schmitz estimated the distance from his current position to the wall on his right. It was behind a stone balustrade and then a gap to allow light for the basement windows. He took it in with the merest glimpse so as not to betray his intentions.

Around 2 metres.

This wall, obviously, did not belong to the War Rooms themselves—but that didn't matter. It was flush in line with the front entrance of Churchill's war-time base, which lay further on down the road.

Schmitz mentally factored in an additional three metres, so that the explosion would occur far enough into the flimsy corrugated iron of the entrance's roof.

He turned to face away from the wall and began walking once more.

He silently counted off steps. He'd previously measured his average pace at approximately 70 centimetres. A small amount of mathematics and all he had to do was take 64 strides: then, he would be exactly 50 metres from the target.

He marched the distance, trying to look as unsuspecting as possible. He was now far enough from the War Rooms that he could move more or less freely without arousing the attentions of the guards on its door.

Careful to keep his distance from the entrance the same, he found a bench and sat down.

His biceps ached with relief as he at last rested the Helix device on his lap. The box, sturdily built and made of walnut, sighed as he slid open the lid.

A smirk tickled at his lips.

Fool proof.

All that could be seen once the Helix was open was a tiny light bulb, a switch and a dial. The mechanism was sealed away beneath the wood these were embedded in. He lifted a compass from his pocket, remembering the instructions from his briefing, one week ago.

“Find north and align the dial in its starting position,” he thought, swivelling the box slightly on his lap. “Then turn the dial to point in the direction of the target. Wait until the allotted time, flip the switch and walk away.”

He twisted the knob to point at the War Rooms.

So, so simple.

A quick check of his watch, synchronized with one in Luftwaffe headquarters in Berlin, and with a definitive click, he flicked the switch. The light blinked alive. He slipped the lid back into place and placed the box under the bench, careful to keep the orientation steady.

The compass needle in his hand began to spin wildly in circles.

Good.

The device was transmitting.

He dropped the compass back into his pocket, stood and began to stride along the path away from the target.

“Excuse me, mister.”

The voice of a boy from behind him.

Schmitz quickened his pace.

“Don’t engage,” he thought. “Don’t engage.”

“Hey!” the boy shouted louder. “Mister! You’ve left something!”

A policeman, across to the right, began paying attention to the child. Schmitz turned around. The schoolboy, the one playing hooky from his lessons that he’d seen earlier, was fishing away under the bench, yanking out the box.

Schmitz was now fifteen metres away as the child picked up the Helix device and began to run after him.

“No, no, no,” Schmitz said. “Please put that back!”

The Helix was already triggered. It had to be left in place.

The policeman began strolling across from his beat, a steady route around the square.

“Mister, you forgot your box,” the boy said, jogging towards Schmitz.

Schmitz ran to close the gap.

“Hey!” the kid yelped as Schmitz snatched the walnut container from his hands.

The policeman was coming over now.

They were seven metres from the bench.

And the box had been twisted away from its initial orientation.

Air raid sirens began to sound. Their long, crescendo wail reverberated around the buildings and park. Everyone else in the area started looking to the heavens. Schmitz was focused on the bench.

He pushed the boy aside, knocking him to the pavement.

The policeman started running.

The boy, only trying to be helpful, grabbed Schmitz by the leg in defiance. The German tripped. The Helix device tumbled from his hand, clattering on the tarmac path. Its wooden exterior cracked.

Wires and cogs and gyroscopes inside were clearly visible.

The policeman’s whistle was blowing, but Schmitz couldn’t hear it.

All he kept thinking was:

“It’s five metres from the bench and no longer aligned...”

The explosion shattered windows throughout the square. The soldiers, standing guard in front of the Cabinet War Rooms, were blown from their feet as a V2 rocket landed in the road.

For a few seconds it seemed that dirt and rubble and smoke filled the air. But not as thickly as the noise of that enormous blast.

And then, as the cacophony of the explosion subsided and the screams and shouts for help began to rise, one sound returned louder, stronger, playing above all others: the continuing wail of the air raid siren.

Chapter 2

The hum of conversation in the auditorium was broken by an outburst of raucous clapping as the professor stepped onto the stage. Three rows back, Captain Maddox didn't join in the adulation. His interest was far too serious for that. He pulled a pen from his jacket and began scribbling on the notepad resting on his thigh.

The professor stepped behind a large lectern. Two tapped beats sounded over the room's speakers as he tested the microphone to ensure it was live. The professor cleared his throat and the dampened the clapping by raising his hands.

"In 1869 Friedrich Miescher discovered what he called 'nuclein' in the pus of discarded surgical bandages," he began. "What he at the time thought of as an interesting biological curiosity, we now call 'desoxyribonucleic acid'."

A slide showing bacteria multiplying in a petri dish flickered onto a house-sized screen behind the professor. Maddox subconsciously tugged at the sleeves of his shirt, pulling the cuffs lower to cover the network of scars that ran along his forearms.

Four days ago, they'd erupted on his chest and legs too.

"We still don't know the exact structure," the professor said, changing slides. "But in 1927 Nikolai Koltsov theorised that it comprised giant mirrored strands that passed on hereditary traits—that this 'DNA' was the so-called 'Darwin molecule' that transformed us from apes, the very motor that has made us the civilised men we are today."

The professor paused for effect.

If he'd been expecting a second round of applause at that very moment, he was disappointed. Instead, through the walls of the auditorium, the muffled wail of the air raid sirens began, a dim whisper unpinning the silence.

Faces glanced at one another with concern for their personal safety.

Maddox looked at the ceiling.

"Civilised men, indeed," he muttered.

It was September 1944. The Allies were pushing their advance through Europe—the first town in Germany, Aachen, would soon be under siege. It was becoming rarer to have bombing raids on London.

Rarer, but not unheard of.

How poignant that a German attack should break through to hit London tonight... but also strange. There'd been a raid earlier in the evening. Two in one day? That wasn't just rare—Maddox couldn't remember the last time it had happened.

The professor, sensing his moment was being lost, clicked to another slide and continued with the lecture.

A tap on the shoulder.

Maddox looked sharply round.

“Sir,” a young man, hair glistening slick like a Hollywood star, leaned closely into his ear. “Are you Captain Maddox?”

A few heads turned from the row in front. Behind him, an irritated ‘shh!’

Maddox's eyes narrowed as he nodded curtly.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the professor's voice reached a crescendo. “I am pleased to confirm, we have replicated the February results from Oswald Avery, Colin MacLeod and Maclyn McCarty: DNA is the transforming principle for life as we know it.”

The young man placed a hand on Maddox's upper arm.

“Sir, there's a car outside for you. They're most insistent you come at once.”

“Is there a problem?” the professor asked loudly, stepping around the side of his lectern. “Because, please, feel free to continue your conversation. I'll just pick up where I was once you're finished.”

Maddox raised his eyes to heaven and sighed.

“Tell them I'll be there directly,” he said to the boy.

His pen fitted neatly in his top pocket as he replaced the cap and slid it back in.

“My humble apologies for the interruption, professor,” Maddox said.

“No, please,” the professor sneered, jerking at the bow tie around his neck. “Feel welcome to butt in to my lectures any time—it's a free country after all.”

Maddox grabbed his hat and placed it squarely on his head.

“Absolutely,” he said. “And I'm afraid I have to go and fight for that freedom right now.”

* * * * *

“Godforsaken country,” Major Nieder said, kicking a rock from the mouth of the mine entrance.

With the well-aimed strike of a champion footballer, the pebble whistled out across the snowy clearing and into the pine trees. There was a loud and echoing ‘crack’ as it stuck a trunk.

Beck sighed.

They were technically behind Russian lines in what was once northern Finland and had in the last few years regularly swapped back and forth in ownership between the Finns and the Soviets.

It was conceivable Nieder's impatient toe punt, and the resulting noise, could arouse the interest of an enemy patrol, snipers, or frankly, even a hungry bear.

Nieder continued to moan.

“It's early September,” he said, leaning on one of the mine's supporting beams. “It's dawn at 4am and stays light again until almost midnight—and yet there's still bloody snow everywhere. It's bitterly cold except at midday—and the wind...”

“It’s been a poor summer,” Beck replied. “Ordinarily, the snow would have retreated, even here. But after winters like the one that scuppered us at Stalingrad, this pathetic summer has barely begun melting the two year build-up of ice on the lakes here.”

Nieder waved his arms.

“Stalingrad,” he spat. “That was the beginning of the end for Hitler’s Reich. The Eagle is burning, Beck. We’re desperate. But never forget – that from desperation, power can be harvested.”

Beck watched Nieder tramp across to the one patch of mossy grass that had managed to poke a hole through the crag and talus of the rocky slope. Beck smirked. The major should have known better. A plume of mosquitos rose up around his body.

“Damn it,” Nieder shouted. “Walk across one clump out of the snow and they swarm like clouds. I swear if we weren’t here I don’t know how they wouldn’t starve...”

Beck shook his head and tuned out the rest of the rant. He’d heard it all before. Of course it was inhospitable. What did Nieder expect? They were north of the Arctic Circle, for God’s sake.

Beck returned his attention to the pile of gems on his lap.

Putting his magnifying eye-piece back in, he lifted another diamond and examined it closely. For a rough stone, it was a beautiful piece. He rolled it between his fingers, allowing the ever present sunshine to glint through its facets. It was large too. In peace time it would be worth a fortune. If cut well, he estimated this one lump could produce three near flawless one-carat stones—as well as a half dozen of lesser quality.

He sighed.

“Worthless.”

He tossed it down into the growing pile by his feet.

Nieder turned and placed his hands on his hips.

“Still nothing?”

“Well,” Beck shrugged. “If we were opening a jewellers, we’d be rich men. I wouldn’t throw these away just yet, we may as well keep them for ourselves for after the war. They’ll raise a fair price then.”

“Yes,” Nieder replied, the already strained patience in his voice now close to snapping, “but for our purposes now?”

“Like I said,” Beck replied, lifting another stone for examination. “Worthless.”

Nieder stormed away from the mine, down the gentle scree slope, towards the haphazard collection of camouflaged tents. Lieutenant Beck saw his commanding officer stride away and bit his lip. He could guess what was coming. It wasn’t the Finn’s fault—but better the major took his frustrations out on someone else. Beck had seen what the man was capable of too many times in the last eighteen months.

Nieder disappeared from view as he entered one of the tents.

The sound of rattling inside the canvas.

Nieder hauled the chained Finn out into the open by his hair.

Beck glanced nervously around the forest. It was okay treating the captured Soviet labourers like that—but a Finn? Technically, they were allies of the Nazis.

At least, so long as both sides fought the Russians... Beck was no idiot: he knew it was a marriage of convenience.

Still, if Nieder were caught by one of the Finnish guerrilla groups treating one of their own this way, things would turn ugly. And the country was so damned small, it seemed everyone here knew everyone else.

With a flick of his arm, Nieder threw the Finn to the ground. The young Finn, no more than nineteen, skidded across the loose rocks, scraping the skin of his face as he fell. Not that it would be possible to tell, in amongst the counterpane of bruises and knife scars Nieder had already left all over the boy's body.

"I've told you," the Finn stuttered. "This is the place. This is the place."

Arms handcuffed behind his back, ankles chained together, the battered kid scrabbled uneasily to his knees. There were blood stains across his shirt and trousers. It would be freezing out here without a coat.

"And I've told you," Nieder replied, "I won't be satisfied until we find more of what you were arrested with."

"It was here," the Finn said. "I swear it was here. I didn't know they were special. I just found the outcrop at the bottom of the shaft, exactly where I showed you. If there was one deposit, there must be others."

Nieder pulled his Luger from his holster and held it to the boy's head.

"What are you not telling us?" he shouted. "Where are they?"

"I don't know! I've told you everything."

"Then you're of no further use to us," Nieder spat.

The bullet scattered the Finn's brains across the stony slope. The echo was loud enough to shake some of the snow from the branches of the nearest trees. Nieder kicked the body down into the slag pile away from the mine, then wiped his boot clean on the snow.

"For Christ's sake, Nieder," Beck sighed again. "Stop with all the noise. If you bring the Red Army down on us, we'll be in trouble."

Nieder glanced around, as though merely saying their name would conjure them like Beelzebub from the ether.

"Let them come," he said. "It would be more worthwhile than sitting here shitting with our frozen arses between these bare rocks."

Chapter 3

Captain Maddox tapped the window partition between himself and the driver of the limousine.

"Slow down," he said. "You're driving too fast for a blackout."

"I'm sorry, sir," the driver replied. "I have my orders."

"We won't get there any faster if we get stopped by a warden because you're behaving like a maniac," Maddox said. "Or if we have to spend a couple of hours waiting for you to be arraigned because you've knocked some hapless bastard over."

"Again, sir, I'm sorry—but I have orders."

All Maddox could see of the driver was the back of his head.

The captain's jaw locked.

"Look at my face," he said coldly.

A set of hazel eyes peeped at him in driver's mirror.

For a second their gazes locked.

"It's the last time I'm going to ask you nicely," Maddox said. "Slow. Down."

He saw the Adam's apple in the driver's throat shift with a nervous gulp.

"Yes sir," came the reply.

The driver eased off the accelerator.

Maddox shifted back into his seat.

It had been a while since he'd seen London under blackout restrictions. German raids were becoming so infrequent, there was even talk that soon the draconian rules would be eased – a new system of 'dim-out' would be introduced.

Maddox tilted his head and saw the sparkling glitter of the stars. Before the war, you couldn't look up and see the sky at night in London, unless you were miles out in the countryside, like Ealing or Wimbledon.

It would be a shame to see it disappear again.

But at least the number of road deaths might return to more normal levels.

How many civilians had died, not from German bombs, but preventable accidents caused by poor planning during the wartime?

Maddox toyed with his wedding ring, spinning it on his finger.

It didn't turn as easily as it used to. Either he was getting fatter or the gold was shrinking. He smiled. Olivia, god bless her, would likely insist it was the latter—never letting on that he had gained a few pounds.

"You're not eating as healthily as you should," he mumbled one of her long used phrases, "and we're all getting older."

The car pulled to a halt outside a nondescript doorway between two shops on Oxford Street.

"Thank you," Maddox said and stepped out onto the pavement.

Two other cars were pulling away from the curb.

Interesting.

Whatever had happened must be big if so many were being recalled urgently.

He moved across to the entrance and stepped inside.

* * * * *

Captain Komelkov raised his arm.

Behind him the boisterous grumble of tank engines eased as his column crawled to a standstill. He wearily ran a hand across his chin. A week of stubble bristled under his glove.

"Damn it," he muttered.

Standing commandingly with the top of his torso poking out of a Soviet tank, he had an excellent vantage point. Normally, he wouldn't take the risk of being so exposed—Soviet tank commanders made for easy targets to well-trained Finnish snipers.

But it had been claustrophobic inside the belly of his T34. They'd been rumbling across half disused tracks in the tundra for days. He'd decided to chance a 15 minute breath of fresh air.

Thank the Lord that he had.

In the distance, he could see a felled conifer across the road.

“If you can call this sack of shit through the trees a road,” he grouched.

He knocked three times on the metal.

“Wake up, Timur,” he shouted down to the driver. “What do you think?”

“Captain?”

“Another Finnish ambush?” Komelkov asked.

The Captain’s eyes scanned sceptically along the snowdrifts that were banked behind two rows of pines. The Finns were out there, somewhere. Just watching. Waiting.

He knew it.

“Yes, sir,” Timur replied, his voice metallic as it bounced around the inside of the tank. “It’s almost certainly a trap.”

“Bloody herring-eating inbreds.”

Komelkov spat over the side into the snow.

At least it wasn’t winter.

His saliva would have frozen solid before it hit the ground.

With a population of barely 3.7 million, Finland’s tiny bands of guerrillas on skis had somehow kept the might of the Soviet beast at bay.

Not even the Germans had managed that.

They did it by ambushing and killing Russians in traps like the one that lay ahead. First to go would be the tank at the back of the column, preventing them from reversing out. Next would be his tank at the front.

“Should I turn the convoy and drive us off the road?” Timur asked.

Idiot.

“Only if you want us all to drown,” Komelkov closed his eyes with irritation.

The surrounding land was known to Russians as *torfyanoye boloto*—literally: *peat swamp*. Every northern nation had a word for such wet, marshy soil—and usually it was regarded in some way as derogatory. For Americans, it was Muskeg—found mostly across Canada and Alaska.

Personally, Komelkov preferred the English term: ‘bog’.

It had the suitable second connotation of ‘toilet’.

That additional meaning for the word certainly adequately described Komelkov’s feelings for this annoyance in Russia’s Westward advance.

He stared again at the giant tree ahead, lazily slapped across the road that just happened to have fallen so as to block it perfectly.

He shook his head.

Yes, the Finns had planned their choke hold well.

Komelkov turned and looked at the other tanks in his convoy. He’d been ordered to secure this part of Petsamo against the local scum—and what had they given him?

Two BT-5s and two T-26s.

He could reasonably safely charge on in his own vehicle. The Finns were lightly armed – as was necessitated by their hit and run tactics. At best, they might muster a grenade or two, perhaps even a heavy duty gun like a Lahti L-39, if the weight could be tolerated.

This late in the war, the Finns had run out of just about everything else.

And a Lahti stood little chance of penetrating his T34's thick armour. It was, in Komelkov's opinion, the best tank of any available on either the Eastern or Western fronts.

But those other buckets of bolts in his squad?

Light and easy to manoeuvre on the fields of the Ukraine – they were a liability up here in the frozen wastelands of the north. Their plate sides were little better than cardboard to even the weaponry used by the Finns. Meanwhile, their speed was made useless by the tactic of blockading ice roads and hemming in the convoy.

Narrow lanes like this one played to all their weaknesses and none of their strengths.

“What do you want to do?” Temur asked.

The tank at the back of the convoy exploded in a fireball so large, Komelkov felt the flames sear his arms even though it was at least 100 metres away.

“Attack!” he shouted.

There was no time to run—and nowhere to run too.

He leapt out of the turret and bounced down onto the ground.

Jarring pain shot up through his aging and frozen knees.

He grimaced and pushed on.

“Time to die, you wretched, tick-infested scrotal sacks.”

He'd drilled his men well for just such an eventuality. Some crews, not expecting to be trapped, fell apart under fire and were annihilated. Not his. The turrets of the tanks began their grinding turn. In seconds, their fully primed cannons began blasting at the nearby snow banks.

As Komelkov darted forward, a sniper's bullet intended for his skull ricocheted off the gun hatch above.

Far too slow.

“Hit the tank at the back,” he grinned. “Then take out the one at the front.”

Short on PanzerFausts, the Finns had opted to use their only explosive charges on the tank at the rear of the convoy—exactly as he'd expected. That left them with only one option on the front vehicle—try and kill Komelkov himself with a marksman's round.

“Unfortunately for you,” the Russian hissed as he zigzagged to avoid being caught by the raking machine gun fire, “I am not your usual wet-behind-the-ears yokel from Yakutsk.”

He leapt through a gap between two pines at the side of the lane. Wood chippings spattered around him as the Finnish partisans tried to take him down. His arms cushioned his landing. He rolled. Up on one knee, he brought his submachine gun to bear.

A Finnish guerrilla, dressed in his arctic white uniform, saw him coming and stood.

Too late.

With a squeeze of his trigger, Komelkov caught the Finn in his left knee. The power of the weapon did exactly what he expected—it severed the leg straight through, like a butcher's cleaver through a finger.

The Finn toppled with a gut wrenching scream.

Komelkov closed the gap, shooting two more partisans in the backs as they tried to fire on the tanks, which had opened up with a volley of shells on the remaining Finnish positions.

Komelkov heard the shouts go up for 'retreat'.

"Not so fast," he muttered. "I've a taste for your peasant blood now."

He saw one Finnish commando rise on the far side of the road, frantically grabbing his ski poles and pushing off to leave. Komelkov extended the stock on his PPS-43 and hunched the machine gun into his shoulder.

He aimed carefully along the sights as the Finn raced hurriedly away.

A rapid burst of bullets.

The fleeing soldier's back erupted in red. His arms flew out to the side like some mock crucifixion as he was hurled forward by the force of the slugs.

As was usual with these ambushes, in seconds it was over.

The Finns came out of nowhere, then vanished into the snow.

Except this time, they'd got more than they bargained for.

Komelkov had counted eight different attackers. He'd personally killed three and wounded a fourth. That left this particular commando group at fifty percent of their original strength.

Behind the pines, back on the road, he could hear the crackle of flames from the first tank to be hit by the attack. He peered across at the blackening hulk, smoking billowing between the pines into the sky.

"Good," he grinned.

That was the vehicle he'd placed the mission's Commissar in. All Russian squads these days had to carry with them a loyalty officer to ensure their devotion to the Communist cause. With that annoyance dead, Komelkov could actually run the platoon the way he wanted without constantly worrying about all the political bullshit.

"Sir!" Temur poked through the trees and ran up his Captain. "I thought we'd lost you in the attack."

The young man's breathing was heavy—as only an unfit tank driver's could be.

"Lost me?" Komelkov bellowed. "I just saved your worthless hides! By diving out here, I drew their fire. They couldn't be sure whether to keep hitting the tanks or take out me."

"But it was a heavy loss sir," Temur replied. "We lost Commissar Roshenko..."

"Oh do shut up," Komelkov waved him quiet. "Now, where did that one I only wounded go?"

"One is still alive?" Temur asked, in voice rising with the high pitch of fear.

Komelkov put his gun back over his shoulder.

"Imbecile," he grunted.

"Sir?"

Komelkov reached down to his belt and withdrew his survival knife.

"You always leave one alive."

Chapter 4

The central hub of the Special Operations Executive was permanently manned. SOE headquarters and its many mission control rooms, briefing arenas and dormitories were in constant use. Even so, Maddox had never seen the main communications area so busy this late into the evening.

He looked at the clocks that ran the length of the east wall. They marked out time in a score of major theatres from the Sydney to Delhi, Paris to Cairo. The building ran, supposedly, on a three shift system comprising 8 hours for each of Asia, Europe and the Americas.

Technically, they should be half way through the shift associated with the Americas and East Pacific. Typically, that was the quietest of the three, unless there was a big European night operation on.

In practice, there was a lot of overlap between the different shifts and most people in the building worked ten to twelve hours straight.

But even so...

There was a high-pitched scraping noise as an information coordinator he knew called Janine pushed her chair back quickly and ran from her desk to one of the side rooms—General Peters' office. She clutched a handful of loosely scabbled documents.

She knocked and went straight in.

Janine was normally assigned to the Asia shift. She shouldn't be at her station for at least another five hours.

Maddox stalked through the room.

High pitched blips and dahs of telegraphy could be heard, leaking out from the headphones of signallers. Fingers tapped furiously. Metal on metal.

Maddox closed his eyes and listened.

The air was abuzz.

"Maddox!" a voice called out.

Caught up in trying to listen to the codes, Maddox couldn't place where his name was called from at first.

"Captain Maddox! Stop ear wiggling and come over here."

Maddox pushed his way past two secretaries, politely excusing himself, and saw, standing on tip toes, a security officer trying to peer above the heads of everyone present.

"McCallum," he said, reaching out for a bracing handshake. "What the hell is going on?"

"There's been a serious development," McCallum replied, his lips drawing thin. "Come with me."

Maddox had met McCallum shortly after being drafted. The dour Scotsman worked for Section 5 of Military Intelligence. He was part of the teams that handled counterespionage and domestic security for the United Kingdom.

In short: McCallum was a spy catcher.

He led Maddox out to the back staircase and down a sharp flight of stairs. They were going all the way to the 'dungeon', an overly dramatic name for the set of interrogation and debriefing rooms three stories beneath the ground.

“This evening,” McCallum said, “about four hours ago, a V2 rocket very nearly killed Churchill and several high ranking members of both the government and armed forces.”

Maddox swore in disbelief.

“Quite,” McCallum replied. “It was only by chance that the plan was disturbed. A boy moved the targeting device – codenamed ‘Helix’ by the Germans. By handling the box, the kid shifted it out of alignment with the Cabinet War Rooms. The V2 landed around 50 yards away, in the middle of the road. Some windows were broken, a car was destroyed and there’s a nasty hole we’re blaming on a gas leak—but, fortunately, no-one was killed.”

“Targeting device?” Maddox said. “Is that even possible for a V2?”

“The Germans have been working flat out on it for years now,” McCallum replied. “Essentially, it’s a shoebox-sized container that has to be positioned by someone on the ground so that it lines up with due north. The agent puts it a prearranged distance from the object he wants to hit—it seems to be about 55 yards. The operative then, at the required moment, flicks a switch and the box emits a radio signal. It doesn’t last long—the power output required is enormous and drains the battery in less than a minute.”

“But you’d need a dish the size of a house to broadcast all the way to Germany and a V2 could never get that far in time.”

“That’s the clever part,” McCallum said, stopping on the stairs for a moment to catch his breath. “The only reason it works is that they run an air raid at the same time.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Actually, it’s genius,” McCallum replied. “The box couldn’t broadcast a signal that could be heard far away, so in amongst the planes on the air raid is one specially designed to pick up the weak pulse. Inside, next to the radio listener, there’s an operator who can pass and relay information on to the V2, which is launched so that its arrival over the target—in our case London—coincides with the raid.”

“It would require split second timing,” Maddox said. “But no worse than we do on many other specialist missions. And I suppose the plane hidden in amongst the others on the raid can be hollowed out and fitted with kit specially to signal the rocket.”

“We estimate the V2 can be ‘remote controlled’ very precisely almost guaranteeing a hit within a twenty by twenty yard range,” McCallum said.

“Amazing,” Maddox lifted his hand to his lips. “Press a button in Berlin and you can obliterate a predetermined target in England. It’s fantastical.”

“It’s worse,” McCallum said. “Stick a big enough warhead on the top of your missile and, if you know roughly where the person you want to hit is...”

“Long distance assassination,” Maddox nodded slowly. “Any speech attended by any dignitary, any dinner, any meeting of people together in a room—the more together, the better—the paranoia the Germans could create would be enormous.”

“Exactly,” McCallum replied.

“Why not just use the targeting beacon to direct the air raid itself?” Maddox asked.

“Well,” McCallum said, “take the target they attempted to hit tonight: the Cabinet War Rooms. The Germans found the building’s only weak spot was the 50 square yard corrugated iron roof at the entrance. Try and bomb that with an air raid...”

“...And you’re just as likely to bury the target under rubble from the surrounding damage of any stray ordinance that miss the target,” Maddox finished the thought. “Whereas, with pin-point precision targeting... it’s brilliant.”

They continued down the stairs and, passing two armed guards, entered ‘the dungeon’. McCallum took Maddox to the third door on the right—the observation lounge for interrogation room six.

The lights in this antechamber were purposefully off. In the far wall, there was a double glazed panel that looked into an oppressively well-lit but Spartan room. The change in illumination allowed people in the observation lounge to keep an eye on those being grilled in the other area.

McCallum reached over and switched on a speaker.

He needn’t have bothered.

The interrogation room contained a solitary individual, his hands secured to the desk in front of him. Maddox took in the man in a single sweeping glance. Late forties, the bushy unkempt hair of a professor, high cheek bones—Germanic probably, with a hint of Scandinavian in his past.

Despite the depth of his predicament, the German sat bolt upright, eyes unblinking as he stared into what, to him, was the endless black nothingness that led to where Maddox stood.

“That was the spy we caught planting the Helix transmitter,” McCallum said.

“And the device itself?” Maddox asked.

McCallum gestured toward a bench that ran alongside the room.

“You can look but don’t touch,” he said. “The boffins are salivating at the opportunity to go to town on it.”

“It’s a little embarrassing for the Germans that they allowed it to be captured,” Maddox said. “A flaw in their plan?”

“Hardly,” McCallum replied.

The Scotsman leaned across and, using a pencil, tapped two phials bolted into the sides of the Helix that connected down to a small copper tube.

“On one side they’ve got a container of picric acid. The other has sulphuric. Once the radio signal depletes the battery, a seal on the phials breaks. The liquids merge here, causing the box to burst into flames.”

“An upgraded pencil bomb,” Maddox said. “Ingenious”

“A what?” McCallum asked.

“German spy Franz von Rintelen terrorized Allied shipping early in the Great War with very similar devices,” Maddox said. “He sank several ships and destroyed thousands of tons of valuable cargo. It looks like this is a modernization of the original idea.”

He glanced through the glass at the spy again.

“What’s his name?” Maddox asked.

“Schmitz,” McCallum replied.

Maddox chuckled.

‘Smith’.

What a perfectly bland name for the spy who almost killed Churchill.

Maddox examined the man's defiant features, then peered down into the box of gyroscopes and wires.

He looked at McCallum.

"All this is fascinating," Maddox said, "but I have to ask: what's going on?"

McCallum raised an eyebrow.

"As I was telling you," McCallum said. "There was an attack on..."

"Let me phrase it another way," Maddox said, waving his colleague silent. "Assuming this V2 attack on the Cabinet War Rooms was in the first air raid this afternoon, you've had at most four hours to capture this guy, bring him here, try to extract information and find out about remote control rockets—incidentally, according to you, before the boffins have had a chance to examine this Helix device."

McCallum smiled.

"Now, I know you McCallum," Maddox said. "I know you're excellent at your job. But you're not that good. And this Schmitz guy you've got in there—to get this information that quickly, you'd have had to break him. This, I will say as a definite fact: that man has not been broken yet. There's not a mark to his body and he sits their defiant as Hitler. This is not a person who's been spilling the beans for the last few hours."

McCallum's smile broadened. He liked Maddox—the captain was direct: you always knew where you stood. Others in the SOE could learn a thing or two from his blunt honesty.

The Scot half-heartedly and rubbed his jaw.

"You're right," he said. "We've been working on this for the past month—trying to capture Schmitz and locate the other five boxes he's brought into the country."

"Five boxes?" Maddox replied.

"Actually, there were a total of seven," McCallum said. "There are five more. Two were used this evening."

"Two?" Maddox asked, alarmed. "What was the other target?"

"Buckingham Palace," McCallum replied. "After we found the first box, we beefed up security around sensitive sites. We got lucky. The box was found in St James' Park."

"And the agent who planted it?"

"Still at large," McCallum said. "So there's still at least one other person out there with a bunch of these Helix devices, roaming the country."

Maddox was silent while he considered the situation.

"Why bring Schmitz to the SOE?" Maddox asked. "Why not take him to your facilities at Section 5—or even those of Section 19? We're commandoes. We're not internal intelligence. Hunting these guys is your job."

"Indeed it is," McCallum said. "But someone's going to have to stop more of these things coming our way—and that is the role we need you for. Someone's going to have to go behind enemy lines and disrupt the supply chain, otherwise we risk Helix devices cropping up in London, Paris or at military sites. God forbid: they find a way to do it without the attached bombing raid and they start hitting Washington DC or New York."

"Makes sense," Maddox said. "So what's the story?"

“Would you believe me if I told you Brigadier Carter wanted to tell you himself?”

“Carter?” Maddox frowned. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“You say that now,” McCallum replied. “But, well, all I’ll say is: I did not request you for this mission. Carter insisted.”

A few seconds of silence.

“Why do I get the feeling this is one mission I may not be coming back from?” Maddox asked.

Chapter 5

Carter ignored Maddox when he entered the office. The Brigadier’s nose was firmly fixed on a set of folders marked: ‘Operation Boreas’.

Blackout curtains had been fully drawn over the large windows that faced south from the building. In daytime, they provided a beautiful panoramic of the roofs of Regent Street and Piccadilly.

Maddox eased himself into the leather seat opposite Carter.

The bastard had the merest glimmer of a grin.

Maddox braced himself for the worst.

“I understand you’ve spoken with McCallum?”

“I have,” Maddox replied.

“So, you understand the importance of stopping the production process for these Helix boxes?”

Maddox nodded curtly.

Around this weasel, you spoke as little as you possibly could.

“We could hit the factories,” Carter said. “But that would be pointless. The Germans could simply up sticks and build them elsewhere. But there is a key bottleneck. Apparently the electronics require a vital component that the Nazis have no natural access to.”

“Which is?”

“Diamonds,” Carter replied. “Not your normal white kind. The scientists tell me they need blue ones. Something about the fact that they have a trace amount of boron gives them unusual electrical properties.”

“And that’s required to make the transmitters and timers on the Helix so damn small?”

“Exactly,” Carter said.

“Diamonds aren’t common,” Maddox said. “But blue diamonds? Where are you hoping to send us? Back to Malaya? Congolese Africa? Ceylon?”

“You’re right, at least in one respect,” Carter interrupted. “There are only a handful of places where you can get the required stones—and even in those spots, they’re unspeakably rare, which is why the Germans have so far only been able to make a handful of the devices. To break the supply chain and prevent any more being built, I’m sending you and your team to Petsamo, in North Finland.”

Maddox sat bolt upright.

“Are you insane?”

“Don’t forget who you’re speaking to,” Carter snapped.

“My men are jungle and desert specialists,” Maddox replied. “We’ve fought in Burma, North Africa and Sicily. We’ve even done France. But Petsamo? That’s inside the Arctic Circle. You want the Kompani Linge—the Norwegian Independents. Linge’s NORIC 1 trains specifically for Scandinavia. For God’s sake: that’s why the SOE has them.”

“I’ve picked you,” Carter replied.

“It’s September,” Maddox replied. “North Finland’s light bloody twenty hours a day—if not more. And that’s not to mention the cross-country skiing. That’s a designated skill. I mean... my team can do it—they’ve had limited training, but it just isn’t...”

“I’ve picked you,” Carter said more forcefully. “You will take your usual squad—Patterson, Marlowe and Fallon—and go to Petsamo, taking with you four additional men I’ve specially selected.”

“Four men you’ve picked?”

Maddox’s eyebrows rose.

“This just gets better and better,” he laughed sarcastically. “I don’t even get to choose the men I go into battle with.”

“That’s right,” Carter replied, his crooked grin enlarging. “You will lead a newly incorporated squad, headed by Lieutenant Charles Walker, comprising sergeants Shield, Conley and ‘Sledge’ McKlenna.”

“None of them are Arctic specialists, either,” Maddox replied. “McKlenna is a bloody Australian. He’s another jungle expert—I fought with him in Burma.”

“Good,” Carter said. “So you’ll at least know one of them. You will go to Finland. You will stop the Germans. You will destroy their mine. You will capture the diamonds and ensure no one else can ever get access to digging out more.”

Maddox ran his hands across his face in frustration. His eyes suddenly felt very tired. His head filled with questions – something was very wrong.

“We’re not even the best placed people to go,” he said slowly. “The Finns are in the middle of the Continuation War with the Russians. Given that the Soviets are supposed to be our allies, wouldn’t it be better to get them to make the attack? They’re at least already on the ground and used to the conditions.”

Carter flopped the folder down onto the desk in front of Maddox.

“Of course,” the general said, “if you want to refuse this mission I’m sure the question of cowardice won’t be raised, again.”

Maddox snorted.

Check and mate.

Take the mission, be force fed an inadequate team, and head off to a near certain death—or risk having the past dragged up.

Maddox stood and snatched the folder from the table.

“I was cleared,” he shot back. “Your nephew’s death had nothing to do with me. He disobeyed a direct order and got himself shot by a sniper.”

Carter leaned back in his chair. His lips drew tight as the grin disappeared from his face.

“And don’t go crying to your uncle to save your hide,” the Brigadier said. “Now get out of my office. A plane leaves from Biggin Hill in four hours to take you to Edinburgh. All the details are in the file.”

Maddox stormed for the door and stopped as he turned the handle. He stared directly at Carter.

"I won't forget this," he said.

Carter's face remained placid.

"I hope not," the Brigadier replied. "I hope you remember it for the rest of your very short life."

Chapter 6

Komelkov cleaned the blade of his knife in the snow and stepped back from the mangled corpse of the Finnish freedom fighter. Temur had turned away in disgust as the captain extracted information on the location of the Germans and local guerrilla positions.

"It is not tasteful work, Temur," Komelkov said, walking back to the tanks on the road. "But it is necessary. We now have a good lead on where the enemy lies and can proceed with our journey."

"If he told you the truth," Temur said.

"You really think he withstood all that I did and lied?"

Temur said nothing but shook his head slowly.

Komelkov squinted as the sun's low angle in the sky caused it to reflect off the snow with a powerful glare. The wind rustled through the pine trees, shaking free droplets of water from the melting frost.

If he didn't have to endure the gnawing temperatures, boggy fields, bile-ridden fighting and the stench of sitting all day long in a heated tin can with his unwashed men, he might almost be able to find it in his heart to call this country beautiful.

Almost.

"When you asked him the questions," Temur asked slowly, "you focused more on the Germans' positions and strength, rather than the Finns."

Komelkov glanced back across to the smoking wreck of the Commissar's tank. With that little shit out of the way, there was no reason to keep his men in the dark any longer.

"We've not been ordered out to the frozen arse end of nowhere simply to kill a few mongrel bumpkins playing at soldiers," he said. "The reason the Germans want this region so badly is for the minerals. Everything their precious Fatherland lacks can be found up here, shat by God under the rock and ice."

"We're here to secure the nickel mines?" Temur asked.

"Eventually," Komelkov replied. "But we have orders that a particular operation must be captured and neutralized first."

"What is it?"

"Something that will make the generals who sent us here very rich men," Komelkov replied. "And in Soviet Russia, a happy general is a wonderful thing."

Chapter 7

Maddox climbed out of the limousine and slammed the door.

He had spent the journey from Oxford Street to Biggin Hill examining the feeble map work and intelligence he'd been given to accompany the mission. His fist clenched involuntarily around the papers, crumpling the outside of the folder in his hand.

It was dark on the airfield and all around him the ghostly outlines of various planes belonging to bomber command could be seen silhouetted against the stars.

Clouds of summer midges danced about the lights of the aircraft hangar. Inside he counted six people. Three would be his usual team of men: Patterson, Marlowe and Fallon. So who was missing from Lieutenant Walker's group of four?

As he stormed across the tarmac, the security barrier on the airstrip's front gate rose to attention. A lorry sped across to his position. It pulled up just as he reached the hangar doors, its wheels skidding to a halt and leaving black streaks of rubber behind them. Four redcaps—military policemen—climbed out of the rear. The fifth, the truck's driver glanced across at Maddox. He had a dark purple bruise swelling around his right eye.

"Captain Maddox?" the leader of the red caps asked.

"Someone's in a hurry," Maddox raised an eyebrow.

"I understand you are to take delivery of... this..." the red cap closed his eyes and swallowed hard, "sergeant?"

Two more red caps hopped down from the back canopy of the vehicle. Between them was 'Sledge' McKlenna. The beefy Australian was easily a third bigger than even the largest of the men. Other than looking like he was working off the last of a mighty drinking session, he appeared much as Maddox remembered.

"Maddy!" Sledge smiled.

The red caps bristled.

"Pack it in, Sledge," Maddox said. "We've serious work to do."

"So you are Captain Maddox?" the red cap repeated. "We were ordered to retrieve Sergeant McKlenna and bring him here with immediate effect. He was in the company of two ladies in a drinking establishment in Whitechapel and proved somewhat recalcitrant to the suggestion."

"I take it that's why your driver is sporting a black eye?" Maddox asked.

"Yes, sir," the red cap replied. "I wish to have Sergeant McKlenna relieved from your mission so that I can press formal charges against him. We've another man we had to drop off at hospital en route to this location. The sergeant saw fit to punch him. Knocked him out cold with a single blow."

Sledge grinned.

"No," Maddox said.

"No?"

"No," Maddox repeated. "Sergeant McKlenna is required for an immediate mission behind enemy lines. There isn't time to find someone to replace his expertise. You'll have to press those charges if he makes it back alive."

The two red caps holding Sledge released their firm clasp of his arms. He waved them goodbye as he strolled across to Maddox.

“Sledge,” Maddox said.

“Yes, boss?”

“What did I just say?”

“To ‘pack it in’?” Sledge replied.

“Now blow your friends a last goodnight kiss and come with me,” Maddox said.

“Yes, sir,” Sledge saluted and clipped his heels to attention.

The stocky Australian puckered his lips and blew a kiss at the red caps as they piled back into the lorry. There was a low rumble of cursing from the leaving soldiers.

“And Sledge,” Maddox whispered. “Call me ‘Maddy’ again and I’ll break both your legs. Are we on the same page?”

“Yes, sir,” Sledge said, bowing his head. “Sorry sir.”

The bulk of the hangar was taken up by a de Havilland Flamingo. A pilot and navigator were walking slowly around the craft, checking they were happy with it for the flight up to Edinburgh. There, Maddox and his team would select the kit they required from a set of storage rooms attached to the airfield. While they pulled what they needed and took parachutes, the plane would refuel for the hazardous trip to Finland.

Maddox admired the craft. Only 14 of them had been built. That number had dwindled as the high-wing plane had lost some of its number to the enemy fire, while others had been cannibalised for spare parts.

Maddox rubbed his fingers on the outside of her skin, feeling the aluminium, cold in the night air, underneath his fingertips. It was the first all-metal aircraft built by de Havilland. In these cost-conscious times, designs had shifted to cheaper builds. It was a privilege to see one up close.

“Admiring her?” the pilot asked, stepping away from the propellers.

“She’s a beauty,” Maddox said. “You been flying her long?”

“Eighteen months,” the pilot said. “She’s a good girl. She’ll get you where you need tonight.”

Maddox’s brow furrowed. He took a few paces back and ran his eyes along the plane’s contours.

“What?” the pilot asked.

“There’re no extra fuel tanks,” Maddox remarked. “The range on a Flamingo has got to be around 1,350 miles. But our drop site is almost that far from Edinburgh. Are you planning on this being a one way trip?”

“No, no,” the pilot replied, tapping his own hand on the hull. “She’s got the range.”

Maddox ducked slightly to check the de Havilland’s underside.

“No,” he said slowly. “She really hasn’t.”

The pilot’s mouth straightened uncomfortably.

“You can’t refuel in Norway or Finland,” Maddox said. “They’re occupied...”

The pilot glanced nervously at his colleague.

“Sweden?” Maddox laughed. “We’ve managed to set up an airstrip in rural northern Sweden?”

There had been tales that the supposedly neutral Sweden, worried about the invasions of its three Scandinavian neighbours, had been slowly tipping its hand toward the Allies—but this was the first time Maddox had heard a tacit admission of it. At the most, he'd suspected the country hosted training grounds for the Norwegian resistance.

Any more than that and they risked a Nazi backlash.

Perhaps the success of the D-Day landings had given them the window they needed?

"Like I said," the pilot replied. "We'll have no problems getting you where you need to go."

Maddox nodded understandingly and headed further into the hangar.

Close to the side wall, a large table had been laid out. Around it, the six other men selected for the mission clustered. They were swapping small talk as they got to know one another. He could hear them asking in turn if anyone had details on their mission.

No one had.

Upon seeing Maddox enter, they broke apart.

"Captain Maddox?" A lithe lieutenant asked. "Charles Walker. A pleasure. I've heard many good things about your previous missions."

Maddox shook his hand.

"The feeling's mutual," Maddox replied.

He went on to grip the palms of the two other new members of his team: Conley and Shield. He then pulled a map of Petsamo from the dossier under his arm and laid it out across the table.

The chart refused to lie flat along its creases, a sign it had been folded for a long time without being examined. The paper crinkled as he tried to straighten the artificial ridges and troughs. In one corner there was a coffee stain. Underneath the brown ring was a date: 1907.

"This is the region we're going to," Maddox said. "I'm sorry all of you have been brought here without warning. Events this afternoon have moved swiftly and, while this mission is a top priority for the SOE, it was felt we had to move now before a narrow window of opportunity closed."

"North Finland?" Patterson asked. "Seriously?"

"I agree," Fallon said. "That's an unusual choice of place for us to be sent, particularly with no time to train for the conditions."

"I'm aware of that," Maddox replied. "I know you'll all have concerns—believe me when I say, I have them too."

Maddox walked around the table and leaned across to point and run his finger along a set of contour lines that indicated a sharp bluff.

"Our target is somewhere along this ridge," Maddox said. "It's a mine operated by the Nazis and used to take valuable minerals back to the Fatherland to aid in producing a deadly weapon."

"No precision on the target?" Lieutenant Walker asked. "We don't know its exact location."

Maddox tapped the date mark in the corner of the chart, next to the coffee ring.

"You can see this map is likely out of date," Maddox said. "It's the best we have, from 1907. The mine was started more recently than that. And since the mission is top priority we have to go in and assess the situation before acting."

Patterson and Marlowe exhaled hard. Sledge frowned.

"I take it," Walker continued, "we have no knowledge on enemy strength, forces or positions?"

"Correct," Maddox said. "We're being sent in blind to an unknown region."

"With jungle specialists," Fallon noted. "That's an interesting decision. Why not send..."

"We've been given the orders," Maddox cut him off. "They come from Brigadier Carter specifically. I spoke with my uncle and Carter's boss General Peters. Both said the same thing: this is his football. He gets to field the team he wants. If anyone wishes to be removed from the mission, now is the time to speak up. I won't hold it against you."

"If we have no knowledge on the Germans," Sledge said, "do we have anything on the Finns? Or our supposed allies, the Russians?"

"That's an easy set of questions to answer," Maddox said. "No and no."

Fallon laughed nervously.

A murmur of discord between the men.

Sergeant Shield, a man Maddox had never worked with before, said nothing, he simply looked from face to face taking in the conversation like a sponge. There was a slight air of worry to his features—unlike the other men, not one of anger or frustration but more of concern this could be his last operation.

"We've been shot in the foot twice by our bosses," Maddox said. "So, now we're all out of feet. That leaves only one option: we do this right. Five of us have worked together before. We've been through tough scrapes. This is no different. We get in. We get out. Everyone makes it through in one piece."

"So, what's the plan?" Patterson asked.

"We've thirty minutes to discuss ideas," Maddox said. "Then we break for twenty and hop on the plane. We'll be parachuting in—you're all rated, so that's non-negotiable."

"Good," Sledge said. "Gliders over that part of the world are death traps."

Maddox tapped the map at a clearing in the trees, just south of the ridge.

"With that agreed," Maddox said, "let's start by identifying the obvious places the Germans would set up camp. Then we'll discuss how to approach and destroy them at each location, unseen."

* * * * *

The thirty minutes moved far too quickly.

Maddox called a halt to the conversation to give them time to ruminate on everything discussed. The men needed time to focus their minds on the journey ahead. They'd recommence discussions once back on the plane.

As they broke away from the table, they separated into smaller groups of twos and threes. Sledge, Walker and Fallon moved to the hangar entrance to have a cigarette. Shield and Marlowe visited the lavatory. Conley kept walking slowly around the table, examining the chart from different angles.

A young man on his first big mission.

Maddox poured himself a mug of tea and selected a biscuit from the refreshments available. He knew what Conley was thinking. Although it seemed a lifetime ago, in reality it had been just shy of five years since he'd been in the same position.

The young sergeant was filled with a bubbling cauldron of emotions: anxiety, excitement, a desire to come up with smart contributions to the discussion of tactics.

Fear.

Maddox sipped his drink.

Yes, he remembered that first time before going into the field.

"What do you think?" Patterson asked, selecting a sandwich and pouring himself a mug of tea.

"It's weak," Maddox replied. "They've been reusing the leaves again. Go light on the milk."

Patterson smiled faintly.

"I meant the mission," he replied, "not the status of the beverages."

"What do you think I think?" Maddox snapped.

Patterson took a bite of the sandwich and chewed slowly. After a few seconds, he swallowed.

"We've been set an impossible task," Patterson said. "With no time to prepare and one we're not trained for."

"And yet," Maddox said, "Carter knows full well we have a nasty habit of surviving."

Maddox took another sip of his tea and grimaced.

His eyes glanced across Sledge, Walker, Shield and Conley.

"Which leads to the next obvious question," Patterson said. "With four men specially selected by Carter..."

"Which one of them is his plant on the team?" Maddox hissed. "Which one has orders to make sure we foul this up?"

"You really think one of them is a spy?" Patterson asked.

Maddox finished his tea in a last gulp and swallowed.

"Yes," he said. "I absolutely do."

Chapter 8

The air was cold and dank at the bottom of the mine shaft.

Major Nieder trod uneasily. His body was slightly hunched even though the ceiling braces were well above his head. It was an effect, he assumed, of both the chill and the oppressive gloom.

An unnatural mist clung to the dim electric bulbs that dangled limply from the ceiling like so many hanged criminals. The only sounds were the distant echo of the generator as it trundled away up near the mine's entrance and the metallic 'chinks' of pick axes as the captured Russian soldiers dug ever deeper into the earth.

Nieder stopped next to his sergeant. The passageway beyond split off in three directions; one leading to each of the main faces where the slaves were working.

“Any progress, Kalb?” Nieder asked.

“Not yet,” Sergeant Kalb replied. “The Russians are slow today. I think they’re failing from lack of nutrition. You might want to raise their rations this evening.”

“You think we have food to spare for dogs?”

Kalb kept his submachine gun trained on the entrances and shrugged.

“I guess that depends,” he replied.

“On what?”

“How quickly you want to find the diamonds.”

Nieder’s fist involuntarily clenched. The leather of his gloves creaked as it tightened about his fingers. Kalb heard the noise but his gaze remained fixed on the tunnels.

Any other member of his squad—even Beck—and Nieder might easily have rapped the man in the face.

Nieder’s fingers relaxed.

There was a rumble from along one of the shafts.

“You’ll want to stand to the side,” Kalb said. “They’re bringing a trolley of rubble up to the surface.”

Nieder took a step across the track. The eerie lights above picked out the browns and orange of the rust encrusted on the rails as he moved to the edge of the passage. The groaning protest of the mine cart grew louder.

Two emaciated Russians, their faces blackened with dirt everywhere except the whites of the eyes, struggled. Behind them one of Nieder’s privates walked slowly.

The slaves were sickly thin, the rags of their clothes flapped as they pushed.

One coughed from deep in his chest.

The dank in these tunnels penetrated deep into the lungs.

“Stop!” Nieder commanded as they reached him.

He leered over the wall of the cart and examined the contents.

Outside, six more Russians would run the spoils through a sluice, pulling out anything that might potentially fit Beck’s requirements as prospective gems in the rough. The potential diamonds were then thrown on a grease belt to separate those most likely to contain true gems.

Nieder poked at the rubble with a single digit. To him it just looked like a trolley full of muddy pebbles.

“I am unhappy with your progress,” Nieder said.

Heads bowed, backs arched in submission; the Russians said nothing.

“At present you are producing three carts of worthless junk a day,” Nieder continued. “Tomorrow, I want that pace doubled. There will be six. Do you understand?”

Nieder lifted his gloved hand from the mine trolley and rubbed the dirt on the closest Russian’s loose clothing. The other Russian once more burst into a deep fit of coughing.

His face reddened as he sought to suppress the barking noise before he was finished.

Nieder was silent a few seconds and frowned.

“I think you are right, Kalb,” he said.

He pulled out his Luger and shot both Russians through the head.

Kalb sighed deeply.

“Now we only have sixteen labourers left,” the sergeant said wearily. “The going will be even slower.”

Nieder holstered his Luger.

“Perhaps,” he said, striding away. “But there will be more rations to go round them. You may raise the portions for the others accordingly.”

Chapter 9

In the corner of the airfield in Edinburgh, Maddox and his men pawed through the equipment racks.

The de Havilland was refuelling. They had an hour to select everything they needed from the stores available. The list of items required had been drawn up on the flight. Marlowe and Patterson were selecting tents. Every man had already tried on the appropriate winter gear and skis. Each had pulled a standard Sten Mark II-S and spare ammunition.

Now, it was time to select the niceties. Maddox was examining the coils of rope, strung like meat in a butcher's window.

Next to him, Sledge appeared with what seemed at first examination to be a harpoon gun.

“Put it back,” Maddox said without turning. “We're not going fishing.”

“It's not for that,” Sledge replied, giddy as a schoolboy. “Get a load of this...”

A few clicks followed, then Sledge pulled the trigger. There was a rapid shush, like a firework being released. The harpoon end rocketed away, expanding as it flew to form a small grapnel. Behind it, a long cord unwound.

The hook thudded as it embedded in a wooden rack, thirty feet away.

“Jesus!” came a shout from down the building.

Fallon popped his head out from between the rows of shelves.

“For Christ's sake, Sledge,” he shouted. “You almost took my head off.”

“Sorry,” Sledge replied, yanking on the line to pull it taut.

There was the sound of grating from the rack the grapnel had secured itself to as with each mighty heave of his arms, the burly Australian shifted the shelving on the ground.

“I really think we should take it,” he said to Maddox. “It's got to make rappelling down that cliff near the most likely German positions easier.”

Maddox said nothing.

He twanged the unwound rope like a guitar string.

He raised an eyebrow.

“Can we?” Sledge said.

“If you want to take the toy,” Maddox said, “you can carry it. Now go and grab something practical, like cooking equipment.”

“There’s no need for that,” Lieutenant Walker said, walking out from another aisle and delicately ducking under Sledge’s length of rope. “I’ve already had Conley box it and take it out to the plane.”

“Excellent,” Maddox replied. “Then I think we’re almost done.”

“There’s a lot of equipment,” Walker said. “It’s going to be heavy trundling it across the snow.”

“I know,” Maddox nodded. “But we’ll pack it all into our bags on the trip to Finland. Once we’re in the air we won’t have an opportunity to change our minds and grab something we forgot. Better to take more than we need and later choose to leave it on the Flamingo or bury it in the forest as a combat reserve than have a regret once we’re on the ground.”

“Agreed,” Walker said.

“Speaking of which,” Maddox said, reaching down to grab a carton of hand grenades. “You can never have too many of these little beauties.”

“Captain Maddox,” a voice called through from the doorway that led out to the aerodrome.

A grizzled staff sergeant, who looked like he chewed thumb tacks for fun, cut across the conversation.

“They’re finished, if you’d like to make your way back to the plane.”

“Thank you, Cribbins,” Maddox said.

He took a deep inhalation through his nose, held it, and exhaled long and hard.

“Gentlemen,” he said. “Let’s go to work.”

Chapter 10

Kapteeni Aku Jouhki rested against his skiing poles and panted.

It was a disaster.

The Russians had seen through his attack and killed half of his men. Finland was losing ground to the Russians up here in the north and they simply didn’t have the resources to keep the Red Army at bay. In many ways, it had been a wonder that they’d held off their menace as well as they had.

But now, with supplies almost totally gone, it couldn’t be long before the government in Helsinki capitulated.

He stared out across the cliff at the endless landscape of trees and frozen lakes. The midnight sun had finally relented and bid the world goodnight.

“Be back, soon, my love,” he whispered.

He knew she would return in a bare few hours.

Truly, this was God’s own country.

The gentle susurrations of his second-in-command whispered between the trees as he skied in close.

“Taking in the view?”

“Lamenting our failure today,” Jouhki replied. “We took a heavy toll for little gain.”

“We lost good men,” the sergeant replied, placing a hand on Jouhki’s shoulder. “But that’s the risk we all know every morning when we go out to fight.”

“And how do I explain that to Ros when I go home next?” Aku hissed. “I’m sorry—your brother died in a futile attack, outgunned in another suicidal assault under my command.”

“It wasn’t futile,” the sergeant said. “Eight men took on a Russian column and destroyed a tank. We have to consider it a victory.”

“A few more victories like that,” Jouhki replied, “and we’ll have lost this war for sure.”

The sergeant reached across and broke off a flake-like piece of bark from a nearby tree.

“I’ll get started on a fire,” he said. “We’ll need something hot to recoup our strength.”

“Warm food sounds good,” Jouhki replied. “We must have burnt off a lot of energy getting away from those Russians.”

“They were dogged in their pursuit,” the sergeant agreed. “Perhaps overly so.”

“Whoever’s commanding that column is a wily old bastard,” Jouhki said. “We need a new strategy if we’re going to catch him out.”

The sergeant sucked breath heavily through his teeth.

“If you want to have a second try at him,” he said, “there’s a lot to consider. We’re running low on heavy weapons ammunition, again. And if we’d had more explosives we might have taken out the front and back tanks at the same time. That would have made the difference this morning.”

“Resupply is always going to be a problem,” Jouhki said.

“What do you propose?”

Jouhki gazed across at the horizon, the last embers of orange disappeared now the sun had sunk out of sight.

“I think it’s time we riled the Germans,” he said. “Then we can get all the supplies we need.”

Chapter 11

Maddox was awakened by the tap of a boot against his own.

He opened a single eye.

Fallon.

“We’re nearly there?” he asked.

“Fifteen minutes out,” Fallon said. “Walker’s already got the others ready.”

“I felt like I only just went to sleep,” Maddox said.

“You did,” Fallon replied. “You spent ninety percent of the flight haranguing each of us to make sure we knew our jobs.”

Maddox smiled.

“Grab your parachute and we’ll be on our way,” he replied.

The inside of the de Havilland was bathed in the sombre red glow of a single bulb attached by the door.

Maddox had never enjoyed the hues these 'jump lights' cast around the inside of planes. Their dim rancour gave an unnatural pallor to the skin and accentuated the shadows in the lines of the face; even the merest glimmer of a worry line became visible as a crevice in a rock face.

And who, presented with the prospect of hurling themselves into the night over enemy territory, didn't contain the tremor of doubt that they may not return home?

Maddox slung his parachute across his back and fastened the buckles across his body.

Soon enough, the bulb would go out. And a green one next to it would blink alive.

He smirked.

He didn't like the green one any more than the red.

"That one actually confirms it's time to hurl yourself into sky..." he muttered.

A pat on his arm.

Maddox glanced across.

Patterson.

"You alright?" his friend asked.

Maddox checked the buckles on his pack and moved on with his preparations.

"I'm fine," he replied. "You?"

Patterson took long breath and nodded.

"What?" Maddox asked. "Pre jump nerves?"

"It's not that," Patterson replied.

The sergeant scratched his cheek uncomfortably, as though dragging his nails across his skin might rake the right phrasing to the surface of his mind.

"You do realise we haven't got all day for you to spit it out?" Maddox said.

A smile crossed both their faces.

"I ran into Harold Jackson two days ago at SOE headquarters," Patterson said.

"Jackson?" Maddox said. "That's unusual. He's Section 5. I knocked into McCallum earlier this evening—it was he who gave me the initial briefing for our current escapade."

"I guessed as much," Patterson nodded. "Which is why I thought I'd mention it. Five doesn't often stick its nose around the SOE; the fact that there have been two of them in the building within a few days of one another is interesting."

Maddox picked up his Sten and checked the bolt action worked smoothly. He dry fired the weapon. The correct sound of a hollow 'clack' was for an instant audible over even the plane's relentless engines. Maddox stopped just before inserting a fresh magazine and looked Patterson square in the face.

"The stores robbery," he said.

"You think?" Patterson asked, surprised. "That's only a rumour."

"But a persistent one," Maddox replied.

"Unconfirmed," Patterson rankled his nose. "I've not been able to find anyone who's whispering that it's true with certainty."

"Really?" Maddox smiled. "I have."

He slammed the magazine into the Sten. It clacked as it locked home. A good sound. A comforting sound. The sound of readiness to kill.

He nodded. Everything worked.

He removed the magazine.

There would be no jumping with a loaded gun this evening. The Sten was too troublesome a weapon to take that risk when landing in the snow.

“You old dog,” Patterson grinned.

“I got it from the stores’ orderly last week,” Maddox replied. “He said they ran inventory check and £10,000 in counterfeit German made Sterling notes had vanished from the lockers.”

Patterson pursed his lips and blew through them hard.

“Twenty-five years’ pay, tax free,” the sergeant said. “That’s a nice haul and no mistake.”

“But he was at pains to point out it was probably a clerical cock up,” Maddox replied. “He seemed to think the notes went to the Bank of England, where they were incinerated.”

“Not likely,” Patterson said. “Not if Section 5 are wandering around the building.”

“Could be we’re taking one plus one and getting three,” Maddox shrugged. “It’s an awful lot of supposition.”

“Bloody East End gangster tea leaves,” Patterson muttered. “The spivs would raid anywhere for a profit—never mind that circulating those counterfeit bills into the economy does the Germans’ dirty work for them.”

Maddox tucked the full Sten magazine in his outside pocket, so it could be quickly inserted as soon as he landed.

“Steady,” he chastened. “Some of us call the East End home.”

“Sorry, Captain,” Patterson grinned. “No disrespect intended to those of our fraternity who have East End gangster familial connections.”

Maddox gave a half smile.

“None taken,” he said. “And when we get back, we might be glad of my distant cousins. They might be able to tip us the nod on the veracity of our theory.”

A cold blast of air roared through the fuselage as Walker opened the plane’s side door. The chill stung Maddox’s face and flicked his hair into his eyes. He clipped the Sten in place, locking it to his uniform for the jump, and yanked on the straps to ensure it was firmly attached. He then fought against the wind to make his way to the front of the parachute queue.

Firmly gripping the door frame, Maddox took a glimpse outside.

The sun had ducked below the horizon and the sky was enjoying its brief few hours of true darkness. Even though it was summer, the air temperature was bitter. Tears formed in the corner of Maddox’s eyes. As they trickled across his cheeks, he could feel them beginning to freeze.

Below, thousands of miles of conifer forests wrapped themselves around rough, stone mountains, snow-laden plateaus and frost covered lakes.

“No wonder the Russians struggled to take this place,” he thought.

He turned back to his team.

Seven men, lined up and ready: Walker, Sledge, Shield, Conley stood alert, each gripping an equipment canister that contained the vital things they’d need on the ground but that were too dangerous for them to pack in their kit bags.

Behind them, Patterson, Marlowe and Fallon – Maddox’s regular squad—leaned out from the queue so that they could hear him.

“Okay, men,” he shouted, his voice barely audible over the buffeting air funnelled in through the door. “Take it nice and easy, nothing heroic. We land, we bury our canopies and we rendezvous at the coordinates you’ve all memorized. It’s wilderness out here so the chances of running into anyone are slim. If you do, hide and avoid. Do not engage.”

The red light went ominously black.

The next few seconds seemed much longer than they were. In his chest, Maddox could feel his heart pounding faster.

He glanced out the door once more.

The forest appeared darker and the distance to the earth further than it had before.

Green bulb flickered on.

He turned to Walker.

“Go!” he commanded.

Chapter 12

As the company of Finns skied out from the tree line, Nieder pulled his glove off and clicked his fingers. There was a trampling of boots; ten German soldiers took up positions around the camp.

Nieder watched as two of his men ducked down next to Lieutenant Beck, using the collection of sluices for cover. Beck ignored them and continued walking along the wooden troughs, occasionally swirling his hands into the rough detritus from the mine to ensure more even washing of the dirt.

More soldiers jogged passed the lieutenant. The sounds of their heavy steps were drowned by the churning generator, occasional puffs of exhaust rising from its vibrating hulk.

As the Nazi soldiers aligned their weapons. Nieder returned his attention to the Finns. With the German soldiers in place, Aku Jouhki issued a hand gesture to his men, who spread out. Both sides warily regarded one another.

The Finnish captain continued across the open ground on his own.

“You should be careful, major,” Jouhki said, thrusting his ski poles firmly into the snow as he came to a halt at the base of the scree slope to the mine. “Having your men take up an attacking formation upon our approach could be misconstrued. We are, after all, supposed to be on the same side.”

In the background, the hum of the generator continued unabated.

Beck could be heard directing the Russian labourers to shovel the gravel from the long sluices across to the heavy grease-belt that the motor was turning.

Nieder walked down the talus slope to greet Jouhki.

“We are, indeed, on the same side,” the German replied. “Which begs the question of why our most recent food and munitions convoy was ransacked on the way to resupply us?”

The Finnish captain smiled sardonically.

“We’re behind enemy lines here,” he replied. “I’m sure they got picked off by the Russians.”

“And yet,” Nieder peered over Jouhki’s shoulder, “your men look remarkably well fed and their weapons seem full of ammunition.”

“We know how to live off the land,” Jouhki said. “And—as for our ammunition—our ambush raids allow us to expend it judiciously. The rest, we lift from Russian corpses.”

The Finn pointed to the bodies of the Russian labourers, half hidden by a light dusting of snow that had fallen overnight.

“We certainly don’t waste it,” he continued.

Nieder’s jaw hardened.

“You’re just four men, I see,” the German sneered. “Weren’t there eight of you last time you dropped by?”

The smile dipped from Jouhki’s lips. The loss of his men raiding the Russian infiltrators was still painfully fresh in his mind.

“I sent the others scouting,” Jouhki lied. “They’ve brought me some interesting news.”

“Really?”

“There’s a mobile column of Russians on its way,” Jouhki said. “We did our best to thin their ranks but I suspect they may be looking for you. There’s no other reason for them to push this far from the main thrust on their own.”

“How many tanks and men?”

“Five vehicles remain,” Jouhki said. “We took care of one other for you. We haven’t the heavy weaponry to hit them again.”

Nieder turned and surveyed briefly the defences of his camp. He knew them well enough but a quick reappraisal reminded him of their vulnerability in their present layout.

“I will radio for reinforcements,” Nieder said, his voice deepening.

Jouhki pulled his ski poles out of the ground. He glanced across once more at the bodies of the dead Russian labourers, piled by the scree; something troubled him. His eyes narrowed.

The soles of the shoes of each corpse were still visible, sticking out through the covering of white powder.

Two pairs were unmistakably the tattered remains of Red Army issued boots.

But the third...

Nokians?

Only Finns wore those...

A pause.

“All is fine here?” Jouhki asked. “Apart from the impending arrival of the Russians?”

“Progress is being made,” Nieder replied.

“And the boy you were connected with to find the mine, Aatami, he is well?”

At the sluice, Beck stopped sifting through the sand. The lieutenant slowly began to move his hand down closer towards his pistol, lazily clamped to his hip.

“Aatami has done sterling work for us,” Nieder said curtly.

“I have a message for him from his parents,” Jouhki said.

“He’s busy,” Nieder replied. “He’s overseeing work in the mine.”

“Of course, of course,” Jouhki nodded and pursed his lips. “Tell him his parents miss him.”

“I will,” Nieder replied. “And I’m sure he’ll thank you for passing along the message—just as we do for warning us of the Russians. Have no fear; Germany will surely authorize more men to come up here to guard this project. Additional forces will no doubt arrive tomorrow.”

“No doubt,” Jouhki replied. “Well, we’ll come back then. Perhaps if you have anything spare, you will share. After all, as we’ve agreed, we are on the same side.”

The Finn began to back away, grateful that if a fire fight were to break out, he at least had three men ready to provide him with cover—and, for all Nieder knew, the rest of his team in place in the trees.

“Certainly,” Nieder hissed. “And this time, they’d better not get ambushed on their way to me or you may find your reception less warm upon your return.”

Chapter 13

Maddox reeled his parachute cords in and stuffed the silk into a tight ball.

His feet sank a few inches into the snow with every footstep. Although one of the equipment drums had only fallen a few hundred yards away, it would be heavy going to reach the nearest. Hopefully, it was the one containing the skis; otherwise it would be even tougher going finding the other three in the dark.

They might have to wait the few hours to daylight.

And somewhere out here in the black were three different kinds of foe: Germans, Finns and Russians.

Although the Soviets were technically on the same side as the other Allies, Maddox had had enough experience with their teams that he was in doubt that their compact was more a marriage of convenience than one of love.

“The enemy of my enemy is just someone biding their time to stab me in the back.”

Maddox stopped briefly.

A shiver ran down his spine.

His eyes narrowed.

It was cold, sure, but he had a deep sense of foreboding.

He scanned the snowline.

Nothing.

“Russians, Germans and Finns,” he hissed.

He unclipped his Sten and trudged across to the equipment drum.

* * * * *

Aku Jouhki lay in the snow and silently extended his gun out along the ground. A collection of sapling spruces that were springing through the ground vacated by the fallen trunk of an old conifer provided him with a measure of camouflage.

He didn’t recognise the uniforms of these soldiers.

Strange.

They certainly weren't German or Russian—were they off course members of the Norwegian resistance?

The leader of the team drew nearby and halted.

He handled the map and compass around his neck like a seasoned soldier, even though his skiing had the erratic quality of a child. Jouhki read his rank from the uniform.

A captain?

The man was muttering under his breath. Jouhki was too far back to hear the words, and thereby glean his nationality, but he could tell the sentiment from the scowl about this soldier's face.

Jouhki lifted two fingers and silently signalled to the rest of his team.

They knew the instructions well: 'fan out, prepare for ambush'.

As they scooted away between the firs, Jouhki returned his attention to the stranger in his woods.

"Are you friend or foe?" he wondered.

He eased his finger through the trigger loop of his weapon and took careful aim along the sight.

"Either way, you're not Finnish," Jouhki thought. "And around here, that alone makes you both my enemy and..."

He aligned the soldier's head into the middle of his gun's crosshairs.

"...a potential source of valuable supplies."

Chapter 14

Maddox pulled to a halt between the trees.

He lifted his map and slapped his compass down on top of the surface, twisting the dial to align the arrow with north. Shit. They were drifting off track.

Maddox grimaced as he tried to peer through the foliage, searching for any hint of a landmark that he could use for confirmation of their route. As he winced, Patterson pulled alongside.

"How much further?" Patterson asked.

"Twenty miles," Maddox replied. "That takes us to this point on the escarpment."

He tapped a collection of contours on the chart.

"After that," he continued, "We'll make camp and two of us will continue on as scouts, running south along it until we can find the German position."

Conley was next to join them, followed by Shield.

The cocking of a weapon caused every man to look up.

They were staring down the barrel of a Finnish partisan's rifle.

"Okay, everybody remain calm," Jouhki said, appearing from his position behind the fallen tree. "Don't move and don't go for your weapons."

Shield's hands reflexively twitched towards his Sten.

"Don't be a fool," Maddox growled. "Let me handle this."

Jouhki had removed his skis and backpack and was pacing slowly across the snow. Maddox recognised the Lahti-Saloranta M26 in the Finn's hands immediately. Supposedly a 'light-machine gun', at a hair over 20lbs in weight, it was anything but. It took powerful muscles to be able to hold such a weapon, let alone handle the recoil with enough confidence to brandish it without resting the mounting stands on something solid.

"Good morning," Maddox said.

"I have three other men hidden around you in sniper positions, ready to shoot if needed."

"Normally a Finnish platoon has two M26s and two ten man squads," Maddox said. "If you've only got three men trained on us, you're either lost or heavily depleted."

"That hardly matters," Jouhki replied. "Since I'm the one with a gun trained on you. Now, you're English, that much I picked up when you started talking—which means you're the enemy, fighting alongside the Russians. Is that why you're here?"

"We're not your enemy," Maddox said. "And we're certainly not here to fight alongside the Russians. Why don't you lower your weapon and we can talk?"

"Why would I want to do that?" Jouhki laughed. "I have the advantage."

"Perhaps," Maddox said. "Perhaps not. It's clear you could use some help. We sure as hell could use yours. Perhaps we could come to an arrangement?"

"An arrangement?" Jouhki said. "The arrangement is that you lower your guns and backpacks to the ground and then I decide if I'm feeling charitable enough not to shoot you all."

"Hmm..." Maddox replied. "I think not. But, just let me confer with my colleagues."

Maddox glanced at Patterson. Patterson let out an ear piercing whistle.

There was motion through the trees as three Finns, in separate places, were marched out at gunpoint by Marlowe, Fallon and Walker. Each Finn had his hands up in surrender.

The partisans kicked heavily with their boots as they staggered through the snow. The irritation at being rounded up by such amateurs at arctic warfare was clear on their features.

"I'm impressed," Jouhki said. "And a little surprised. You didn't look that capable as we tracked you."

"We're Jungle specialists," Maddox shrugged. "Strip away the cold and a forest is a forest."

"I still have you in my sights," Jouhki replied. "I suggest you let my men go before things turn ugly."

Sledge stepped from behind a mighty trunk and jabbed the barrel of his Sten into the back of Jouhki's neck.

"Well this getting awkward," Maddox said. "How about everybody lowers their weapons together and we discuss you helping us with some of your local knowledge?"

Jouhki did not comply.

"Not until you tell me why you're here," he said softly.

Maddox had no desire for a firefight in close range with the Finnish commando. He had no doubt his team would win, but Jouhki would manage to get off a burst of rounds before being killed. That could mean Patterson, Conley or himself ended their lives with a belly full of lead in the next few minutes.

He glanced at Shield.

The sergeant was staring straight back at him, eyebrows raised, as though to say: 'your move, Maddox.'

"There's a German mining operation," Maddox said. "It's not far from here. It's sending diamonds back to Berlin that are being used to make a deadly new weapon. We've been ordered to shut it down. That's all we're here for—we have no quarrel with you."

"Then you're in luck," Jouhki said.

He slowly lowered his gun, then slung it on his shoulder.

"I'm no fan of the major that runs that operation," he said. "I suspect he killed a local boy we handed over to him as a scout. The kid had been illegally mining in the abandoned shafts and was trying to smuggle what he'd obtained to Switzerland. The idiot got in bed with the wrong people and found himself caught by the police."

Maddox signalled his men to release the Finns. The two sides warily regarded one another and then began to head back into the undergrowth to grab their kit as Maddox and Jouhki moved closer.

"I suppose the Nazis stepped in, then, and confiscated what he'd dug up," Maddox said. "That's when they discovered the blue diamonds."

"You heard about those?" Jouhki asked. "I only picked up drips and drabs. What's so special about them?"

"Apparently the technical boffins can use them to make better ways for us to kill one another," Maddox replied. "Which is why we're here. We have to stop the Germans."

"Like I said," Jouhki replied. "I'm no fan of the commander—a sociopath called Nieder. I won't stand in your way. But they're just about the only thing stopping the Russians from swamping us right now. So I'm not willing to aid and abet you."

Maddox nodded and thought for a few seconds.

"If the Germans can use these things to make better weapons," Maddox said. "The Russians sure as hell can. What's the likelihood of the Red Army over-running Nieder's position?"

"Fifty-fifty," Jouhki said. "The Russians have five tanks on their way to him now. And that's just this time. If they fail, they'll send more. However, Nieder is—how you say?—a special kind of arsehole. Forewarned that the Russians are coming, I think he'll give them a run for their money."

"Can you tell us where Nieder's mine is?" Maddox asked.

"I can," Jouhki replied. "But I don't think it'll do you much good. You're 8 men. He's got forty up there, plus captured slave labourers. And this morning, after we told him about the Russian advance, he said he'd bring up reinforcements."

"It seems to me," Maddox said, "that both you and I have aligned interests, after all."

"How so?" Jouhki asked.

“You’re short on equipment,” Maddox said. “I don’t think you warned Nieder out of the goodness of your heart. I think you intend to hit his supply train. And we want to do the same.”

“You’re an astute man,” Jouhki smiled.

“You’re low on soldiers,” Maddox said. “We’d stand a better chance with twelve men working together than either of us on our own.”

Jouhki chewed on his tongue as he watched his team returned through the trees with their reclaimed kit. They looked bedraggled. Certainly, his small band would struggle to take on an entire German convoy.

“You make a persuasive case,” Jouhki said.

Maddox opened his map out further and showed it to the Finn. Jouhki pulled a glove from his hand exposing his fingers to the freezing air. If he felt the cold, he didn’t show it.

He ran his digits across the paper as he took in his bearings and compared them with the chart.

“So, in the spirit of cooperation,” Maddox said, “you know the land. Where would you hit the German reinforcements?”

Chapter 15

“Kalb!” Nieder bellowed through the mine entrance.

His voice echoed as it reverberated down the heavy stone walls.

No answer.

He kicked his heels. If Kalb hadn’t been such a formidable warrior, he’d have made an example of his continued insolence. Much as he didn’t like him, Nieder had a grudging respect for the sergeant. He’d first seen him at a railway station in Krakow, loading captured Poles onto a train bound for an internment camp.

A bombing raid had started.

The leader of the Polish soldiers immediately used the distraction to overpower a nearby guard. With a captured gun, he’d shot a second German and suddenly there was the possibility of the outnumbered Wehrmacht forces being stampeded by the captured East European rabble.

Nieder was in the station manager’s office.

He withdrew his pistol from its holster and stalked outside, firing immediately on rioters. One, two, three—the bodies started falling. But as each dropped, two took their place. As they overran their guards, they were picking up weapons.

Kalb was the next target for the crowd.

No hesitation, the sergeant pulled the trigger on his submachine gun.

A perimeter was mown in the advancing prisoners. Those behind had pause for thought. Kalb kept firing until his finger clicked on an empty magazine. Seizing their moment the Poles rushed forward again.

Kalb span the gun round and broke the stock on the nose of the first man to approach close enough. He whipped it round again, hooking the magazine like a pickaxe into the skull of the next.

The weapon was stripped from his hands.

He didn't blink.

Cleaver-sized fists closed and punched the face of the Pole who had dared to disarm him.

Nieder bounced down the steps of the station, continuing to fire into the crowd.

The hooped thumping of reinforcements as German soldiers released the danger of this uprising and were ordered along the station platform.

Taking aim, they launched a volley into the Poles.

Bodies were littering the floor like felled trees.

The Poles stopped their advance.

Another round from the Germans.

The Poles retreated—their brief chance at potential freedom had been snatched away.

Hands raised, the East Europeans backed up and dropped the few guns they'd grabbed.

As they moved back, they parted around Kalb, his face bloodied from fist fighting, the sergeant stood, muscles bulging, snarl on his face, his fingers tightly wrapped around the throat of the Polish leader who'd started the uprising.

With a huff akin to a roar, he rattled his victim until the last gasp gurgled from his lips and tossed him asunder.

Nieder had immediately requested Kalb for his team. He wanted that brute force among his men when he fought. Little had he known at the time, Kalb was smart too. Whereas the combination could have been a potent one, instead, it often manifested as insubordination.

Nieder had always regretted the decision to add a man to his command who always seemed so contemptuous of his orders.

And yet, he'd never risked doing so much that Nieder had been able to discipline him and bring him into line.

Or maybe he had—but the last look of desperation on the face of the Polish commander as his neck snapped between Kalb's palms had made even Nieder wary of unleashing the beast within?

Nieder twitched with irritation at the thought.

"Kalb!" he barked, louder this time.

The sergeant slowly rumbled up the tunnel to the surface.

"Major?"

Nieder eyed his subordinate.

Chastise him now?

Brutality and intelligence. No. Those skills would be useful here in the snow.

Particularly for the mission Nieder had in mind.

"I don't trust the Finns," Nieder said. "Assemble ten men. I want you to go and ensure our convoy makes it here in one piece. If they so much as blink in its direction I want them dead. You understand?"

Kalb lifted his chin.

"Perfectly," the sergeant replied.

Chapter 16

Maddox stared through his binoculars at the German convoy.

A long trail of Germany's finest were winding their way through the forest track. Their leader, a lieutenant, stood proud and rampant, jutting out of the tank at the front of the convoy. Sunlight glinted off the glass of his driving goggles.

Despite the monotony of what must have been an all-night journey up from their main base, the soldiers sat in rigid lines in the back of the half-tracks. Maddox ran his binoculars across their faces. They were clean shaven. The buttons of the uniforms glinted despite their matt, pebbled finish as they bounced up and down on the uneven road.

Fresh men.

Not jaded cynics—broken souls who'd been chewed up in the icy winters of this frozen war.

But the spit and polish wasn't that of raw recruits; it was the burnished pride of professionalism. Veterans. Rested and tested.

"Shit," Maddox muttered. "They don't do things by half, do they?"

"What have we got?" Patterson asked.

"I count three Hanomags," Maddox said. "Two with cannons."

The Hanomag was the Heer's vehicle of choice as an armoured troop carrier. Its proper name was the Sonderkraftfahrzeug 251 and it was designed to carry the Panzergrenadiers of the German mechanized infantry corps into battle. They were so popular that more than 15,000 had been made and so proficient that they were always in demand.

Sending three at such a crucial phase in the war was a strong indication of just how high a priority had been given to Nieder's mining operation.

"It's a feat," Marlowe said. "But we've faced worse. With twelve men, we should be able to ambush them."

"It gets worse," Maddox said. "There are two trucks, presumably loaded with equipment. Plus, there's an armoured car at the back of the convoy and a Panzer at the front."

"What kind of a Panzer?" Walker asked.

It was a good question. One Maddox didn't especially want to give the answer to. The Nazis were sending reinforcements to counter a Soviet armoured column and they were doing it in style.

"A Königstiger," Maddox replied, lowering the binoculars.

Patterson's face was white.

"We're screwed," the sergeant said. "A Tiger II has armour over 4 inches thick on the front. We've got nothing that can punch through that. The only weak spot is a small patch on the rear—and good luck getting close when it's got so much cover from the half-tracks and troops inside them."

"Yep," Walker agreed, rubbing his eyebrows. "That's seven vehicles and a ridiculous amount of firepower. I don't see how, even with us and the Finns working together, we can pull this off."

"Bullshit," Maddox replied. "We'll just have to come up with a clever plan."

“What do you have in mind?” Jouhki asked.

Maddox lifted the binoculars back to his eyes and scanned the narrow icy path between the conifers. Shifting back to the vehicles, he watched the lieutenant bend down and shout orders to the men below him, out of sight inside the Tiger II.

The lieutenant’s own binoculars were passed through. He brought them to his face.

“Everybody down,” Maddox said. “Jerry’s suspicious and taking a gander of his own.”

Maddox dropped to his chest.

The snow was cool but not freezing against his skin. It melted quickly, seeping into his uniform.

Jouhki, Walker and Patterson joined him.

“Do you think he saw us?” Jouhki asked.

“He’d have had to be monumentally lucky,” Walker replied. “We’ve five miles away, between the trees.”

“But we’re on a hill,” Maddox said. “Even if he didn’t consciously catch us, something in the back of his mind prompted him to start searching. We’ll need to be more cautious. This guy’s no fool.”

“What do you want to do?” Jouhki asked.

“I want to hit him as soon as possible,” Maddox replied.

“You have an idea?” Walker asked.

“Yes,” Maddox replied. “But it relies on Aku.”

“What do you need?” the Finn asked.

“I need to know exactly what supplies you took off the last convoy that passed through,” Maddox said. “Was there a PanzerFaust?”

The *PanzerFaust*—literally “Tank Fist”—was a cheap, single-shot disposable tube that contained an anti-tank warhead.

“There was,” Jouhki said. “We used it yesterday on the Russians. We only had one.”

“What else was there?” Maddox asked.

“What you’d expect,” Jouhki replied. “A lot of it wasn’t salvageable after the hit. We managed to carry away about a month’s worth of rations for my men, 10 boxes of ammunition—mostly 9mm rounds, three cartons of dynamite, shovels, medical supplies—bandages, mostly, fuel drums and pump oil for the mine generator, candles, some pots and pans, pick axes, flares, a spare radio, a few canvas tents and some other random tools.”

“Any of that any use?” Patterson asked.

“Oh yes,” Maddox grinned. “That’ll do nicely.”

Chapter 17

Maddox popped his head over the crest of the snow bank.

The Königstiger was an awesome beast, in the way that a shark charging through the water towards you, jaws gaping, was a beautiful spectacle to behold even as it terrified and signalled a near certain impending death.

The cannon barrel was big enough that you could stick your fist inside and still have room around the sides.

Maddox noticed his fingers twitching with nerves as he saw the tracks rumble hypnotically toward him, churning through the dirt and frost.

It was by far the biggest of the main German battle-tanks and designed specifically to overcome the improved Allied and Russian tanks that the Nazis now faced.

Worse, Maddox had never been up against one before. If he'd had experience destroying them, he might have felt a little less trepidation.

"If we die doing this," Jouhki said, "you have to promise me one thing."

"What?" Maddox asked.

"You'll take care of the Russians," Jouhki replied. "You don't need to kill them, I understand they're technically your allies—but make sure they don't make it any further into our land. My village isn't far from here. Without me to protect them—well, I don't want to die fighting Germans, the last thought on my mind being whether it'll lead to the raping of my wife and the burning of my kids."

Maddox stared deep into the Finn's eyes. He knew the comments weren't idle paranoia. He'd spent enough time around Russians, even billeting a few days helping their soldiers defeat the Nazis at Stalingrad. He knew that the Red Army didn't worry too much about the boundary between civilians and military when it overran towns that had shown resistance.

"Agreed," Maddox said. "But it won't come to that."

Jouhki's eyes narrowed as he explored Maddox's face. He nodded slowly. In that moment the vows between them were truly sealed. Jouhki climbed up onto his skis and ran them back and forth through the snow to prepare himself.

"Ready?" he asked.

Maddox stared back across at the advancing German convoy. Three Hanomag, two trucks, 40 or so troops... and a Königstiger tank.

"Go!" he hissed.

* * * * *

Ten of Nieder's soldiers were lined up in the mine camp and ready to climb into his one working truck.

Kalb marched along the men, checking they were ready for combat.

Nieder liked the way Kalb handled the MP38. His hands were carefully placed around the weapon, marking him out as a veteran of the war. Although the gun was generally reliable, Nieder knew well from experience that the long magazine on its underside was a weakness.

Raw recruits could often be lulled into gripping the sub machine gun there, using the magazine as a handhold. The increased pressure, over time, knocked the ammunition out of alignment with the MP 38's single-feed insert.

That led the gun to jam.

Nieder knew his men well. There were no raw recruits left in his squad. They'd all been weeded out early in the hellish conflicts they'd experienced fighting in the Ukraine and Poland.

Nieder reached into his pocket and pulled out a small lapel pin, just slightly larger than a jacket button. It was a symbol of membership, the gift of an organization he'd joined earlier in the year.

He twisted it around in the light.

The sun dazzled as it sparkled around the ivory inlaid pattern—an angled swastika, set against a faded pink maze as a background.

“Labyrinth,” he muttered. “I hope to god you bastards are right and this war can be turned around and won.”

His attention was brought back to the present as Kalb began shouting orders.

“Right,” the sergeant bellowed. “Everyone in the truck.”

Kalb approached Nieder and, uncharacteristically, seemed almost contrite.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked. “You’ll be dividing your forces—and we know the Russians are on the way.”

“Have I not told you exactly what I want?” Nieder finally snapped.

“You have,” Kalb replied, instantly stiffening.

“Then do it,” Nieder said. “Find the convoy. Protect it. Any problems with Russians or Finns and you kill them. All of them.”

Chapter 18

The Königstiger tank rumbled towards Maddox's position with relentless intensity.

It was 100 yards away.

A single blast of its almighty cannon could punch through one side of a brick house and go straight out the other. Its awesome noise startled a stag and his does, foraging along the edge of the trees. The deer herded three young calves and pelted into the woods.

90 yards.

Behind the tank, the drivers of the Hanomag had their gazes firmly fixed ahead, their faces obscured by the metal plate armour guarding the driving compartment. Even with the Tiger II tank destroyed any one of them, on their own, could take out all his men with their armoured machine guns.

80 yards.

And there were three of them to contend with.

Never mind whatever the Germans had stashed in the trucks.

Maddox could feel the muscles in his shoulder blades tighten. He flicked his neck from side to side and felt the relief as the bones cracked all the way to the base of his skull.

70 yards.

Mild, palliative relief.

But the stress would only end when the war was finally over.

And perhaps not even then.

Maddox shouldered his Sten gun and took aim along its sight.

“But if there’s fifty fewer Germans in the world,” he thought, “that day draws ever nearer...”

60 yards.

Maddox swallowed hard. His mouth was dry. As he lay the barrel of the Sten along the snow the soft coldness prickled against his skin. He couldn’t see the rest of his men but he knew they were in place and awaiting the first signal.

55 yards.

If these Germans were veterans, they knew Finnish tactics. 54 yards. First, block the road with a tree, then hit the back vehicle. 53 yards. They’d have a response in mind after so many previous attacks.

52 yards.

“So let’s see how you respond to an SOE spanner in your works,” he muttered.

51 yards.

The explosion was deafening.

Two boxes of dynamite, buried under the road.

The tank tracks shuddered. A brilliant, orange flash erupted from its underside. Smoke plumed from the chassis. But the damn thing was so heavy, it bulk stuck fast to the road. The lieutenant, seconds before proudly erected, gripped at the sides of his position. He bent through and shouted.

His men were dead—hot metal would have splattered through and ricocheted around the inside until they’d mashed everyone inside.

Walker, Conley and Shield opened fire from the side. They shot through the canvas walls of the trucks. Maddox didn’t know how many soldiers the vehicles contained—but he needed them dead before they could leap out onto the ground.

Bullets ripped through the fabric.

Screams and shots from those inside.

A second almighty explosion.

One of the trucks was blasted from its wheels. A stray slug from Walker had hit TNT inside destined to help the mining operation extract their diamonds. Steel fragments pinged off the Hanomag in front and behind.

Five seconds had passed.

But the Germans were quick to recover.

Those inside the Hanomags were already on their feet, readying rifles over the sides.

The lieutenant leapt from the tank.

Maddox, already primed, unleashed a burst from his Sten.

The lieutenant’s boots hit the earth. Rough lead ripped through his body. His back arched. Another burst barked from the Sten. The German collapsed.

Jouhki’s Finns opened fire from hidden positions, filling the truck cabs with bullets. Windscreens shattered, raining glass tears onto the world. The drivers inside jiggered as their torsos stiffened then went limp.

Ten seconds had elapsed.

The Nazis were without their tank, leaderless and their procession already devastated.

A third explosion—this one Sledge's well placed charges around the conifers behind the convoy. Giant trunks severed at their bases and tumbled across the road, crashing to blockade the Germans in.

The veterans of the Heer inside the three Hanomags were responding though. Withering fire was directed toward Walker's position. The lead half-track driver was trying to find a way around the Tiger II, blocking his path. The second and third, were up on the banks of the road, the soldiers within also launching round after round to keep the Allies pinned, as they began to snake their way passed the stalled trucks.

Twelve seconds.

"Come on," Maddox hissed. "We're taking too long. They're going to get it together if we don't move it."

There was a thunderous clap and groan. The ground underneath the tank, weakened by the explosion of the dynamite, gave way. The beast tipped upward and nosed into the pit that opened.

The Germans were trapped. The natural route out was to reverse. And that escape was blocked by the felled pines.

The Finns started firing from their separate position, further along the convoy.

Fifteen seconds.

The Germans began to respond in force. They shifted men within the armoured half-tracks to shut down this second assault.

Slugs clanged as they ricocheted off the Hanomags' steel plate.

The Hanomag machine guns raked the snow banks. Walker and his team were utterly suppressed; their fire stopped as they hunkered in, close as they could to the ground, trying to withstand the withering counter attack. The German soldiers unleashed volley after volley.

Twenty seconds.

Empty shell casings flicked into the air, clattering onto the ground like hail stones. Steam rose from the snow as white-hot lead impacted and melted it as it pounded its way through.

The third Hanomag eased past the stalled back truck, allowing it to support the second and protect its rear. That allowed soldiers in the second to refocus on the Finns. With their weapons joining those in the first, now the Finns were pinned down too.

The front two half-tracks rotated their heavy machine guns on the Finnish position.

Twenty five seconds.

The attack was devastating.

Shells powerful enough to fell an elephant punched into the snow banks around the Finns.

Thirty seconds.

It was all over.

The Finns broke ranks.

Up on their skis, they launched across the road.

Typical tactics.

Hit and run.

The Germans were expecting it.

Maddox heard the shout of the sergeant in the lead Hanomag as he took command: "*Wir sie jetzt haben!*"

'We have them, now!'

The grinding whirr as machine guns rotated.

The Finns struggled with their skis on the road's ice, churned to slurry by the Tiger II's bulky tracks.

"Faster," Maddox muttered. "You need to be faster..."

The Finns, so quick on their skis over their normal ground, grew faster as they reached the path's edge and darted through the gaps in the trees.

But the Germans were quicker.

The Hanomag machine guns muzzles spat forth.

Jouhki was first to into the pines.

He made it. His second was caught in the back.

The machine gun rounds were so big they blew a plate-sized hole in his body. His chest exploded as the shell exited. Arms asunder, he was thrown to the earth. The third Finn weaved. He reached the trees and nipped through. Bark on the tree trunks splintered into the air as the German soldiers missed him.

The fourth Finn was caught in the side.

The force of the German rifles lifted and span his body.

For a brief moment he moved in slow motion – a ballet dancer in mid turn as he rotated through the air.

A whelp issued from his lips.

His body smacked into a tree stump and was riddled with more machine gun fire.

Another report from the Germans and he was silenced.

Maddox was already moving. The Finns needed cover. The Hanomags veered off the road, the lead driver directed by his sergeant to push through the trees in pursuit of them fleeing commandos.

They ploughed through the first row of conifers. The forest here was less dense than in other places and wide enough between the boughs to support their bulk. Even so, the skiers had the advantage of being able to duck around the pines, even as the heavy German rounds, punched their way through the wood.

Maddox pushed himself on.

He was behind the Germans, but gaining on their right flank.

Jouhki's remaining squad member flittered between the pines. A shell cracked into the soil next to him. The Finn swerved. A slight jump. More bullets rattled. He bobbed. A German machine gun clipped his shoulder.

He upended.

He tried to stand.

The lead Hanomag caught up to him.

A face full of terror.

Maddox averted his eyes. He heard the chilling crunch as the man was crushed beneath the half-track.

A scream that was cut all too short.

Only one Finn remained—Jouhki himself.

Maddox raced on.

A trample to his side—his eyes flicked instinctively toward the source—the reindeer from earlier, disturbed from their new haven, bounded away, seeking greater safety from the whipping bullets that thickened the air.

His breathing was heavy. The muscles in his thighs ached from the exertion. Fit though he was, the tiny stabilizers required for cross-country skiing weren't those he normally used. He could feel the lactic burn with every pound of his poles into the ground.

He was nearly level with the half-tracks, now.

They rattled and clawed at the earth, Rottweilers chasing a fleeing rabbit.

Jouhki had the edge on distance.

But the Germans were gaining.

Chapter 19

A shout from the third Hanomag.

They'd seen Maddox.

There was a crack and a boom.

The third half-track's machine gun swivelled in the Englishman's direction and rattled off slug after slug.

The driver swerved and began to head in his direction.

Barked shouts of *Schnell!* and *Dort drüben!* intermittently hit his ears.

"No, no," Maddox said.

He was racing so fast, he couldn't afford to drop his stance and return fire.

Against the half-track's armour, his Sten would be useless anyway.

Jouhki was barely 60 yards ahead now—bobbing and winding away to his left.

A new rally of fire.

The second Hanomag joined the third in aiming at Maddox. The first, scenting blood in the water, continued its focus on the Finn.

A tree next to Maddox received a dizzying volley to its trunk.

Its trunk disintegrated, reduced to a pulp.

Another, ahead, was ripped from the ground by the rain of fire.

Maddox leapt, soil smattering around his skis as he vaulted the fallen branches.

He was nudging in front of the leading Hanomag.

The half-tracks roared on, forever closing the gap to the Finn. Ahead, the forest thickened. The trees knitted together so that their high canopy prevented the snow from reaching the woodland floor.

Jouhki unclipped his skis and sprinted into the blackness between their branches.

More slugs as the first Hanomags joined the others and focused on Maddox.

He reached the thicker tree line and darted through, twisting his boots free of the straps that held them tight to the skis. Although the high ceiling of the forest meshed the trees almost seamlessly into a roof above, at their base they were far enough apart to still allow the half-tracks through.

Maddox, his lungs bursting, cast his skis aside and ran after his Finnish friend.

He was barely ahead of the Germans now—but still 50 yards to their right...

He heard the crash as the lead vehicle plunged into the woods—the thin pines at the forest's edge no match for the Reich's finest in heavy engineering. With a growl from its 6-cylinder Maybach engine, the 8 ton monster changed course and charged after the only target in sight: Maddox.

There was no hope of outrunning them on foot.

40 yards.

It would chase him down in less than thirty seconds.

35 yards.

He pelted onward.

30 yards.

His hamstrings screamed as his legs pounded away.

25 yards.

He could hear the trees being pulverized as the massive half-tracks ripped them aside and hunted him down.

20 yards.

He saw it.

The ditch.

Maddox grinned sardonically.

"I've got you now, you bastards."

He dropped into hollow.

With a heavy *oomph*, he dropped onto his front and began to crawl.

Mud and sticks and pine cones and needles jabbed through the earth, slashing at his forearms and knees.

This deep into the dense forest, the light was cut to a permanent dusk. With luck, the Germans hadn't seen him vanish.

The engines of the Hanomags grew louder.

Elbow over elbow, he scabbled along the trench.

He could feel the jabbing twigs ripping away beneath the leather of his gloves.

The motors were drowning out all other sound.

They had to be nearly on top of him...

"Please, please, keep going..."

The Hanomags roared.

They reached the ditch Maddox had tumbled into.

"Please... please..."

Tank tracks growled, lashing at thin air as they span over the narrow trench.

The Germans raced on, ripping across the ditch as though it wasn't there, the unstoppable bluster of the chase flaring in their nostrils.

Maddox chanced a peek over the earthen edge.

The lead sergeant in the first Hanomag must have realised something was wrong. Its half-track wheels seized as it skidded to a halt 50 yards on from the hollow. Its body juddered as it idled. The second closed in behind it, swerving to miss its new commander. It, too, came to a standstill. The third, almost jack-knifed against the others as it slammed on the brakes.

In the gloom of the forest, the conical beams of their headlamps glowered out through the trees.

The soldiers plunged out onto the ground—guns at the ready. Maddox smirked. They expected another ambush. It seemed a pity to disappoint. The sergeant hopped down, his chest already filling as his ego enlarged to fill his field commission to leader.

Rifle in hand, gripped to fire, the sergeant's head jerked – first to the left, then the right.

Clipped orders: 'He can't have got far. Search the area.'

"Now!" Maddox yelled.

His voice echoed among the bows.

All German heads spun in different directions trying to gauge his location.

From somewhere else in the forest he heard a familiar Australian voice ring out...

"My name is Sledge McKlenna. Thank you—and goodbye."

The heads flicked back, weapons moving between the trees for any sign of a target.

A thin trickle of flame wound its way between the trunks. It lit a meagre trail, snake like, writhing through the darkness of the forest floor.

A cacophonous whoosh.

"Mein Gott in Himmel!"

The ground had been doused with petrol in a thirty-yard circle around the half-tracks.

Petrol that, all this time, had been soaking into the highly flammable decades of pine needles and resin that laced the woodland floor.

The sergeant tried to get back in his Hanomag. Some of the Germans tried to run.

No-one was swift enough.

A booming rush of fire ripped up from the land, hell unleashed.

The burling intensity of heat flushed Maddox's face.

"Okay," he ducked back into the trench, "this is going to get out of hand quickly..."

Back on all fours he barrelled on.

Crackle and hiss.

The fizzles and pops and screams echoed around the forest.

As Maddox barrelled along the ditch, he heard the submachine guns of Patterson, Fallon and Marlowe open up. It wasn't maliciousness—Maddox had ordered it. Any German obviously alive should be shot to end their suffering.

He crawled far from the perimeter of the fire and lifted himself back into the forest.

The flames were raging and began to take hold outside the initially doused area.

The conifer resin was catching fire far more strongly than he'd anticipated.

"Fall back," he yelled. "Fall back."

The last thing he wanted was to lose his own men to the trap as the entire area turned into an inferno.

Chapter 20

Sergeant Kalb raised an eyebrow.

The balling mushroom of flame burst into the sky two miles to his right, well away from the road.

“Shit,” he growled.

The fire ballooned as it rose, black ash casting a dancing shadow across the forest canopy as it spread.

“What is it?” one of his privates asked.

“At a guess?” he replied. “Our relief convoy, literally going up in smoke.”

He slapped his palm firmly on the driver’s compartment of the truck. The driver pulled the lorry to the side of the road and allowed its motor to idle as everyone stared at the rising plume.

“The Russians?” the private asked.

“I doubt it,” Kalb sneered.

“Then the Finns,” another piped up. “We’ve long suspected they’ve been intercepting our supplies.”

Kalb’s tongue flittered across his lips, chapped from the moist air.

“That’s a no as well, I’m afraid,” he replied. “They would hardly be so stupid as to raze one of their own forests to the ground simply to get a few cases of TNT. And attacking a force of that size on their own is also foolhardy beyond even their level.”

“Then who?”

Kalb tapped on the driver’s partition a second time and the truck recommenced its journey.

“If not the Russians or the Finns,” he said, “then it’s a mystery. Let’s go and find out who it was. And then execute every last motherfucking one of them.”

Chapter 21

Maddox emerged from the trees coughing, his face dark with soot.

Patterson passed across the Captain’s skis, retrieved from the spot where he’d discarded them.

“What was the final tally?” he asked.

“Every German is dead,” Patterson replied. “Walker says one of the trucks is still usable and contains more food and bandages. I’ve said Aku can take it back to his village.”

“Agreed,” Maddox said, looking across at the Finn.

Aku was sitting next to a fallen stump, leaning over the fallen body of one of his men.

“I’m so, so sorry for your loss,” Maddox said, placing a firm hand on his comrade’s shoulder.

The Finn shook his head. There were tears on his cheeks.

"I grew up with these men," he said. "In the last two days, I've lost friends, distant cousins—even my brother-in-law."

Maddox nodded grimly. There were no words for occasions like this, only empty platitudes; none of which could stitch tight the wounds caused by death.

"And what now?" Aku asked. "The Germans will be gone as soon as they have their blasted diamonds. We'll be left with no-one to protect us from the oncoming red horde."

Maddox glanced down at the blood stained white coveralls of Jouhki's fallen team mate. There was a youthful quality to his features, his eyes stared out blankly.

Aku reached over and gently brushed the lids closed, leaving his friend resting in eternal sleep.

"I meant what I said, earlier," Maddox proffered. "I'll take care of this incursion and send them packing on your behalf."

Jouhki rubbed the sleeve of his jacket across his cheeks, wiping the tears away from his skin.

"And what good will that do?" he asked. "Saved today—but more will come tomorrow. Rumour has it Helsinki will capitulate inside of the month. This land will be forever ceded to the Russians; Petsamo will be lost."

"You have the truck," Maddox said. "Take it and the contents. Drive back to your village and evacuate."

Jouhki leant down and picked up a fistful of snow.

"I was born on this land," he said. "It has been paid for with blood."

"The price has been too high," Maddox replied. "Don't lose any more and still not be able to keep it. If you stay, you will be a subjugated people for all time—or at least so long as Soviet Russia exists. Go southwest. Escape while you can. We will hold this Russian advance for you, which should buy you a day or so head start."

Jouhki's leaden shoulders rose as he inhaled deeply. As he sighed, deep clouds of vapour poured from his nose and mouth.

"I will do what I can," he said. "I can take my wife and two children. I cannot speak for the others. Many will stay. But, as of today, I am the only Finnish man for a hundred miles around who is younger than 60 and older than fifteen. We have fought. We have died. We have been beaten. I'll be damned if I let them take my kids, too."

Maddox offered a weak smile. He still could not find words to express his empathy.

He offered an outstretched handshake.

Then Finn laughed, then caught himself and ran his sleeve again, this time under his nose.

"You are too English," he grinned.

He gave Maddox a bracing hug. When he let go, he reached across for his skis and backpack. As he put them on, he continued speaking:

"May I make a suggestion?"

"Sure," Maddox replied.

"If you're going to stay here," he said. "You need to understand the land better."

"In what way?"

“Keep an eye out for bears,” Aku said. “Now is when they fill up on food for the winter. They get bolder and can be vicious if riled. I’ve seen them attack and kill men—particularly if you come between a parent and its cub.”

“Got it,” Maddox said. “Avoid the bears.”

“Also, it may be summer but don’t be fooled by the heat,” Aku said. “In this region the weather can turn sharply when you least expect it.”

Maddox shivered and huddled into his coat.

“I think I’d already guessed that,” he smiled.

“Yes,” Aku replied. “But I don’t think you realise just quite how cold it can get or how you should deal with it. If your body temperature gets low enough, you won’t be able to use your fingers – not even to open a box of matches. There are ways to deal with it.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a carton. The end had been closed so that three match heads were caught outside it, able to be clasped and used even with fumbling palms of both hands brought together.

“Here,” he said, passing it across. “Keep it. I have another.”

“Anything else?”

“Many, many things,” the Finn said. “Too many to tell you now. But you know the fog can descend in minutes, right?”

“I did,” Maddox replied.

Aku waved him quiet as one might a petulant child.

“Not like this,” the Finn said. “Your London ‘pea soupers’ have nothing on this. Always keep an emergency flare in your sock. When the fog drops you won’t be able to see your foot, but hopefully you can still find it.”

“You’re joking?” Maddox replied. “A flare in my sock? I’d be likely to blow my own leg off.”

Aku shook his head and lifted the hem of his trouser leg slightly.

A small red cylinder was just visible above the end of the cotton.

“Trust me,” he said. “When you’ve lost your team even though they’re only a few metres away, you’ll be glad of it.”

The Finn clipped his boots into his skis and grabbed his poles.

“I’ll take the tip,” Maddox replied.

“Good hunting!” Aku said, pushing off in the direction of the truck. “I hope we meet again.”

“You too,” Maddox agreed. “And I’m certain we will.”

Chapter 22

Kalb jumped down from the truck and surveyed the carnage.

In the distance he saw one of the supply trucks driving away. A soldier next to him—Corporal Gansk—raised his rifle to shoot after it. Kalb tapped the barrel down.

“Don’t be a fool,” he said. “The report from your gun will alert the raiders to our presence.”

“But he’s stealing our supplies.”

“Whoever that opportunist thief is,” Kalb chastened, “they’re the least of our worries. And I very much doubt they were responsible for this on their own.”

He gestured toward the carnage around them.

Kalb let out a silent whistle in appreciation at the strike on the convoy.

The wreckage of the Tiger II tank was still smoking, its nose half sunk into the pit. He cautiously moved around the burnt-out hulk, his eyes taking in the destroyed remains of the other truck behind it.

He shook his head as he examined the placement of the spent shell casings that littered the ground like confetti decaying in the street a day after a wedding.

“What the hell do you think happened?” Gansk asked. “They must have hit it with an entire army.”

Kalb ran his hand across the ground and picked up one of the empty cartridges.

He sniffed it.

It still carried the scent of being recently fired.

“Clever tactics were all that was needed,” he said. “First, they hit the tank at the front—standard Finnish strategy.”

He held up the spent round for Gansk to see.

“But with a British twist,” he sneered.

He flicked the shell casing off into the trees.

Kalb pointed at the tank but he didn’t look at it. His eyes were tracing out the patterns of blood spatter across the churned soil.

“By using local tactics at the start,” he said, “they lulled the Germans into expecting a hit and run operation. But at every turn, the British attackers suckered our men. First: no blockade; instead, they used explosives buried under the road. Clever. Then they purposefully hit the trucks. We can see that from the spent rounds. One was destroyed. The second, we saw driven away just prior to our arrival. They fired from the snow bank over there, but, again, another twist.”

“How many men?” Gansk asked.

“Three there,” he pointed to the drift, and then to the hiding spot used by the Finns. “Four there.”

“They left the Hanomags intact,” Gansk said. “That was the twist. Why do that?”

“Yes,” Kalb grimaced and stalked towards the devastation in the tree line where the armoured vehicles had ploughed through into the forest. “They obviously didn’t have anything left in their arsenal that was capable of punching through the armour. After the initial attack, men on skis acted as decoys, dragging the Hanomags off on a wild goose chase through the wood.”

“And we saw how that ended from the explosion in the forest,” Gansk shook his head.

“Indeed,” Kalb replied. “A second ambush, no doubt. But all this information helps us.”

“How?”

“Aside from knowing the attackers are Allied soldiers,” Kalb said, “we now have an idea of their numbers. We also know they will use unorthodox tactics and take on much bigger forces than their own. That suggests they are SOE commandoes.”

“Then we should retreat,” Gansk said. “We should go back to Nieder and dig in at the mine for an assault.”

Kalb chuckled.

“No, you fool,” he said. “The moment he figures out we’re here, we will become a target. Right now, the element of surprise is on our side.”

He grabbed his MP38 and cocked a round into the chamber.

“Assemble the troops,” he said. “The thing with success is: it leads men to overreach. We can use that to trap and kill them.”

Chapter 23

Maddox pushed along between the pines.

The gentle shushing of his skis as he tramped forward were only interrupted by the call of a sparrow hawk as it passed above the tree tops.

He’d ordered Walker, Marlowe, Fallon and Peterson to survey a set of gullies to their west. They hadn’t been marked on his map and he hoped it might provide a smoother route through the rugged terrain ahead. They would rendezvous at agreed coordinates in three hours.

Maddox also had an ulterior motive for sending his three long-time friends off with Walker. It would allow them to make a judgement on the lieutenant’s loyalty. Meanwhile, Maddox would get to spend more time with ‘Sledge’ McKlenna, Conley and Shield. Somewhere among this group of four he still suspected there to be a spy who would report directly back to Carter at the end of the mission.

He pulled to a halt at the edge of a ravine.

“Damn it,” it he muttered, examining the map and staring across in exasperation at yet another obstacle totally unmarked on the chart.

Shield drew alongside.

“Well,” the sergeant said, “there’s no going this way.”

“I think the cartographer drew this region entirely from his imagination,” Maddox replied.

“Didn’t the Finn have anything to say about the map’s accuracy?” Shield asked.

“He said it was correct about the larger features,” Maddox replied. “But said there were one or two minor errors that wouldn’t be visible from the air.”

Shield peered down the jagged rocks to the bottom of the gully. A mountain stream burbled gently, tumbling a path around the rocks. The gentle scent of Valerian wafted sweetly from the pink and white flowers the poked through along the banks.

“It’s only fifteen feet wide,” Shield said. “I suppose, if the cartographers had surveyed the region in winter, it would have been easy to miss.”

“Perhaps,” Maddox agreed, “But it’s still too wide to cross here.”

“We could rig up a commando crossing,” Shield said.

Maddox looked at the gap again. Shield was right—but across a fifteen foot wide crevasse, it was a risk. The tree line on the far side stood a good ten yards back from the precipice. Even a simple rope bridge was better built with someone on both banks and tossing a grapnel, hoping to hook the trees on the far cliff...

“I’ll bear that in mind,” he said. “But let’s see if there isn’t an easy way first.”

He looked across to Sledge and Conley as they arrived.

The burly Australian lifted his snow goggles from his face and rested them on his forehead. He took a deep sniff of the air and sighed.

"I love it here," he said. "So tranquil. I could easily see myself romantically settling down in a little log cabin—easing my way through the long winter nights with a wood stove and a beautiful future Mrs McKlenna."

"You'd better learn to speak Russian, then," Maddox smirked.

Sledge went to reply but thought better of it.

Maddox tugged on the sleeve of his coat and checked his watch.

"Let's take an hour's break," he said. "You use the time to eat and rest up for the long trek ahead. Meanwhile, I'll move further along the gully to see if there's a route across. Sledge, you're in charge while I'm gone. Shield, you're with me."

Chapter 24

Kalb shifted quietly through the trees.

Behind him the rest of the squad followed his lead, moving as silently as possible across the forest ground.

"If they're on skis," Gansk whispered, shifting alongside his commander, "Surely we have no hope of catching them on foot?"

"That's why we took the truck back to where the river spring emerges on the road," Kalb replied.

"I don't follow," Gansk said.

"We've performed enough missions that we know the area at least marginally better than the Allies," Kalb said. "We know where they were thirty minutes ago from the explosion. We know where they're heading: the mine."

Confusion still sat uneasily about Gansk's features.

"Where does the spring lead?" Kalb asked, with elaborate patience.

"To a narrow crevice," Gansk replied.

Realization dawned on his face.

"If the Allies are moving from the explosion toward the mine, they'll have to cross it," he said.

"Exactly," Kalb said. "And if they're not planning to do it at the road, we know the only reasonable spot to make the trip across. We can lie in wait."

* * * * *

Maddox followed the line of the ravine.

The sun was on its descent toward the horizon. Hard to believe they'd been in the country almost sixteen hours and they'd experience their first brief night in a short while. He had agreed to make the rendezvous with Walker and the others four miles to the north before the light went but even though the gully was narrowing, it was still too wide to cross.

If he didn't find a route over soon, they'd miss their meeting time.

“But why stop them?” Shield asked. “Just let the Germans do their thing. So they have a few of these devices, so what? Blue diamonds are rare, that’ll limit the scope for any damage.”

“Seriously?” Maddox asked. “This again?”

“Look—you have family in London, I have family in London,” Shield said. “Night after night they’ve been at risk from bombing raids. Hundreds of thousands of tons of explosive blanketing entire districts—sometimes entire cities. Imagine a world where you could precision pin-point attack anything you wanted to. And since they only have a few—they’d be really selective in how they used them. Wouldn’t that save countless lives?”

Maddox pushed onward.

His pace on the skis was slower than he’d have liked. He couldn’t be sure if it was Shield’s incessant blathering that was making him tired or the fact that his body was beginning to ache; he might have been fitter than the average man but moving across the snow was using muscles that weren’t used to exercise.

“Not if the Germans could accurately land one of Churchill’s nose, no,” Maddox said. “In that circumstance, we would have lost the war long ago and Britain would be under the Nazi jackboot. If that didn’t actually lead to more lives lost—it would at least lower the quality of the lives of the survivors.”

“Maybe,” Shield concurred. “But these leaders start these wars. Surely if they knew that they could be precision hit with a bomb at any time and it wouldn’t affect the general population it might cause them to think twice before engaging in so much destruction?”

“I doubt it,” Maddox said. “The technology for such targeted kills has been in existence ever since the invention of the assassin. Did the sniper rifle lessen the desire of warmongers to wage war? I see no reason to suppose that a targeted missile should somehow make war cleaner or neater or less likely than blanket bombing.”

Maddox glanced ahead, along the gully.

There was an outcrop of rocks that narrowed the gap between the two sides. If they were lucky, it might be a route across.

“Come on,” Shield said. “If you could pick your targets, surely that would make warfare, well, almost surgically precise.”

“Assuming your intelligence on locations of enemy installations is perfect,” Maddox said. “Assuming your enemy doesn’t adapt to your new tactics. Assuming they don’t build bigger and better fortifications. And then, to break those bunkers you’ll fit bigger and bigger warheads on your rockets or larger bombs on your planes until they’ve dug themselves so deep and you’re so desperate to get them that your rockets deliver a payload big enough to wipe out a city again.”

“A bomb that could destroy an entire city?” Shield laughed. “You’ve been reading too much Flash Gordon.”

“Let’s hope so,” Maddox replied.

They reached the outcrop and Maddox unclipped himself from the skis. Leaning them against a fallen stump, he dropped his backpack on the ground beside them.

The overhang cantilevered out of the cliff face, extending to a similar formation on the far side. The two didn’t quite connect but the narrowest distance between them was around two and a half feet.

Maddox wasn't usually prone to vertigo, but an initial peek down still caused his mouth to dry. He rolled his tongue around his teeth and was careful to avoid staring down at the bubbling stream and long fall a second time.

Although he had the sensation of a swimmer shifting out across the highest diving board at a lido for the first time, the ground remained surprisingly firm beneath his boots.

"I think we've found our spot," he said.

"Better test it cautiously, to make sure," Shield replied.

Maddox tapped heavily with his foot, then tried a small jump.

There was a slight spring as he landed. His hands instinctively spread slightly to his sides to ensure his balance. The reverberation quickly subsided.

"That confirms it," he said.

There was a sudden itch just above his ankle and reached down to scratch it. Running his fingers across his skin he frowned.

"Hey," he said. "Have you got a spare flare in your bag?"

"Yes of course," Shield replied.

The young man reached into his backpack and took out one of the small cylindrical sticks. He passed it across to Maddox, who examined the printed instructions on the side. It was a new design produced by the boffins in the SOE's technical services department. It fired a small rocket like a firework into the air without the need for a flare pistol.

"That wasn't quite what I wanted," Maddox said. "I'm after a standard one that burns on the device, so that we can find one another if visibility drops."

"Oh," Shield said. "I think Sledge has those. Ask him when we get back."

"It's okay," he said. "I'll take this one for now."

Maddox took the baton-sized stick and stuffed it into his sock.

And then the shot rang out.

Chapter 25

Kalb rested his submachine gun against the rocks and grabbed a sniper rifle from a squad member. A Karabiner 98k. It had been a few years since he felt its smooth bulk in his palms. It was like falling into the arms of an old lover. The sleek curves of the butt fit neatly into his grip as he rested the barrel on the top of a boulder and lined his sight up on the Allied soldiers.

One, a captain, was out jumping up and down on the crevice ledge, testing its safety. The other stood on watching, fat and lazy, leaning against a tree.

They were arguing about something.

It didn't matter.

In a moment they would both be dead and Kalb could get on with eradicating the rest of their team.

"I'll take the Captain," he whispered to Gansk. "When he's down, you and the others open up with your machine guns. Mow down the one still standing."

“From this range?” Gansk replied. “All nine of us shooting will just spray bullets into the air. We’re over hundred and fifty metres away. We might get lucky and hit him in the hail but it seems like a ridiculous risk.”

Kalb raised his eyes to heaven.

“Not from here, you idiot,” he said. “You will sneak closer in a flanking movement and open fire upon hearing my shot. I’ll give you two minutes to move into permission.”

“What about Petrag?” Gansk asked. “You have his gun. He’s the trained shot. Would we not be better...?”

Kalb lifted his head from the sniper sight and stared at Gansk.

The corporal fell silent and gestured to the rest of the men. He pointed through the trees. The platoon began to head into position.

Kalb shook his head and rested his cheek down into the gun again.

It had been so long since he’d taken a ranged shot at an enemy soldier—too much time up in this godforsaken wasteland, playing nursemaid to that sociopath Nieder.

It would feel good to pull the trigger once again.

The skill.

The power.

One shot. One kill.

How it should be.

“I hesitate to offer another question, sir,” Gansk replied as the soldiers laced their way through the shrubbery.

“I’m not a sir,” Kalb glowered. “I’m a sergeant. I work for a living.”

“Apologies,” Gansk said hurriedly. “But these are clearly scouts looking for a way to cross the ravine. Would we not be better served waiting for them to fetch the others?”

Kalb aligned the weapon on the captain’s head.

“No,” he replied. “We do not know the size of their force. Better to take them out one small group at a time. When these two do not return, the rest will come looking. Our ambush will then have additional bait in the bodies. Now, get into position. Once I fire, you and the men open up.”

Kalb ignored Gansk as the corporal disappeared through the undergrowth to join the rest of the squad. He focused entirely on the English captain. His rhythm, his flow, the bobbing of his body as he kept his target’s head firmly fixed in the crosshairs.

He counted down time for the squad to reach the correct position.

“My dear English captain,” Kalb muttered, “for you, the war is over now.”

He pulled the trigger.

Chapter 26

Maddox ducked to stuff the flare into his sock.

The bullet thumped as it splattered into the bark to the right of Maddox's head. The loud crack of the rifle report followed a fraction of a second later.

Maddox dropped flat on his belly. His hands grabbing the Sten, conditioned reflex.

"If I hadn't chosen that second to bend down..."

He just had time to see Shield's face spin the direction of the bullet's landing sight, then flick back—lips open and eyes widening with horror.

Then the machine guns opened up from the bushes, twenty yards away.

How the hell had they got so close?

Bullet after bullet ripped through leaves and bark and tree. Shield was cut to pieces. Blood frothed from his mouth. Eyes, already wide, grew larger still. Horror turned to terror. Half dead hands, lifted bloody into his vision as he realised just what had happened. Still more gunfire tore holes in his coat.

His body slumped forward and tumbled into the ravine.

With a clatter of equipment, it bounced off the rock walls.

There was a muted splash as it slammed into the stream below.

Maddox returned fire, scrabbling forward from the exposed ledge. Snow mounted around his body as he crawled forward.

Another sniper shot.

Hidden by the snow channel he was creating, he saw the slug tear into the ground barely inches from his nose.

He quickened his crawl.

All the while, his finger kept the trigger depressed.

There were only 32 bullets in the Sten magazine.

But their noise and random shooting pattern as he barrelled onward on his belly kept flicking through the bushes in the direction of the machine gunners.

"Eight or ten men," he thought, "Off to the left, to the front. One sniper, behind me, also on the left."

Empty clicks.

He reached the bushes.

Soft cover. Good for hiding, only. If only nature had invented a bulletproof leaf...

The machine gunners, also reloading, could be heard crashing the shrubbery toward him.

He lifted to one knee and grabbed a grenade from his belt.

He chucked it through the branches in the direction of the trampling feet.

His hand reached for a second.

Pandemonium.

He threw it.

Two loud explosions.

A chunk of the tree he was hidden behind disintegrated. He face twisted away as wood chippings spat across his neck and head.

The damn sniper was still taking pot shots.

He rammed a fresh magazine into the breach and tossed the old one through the leaves. It rattled as it bounced through the twigs.

Raking machine gun fire followed its path.

"Thanks for giving me your position," he snarled and threw another grenade.

On his toes, Maddox darted back through the bushes.

Slugs pounded into the spot where he'd last been.

A third explosion.

Maddox dived through another set of branches.

He lay motionless for a few seconds, his ears straining for any sign of his attackers.

He shuffled forward once more on his belly.

He'd left his pack back at the ledge across the ravine.

"Pluses and minuses," he thought, scrambling on. "With it, I wouldn't be able to fit through all these gaps. Without it, I'm down to a fresh ammo clip in the Sten and a last one in my pocket. Then there's my pistol, a last grenade and my Fairbairn-Sykes knife."

With more distance between himself and the attackers, he had a chance to take stock of how much damage he'd done.

Through the fickle spaces in the pines and saplings, shifting on the breeze that whipped along the gully, he counted four visible bodies face down on the ground. Allowing for perhaps one other out of sight, he might be lucky and have four men left and the sniper.

"Who am I kidding? I don't have that kind of luck."

So: five men left chasing him and one out of condition sniper who couldn't hit a lone man, exposed over a ravine.

Maddox raised an eyebrow.

"Maybe I am that kind of lucky..."

Movement.

Maddox loosened his coat so that he could reach in for his knife as he shifted silently back through the trees. The snow was shallower here, the ground protected by the boughs overhead, making his movement easier.

He glanced up to the sky, hoping to get his bearings. The sun was hanging lower in the air, lengthening the shadows in the forest. It was just possible he might be able to sneak back to Sledge and Conley. He'd stand a better chance with them than on his own.

But tramping through the snow was also leaving tracks...

Two shapes flickered through the trees to his right.

He was being flanked!

"Definitely five men," Maddox thought. "How the hell can I take down five men plus the sniper?"

Chapter 27

"Damn it," Kalb spat.

He was shifting through the forest to catch his men. He'd cast aside the sniper rifle in favour of his submachine gun.

"Two years ago, I'd have made that shot," he berated himself. "You've become soft, you old fool."

He dropped to one knee as he neared the ledge overhanging the ravine. The bodies of four of his men lay scattered across the snow. If the Englishman had managed to take down so many with the grenades, he'd either been monumentally lucky or was a hardened veteran.

But the fight had moved on from here.

Kalb heard a burst of gunfire further into the wood.

Good.

As the trees got thicker, the chances were that they were heading away from the snow. Stalking the British officer would be easier. Kalb knew he had to catch up with his men.

He weaved back between the trees.

He'd failed his soldiers once already.

He might be rusty as a sniper—but his hunting skills were still first rate.

* * * * *

A hundred yards further into the forest, the snow line petered out completely.

If Maddox could make it there, he'd stop leaving so many obvious tracks. But to break out of the pincer movement he was now facing.

He estimated two on both sides of him—the fifth soldier probably being joined by the sniper behind him—a herding action.

“Two in each location,” he thought. “I need a distraction.”

His hand reached into his pocket for the last grenade. The silhouettes of the Germans were skulking cautiously on all sides. Maddox had to assume his white Arctic camouflage coat and the long shadows meant they hadn't spotted him yet—or else, they'd simply have opened fire and taken him down.

He crawled through the thinning snow, heading into the forest, towards one of the set of Nazis. He'd lost sight of their exact location—they'd probably hunkered down.

He peeked behind.

Fifty yards back, two outlines were visible against the brighter light near the ravine's edge.

He lifted to a crouch, hidden by a low set of bushes ringing an aging spruce.

Which group to throw it at?

“Diversions first...”

A glimmer of movement to his left.

“Damn it...”

The fifth German, drawing a bead along his rifle.

Maddox dropped the grenade to the floor, pin still in it. It patted softly in the snow. Fluid motion, his palm clasped the Fairbairn-Sykes and hurled it at the young private.

The clap of a shot.

The knife thudded home.

Maddox dropped.

Another thump as the bullet ricocheted off the trunk.

Rustling leaves.

He'd been spotted.

Shouts. He grabbed the grenade.

Gunfire.

Pin pulled.

Maddox tossed the Mills bomb through the branches and dodged to use the trunk as cover. Slugs rebounded through the brush. Sten in hand he launched toward the depth of the forest. The grenade exploded. Screams of agony. No time to see the damage, he dodged left, three bounces to his pace.

More trees for cover.

He dived.

Withering rounds of machine gun fire rippled through the trees.

He landed.

He rolled.

Up on his toes.

The Sten barked in his hand as he shot blind.

More bushes.

He hurdled them.

A second claw of slugs. Another position.

The sniper?

He was well past the snow line now, sprinting deeper into the woods, heart thumping and breath heavy, the tail of his open coat billowed behind him as he continued running.

But which way?

He darted to the right, then zigzagged between some rocks.

Another tree.

He dropped to his knees on its far side. The barrel of his weapon whipped this way, then that as he stared through the branches.

Somewhere back there, he'd left the remaining Germans. Based on the salvos as he'd run, there were three remaining.

Would they fall back, having sustained such heavy losses or push on to take him out?

Either way, he could expect them to be more cautious as they advanced.

Balancing the nose of the Sten on a knot in the trunk so that he could keep it ready to shoot, he hastily tugged at his coat. He swapped hands around the trigger and yanked the other sleeve loose.

The garment slunk to the ground.

It was cold without its thermal layers but hypothermia was less of an immediate threat to him than a brilliant white pelt in amongst the greens and fawn of the forest.

Perhaps he could use it to his advantage?

His eyes scanned furtively across the leaf litter. He spied a broom-length branch, dry and old, poking from beneath the matt of pine needles. Nervous glances. He draped the coat on top of a bush and stepped across for the stick.

Crack and ping.

A bullet hit the Sten.

The gun lashed from his hand.

Maddox rolled.

Head tucked, shoulders curved, he clasped his pistol.

The Mark VI Webley was a formidable revolver—its .455 calibre cartridge fired a low velocity bullet giving mild recoil with high stopping power due to the sheer heft of the round. Maddox had heard anecdotal reports from the Boer War that the earlier models of the pistol had even been used to fell a buffalo charging down on a soldier in the bush.

Revolver in hand he was back on his toes.

Two shots.

The first was unaimed. It ‘thunked’ into a conifer.

But the German who’d shot at him ducked for cover. His shifting mass flashed in Maddox’s peripheral vision. The second shot was fired true.

A groan as it impacted the private.

Maddox was off balance as he spun and pulled the trigger.

He kiltered.

He fell.

Machine gun rounds flashed through the bushes.

He wounded but didn’t kill the soldier.

Maddox landed on his back.

With an *oomph*, his lungs emptied.

His finger contracted.

Another shot.

The German, scrambling from his position in the bushes was hit in the chest.

He slipped.

A fourth round.

The man slumped into a thicket of ferns.

Maddox crabbed backward.

His breathing was laboured, his eyes wide.

The Webley was an excellent weapon but it had one major drawback.

It was a revolver. It only chambered six bullets.

Four were gone.

The sniper and one other men were left.

“Two men, two rounds,” he cursed.

Chapter 28

Maddox slipped across to a narrow ditch.

It was barely two feet deep and a man’s height wide but he was glad to be below the level of the woodland floor. Rolling onto his chest, he powered his way through along the hollow. Mud from a thin trickle of snow melt caked his face and hands as he crawled.

It also splattered the metal of the Webley.

Carefully, he lifted his head above the ground line.

His eyes panned furiously for his earlier weapons.

Where was the Sten? His knife?

Or even the bloody corpse of a felled German—hopefully lying next to its disused weapon?

Another salvo of machine gunfire.

This one was distant and poorly targeted.

What was the idiot shooting at?

Maddox's coat, perhaps?

He lowered back to his chest and crawled away.

"Two bullets, two bullets, two bullets," whispered mantra. "Got to even the score or run away..."

Still on his elbows, he left the stream. He reached a briar patch. Ignoring the stinging barbs as tiny thorns snagged his uniform he shimmied beneath the lowest runners.

He was hidden.

He closed his eyes and cleared his mind.

He strained to listen past the faint whine of tinnitus from the earlier gunfire.

The timberland was eerily silent.

"I can't run," he thought. "Not without getting a bullet to the neck..."

A crackle.

The crunch of a pine cone underfoot?

Maddox held his breath.

His ears were gaining in sensitivity as he continued to listen.

Nothing.

He dared to take shallow breaths.

The handle of the Webley felt slippery beneath his fingers as his palms began to sweat. His spine shivered. Perspiration without his coat was going to be a problem. In cold environments, running made you sweat. Without insulation and wicking outer layers, the water froze on your skin. There were few surer ways to hypothermia.

If Maddox had to stay hidden long, the Germans might try waiting him out...

Another crackle.

He turned his head to see if he could catch sight of a leg or shoelace—anything that might provide him with a target.

His thumb toyed with the revolver's hammer.

Two rounds left.

Two men.

"I've got to be sure..."

He twisted. A prickly spindle from the briars juddered across the naked skin of his neck. Scarcely daring to blink, his eyes swivelled to the furthest corners they could reach.

A crunch.

A boot landed.

Three feet from his nose.

He couldn't move his right arm to bring the pistol to bear without risking a noise.

The second boot shifted into view. Delicately placed. The soldier was on guard.

Was this man alone?

Had Maddox killed more of them than he'd estimated?

There was no talking. But that meant nothing—they could have split up. Or be using hand signals.

The Nazi took another pace.

A wide stance.

He must be crouching.

Maddox could turn his neck now and keep both feet in view. He still was twisted, though. He could move his right arm and stay balanced.

He could hear the German's breathing now.

Long and low.

Nervous.

Trigger happy?

Maddox closed his eyes.

He'd heard tales of men, hidden in camouflage, spotted only because of the human brain's powerful ability to feel another's gaze staring out at them. Maddox's face was covered in mud from the ditch. Hopefully that and the thick shrubbery would keep him hidden.

Another step.

A waft of animal dung stuck to the soldier's boot tread as his sole lifted from the ground.

"Come on... come on..." he thought.

He chanced opening his eyes again.

The boots were now two yards on and facing away from him.

Maddox slowly was able to move his right arm. Realigning himself, he could point the Webley upward.

The German took one more step.

Maddox fired.

The German teetered.

He fired a second time.

The soldier fell.

Maddox scabbled forward. He ignored the clawing tendrils of the bush as he rushed for the soldier's rifle. Chips and spindles and leaves. He rose to his feet and bolted for the weapon.

He grabbed the gun and kept running.

He knew he was making too much noise but wanted to put as much distance between himself and the body before he checked the magazine.

A distant cry to his rear.

"Halt!"

Maddox kept running.

The rapid spit of a machine gun.

"Good luck hitting me at that range," he growled.

Ahead, there was a depression in the ground, filled with coppiced trees. Maddox dropped and rolled down the bank.

He landed on his feet and leapt through the bushes.

Using them for cover, he yanked the rifle's magazine clean and stared inside.

"Tremendous," he hissed.

It was empty.

He yanked the bolt to check the breach.

“The guy fired his last round?” he hissed. “You have got to be joking.”

Above him, at the edge of the coppice, he saw the outline of the German running down the bank.

Chapter 29

Kalb barged his way through the branches as he ran down the slope into the depression.

His pupils were wide with rage at the loss of his men.

He'd been counting the rounds as they were fired by his team. He'd known Gansk was out of ammunition as he stupidly stomped through the forest. And when he heard the two shots that ended the life of his corporal, he knew the British captain had used every slug in his Webley.

To catch up with his wayward team, he even passed the spent Sten gun and Fairbairn Sykes knife protruding from the chest of his soldier Petrag.

The fact that the Englishman had taken Gansk's rifle was proof enough to back up his theory: the captain was out of bullets and out of options.

Kalb had nothing more to fear—with a submachine gun in his hand, he didn't need to wait; all he wanted was to kill the bastard who'd murdered his men.

There was a snap in the undergrowth.

A twig broken.

Kalb, conditioned reflex, fired a volley into the bushes. There was a loud shriek and the sound of a hefty body falling. He pulled the trigger again. A second burst spat forth as he charged through the leaves.

“Damn,” he said.

A female deer lay shuddering on the snow, her legs quivering as though she were still trying to outrun death. Next to her, her terrified calf leapt away through the brush.

Maddox seized his chance.

He crashed through the underbrush, attacking the Nazi.

* * * * *

Maddox swung the rifle like a club, knocking Kalb's MP38 aside.

A second ruthless swing, aimed to crack the German's skull.

Kalb ducked.

With the gun butt sailing overhead, Maddox was off balance. Kalb kicked him in the knee. The strike was sloppy, but Maddox went down. Kalb jumped closer, another kick, aimed for the kidneys.

Maddox rolled.

He scissored his legs around Kalb's. With a twist, he toppled the German.

Maddox was back on his feet.

As Kalb rose, he grabbed Maddox around the neck.

The German bobbed forward, tossing Maddox.

Caught unexpectedly, Maddox was lifted from his feet and flew through the air.

He landed hard on his shoulders.

He rolled.

He was back up.

Kalb punched him in the temple. As Maddox reeled, the German followed with a jab, then another, then third.

Maddox lifted his elbows to block the assault.

He was tired and bruised.

He struck out with a flat palm, crushing the German's nose.

Blood spurted.

He then tapped under Kalb's jaw and tried to hit his throat.

Kalb rebuffed the attack.

Red ooze trickling across his lips and down his chin, the German clasped Maddox's shoulder and hit at the belly. Maddox replied with a head butt. There was no elegance to the battle, like a school yard brawl, they grappled and tumbled to the ground—rolling and biting and gouging.

Kalb landed on top.

Blood dripped from his broken nose onto Maddox's cheek.

Before the Nazi could complete his punch, Maddox clasped Kalb's lapels and put a knee to his testicles. Continuing the movement, Maddox threw the sergeant—Maddox had been trained in the SOE's Closed Quarters Combat system, an expanded and aggressive form of the martial art known as Defendu.

Kalb grunted as he hit the ground flat.

Maddox huffed to his feet and prepared to end the fight.

Kalb was chuckling, prone in the mud.

Maddox's eyes narrowed.

There were ten yards between them. Kalb was beaten. What could be so funny?

Kalb began to roll over.

Maddox saw it.

Horror!

He'd thrown Kalb on top of the German's MP38.

Maddox dived through the bushes just in time as Kalb unleashed a frenzy of bullets where he'd been standing. Desperate groping on his hands and shins as he tried to get upright and run.

In standing, his head whacked a knotty branch.

He clutched his head.

He staggered.

He lurched into a clearing.

The inside of his head buzzed and his vision took a few seconds to return.

He slipped and fell.

Maddox lay bruised on the ground. His muscles ached from the skiing and fight. His breath was fitful, each intake of oxygen requiring conscious effort in the heavy raising of his chest and sending spasms of pain from his battered ribcage.

He glanced about for a weapon.

A rock—a stick—anything...

Through the bushes at the clearing's edge, he saw the reindeer calf whose mother Kalb had slain mere minutes before.

It shivered with fear.

Everywhere else, there was nothing but ferns and mud and lichens.

Sergeant Kalb stalked headlong into the dell.

He ejected the magazine of his MP38 and checked it still contained ammunition. It did. He jammed the cartridge back home.

There was a leering sneer to his lips.

Maddox scabbled to his feet and took several paces back.

Kalb cocked the weapon and advanced. He crossed in front of the bush with the calf. It hunkered down, terrified to do anything more than shudder.

“And now, Captain, you will die.”

Kalb raised the gun square with Maddox’s chest.

The Englishman stared down the barrel to his certain death.

With a rustle and a crash, the stag burst through the shrubbery. Kalb just had time to issue a surprised *oomph* as its antlers gouged into his body. Its enormous bulk tossed him into the air. Kalb’s weapon was flung aside, landing with a pat on the snow.

Kalb was less fortunate.

He hit the ground hard. The reindeer turned and stomped its hooves on the earth as it stood to proud, protecting its calf from the predator who’d killed its doe. Kalb, winded, just had time to glance up, as the stag charged forward again, thrusting its pronged antlers deep into his chest.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Then, with a rattle of its head, skewered him through the neck.

Maddox, slowly, inched across for the MP38.

Kalb’s broken body was a bloody mess. His chest still heaved. His eyes remained open as he gasped, staring up at the animal. The stag stomped a warning to Maddox as he reached the machine gun.

Maddox gently clasped the gun, careful not to cross anywhere near the beast or its errant calf.

The stag snorted through its nose in derision and bayed at its fawn. The calf meekly trotted forward.

All the while, both kept their gaze fixed on Maddox.

The stag, bowed its head, brandishing its formidable horns at the Englishman.

“I hear you,” Maddox said. “Stay away from your new born.”

Maddox backed cautiously away.

Then, with final snort, the reindeer shepherded its young away through the trees.

“Jesus,” Maddox murmured. “And I thought the bears were supposed to be the things to watch out for.”

With the animals gone, Maddox at last stepped cautiously toward Kalb.

The sergeant’s eyes swivelled up to look at him. Blood curdled through his teeth, mixing with saliva to form bubbles that blistered and popped with every exhalation.

A twitch of his fingers as he tried to move them.

Then, with a guttural hiss, the German breathed his last.

Chapter 30

Maddox staggered up the bank to the grove, using the MP38 for support.

When he reached the top, he sat down, leaning his back against a gnarled tree stump, surrounded by clusters of toadstools.

His lids felt heavy as night began to descend.

A glimmer of movement.

With a snap, the MP38 was firmly in his palm and pointed at a clump of bracken from where the motion had come.

“Whoa,” Peterson said. “Don’t shoot.”

Maddox said nothing, an exhausted wheeze that might have made a chuckle had he had the energy, issued from his mouth.

“Jesus,” Marlowe said. “You look like shit.”

“You should see the other guys,” Maddox said.

Fallon came through the bushes to Maddox’s right. In his arms he held the captain’s Sten, his coat and his Fairbairn Sykes knife.

“We did,” Fallon said. “I counted ten. Not bad for a man on his own.”

“There’s another in the dell down the slope,” Maddox replied.

“What about Shield?” Marlowe asked.

Maddox shook his head.

“Tough break,” Marlowe replied. “When you didn’t make the rendezvous, we backtracked to find you. Came across evidence of the gunfight at the ravine and started following the carnage.”

“Walker?” Maddox asked.

“Here,” another voice said, passing through the shrubs behind Fallon. “Come on, let’s get him fixed up and then make camp for the night.”

“We’ll head back to Sledge and Conley,” Maddox agreed. “Hopefully, they’ve set up a fire and we can have something warm to eat.”

* * * * *

Half the village had turned out into the church hall.

Aku Jouhki stood in the vicar’s pulpit. Below him the faces of people he’d known his entire life stared back. In a back row, the local gossip monger whispered, hand over her lips to cover her mouth, to the woman next to her, whose face bobbed forward and back like a wagging dog’s tail.

Two-thirds of the way down the pews, a farmer and his brother, both nearing their seventies, sat with brows furrowed, deep as the troughs they ploughed in their fields in the spring. Their silver hair somehow added to the seriousness of their expressions.

In the front row, Jouhki’s wife, Ros, sat with their two children.

The youngest bounced on her lap as she tried to keep him still.

“Everyone,” Aku shouted, bringing the room to silence. “The Russians have broken through our lines. I’m sure you all saw the truck I had to steal from the Germans to get here ahead of them. The Red Army will be with us in just a few hours. I need you all to pack your belongings, bringing only what you absolutely must, and come with Ros and myself south.”

An eruption of disagreement and babbling between the people.

“Where is our army?” one shouted.

“Where is my son?” the mother of one of Aku’s comrades, who’d fallen earlier in the day, joined in.

“What of the Germans—they will protect us! That’s why they’re here.”

“Well, they would have, if he hadn’t stolen their truck...”

“Please,” Aku replied. “You must believe me—we tried to stop the Russians and lost many good men in doing so. They were too strong. You know what they will do when they arrive. There will be no quarter. Men will be shot. Women will be raped. Houses will be burned. If you value your lives and the lives of your children, you must join us and come south.”

“There isn’t enough space in your truck for all of us,” a catcall.

The gossip.

“We will move in convoy,” Aku replied. I will take the old, the sick or children in my truck. But there are enough vehicles in the village—whether cars or tractors or sledges for us to bring anyone who wants to come. But those who do must know, that I will be leaving in one hour. That is the only way to stay ahead of their advance.”

“Coward! You should stay and protect us!”

Aku winced.

The deaths of his friends still hung heavy in his heart. Perhaps he’d been wrong to help the British—at least if he’d let the Germans get their supplies, they might have taken up the brunt of the Russian assault.

He closed his eyes.

No.

Maddox had promised him he would deal with the Russians.

But there was just no way he’d be able to do it before they overran this village. And, even if he’d let the Germans get their guns, they’d have only used them to defend the mine—that still meant the Russians would reach these farms before their final assault.

“We’re not leaving,” the farmer yelled from the middle of the congregation.

“I’m an old man,” his brother agreed. “The Russians won’t care about me.”

“Enough,” Aku shouted. “I’ve told you how it is. If you wish to stay, that is your choice. For the rest of you, know that 60 minutes from now, my truck will be on its way. It is dangerous to wait even that long. You have one hour.”

Chapter 31

A billy can of snowmelt boiled over the small fire. Fallon, gingerly wrapping a cloth around his hand, lifted the pot and poured tea into separate mugs. They were passed out around the group.

Marlowe sucked on the air above his drink, taking the heady vapours into his nose.

Sledge entertained Conley with tall tales of the group's exploits in the jungles of Malaya.

Maddox smirked as the Australian reached the crescendo in his story. He'd heard it a dozen times before—and, of course lived through it. The legend being spun now was wholly different to the one he recalled taking part in. It involved wholly more giant snakes and a good deal less crawling through fetid swampland.

Maddox's left forearm began to twitch with pain.

He rolled up his sleeve lightly and massaged the muscle to alleviate the itching. He traced his fingers along the network of worm-like scars that ran the length of his skin. As the blood recirculated, the sensation of being gnawed at subsided.

He found himself looking at his wedding ring.

Olivia.

He twisted the golden band between his fingers.

Walker had been watching Maddox in his deep period of thought.

"I didn't realise you were married," the lieutenant said.

"Oh, yes," Maddox replied. "With a young son."

Walker whistled through his teeth.

"That must be hard," he said. "Being away from them so much. And tough on them never knowing exactly where you are."

"You have no idea," Maddox said, standing to leave.

"Still," Walker said, realising he'd strayed into an area of conversation he should have left alone. "Til death do you part, eh?"

Maddox stopped just as he was about to walk away and turned.

He smiled weakly.

"And even beyond," he said.

As the captain headed away, Walker looked across to Patterson.

"What was that all about?"

Patterson shook his head slowly.

"It's his story to tell," Patterson said. "If he wants you to know, you'll know."

"Come on," Walker said. "What was it? Did she leave him for another man? Run off with his baby?"

"She died," Marlowe said. "March last year, in an air raid. The Bethnal Green Disaster, the papers called it. Now, drop the conversation."

Patterson flashed Marlowe a death stare.

"What?" Marlowe said. "If the Walker's going to shut up about it, he should at least know why. Otherwise it's like having him walk around a mine field and not warning him of the danger."

Walker mumbled about 'condolences' but even as he quietened, his face carried that pained expression of a child who had further questions but had been chastened to silence by the adults.

Patterson shook his head again and broodily went back to drinking his tea.

Chapter 32

“They should be back by now,” Major Nieder said.

Beck took a wet rag from the side of the sluice and wiped the dirt from his hands.

He was beginning to suspect there were no blue diamonds left in this hole in the ground.

“Give them time,” Beck said. “The Finns were probably just rattling our cage. Kalb probably bivouacked up for the night or laid a trap.”

“Even if he had stayed to set a trap for the Russians or Finns,” Nieder said. “the resupply group should have been here by now. They left the main base hours ago.”

Nieder paced across to the first row of tents of their makeshift camp. In the middle of the huddle, two of his privates were cooking a late dinner over a small fire. The background hum of the grease conveyor still chuntered in the background, as it always did.

The broken Russian slave labourers shuffled back and forth loading the gravel from the water troughs onto the leather belt.

After sending out a squad with Kalb, he only had 32 men – including himself and Beck—to defend the camp. If the Russians attacked, the first thing he’d have to have his men do is execute the slaves.

His soldiers couldn’t be expected to fight the Russian advance and keep an eye on the miners—who could easily create havoc when they saw the potential for freedom when their comrades arrived.

Any uprising would have to be nipped in the bud before it started.

He wasn’t going to get caught short by prisoners, like he had in Poland.

“What exactly do you propose?” Beck said. “If we leave before we’re done here, we’ll face a firing squad.”

“You don’t think we’ve enough diamonds to buy our lives?”

“We’ve enough to ensure we live fat and happy forever,” Beck said. “But anything short of what we’ve been sent here for and our masters in Labyrinth will be most unforgiving.”

Nieder nodded in agreement.

“So we need to hold this position or die trying,” Nieder said. “At least until we hit the payload we need.”

He pointed out into the forest.

“We’ll want a trench dug along the road there,” he said. “Five men in it. That should be able to exert a choke hold on the main approach.”

He turned around and pointed across to the snow line.

“A second, with another five men, will need to be there,” he said. “Then two more, one behind us on the bluff and another in the woods. The rest of the men, we’ll place around the mine and camp.”

“What about our escape,” Beck said.

Nieder smirked.

“That’s well camouflaged,” the major said. “It’s all ready to go. We just need what we need.”

“Blue diamonds,” Beck sighed.

* * * * *

The night was short.

Despite his tiredness, Maddox found sleep to be an elusive mistress. He climbed out of his tent and made his way across to the central fire. He poked the ashes, lifting a gentle flurry of grey dust into the air. Underneath, the final dying hints of red embers flickered briefly, exposed to fresh oxygen.

He knelt and clasped a handful of kindling. With the skill of a survivalist, he coaxed the dying fire back to flames.

“Couldn’t sleep, sir?” Conley asked from over his shoulder.

“Fits and starts,” Maddox replied. “And you don’t need the sir. I’m reasonably informal when in the field with men I trust.”

“Thank you, sir,” Conley replied.

Maddox smirked.

“Anything to report?”

“All quiet since I took over from Fallon,” Conley said. “You want me to wake the men?”

Maddox stood and admired the crackling flames as they licked their way higher.

“Not yet,” he said. “Give them another hour. Most should come-to naturally as the light gets stronger. Then, shake the slug-a-beds.”

Maddox tipped the dregs from the billy can into the forest. He then crossed to a deep snow mound just clear of the treeline and scooped in a large dollop of snow. The men would need something to drink before they began the trek back along the ravine.

He stopped himself—they should amend their plan.

If the German attack had reached them from the mine, they had to have come in a vehicle of some kind. It made sense to see if they could find and make use of it themselves.

He paced back to the fire and slipped the pan on.

“You need to relax more,” Conley said.

Maddox raised an eyebrow.

“What says I’m not relaxed?”

“Lots of things,” Conley replied. “The way you stand. The way you play with your wedding ring when you think no-one’s looking. Lots of tiny signals.”

“I think you’re misreading things,” Maddox said.

The snow hissed as it slowly fizzled into water in the pot.

Maddox broke a branch into three pieces and fed them to the flames.

“I don’t know,” Conley said. “I’m usually pretty perceptive about people.”

“Oh, for the certainty of youth,” Maddox smiled. “There’s a difference between being tense and on guard. We had a lucky run in with the Finns. We’re in the middle of a Russian counter offensive. And we’re about to have a third entanglement with the German army. Relaxation might just get us all killed.”

“If you keep going like this you’ll be one of those people who has a heart attack at fifty,” Conley replied.

“Better than a bullet today,” Maddox said.

The billy can bubbled as the water reached boiling point.

Maddox poured himself out a mug of tea. He offered a second cup to Conley, who eagerly pulled off his gloves and used the steam rising from the beverage to warm his fingers.

They'd have to drink it black. Milk in the field was a luxury and Maddox didn't fancy trying to get any from the reindeer given his encounter the previous day.

Conley hopped from one foot to the other. Clearly, for him, the conversation wasn't over.

"It's not hard," Conley replied. "I learned this trick off a Chinese guy we did a mission with last year outside Shanghai. All you have to do is empty your mind and think of something simple like *cool, wet, grass* or *slow, dripping, tap*. He used to repeat these things to himself—in Chinese of course—until he entered a sort of trace. Works wonders."

Maddox's eyes narrowed.

Sledge came out of his tent. The Australian tripped over a guy rope, clanked his nose on a branch and landed face down.

If any of their enemies were within 500 metres Sledge had just given their position away.

Maddox shook his head and took a belt of tea into his mouth.

The liquid gushed down the back of his gullet, almost scalding, but filling his body with the warmth of a passionate lover when it hit the bottom of his belly.

"It's easier for some people than others to have empty minds," he said.

"Don't mind me," Sledge said. "I'm not hurt or anything."

The enormous sergeant drew himself to his full height and brushed the dirt from his trousers before continuing on his way.

"Look," Conley whispered, "I know it sounds silly but just give it a try. Go with something that suits you and is relaxing. How about: *I am a leaf on the breeze*."

Maddox stared at the young man in front of him. Conley took deep sips from his mug.

"Seriously?" Maddox said. "I didn't have you down for one of those Blavatsky types."

"Give it a go," Conley replied. "If it doesn't work, you don't have to keep trying: 'I'm a leaf on the breeze'."

Maddox issued a long, deep sigh.

"I'll consider it," he said. "Now, get back to watching the perimeter."

Conley tipped the tea in his cup out onto the snow. Maddox watched the sergeant walk away, the flashes of the fire lighting his coat with lonely flickers of orange slowly being overpowered by the rising daylight.

He closed his eyes.

"I'm a leaf on the breeze," he thought. "I'm a leaf on the breeze..."

Maddox opened his eyes again.

"Pillock," he said and tipped the dregs of his tea onto the ground.

Chapter 33

Komelkov drew his armoured column to a halt outside the village.

It was a ramshackle affair—a church, a few shops, a lumber mill and some farmsteads.

He counted fewer than twenty houses scattered like breadcrumbs on the earth. Hard to believe such a pathetic array of dwellings could do anything to halt his advance. But Komelkov was no fool. When every inch of road through this land contained the potential for a Finnish assault, a collection of buildings like this was a veritable nightmare of possible sniper holes and ambush sites.

Torn white bed sheets twitched anaemically on the breeze from windows and mop handles outside three of the structures and from the tympanum in front of the chapel.

“What do you propose?” his number two asked.

Komelkov pulled a cigarette carton from his pocket and with a veteran’s skill tapped a single cylinder from the carton. He stuck it in his mouth and lit the far end.

The ersatz blend of road tar and dried leaves that in the Soviet Union passed for a real cigarette washed over his tongue.

A lesser man might have coughed.

“It didn’t snow last night,” Komelkov replied. “So the answer is obvious.”

“Sir?”

Komelkov sucked heavily on the end of his cigarette until he could feel the heat of the end as it burned to his fingers. He flicked it out to the side of the tank and exhaled a brooding cloud of smoke.

“The tyre tracks,” he said. “Two sets. One is fresher than the second. No snow last night and their rate of decomposition means a truck came in, stayed a few hours and left.”

“How do you know it left? That there weren’t two trucks?”

Komelkov closed his eyes.

“Do you see a truck in the village?” he asked wearily.

“No, sir.”

“And what makes tracks like those?”

“An Opel Blitz.”

“So, now we know the inhabitants of the village have had contact with the Germans,” Komelkov said. “They have been warned of our arrival. A fact supported by the flags dangling from the windows.”

“How does this affect our actions?”

“That’s easy,” Komelkov replied. “It means we level the village. It’s that or take the risk of falling knowingly into a trap.”

“But,” the second said. “The white flags.”

“All that tells us,” Komelkov said. “Is that the inhabitants of those three buildings might—*might*—be willing to surrender.”

“The articles of war...”

“Very well,” Komelkov shrugged. “Target every building other than the ones with the flags. But if you see someone move or run from one structure to another, kill them. I’m not losing another man to these inbreeds.”

* * * * *

Maddox pulled the keys to the truck from his pocket and tried them in the ignition.

The motor coughed for a few seconds before clipping over. The brutal cold of just a single night out in the Finnish open.

“And this is summer,” he shook his head.

Walker poked his head in through the window.

“It’s working, then,” the lieutenant said. “That’s good. We can make up some of the time lost last night.”

“Indeed,” Maddox replied. “We’ll take the road as close as we can, then hop back onto skis for the last mile or so.”

“So, is our target the Germans or the Russians?” Walker asked.

“Both,” Maddox replied. “Though I think our most prudent course of action may be to allow the two of them to knock seven bells out of one another and then step in to mop up the exhausted victor.”

Walker’s nose wrinkled.

“What?” Maddox asked.

Walker leaned back from the passenger window and checked the rest of the men were piling into the back of the vehicle.

“It’s just,” he replied, “I’m not sure how I feel about attacking an ally. We’ve already aided and abetted the enemy by teaming with the Finns. That’s technically a court martial offence. If we attack the Soviets...”

Maddox leaned forward and flicked the glass on the dashboard, behind which the fuel gauge sat. The needle flickered upward. He grimaced, there was only a third of a tank left. It wasn’t ideal – but better than nothing.

“Captain, did you hear me?”

“I heard you,” Maddox replied.

“And?”

“And what?” Maddox asked. “We had an agreement with the Finns. They died helping us stop the Germans. Had that force made it through to the mine, this mission, which was suicidal in its stupidity from the start, would have been a total impossibility. Not even I would have been crazy enough to take on the firepower of that convoy we stopped yesterday, together with the soldiers killed in the forest and god knows what else they’ve got at the mine, dug in and waiting for us, altogether at the same time.”

“So,” Walker said, “you’re just going to ignore my concerns?”

Maddox stared thoughtfully through the windscreen for a few seconds.

He took a deep intake of breath, raising his chin as he considered his response.

“Would you feel any better if I derisively laughed at them?” he said.

A moment’s silence.

“Not really, no,” Walker said.

“Then don’t be so bloody stupid and get in the back of the truck,” Maddox replied.

“I must protest,” Walker said. “We cannot attack an ally.”

Maddox stared straight at Walker.

His eyes were a cold, brutal blue.

“Bullshit,” he said. “This isn’t the nice honourable end of the war. This isn’t sitting behind a desk on Oxford Street, or in the halls of Parliament, quaffing sherry and jaw-jawing about the front line. This isn’t even the niceties of advancing over the French countryside, where two-thirds of the infantry will never

fire a shot in anger, pushing the German lines back mile by mile with a full belly; supporting supply chain and reinforcements on tap. This is war as war is. It's a bunch of men, scared out of their wits in the back country, frozen, alone, dirty, brutal and begging for the kiss of their mother as their last breath curdles in their throat as they die swallowing a mouthful of mud. It is bloody and nasty; gouging in the eyes, gnawing through the sinews and—if you are very, very lucky—stabbing through the chest with the point of a knife, hoping to God that this thrust will give the man you're grappling a painless passing as you watch his eyes widen in horror and his bowels empty into his trousers. It is piracy. It is the wrath of the Vandal horde. It is thuggish. And above all else: it is how it is. You either understand that or you will die—and it is my job to very much make sure you don't."

Walker swallowed hard. When he spoke, his pitch was higher in tone.

"I want to formally go on the record as opposing this plan."

Maddox raised an eyebrow.

"Don't be so bloody stupid," he said. "And get in the back of the truck."

Walker stood in silence for a few seconds.

He bit his lip.

He then nodded and wandered to the covered flatbed.

"Sledge!" Maddox bellowed.

"Sir?" a hollow, metallic voice resonated through the truck's frame from the rear.

"Get your arse up here," Maddox replied. "You're riding in the front with me."

With a scraping of boots and an 'oof', McKlenna jumped down and jogged around to the cabin. He clicked open the door and climbed inside next to the major.

"Everyone in?" Maddox asked.

"All settled."

Maddox put the truck in gear and pulled down the bumpy road.

"Right," he said in a low hush so that he couldn't be overheard by those in the back, "let's talk about your team."

"My team?" Sledge replied, glancing nervously both ways.

"Carter picked you, Walker, Shield and Conley to come on this mission," Maddox said. "I've known that bastard a long time. One of you has been asked to prepare a separate report on this mission specifically for him upon your return. That person is, effectively, a spy for Carter."

"And you want me to tell you if I know who it is?"

The engine protested as Maddox changed gears, picking up speed.

"That would be nice," he replied.

"Well, that's easy," Sledge replied. "He asked all of us."

The truck bounced as it rode over a large pot hole, eaten through the tarmac by the jaws of winter.

"All of you?"

"He asked," Sledge replied. "Naturally, I told him to shove it sideways up his jacksie. I've worked with you before. You may be unorthodox—but in the field, you look after your men and your crazy methods seem to work. You can't ask for more from a commander than that."

“And the others?” Maddox replied.

“No idea,” Sledge said. “The carrot dangled was pretty persuasive. A safe posting as a trainer at Camp X. There was also a bump in pay. He told me he was putting the same package on the table to each of us—first one to take the offer, had it. Either I took it or someone would.”

“Nice deal,” Maddox frowned.

“Not good enough for me to turn nark,” Sledge replied. “I couldn’t say if one of the others bit the bait.”

The truck growled as it continued on its way.

“That’s okay,” Maddox said. “I know exactly who it is, now.”

Chapter 34

Nieder stood over the top of the trench his men had dug along the road’s edge.

It was good work. Hidden behind the first row of trees, the soil mounted along the street side, it offered both protection from bullets and a measure of camouflage.

“Take the fallen branches and embed them in the embankment,” he said. “It’ll hide you even more.”

With the five of these in place, the camp stood a good chance of holding off an assault from along the track. The back of the base was protected from tank attack by the sharp cliff, into which the mine entrance was cut. The only way up or down was a narrow path barely big enough for single file travel—certainly unsuitable for a tank-led Soviet advance.

The flanks of their position were protected by snow banks, frozen lakes, bogs and forests.

Any attack had to come along the main road.

A shout went up.

Several of the privates digging the trench looked up.

Were the Russians here?

More shouting.

Laughter.

Cheers?

From the camp.

“Follow my orders,” Nieder said to the men, “and stop dawdling. When the Russians arrive, you’ll wish you’d worked faster.”

He started walking quickly back toward the tents.

But he could see in between the rows of canvas, Beck was running—almost dancing—as he charged down the slope, heading for Nieder’s position.

“What is it?” Nieder called out.

“We’ve found them!” Beck shouted. “We’ve found them!”

“Found what?”

Beck, face beaming, arrived breathless beside the major. His chest heaved up and down and he bent forward, resting his hands on the filthy knees of his trousers as he caught his breath.

“Diamonds,” he croaked, between gasps of air. “Blue ones. We’ve found them.”

Chapter 35

Maddox slowed the truck as they approached the village; it wasn’t a matter of choice, the dead bodies lying across the streets made it impossible to drive around them. Maddox sucked in air through gritted teeth. The only way forward was to push the truck over the top of the corpses and he wasn’t prepared to do that without at least a few moments of reflection on the scene before them.

“Jesus,” Sledge muttered.

“I hope Aku got as many people out as he could,” Maddox agreed.

Smoke rose from lingering fires visible through the ruins of the structures. Some of the buildings looked like they’d been demolished by simply ramming the tanks through the walls.

A white flag fluttered like a joke that had gone flat from a pole on the one wall of the public house that remained standing.

“What do you think happened?” Sledge asked. “Did they just kill them for the sake of it?”

“With Russians, it’s hard to say,” Maddox replied. “They may have feared an ambush—or they may have actually been ambushed. All it would have taken is a couple of farmers with their shotguns taking a pop at the tanks and the Russians might have gone into overdrive. How many men have they lost to snipers out here in the wilderness?”

“You almost sound approving of this carnage,” Sledge said.

“Good God, no,” Maddox said. “It’s a war crime. That said, you and I both know that if it were our convoy travelling down this road and trying to get through and some yokel fired at us, things could easily get out of hand. We wouldn’t flatten an entire village and slaughter the occupants—we’ve been in that position before and never done it.”

“Many times,” Sledge agreed.

“But we could both see how it could happen,” Maddox replied. “That doesn’t make it any less disgusting. Once you’ve shot the guy with the gun, it takes a special kind of nasty to obliterate everything.”

He glanced through his window, his eyes moving onto the still body of a young girl, perhaps six or seven years old. Her pink floral dress, stained with splashes of blood and mud, fluttered as the wind whispered across it. Under one arm, a teddy bear lay alongside her,

A single paw reached out to hug her in an eternal, ever-loving embrace.

The second, guttering on that same breeze, mockingly seemed to be waving goodbye.

Maddox stared at his feet for a second.

He couldn't help but think of his own son.
"You take over the steering wheel," he said.
"What?" Sledge asked.
Maddox's jaw hardened.
"You drive," he said harder, and opened the door.
He slammed his fist on the metal partition with the back of the truck.
"Everybody out," he yelled.
"Where the hell are you going?" Sledge replied.
"It'll only slow us by a minute or two," Maddox said.
"We don't have time to bury them," Sledge said.
"Of course not," Maddox said, hopping down onto the icy pavement. "But we are going to pull the bodies to the side of the road. I'm not simply rolling straight over the top of them."
He slammed the cab door shut and hammered once more on the flatbed.
"Out," he yelled. "The sooner this is done, the sooner we're on our way."

Chapter 36

Beck plucked an unremarkable piece of gravel from the grease-belt and held it aloft.

The stone, half the size of Nieder's thumbnail, was covered in tarry oil.

"See?" Beck asked triumphantly.

Nieder shrugged.

"The oil on the belt repels water," Beck sighed with the weariness of a man who'd explained this many times before to his commander. "Since the gravel soaks up water from the sluices, it is also repelled. The diamonds, however, don't absorb it so remain stuck."

He gestured along the leather conveyor at the dozens of grains that remained, held fast to its surface.

"I know all this," Nieder replied. "How do you know that one is blue?"

Beck thrust the stone into a bucket that contained detergent. The tar lifted from its surface in clumps. He shook his hand vigorously, causing a bubbly froth to form. When he pulled the gem out, it remained a dull and unremarkable sight.

"It looks like a worthless pebble," Nieder shrugged.

"Exactly," Beck smiled. "If it were a white diamond, it would also look pretty rubbish but would at least be somewhat clear – like a dirty lump of quartz. But there's no quartz or amethyst or other similar stone in this hole in the ground. The only thing left for this to be is a blue diamond."

Beck removed his magnifying eyepiece from his pocket and held the stone to the light. With a theatrical air, he turned the diamond slowly between his fingers. As the sun's rays passed through the gravel, Nieder could see it took on a glassy note. It was transparent.

And glowed with the eeriest shimmer of cyan.

"See it now?" he asked and passed it across.

“Yes,” Nieder laughed, “yes I do.”

“It may not look like much now,” Beck said, “but it’s the real deal. Cut and polished, that’s our ticket out of here.”

“How many do we have?” Nieder asked.

“I can’t be sure,” Beck said. “These lumps could be normal diamonds, but if someone hit one on the walls of the mine, the rest of the shovel load should contain some too. However there’s no way to know until we empty all of the sluices out onto the conveyor whether the ore this diamond came from is already on the belt or happens to be somewhere else in the troughs. The hope is that if we find one, there should be more—but there’s no guarantee; they’re impossibly rare unless someone somehow hit a nodule of the damn things.”

“Then empty the sluices and load it all onto the belt,” Nieder replied. “Wash and check as much as you can. We’ll be out of here as soon as you’re done.”

The explosion blew one of the tents into the air.

Nieder and Beck reflexively ducked, drawing their pistols.

There was a distant rattle of machine gun fire from the trenches hidden in the forest.

Nieder heard the rumble of engines.

The Russians!

He could see now the nose of the first tanks, surging along the road at top speed, its mighty cannon pointed directly in their direction.

“What now?” Beck screamed as a second blast pounded from the weapon.

Nieder glanced at the armoured vehicles as they churned along the road between the trees.

“Wash what’s on the belt,” he yelled. “If it’s blue bag it. If we get lucky we might have enough to not need what’s in the sluices.”

“How many is enough?”

“A handful—as many as you can—I don’t know,” Nieder shrugged. “Just keep checking them.”

A whistle as the shell flew.

A deafening explosion threw mud and soil into the sky.

A scream as a soldier running barely fifteen yards from them was blown to smithereens.

“There isn’t time,” Beck said.

“Just do it,” Nieder replied.

Another blast from the tanks rocketed into the ground.

“You keep working,” Nieder said. “I’ll hold the Russians off as long as I can.”

Nieder sprinted down the slope towards the attacking tanks.

Chapter 37

Maddox kept his foot to the floor, pushing the truck as hard as he could.

It hadn’t taken long to shift the bodies aside and drive through the town but shifting each of the corpses out of his path had given him a fresh impetus to catch

up with the Russians. Hopefully, given the amount of time they must have wasted obliterating the village, they weren't far ahead of them.

Sledge had the map spread across his lap. The compass needle lined along the folds jolted nervously with each bump in the road.

"Just up ahead there's a track off through the trees, according to this," he said. "Swing into it and take it for a mile."

"Then it's everyone out onto skis," Maddox agreed. "If Jouhki's indications were anything to go by, we should intersect with the German base very quickly from a blind spot along the escarpment."

Although the map was out of date and the path through the pines was hidden by dense bracken, it was exactly in the right location.

"Perfect," Maddox said, swinging the truck off the main track. "We'll take these bastards down yet."

Chapter 38

The Opel Blitz bounced roughly as Aku Jouhki drew to a halt on the icy track. The engine grumbled lightly as it ticked over. Beside him, Ros sat gently caressing the hair of their son and daughter, one on each side of her, their heads nestled up against her body as she cradled them.

"What now?" she asked.

"Well, we've taken the disused backtracks as far as we can," Aku replied. "We'll have to return to the main road from here. We should have skirted far enough away from the main highway to avoid the Germans, the Russians and the English."

"You think it'll be safe to get back onto the road?"

Aku looked both ways along the highway's length. It was empty as far as the eye could see.

In the back of the lorry, twelve others had joined them in their evacuation. While Aku was soulful that so few of the villagers had joined them, at least the number was small enough that they could all fit—even though it was a squeeze—in the back of a single vehicle.

"Yes," he said, after careful consideration. "From here, it's all plain sailing south, to Helsinki."

"And a new life," Ros said. "Just as soon as this damned war is over."

Aku nodded and sighed.

He pushed the Opel into gear and accelerated away to freedom.

* * * * *

Beck glanced down at the misshapen lumps on the conveyor.

He had no idea which ones, covered in heavy grease were blue diamonds—if any. He grabbed a fistful of grime, the mechanical ooze squelching through the gaps in his fingers as he plunged his hand into the bucket of water.

Another Russian shell landed barely ten yards from him. Soil was flung high into the air and began to patter on his head, face and back as it tumbled from the sky.

A German soldier, running through the tents to his right, dodged as his position was raked by more machine gun fire from the attackers.

Swishing his hand vigorously in the water, a froth of bubbles floated to the surface. He could feel the grit grow coarser against his skin. He pulled his palm out and opened it.

Success.

He could instantly see among the gravel, five gem stone lumps.

Three were blue.

He eagerly plucked them out and dropped them in a small pouch.

He clasped a fresh handful of grease and repeated the process.

Gunfire sounded all around.

A ping as a bullet hit the generator driving the belt and rebounded.

With a crunching whirr, the leather conveyor ground to a halt.

Beck didn't care. There were either enough gems already hidden in the muck or there weren't. He washed the stones and quickly checked his bounty.

Nothing.

"Pah," he tossed them aside with disgust.

Rough diamonds clattered as they skimmed across the rocky ground.

Another fist of gunk.

"Come on," he hissed.

The froth in the bucket was beginning to subside as the detergent struggled to keep pace with the oil.

Another one.

A shout.

He looked up.

Russian labourers had managed to break free of their guards in the mine and were pouring from the entrance out across the land. The soldiers in the encampment shifted from their positions, moving closer to the conveyor.

"No, no, no," Beck whispered.

As the slaves sprinted down the slopes toward their comrades in the tanks, the Germans raised their submachine guns and began mowing them down.

The Soviets in the tanks weren't about to let their countrymen die so easily.

Three tanks turned their turrets to face the conveyor.

Beck ducked beneath the level of the belt, using the machinery for cover.

With an earth-shaking "*boom*" the tanks all opened fire on his position.

Chapter 39

"Attack!" Komelkov screamed as his tanks opened fire on the German positions.

His T34 veered violently to the right as it crushed one of the Nazi defenders under its mighty bulk. Through the narrow slit in front of his eyes he could see

five Germans pop out of a conifer-covered trench and begin firing at their tank tracks.

The pathetic pinging of ricochets could be heard on the outside of his armoured shell.

He just had chance to see one of his smaller BT-5s plough across the top of the open dugout, catching two of the defenders beneath its tracks—the other ducking away to avoid decapitation.

“That’s right,” he yelled. “Ignore their anaemic outer line. We’ll be in amongst their forces and slaughter them where they stand!”

As they charged forward along the main track toward the camp, there was a crashing of trees to his far left. His pincer movement was complete—the two other tanks from his squadron thrusting toward the German position from the other end of their complex.

Now they’d be fighting on two fronts.

He could already see the fear gripping the defenders, unsure which group to attack first.

A flicker of movement, up the slope, towards the entrance to the mine shaft.

Komelkov’s gaze instinctively shifted.

“Holy mother of God,” he whispered.

Emaciated, near corpses stagger, forth from the hole into the ground. They blink as they pour into the daylight, trying their best to run, shambolically, as though the earth had vomited forth bats in human form in the midst of the day against their will.

“They’re Russians!” Temur exclaimed.

No sooner had the mine labourers began their flight than a line of Germans drew in near the machinery by the sluices. The soldiers raised their guns and began to mow the slaves down.

“Bastards,” Komelkov bellowed. “Train all weapons on those Nazis. I want them dead! Dead!”

Chapter 40

Maddox stared in disbelief at the battle through his binoculars.

“Bad?” Walker asked.

“Total carnage,” Maddox replied.

“What’s the strength of the Russians?”

“At the front is a T34-85,” Maddox said. “It’s flanked by two BT-5s.”

“Well,” Walker said, “I guess they don’t do things by half.”

“Certainly not,” Maddox continued. “They’ve a couple of T-26s chomping through the trees over there too. A nice flanking manoeuvre. They’re in danger, though.”

“How so?” Walker asked. “They look like they’re tearing strips out of the Germans.”

Another volley of blasts from the Russians threw soil and scree into the air. Tents blasted apart and Nazi youth were tossed like rag dolls.

"They've pushed too far in," Maddox said. "See the trenches they ploughed over at the start?"

He pointed to six men, crawling out of their dugouts and across the land toward the back of the tanks.

"Tanks are vulnerable to infantry when they're unsupported," Walker nodded.

"Exactly," Maddox replied.

At the front of the line of Germans was a major. In his hands: a sticky bomb. The makeshift explosive device, if attached to the underside of a tanks or its tracks would be devastating. He gestured to one of the men following him, who had a similar device, to head for a second Russian vehicle.

The Germans were about to even the odds.

"So, what's our plan?"

"Wait until they've finished knocking seven bells out of one another and move in to secure the diamonds from the weakened victor," Maddox said.

At that moment, his attention was caught by the lieutenant at the mine conveyor. An explosion from a tank shell shattered the leather belt and spattered fragments of it across the rock face.

The lieutenant reached out and grabbed something, drew to a crouch and began running as quickly as he could away from the battle.

Maddox trained his binoculars as closely as he could on the fleeing man.

"Scratch that plan," Maddox said.

"Why?" Walker asked.

"That German has a pouch in his possession," Maddox said. "And I'm willing to bet it contains what we're here for."

He grabbed his Sten.

"Okay everyone, let's move."

* * * * *

Beck dived as low as he could. He willed himself to become the earth. The whistle and buzz of the shells as they dropped through the air seemed cut short by the deafening boom as soil and loose talus rained down.

Beck opened his eyes.

His uniform was pitted and burnt in places as though flaming moths had gnawed holes through it. A charred arm lay in front of him, poking through what remained of the conveyor.

Next to it was an oily lump of diamonds, stuck bubbly to a smoking strip of the belt.

His head bobbed to see if he was still a target.

The bucket of detergent, knocked on its side, still had a centimetre of water swilling inside, held in place by the slight incline of the slope.

He grabbed the tarry mound and thrust it into the liquid.

"Please, please, please," he muttered. "We only need one or two more."

The water blackened, the grease washing away between his fingers.

He pulled his arm sharply back and, still belly down on the floor, opened his palm.

One, two...

Three!

“Ha!” he grinned.

But where were the pouches?

They had been resting on the ground beside him.

Frantic scrabbling.

Success.

Both lay, protected by a plank from the sluices, untouched nearby.

He slithered across.

The larger one, containing the normal diamonds, he tied closed and slipped into his outside pocket. The smaller one, wrapped tightly closed with a ribbon, he prized open. At the bottom he counted seven stones. His lips broadened. He tipped the additional three inside.

Ten gems.

More than enough, under the circumstances, to guarantee he didn't face a firing squad upon his return to his masters.

He resealed the container and checked the Russians.

They were advancing deeper into the camp. Bodies of his platoon littered the escarpment. Nieder was nearly at the back of the lead commander's vehicle.

“Let him keep the cabbage eaters busy,” Beck thought. “I'm getting out of here.”

He moved to a crouch and began to follow the line of the cliff face.

Fortunately, he and Nieder had long ago planned an escape route just in case the base was overrun.

No-one would catch him now.

Chapter 41

Nieder inched closer to the back of the tanks.

They were arranged in a triangle. The larger T34, clearly the commander, was perhaps ten metres in front of the other two. Their advance into the compound had slowed as the road gave way to the loose scree that ran into the escarpment up to the cliff face.

Their compatriots, the two tanks charging in from the forest, well there wasn't much he could do about those, they were ploughing through the tents. His men in the camp had gone from an efficient fighting machine to school girls dancing giddily because someone had thrown a snake among them.

If Kalb had been there, he could have rallied them.

But it was too late for recriminations.

He needed to take down the three beasts in front of him.

If he could slice the head of the viper, he could still contain the situation.

Arm over arm, he crabbed between the tanks—right in their blind spot. His men, behind him, had the shorter journey to the backs of the more lightly armoured vehicles. The turrets of all of them faced toward the conveyor.

With the first volley they demolished the sluices, machinery and generator.

Beck!

He needed to move faster.

He rose to his feet, half crouch.

A glance over his shoulder.

One team reached the back of a BT-5. With a grimace of triumph, the private slapped the sticky bomb—a gelatine coated sock, filled with explosive, to the underside. The second team—lacking an explosive, had orders to shove grenades in the vulnerable exhausts at the back and roll them under the wheels the moment the other explosives went off.

A rattle and thunk ahead of him.

Nieder dropped back on his belly. He was between the animals now. If anyone popped their head through a hatch and saw him, he'd be cut down where he lay. Ahead the mighty T34 was losing traction. Even as its track churned on the loose stones, they flew out behind it.

Nieder raised an arm to shield his face. His other hand clasped firmly around his own sticky bomb.

He needed to get closer.

His heart thumped in his chest as though a giant tympanum being thudded for all it was worth to the rhythm of some unheard orchestra.

His mouth was dry. He was barely ten metres behind the armoured shell. He knew well the narrow plate patch – the tank's only weakness.

From the corner of his eye he saw Beck by the mine entrance get to his feet.

"That coward is running off!" he hissed. "Damn him."

The whirr of the tank turrets drowned even the almighty pounding of his heart. They drew a bead on the mine entrance.

For the first time, Nieder was no longer in the blind spot between them.

Time was out.

Back on his toes.

He ran.

Another pounding volley from the tanks. They bombarded the cliff above the mine. Boulders the size of cars crashed down through the entrance, sealing it tight. In all probability, the tunnels inside would have collapsed under the withering fire.

Nieder heard a muffled cry from inside one of the BT-5's.

He knew what would come—they'd pin point him with the machine gun on the front and he'd be dead in seconds.

"Now!" he yelled.

He closed the gap to the T34.

Vaulting the back, he slapped the greased sock onto the back of the tank.

He saw the BT-5 closest to him line its machine gun with his chest.

The explosion was enormous.

The sticky bomb slapped on its underside ripped a hole in its thin hull. Fragments of molten metal liquidated everyone inside.

The second BT-5 was now spinning in his direction. Nieder leapt.

Behind the tanks he could see his men, having shoved their grenades home, sprinting back for the trees.

A second detonation.

Nieder dived.

He hit the gravel.

The air was knocked from his lungs as he landed badly, somehow twisting his elbows beneath his body. He scowled as the stone scrapped the skin from his forearms.

Pings and clangs as though someone had thrown a jug of pfennigs at the far side of the T34; vicious shrapnel from other exploding tank. The larger tank shielded his body as shattered fragments of the BT-5 flew in all directions, metal confetti.

He didn't have time to savour the moment.

He was running again.

He had to put distance between himself and his own stick bomb before the thing went off.

Then, he had to catch Beck before he fled with their passport to freedom.

And rip his intestines from his thieving, cowardly belly.

Chapter 42

Maddox ran out of the cover of the boulders 100 yards from the mine, charging toward the battle.

"Walker," he shouted. "Take Fallon, Patterson and Marlowe. Drop your skis and keep the Russians and Germans busy down here on the rocks. Whoever wins, wipe them out. Conley and Sledge—you're with me. Bring your skis with you. We have to stop that lieutenant before he gets wherever he's going—and I've a feeling it's somewhere up on top of that snow lined cliff."

Sledge and Conley both nodded.

"Wait a minute," Walker shot back. "You want us to fire on the Russians?"

"Just do it," Maddox replied.

* * * * *

Komelkov heard the two tanks beside him explode.

"Shit—we're in trouble now," he snarled.

Infantry.

He could hear the ricochets as their debris chinked off his own armour. Without the machine guns on their turrets, he had no way to deal with soldiers running around his own vehicle – and if they got to the vulnerable back plate...

He grabbed his gun and barrelled through the hatch.

Twisting left.

Two German soldiers.

He fired.

One of the soldiers tumbled. The second turned and fired his submachine gun. Bullets clattered around the hatch. Komelkov returned fire, knocking the youth from his feet.

The Russian hoisted himself out of the tank and rolled onto the ground. He heard the scrabbling of rubble to his right, spinning, he saw Nieder rising to a run.

“I have you now,” he hissed gritted teeth.
His finger squeezed tight around the trigger.
A hail of bullets.
Instinctively he ducked.
A flash of confusion.
They weren’t from his own gun.
Flashes as they sparked off the front of his tank.
He went flat on his side.
Eyes drawn to the source.
“Who the hell are you?”
Four troops in snow camouflage were vaulting across the land, bombarding both the Russians and the Germans.
Nieder was escaping.
“Finns?” he exclaimed.
Three more of these white-clad commandoes were sprinting along the top of the escarpment. Only one had his face visible. Dark-haired, a captain’s three pips on his shoulders, a Sten gun in his grip.
“British!” he roared.
His thought train was cut short as the world around him exploded in ear-drum bursting eruption.
He was flattened against the scree by the blast wave.

Chapter 43

Walker saw the ball of fire from the T34 and realised what had happened—the German had managed to place a charge on the thinner back panel. As he and the others surged down the slope, he spun his Sten to focus on the escaping major.

It was an unlikely shot.

Stens were notoriously inaccurate over anything further than 30 yards and the major was pelting towards the trees, at least 150 feet away.

Still, Walker rattled off a short burst of rounds.

Too late.

The wily Nazi bastard chanced a quick glimpse over his shoulder and then bowed beneath the outer branches of the forest.

“Should we follow him?” Patterson asked.

In the main camp, the two remaining Soviet tanks were making short work of the stragglers in the German defence force. Canvas, torn apart by the tracks ripping across them and wrapped around the turrets by slashed guy ropes bellowed as they patrolled back and forth, machine gunning any resistance.

“No,” Walker replied. “We have our orders. We need to take down those remaining tanks before they figure out they’re on their own and chase after Maddox.”

“Four men against two tanks,” Patterson shrugged. “I suppose we’ve faced worse odds.”

At that moment, one of the armoured T-26s rotated its slender cannon in their direction.

Chapter 44

Maddox stumbled as he ran across the talus.

The long skis and poles attached to his backpack, made him unbalanced as he ran across the rugged terrain. The German lieutenant was still at least two hundred yards ahead and scrambling on his hands and knees up a narrow path that steeply climbed to the top of the cliff face.

“So, you did have a backup escape plan, after all,” Maddox muttered.

Maddox was grabbed by the back of his haversack and craned bodily back onto the soles of his boots by Sledge in a single, swift move.

Conley whipped past.

“Come on,” the sergeant shouted as he streaked by.

“Conley!” Maddox called out. “Wait!”

But the boy was in no mood to stop and continued running.

“Damn it,” Maddox panted as he started trying to catch up.

“None of us is as young as we were,” Sledge replied as he jogged alongside Maddox. “You can’t expect to keep up with the kids forever.”

“True,” Maddox said. “Too damn true.”

Conley reached the bottom of the slope. Lieutenant Beck had groped his way to the top and rolled over the lip. The ground up there was still covered with snow and as he kicked his way onto the plateau, a flurry was flung into the air.

Conley was making good pace.

Beck stood once he was fully over the top and peered back down at Conley, almost a third of the way along the incline. Beck’s chest rose and fell heavily. The condensation of his breath clearly visible as it left his lips as though a fire were smoking deep within his gut.

Maddox and Sledge reached the bottom of the slope at the same time.

Beck lifted a pistol from his holster.

He aimed and fired three rounds.

Sledge barged Maddox aside.

He needn’t have bothered.

Beck was so exhausted the bullets were wildly inaccurate, harmlessly chipping the ridge above their heads. But Conley was now halfway to the top and Beck was lowering his weapon to take the Englishman down. Conley was in no position to return fire. He needed his hands simply to maintain his grip on the ledge as he crawled higher.

Sledge rammed his Sten into his shoulder. Its familiar bark filled the air. Maddox dropped to one knee and aimed along his rifle. He too launched a withering volley at the German.

Beck disappeared from sight. Conley was two-thirds of the way up.

“After you,” Sledge gestured to the path up the cliff, little wider than bar stool and strewn with loose pebbles and grit.

“Keep us both covered,” Maddox replied.

* * * * *

“Split up,” Walker yelled. “That’ll at least give them two targets.”

He and Fallon barrelled down the slope, heading for the tree line, hoping to sneak behind the tanks and come at them from behind. Patterson and Marlowe charged along the top of the escarpment, making for the former entrance to the mine.

The tanks unleashed another round of shells.

They bounded down the slope, half slipping, half jogging.

The ninety horsepower engines of the T-26s churned as they began ploughing their way across to where Walker was running.

A last German futilely raised his submachine gun and clattered off a full clip at the lead machine. Even with its slender armour, the burst had no hope of killing the men inside. The tank’s 7.62mm Degtyaryov machine gun twisted in its mounted position.

The first barrage ripped the soldier in two like a guillotine.

The main 45mm cannon and machine gun both swivelled in Walker’s direction.

Walker was less than a tennis court’s length from the trees.

“We’re not going to make it,” Fallon called from behind him.

“We will,” Walker exclaimed.

Fallon changed direction.

“Head for the trees,” he yelled. “Get behind them—I’ll provide a distraction.”

Fallon was now bounding back up the slope, hoping to draw the tank’s fire.

He ducked among the remains of the sluices and threw a grenade at the lead tank.

“No!” Walker shouted.

He stopped running.

He turned.

The T-26 fired its main cannon.

The shell caught him in the right side of his rib cage.

One second he was there; the next, he was vapour.

Chapter 45

Lieutenant Beck was out of breath from running.

The snow was thicker than he’d expected—and keeping his movement up as he tried to pelt across it had sapped him dry.

He half collapsed on a moss ridden stump.

He was a jeweller by trade, before the war. He hadn’t wanted to be on the frontline fighting the Führer’s reckless campaigns. Still, he was no fool. He’d seen which way the wind was blowing in Germany. Six months ago, he’d been

approached by a radical team of officers who'd wanted to alter the course of the war: Labyrinth.

In the new normal that was the Nazi Reich, you didn't get anywhere if you didn't join these elitist groups when they came calling. He'd seen it happen dozens of times to his friends. They'd been promoted and soon after risen high enough to leave the blood and stench of the Eastern Front behind.

That was all he'd wanted.

Especially when they said they needed a man with his particular skills.

What was there to think about?

A chance to use his jeweller's skills and avoid a messy death in the lost fields of the Ukraine.

But he also knew the price.

Failure was not an option.

He patted outside of his jacket, feeling the weight of the pouch containing the blue diamonds inside.

His only hope at not being shot on his return to Germany—the only hope that anyone he ever cared about—his wife, his daughter, his mother, his sister—wouldn't face a firing squad was those tiny stones rattling around in his pocket.

The snap of a twig.

Beck's head twitched.

Breath held.

Where had the sound come from?

His eyes whipped between the pine needles. He knew they were there.

But where?

He turned, hoping to silently slip between the trees.

"That's far enough," Captain Maddox said.

The Englishman held his Sten II-S in both hands, pointed squarely at Beck's head.

"Listen," Beck said, "You don't understand. I'm Lieutenant Beck—I'm only a jeweller on this mission to grade the gems. I have to get them back to the Fatherland. They have my family as hostages."

"Not going to happen," Maddox said. "Please lift the bag gently out and place them on the ground."

A second soldier appeared between the trees, dressed in the same white uniform.

"Conley," Maddox said, the barrel of his Sten pointed at Beck's midriff, "please step forward and relieve the German of the stones."

"That I can do, captain," Conley replied, pacing closer to his commander.

Beck reached into his clothes and removed both pouches.

He gently tossed the closed bags down. They landed softly in the snow.

"Good," Maddox said. "Now delicately take your pistol out and toss it there, too."

A heavy sigh from the German.

Gingerly holding the grip of his gun between his thumb and forefinger, he threw it alongside the pouches.

"Please," Beck said. "The larger pouch. It is full of gem quality normal stones. They're worth a fortune. I'm begging you. Major Nieder, our leader, he kept a small plane nearby. It wouldn't trouble you to allow me to leave with the smaller purse."

"I'm not unsympathetic to your position," Maddox replied. "But, even if you were telling me the truth, I can't allow the kind of precision V2 bombing the stones in your pocket will be used for. Conley, step forward, careful not to cross my line of fire and retrieve the stones. Then hand them to me."

"Ah," Conley said. "Now that, I can't do."

A dull snack.

Maddox knew the noise well—the sound of a Sten refusing to fire.

Before he could turn, he was struck across the back of his skull with the butt of a rifle.

* * * * *

Patterson leapt across the top of the wreckage of the generator.

When he hit the ground, he rolled, ignoring the pain from landing on the gravel. Another round of shells from the tanks. Too slow, you Russian bastards. The volley blew a mine cart to splinters and scattered an already dead German to the wind.

Patterson rattled off a burst from his Sten.

He was still running, the bullets were never going to hit their target—and if they did they'd prove as powerful as a wad of wet paper blown through a straw at the hide of an elephant.

But that wasn't their purpose.

"All eyes on me," he grinned. "Just keep following me."

He reached a small gully and dropped into it.

There was a withering burst of machine gun fire from the tanks.

"Good," Patterson said. "Come a little closer, comrades."

He popped his head so his eyes scarcely emerged from his hideout.

With a rumble of their giant diesel engines, the Russians were tearing toward him.

"Now!" he bellowed.

Fallon and Marlowe crawled out of the detritus of broken tents littering the former campsite. One was on each side of the back tank. They grabbed the guy ropes of one stretch of canvas that clung stubbornly to the behemoth's front.

They sprinted in to the T-26's side, then vaulted onto its shell.

Confusion inside the belly of the beast.

The canvas tarpaulin blocked every way to see out of the machine—loud swearing could be heard from within. The front tank headed on regardless, unaware that its compatriot was blind and had stopped moving.

Fallon tied the canvas tight at the back of the turret. The Russians within spun it around, trying to free themselves of their blindfold. The machinegun blared, attempting to cut enough of a hole through the cloth to disintegrate it.

Foolishly, they fired the main gun.

A hole tore through the canvas.

The lead T-26 was hit squarely on its rear.

It detonated like a firework.

"Well that was an unexpected bonus!" Patterson smirked.

Louder swearing from within the remaining tin can.

Fallon and Marlowe withdrew fistfuls of hand grenades and rolled them underneath its front, before darting away to safety. The underside of the T-26 was its well-known weakness. The steel there was less than a third of the thickness of its armour elsewhere.

Six seconds later, the first of the Mill's bombs exploded.

The tank erupted like a volcano.

The hatches blasted open.

The contents rocketed skyward.

Smoke billowed from every crack.

Marlowe let out a whoop of joy and slapped Fallon on the back.

But Patterson was less than amused. His head twisted back and forth, searching, seeking, checking for something and not seeing it.

"What?" Fallon asked. "What's wrong?"

"The commander," Patterson said. "He was face down in front of the lead battle tank."

All three of them stared blankly at the empty spot in front of the vehicle, where Komelkov had been knocked flat at the beginning of the fight.

"Shit," Patterson muttered. "The bastard's gone."

Chapter 46

"So, your suspicions proved correct," Sledge said, hoisting Maddox to his feet, once again.

In front of them, Beck lay on his back, three bullet wounds to the torso.

The pouches were gone.

So was Conley.

"Regrettably so," Maddox replied.

"You're lucky he opted to bonk you on the head," Sledge said. "He could have shot you. He had the opportunity."

"He'd have had a devil of a time doing it without this," Maddox said.

He fished in his pocket and held up a small sliver of metal.

"You took the firing pin from his Sten?" Sledge asked. "Man, that's cold. What if he'd needed it? He got up the slope first."

"I tried to stop him," Maddox replied. "I figured if he was with me, I could stop him getting into trouble. In any case, he tried to kill me—the strangest thing happened..."

"His gun didn't work," Sledge raised his eyebrows. "You surprise me. Still it didn't stop him dispatching Beck."

Maddox moved cautiously in a circle, examining the patterns in the snow.

"There was a struggle," he said. "Looks like Conley and Beck both made for the German's pistol."

"It would appear Beck did not win that particular wrestling match," Sledge observed. "Why didn't Conley shoot you then?"

Maddox paused.

He hadn't factored in that Conley would pick up another weapon quite so quickly—or be fast enough to smack him unconscious when he realised his Sten didn't work. He scanned the ground more closely.

"Looks like another person arrived," he said. "Must have scared him off."

"It wasn't me," Sledge replied. "So who the hell was it?"

"I don't know," Maddox said, pointing with the barrel of his Sten at another set of tracks into the area. "But they both went that way at pace. Come on. Put your skis on. They're on foot—it's the only way we'll catch them."

A shot rang out deeper into the woods.

A second followed a few seconds later.

Chapter 47

Nieder was barely ten metres behind the English sergeant but was losing ground.

The snow was getting thicker with every stride.

He pulled his Luger from its holster.

"That's enough," he said. "Stop, or I shoot!"

The sergeant didn't slow.

He managed two more bound-like strides.

Nieder's pistol barked. The round hit Conley squarely between the shoulder blades. The young man toppled. Nieder inhaled deeply and closed the gap. Conley was prone, his fingers twitching, his head contorted to the side. In one palm, he gripped Beck's pistol. The other was curled around the tops of the diamond pouches.

Nieder didn't say another word.

He put a single shot straight through the side of the Englishman's head and hungrily snatched the purses. Tucking the bags in his uniform, he staggered through the drift to a patch of ground more shielded by the pines above. At least here, his footing would be surer.

Gaining his bearings, he started off towards his plane.

Now, to get out of here.

Chapter 48

Maddox looked up to the heavens.

He and Sledge had followed the tracks of Nieder until they petered out on the snow. From their general direction he'd guessed the major was heading for an open patch of land marked on his map as somewhere around here.

But they found themselves standing on the edge of a high bluff, staring out across the steep slope and onto a frozen lake, with no sign of the Nazi.

"Maybe he doubled back?" Sledge suggested.

“Couldn’t have,” Maddox said. “We’re on skis. We’re faster—have every advantage. No, he was headed over here. He has a plan. But what?”

The rumble of an engine.

“A plane!” Sledge and Maddox both exclaimed at the same time.

“But how in the hell would you find enough flat land around here to take off?” Sledge asked.

Maddox closed his eyes, listening for the source of the sound. It was impossible to pinpoint, the noise echoing off the trees until it rang like it was coming from the very earth itself.

From here they had a good vantage from which to see the plane.

But there was nothing.

Simply miles and miles of snow covered conifers.

Yet the buzzing was there—higher pitched now as the craft took to the air. Maddox turned sharply to Sledge.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “No plane could get off the ground that quickly and just vanish.”

“There!” Sledge pointed through the pines behind them.

A lone aeroplane, small enough for just one passenger, putted gently through the sky. It was barely visible through the branches but heading their way.

“A Fieseler Storch,” Sledge said. “Damn it. They’re slow movers. If only we had a bazooka—we could catch it and bring it down.”

“But we don’t,” Maddox replied.

“We could rake it with Sten gun fire,” Sledge said. “We might get lucky.”

Maddox considered it for a second.

“It’s massively unlikely,” he said. “Even on a tiny plane like a Storch.”

He glanced away from the aircraft and down the steep embankment to the lake. Maddox had assumed the German would have planted his getaway plane down there, hiding it under a canopy, so that he could use the frozen water as a runway. But wherever he’d picked, his plan had been devastatingly effective.

The Storch had been a good choice for Nieder. The wheels on this one had been augmented with runners to allow for landings on the frozen tundra. It was resilient and so simple to maintain, you could almost fix problems with an elastic band and a paperclip.

It was also well-known for its extreme abilities: with a slight headwind, it could launch in 150ft and land in just a little more than 50.

But where the hell had he taken off from?

The Storch, barely visible through the conifers, turned gracefully and began to head in their direction—it would have to pass over the bluff they were standing on to set a course south for Reich.

It didn’t matter. He was aloft now.

Uncatchable.

Unless...

Maddox glanced at Sledge.

“What?” the burly Australian asked.

Maddox grinned irascibly.

“Oh shit. Don’t tell me you’ve got another crazy plan again?”

“I’m quite sure I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Maddox smiled. “Have you still got that exploding grapnel?”

Sledge swiftly dumped his knapsack on the ground and began chucking items out onto the ground. Three seconds later he pulled out the grappling crossbow and rope.

He held it up for Maddox to take.

“You cannot possibly be thinking...”

“Have you ever seen anyone try to lasso a plane and fail?” Maddox asked.

“No...” Sledge replied.

“Then don’t tell me it can’t be done.”

Chapter 49

Maddox pushed off with his skis, making as swiftly as he could for the top of the embankment where the Storch would pass overhead. Although the plane was hardly lightning fast, it would still be touch and go as to whether he would make it in time.

“And even then, there’s the question of whether this plan will get me killed,” he hissed.

The snow squeaked as it compacted beneath him. His muscles burned with the exertions of his earlier actions. He grimaced and ignored the pain. His breath plumed from his lips as though he had a literal fire in his belly.

The Storch was getting louder with every second.

He dared not look up, lest he see its tail whip by—taking Nieder on to Germany and freedom.

And the potential for deadly accurate V2 rockets to be rained down on London was not something he wanted to see.

Maddox slid to a halt at the very edge of the slope, tossing his skiing poles aside. He threw his backpack after them. He wished he could take his equipment with him but his plan was dicey enough as it was—the additional bulk would make it impossible. He kept his Sten, shifting the shoulder strap so that it ran diagonally across his back. He’d need it if he was to have any hope of stopping Nieder, and repositioning the harness made it less likely to slip off. There was also his Webley on his hip and his trusty Fairbairn-Sykes knife.

The Storch was barely 100 yards away. It had been painted in disruption camouflage. In this forest, with webbing over the top, no wonder they hadn’t found it.

Maddox levered the bowline on the crossbow taught, the grapnel fixing into place with a heavy ‘thunk’.

50 yards.

Maddox shouldered the crossbow and took aim.

40 yards.

Heavy breaths.

30 yards.

“Come on. Calm yourself. You need to relax to make this work.”

20 yards.

“Slow, slow your heart beat. Relax those muscles.”

10 yards.

“I am a leaf on the breeze... I am a leaf on the...”

The Storch whisked above his head. Maddox tracked its motion with the bow. He pulled the trigger. With a satisfying ‘swish’ the quarrel fired into the air, carrying the grapnel. Maddox had expected the arrow to move without the pace of an aimed bullet but it travelled even more slowly than he’d expected.

“Shit. It’s going to miss.”

He’d targeted the Storch’s wing, hoping his weight on one side of the tiny plane would prevent it from getting the lift it needed. For a second he’d wished he’d followed Sledge’s plan and simply raked the thing with machine gun fire...

Then the grapnel reached the right height. The wing had passed it but one of the flukes caught on the aircraft’s tail and punched a hole through the outer skin.

“Holy shit,” Maddox said. “This might just work.”

The grappling hook bit in deep.

It held.

The rope pulled tight.

Maddox’s arms were nearly ripped from his sockets as he accelerated from a standstill to fifty miles an hour. Yanked almost horizontally from his position, he gripped the line tight as he whipped over the top of the embankment.

The extra weight on such a sensitive part of the plane immediately caused the Storch problems. At first Maddox was pulled through the air. Then his mass started to yank the tail lower. He could see Nieder desperately struggling with the controls as he tried to keep the Storch aloft.

The plane struggled.

Its nose began to tilt upwards.

“That’s it,” Maddox said, gripping onto the rope with all his might. “Stall, you bastard, stall.”

But Nieder had other ideas. He manoeuvred the plane into a dive, bringing it closer to the ground. The sharp slope of the embankment was coming up fast underneath Maddox. The captain bent his legs at his knees to cushion his landing.

With a gentle pat, his skis landed back on the earth.

He was picking up speed as he moved down the hill. Nieder still hadn’t realised the cause of his problem as tried to gain lift again.

Maddox briefly left the ground.

“I’m a leaf on the breeze... I’m a leaf on the breeze...”

He swung forward.

The Storch’s engine wasn’t powerful enough. It couldn’t cope with either the extra weight on its tail or the shifting balance of Maddox swinging underneath it like a pendulum. Nieder glanced out the window.

His face was death.

Maddox smiled politely back at the German and winked.

The Storch dived once more, and Maddox’s skis touched back onto the ground. The combination of the dive and the slope caused the Englishman to go ever

quicker. Maddox wasn't sure if this was a good thing or not. If he overtook the plane, he might cause it to fishtail from the instability, bringing it down.

That would be a good thing.

Alternatively, if he got in front of the aircraft, maybe the grapnel would shake loose or he'd lose his clasp on the rope.

In those eventualities, Nieder would escape.

Maddox had to slow his descent somehow.

The embankment was covered in rocky outcrops and tree stumps. Maddox struggled with maintaining his hold and remaining upright. He swung sharply to the left, whistling past the crest of a boulder poking through the snow.

Nieder leaned one arm through the window and fired three shots with his Luger.

Maddox swerved.

With the difficult angle, awkwardness of reaching through the cockpit and struggling to keep the plane in the air, Nieder's shot went hopelessly wide.

But it worried Maddox. It showed just how vulnerable he was. He couldn't hope to return a volley and keep a clasp on the rope. Never mind the Sten across his back, he'd struggle to even reach the Webley on his hip.

He had to do more to crash the plane before Nieder could come up with a plan to kill him.

One of his skis ran near a stone.

He slalomed.

It whipped past him.

An idea.

Maddox began zigzagging as he went down the hill. This slowed his descent and, by falling behind the plane, his weight began to tug on its tail as he swung from left to right.

Nieder tried to turn the Storch so that it would fly along the hill rather than down it, making Maddox's skiing harder. With a particularly forceful jump, the Englishman prevented the move.

Nieder altered course again.

Putting the Storch into a shallow dive parallel to the embankment, he started pulling Maddox with the plane, like a water skier following a motorboat.

Maddox wasn't sure what the German was trying to accomplish—the effect was to force him to pick up speed again.

He looked ahead to see what Nieder was heading the two of them towards... the lake?

It was frozen over.

What did Nieder gain from that?

Maddox considered his options as he slalomed around a toppled tree.

If he released his boots from the skis, he could try to climb the line up to the plane. If he didn't have to worry about his path along the ground, he could hold on with one hand and finally get his other to the Sten. He might not be able to guarantee hitting the Storch from down here—but if he got up higher, he certainly hit it.

One Sten magazine contained 32 bullets.

Would that damage the plane enough to crash it?

It seemed doubtful, unless he picked the right target. The fuel tank was out – he wasn't entirely sure where it was on this design. What about riddling the cabin with slugs? If he didn't kill Nieder he'd have wasted his ammo. He wasn't sure if a Sten had enough power to punch holes into the cabin while he swayed beneath the plane.

He had a grenade...

If he climbed to the tail of the plane, he could rip a gap in the skin with his Fairbairn, then stuff the bomb inside.

It might just work...

Maddox tested his theory by hoisting himself, hand over hand, a few feet from the ground. He kept his skis on just in case he failed. Immediately, the Storch experienced problems. It began to shake and he twisted sideways on to the slope.

Nieder used Maddox's predicament to nudge closer to the earth.

Maddox barely had time to lift his knees. If he hadn't he'd have landed with his skis facing the wrong way and tumbled head over heels, probably both breaking his legs and losing his clasp of the grappling line.

He managed just in time to turn his feet to face the right way. Nieder had manoeuvred the Storch towards another family of boulders. Maddox twisted sharply against the snow.

Not fast enough.

He was going to be dashed against a child-sized outlier to the rocks.

He pulled again on the rope and jumped.

His feet lifted clear of the ground.

The skis scraped as they ran across the top of the boulder.

He landed on the far side.

Nieder took another set of pot shots at him with the Luger. There was a soft 'pat' as two of the slugs impacted the snow to his side. The third punched a coin-sized hole in one of the skis.

"He's getting closer," Maddox thought. "I'd better come up with a better idea fast..."

But it seemed that Nieder had already formulated a new strategy.

The Storch levelled out as it reached the bottom of the escarpment and with a bump, Maddox vaulted over a low lip that must originally have been the edge of the lake and found himself skidding across the ice.

The frozen lake clearly made it easier for the Storch to pull Maddox and, without the momentum of the hill to keep his speed higher than the plane's, Maddox found it harder to swing back and forth and make flying the thing difficult for Nieder.

He realised that Nieder was accelerating. Beneath him, the ice whipped past both more quickly and with a higher, whining pitch as it ran beneath the skis.

First, 60 miles per hour, then 70.

Maddox tried to act as a break by slaloming again—but all the force of trying to slow the aircraft was being carried by the weakest part of this tug of war: his own arms. He couldn't decide which of his joints hurt the most – his fingers, his wrists, his elbows, his shoulders; every part felt like it was being ripped asunder.

He was in the middle of the lake now and heading rapidly for the far side.

Surely, Nieder didn't intend to drag him all the way back to Germany?

Then he realized the plan.

Nieder's altitude was low—but still the length of the rope, plus part of Maddox's height. That put him around 105 feet off the ground. Maddox looked nervously ahead at the trees lining the far bank of the mighty lake.

"Tremendous," he muttered.

He might skim the tops of some of the taller, mighty pines but the Storch had clearance to go straight over the forest. Maddox, by contrast would get dragged through the thick meshwork of low hanging branches.

At this velocity, he would likely be ripped to shreds.

There was no way he'd hold on.

There was a subtle sound of cracking underneath his skis.

"Oh Lord, no," Maddox muttered.

He looked down and had his worst fears confirmed. He glanced behind his trail as he crossed the ice.

There could be no doubt.

The long Finnish summer had thinned the frozen layer beneath him—here, near the middle of the lake, it was too weak to support his weight.

Chapter 50

The fissures in the ice started small but as he raced along, he was pulled away before he could fall through.

There was a slight advantage to being on the ice: with the ground much smoother, and unable to duck and weave, he reckoned he could hold on to the rope with just one hand for a brief moment.

Tentatively, careful to maintain his balance, he reached for his Webley.

Six shots.

Make them count.

He aimed for the cabin.

He loosed the rounds into the underside of the pilot's compartment.

Before he had time to wonder if he'd hit Nieder, the German poked his pistol back through the window.

Clumsily, Webley still in hand, Maddox clasped the rope again. Two cracks from Nieder's pistol. Then another two. Maddox swerved as best he could to make for a moving target.

The slugs hit the ice.

Although they landed wide of his position the weakness they created allowed the cracks to spread faster. In a short second Maddox saw the tiny fissures rush past him. HE swore loudly.

He fired the last three rounds of his Webley into the cabin.

"Stupid revolver," he muttered. "Next time, I'll bring an automatic."

If the shots hit anything, it didn't seem to make a difference. He tossed it aside. The weapon skidded out across the frozen water. Maddox didn't care. He had more immediate worries. This portion of the lake, unshielded from the Finnish sun by the sloping hillsides, was in near constant light during the summer months.

Consequently, the ice was weaker, to the point of thawing in places.

And the cracks were beginning to turn its smooth surface into a patchwork of icebergs.

The Storch was getting on for maximum speed now. Maddox estimated it from the ground ripping past him at around 110 miles per hour. It was getting difficult for him to dodge the slivers of ice as they broke apart and lifted beneath his weight.

His skis hit one section and he felt his balance upend. A car sized chunk sank into frigid water beneath him—those opposite side rising up and slamming down on the lake's fragmenting surface.

A ramp!

Maddox bent his knees and sprung into the air.

He glanced across at the far bank. He was two-thirds of the way over the lake.

When he smacked back down he would punch a hole in the surface for sure.

Once his feet disappeared beneath the surface, he'd be upended—he'd either lose them, have his arms ripped from his sockets, drown, get dragged across the ice like a cowboy pulled by a horse in an old fashioned Western...

"I... am... a... leaf..."

The rope slackened as he launched into the sky. Maddox released the end he'd been holding and flailed with his arms. He grabbed a fresh section.

"On the breeze...!"

He caught it.

He had hoisted himself a full ten feet from the lake below. The Storch above now started experiencing problems again – with his feet no longer on the ground, it was supporting his entire mass on its vulnerable tail section again.

The Storch struggled.

Nieder leaned out the window and grimaced.

He'd obviously run out of ammunition or he'd be taking further pot shots, Maddox concluded. The German tried briefly waggling the plane to shake him off, then settled for trying to plough him back onto the broken ice.

Maddox had seconds to consider his options.

Did he try to climb higher and put the grenade in the tail?

He couldn't risk reaching for his Sten...

He needed something small and easy to hand...

The lake's surface was closing hard. And with every passing second, the lip of the far bank was drawing nearer.

He needed an edge. He needed a distraction. He needed...

His eyes widened.

The flare!

With the ice looming fast beneath his legs, he bent at the knees once more to give as gentle a touchdown as possible.

Success. Travelling through the air had taken him far enough from the cracking ice that the surface underneath his skis seemed once again able to bear his weight. Now he could briefly hold on with just a single hand, he ducked low and fished the emergency flare from the inside of his sock.

He'd get one shot at this.

The edge of the lake loomed near. The treeline lay barely 70 yards beyond the bank. Maddox picked the smoothest spot he could but there was still a small ramp. Lining himself up, he hit the rim and for a brief moment, once again, sailed through the air.

60 yards to the trees.

It was now or never.

50 yards.

He aimed the signal tube.

Nieder looked out the window and laughed. He knew in mere seconds, Maddox would be torn apart by the branches.

40 yards.

Maddox fired.

The flare, red shimmering angel, rocketed to life from the end of the device. It arched as it whistled into the sky, leaving behind a smoky trail.

The glistening star hit the top edge of the pilot's window.

30 yards

Nieder reflexively raised his elbow for protection.

It ricocheted down.

Maddox could see the flare's bright intensity was burning the Nazi's skin.

20 yards.

It rebounded off the lower edge of the window frame and popped back down to the lake.

"No!" Maddox shouted.

He'd missed!

15 yards.

But Nieder had been distracted for vital seconds.

10 yards.

There was hope!

Maddox's earlier leap had dragged the Storch lower by ten feet. That vital descent pulled it down so its undercarriage was barely cresting the line of conifers.

5 yards...

Maddox saw his chance. With the razor-like branches rapidly closing toward him he flicked off the skis and spun his back to the vicious boughs. Tucking his head low he felt the reed-thin underbrush 'thwack' against his back. Fortunately the Sten gun bore the brunt of the blows.

Without it, at this speed, they'd have surely cracked his ribs.

There was an unhappy scraping above as the Storch struggled, skimming across the spindly tips of the pines.

"I'm a leaf on the breeze," Maddox said. "And you are a cannonball about to plummet."

He had ten feet of rope trailing behind him to play with.

He could feel the strain as the Nieder tried to pull the Storch higher and couldn't so long as he held on.

Twigs lashed across the backs of his hands, lashing them bloody.

Without the skis, his legs bounced along the turf, no longer cushioned by snow, but now comprising centuries of undisturbed pine needles and cones, all brown with age.

“Now,” he hissed.

He powered off the ground, jumping a few yards to the side. At the same time, he allowed the rope to slip slightly through his palms.

The plan worked.

The rope caught around a trunk, with him on one side and the plane, high above, on the other. Before his arms could bear the full force of the plane, his leapt again—this time the other way.

Now the rope formed the beginnings of a hitch, twisted around two sturdy trees.

His speed was slowing now and the plane was starting to tug the rope from his hands.

Another jump.

A third trunk.

The first tree, rope whacking up through its branches, was bending now—a battle between its bulk and the engine of the Storch.

Maddox had slowed to a standstill now and wrapped the remaining foot of rope around the trunk of the third conifer.

Not a moment too soon.

The Storch was battling three anchors and running out of time.

It could move slowly and stay aloft—but it had to keep moving nonetheless.

And now it was anchored.

The pitch of its motor grew higher and higher as the engine strained.

In an instant, with an almighty crash of branches and toppling wood, one hundred feet away at the top of the hawser—the plane was dragged just a few feet too low and plunged into the pines.

There was no giant fireball—no loud marking explosion.

Maddox fought his way through the branches. He ignored the stinging of his face and arms. He knew he must look like a man who'd been flogged. The plane had landed nose down, felling four large firs in the process.

Through the smashed glass of the cockpit he could see Nieder twitching. In the silence of the forest, the German's pained groans were the only audible noise.

Maddox pulled the Sten from his back.

Useless.

The barrel sleeve had been dented, warped until almost mangled. That wasn't so much of a problem in and of itself—sure, it increased the likelihood it could jam or that you'd blow your own hand off when you fired it, but you took that risk when pulling the trigger on a Sten in the first place—and, in a pinch, if the enemy was bearing down on your position, you could at least assess the balance of risks and choose to fire if you wanted.

No, the state of this weapon was far worse.

The portion of the barrel that extended past the sleeve to the muzzle was bent to a thirty degree angle.

“If I wanted a sodding boomerang, I'd have borrowed one from Sledge,” Maddox said, throwing the weapon into the underbrush in disgust.

He picked his path to the side of the Storch with care.

He might be able to see what looked like Nieder moaning from his injuries—however, for all Maddox knew, the German was simply ‘playing possum’.

Maddox had reasoned earlier that Nieder had fired the last bullet from his Luger.

But the German was a crafty bastard.

Maddox didn't want to get this far, only to die from a pistol wound to the gut.

The twigs underfoot snapped as he treaded cautiously to the Storch. The window had gone and a broken branch poked out. Inside Nieder was a bleeding mess. The lower half of his body was pinned beneath the concertinaed dashboard machinery. A support strut skewered him into the pilot's seat through his left lung.

His hands were feverishly reloading ammunition from his jacket pocket into the Luger magazine. He'd succeeded with one hand inserting three bullets.

He glanced up as Maddox approached and hurriedly primed the weapon.

"No," Maddox said, pulling the pistol from his hand and throwing it aside into the woods. "We won't be having any of that."

The German half-snorted a chuckle.

"I thought I might have time to get at least two rounds into you before you got close to the plane," he said. "The third would be for me if I couldn't get free."

Maddox surveyed the major's injuries.

"I'm afraid, I don't think you'll be going anywhere," he said. "Even if I could free you, you'd bleed out before I got you anywhere near a medic."

Nieder released a guttural sigh.

"I can pay you to try," he said.

"A bribe?" Maddox replied. "You really think that'll work?"

Nieder brought his hands to the strut poking through his chest. A snarl of pain flickered across his face.

"No," he replied. "No, I suppose I don't. I offer you the diamonds and you'll act with wounded pride. I try to play on your humanity and you'll ask where my sympathy was when I killed people in my career as a Nazi officer. I guess, when you reach a certain point in the game, there are just some times when there is no winning move."

"Indeed," Maddox said.

"So, perhaps we can make this work another way," Nieder said.

One hand left the metal pole through his ribs and fished across the seat from a small pouch. He held it out for Maddox.

"Here," he said. "The blue diamonds."

Maddox checked the contents. Ten tiny, rough gems. Even encrusted in the rocks they'd been mined from, he could see their beauty.

"With their size, they could be split easily; perhaps enough for twenty of the Helix devices," Nieder said. "Imagine that: twenty precision strikes by the Nazis on your nation. If we'd have picked the right targets, we could perhaps have turned the war in our favour."

"What did you mean when you said 'we can make this work another way'?" Maddox said, slipping the purse into his pocket.

Nieder smiled despite his obvious injuries.

With the sun hanging lower than the tops of the cedars, the only light strained down through the opening caused by the Storch as it had crashed through the canopy. The shafts of light left the back of the passenger seat shrouded in shadow.

With effort, Nieder shuffled across a leather satchel. Maddox reached an arm across to help the German pass it out, then opened it and raised an eyebrow. It was half full of rough diamonds in various shades of whites.

“They were useless for the rocket program,” Nieder wheezed. “But there was no sense in letting them go to waste.”

“They would have made a nice nest egg for you after the war,” Maddox agreed.

“They won’t help me where I’m going,” Nieder replied. “However, they might be enough to ensure me one last request. Even a man facing a firing squad gets that.”

Maddox closed the bag and stared into Nieder’s eyes. They burned with an intensity that he’d only ever seen before in a manic or those in the last vivid gasps of death.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Put me out of my misery,” Nieder replied. “If I don’t die now, I’ll limp on for a few more hours, only to be mauled by wolves or bears. Kill me. Kill me now and leave with a clear conscience.”

Maddox looked at the man responsible for so much suffering to so many: a torturer, a murderer, a sadist.

“I’ll grant your request,” he replied. “In my fashion.”

He pulled the pin from his hand grenade and tossed it into the foot well of the cabin.

Nieder yelled as he tried to lean down and throw it out. He was prevented by the strut pinning him to the seat.

As Maddox walked away through the forest, the Storch exploded in a giant fireball.

“Hmm,” he said. “So that’s where the fuel tank was.”

Chapter 51

In the office of Brigadier Carter, the bloated slug tossed the file onto his desk and rubbed his forehead with irritation.

“And I’m supposed to believe this?” he sneered. “I wouldn’t be surprised if this report was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for fiction once the war is over.”

Maddox ignored him and said nothing.

He sat in the overlarge leather chair and simply let the Brigadier rant. There was a slender scratch in the material and he ran his fingernail along it. As he moved his hand, the cuff of his shirt moved subtly up his wrist, revealing the half-inch of a scar; an angry pink set against the paleness of his skin.

It was a natural tattoo to the nemesis that lingered within his blood.

To a lay observer, it and the myriad of others criss-crossing his chest, back and legs, would look like the badly healed scars of an attempt at suicide by knife—or perhaps the remnants of a flogging.

They were not.

Maddox knew well that the deadly griddle pattern extended over a third of his body.

He knew it because he came face to face with it every time he stood in front of a mirror naked.

And the marks were getting bigger with every passing week.

He closed his eyes for a second.

“Well?” Carter said, bringing his attention back to the room.

“Well?” Maddox replied.

“What happened to the diamonds?” the Brigadier huffed. “And I’m not talking about this nonsense that the plane exploded on contact with the ground and was too hot to get near.”

Maddox exhaled slowly.

“You have my report, sir,” he replied.

Carter stood behind his desk and banged his knuckles on the heavy wooden veneer like a gorilla stomping on the ground. A glass ashtray clanked as it bounced from the force of the blow.

“Perhaps I should send a second team up there to recover them,” he bellowed. “Then we’d get to the truth of the matter.”

Maddox pulled the cuff of his jacket down to cover his scar.

“You could, sir,” Maddox replied. “Unfortunately, I doubt they’d find what you hope them to.”

“No?”

“No,” Maddox said. “I’m not a man of science but my limited understanding of diamonds is that, unlike water, which has a solid phase—ice—and then a liquid and finally a gas as it’s heated, that diamonds respond quite differently to high temperatures.”

“Do they really?” Carter huffed.

“Yes, sir,” Maddox said calmly. “I believe the technical term is *sublimation*. There is no such thing as liquid diamond. When heated, like coal, they simply go straight from a solid to smoke. If the diamonds burned, there would be nothing there for your second team to discover in amongst the ashes of the charred Storch.”

“And what if the diamonds didn’t burn?”

“It was a very violent fire, sir,” Maddox replied. “I’m quite sure they would have.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Carter said, peering down his nose.

“Quite frankly, Brigadier,” Maddox replied, standing. “I don’t really give a damn what you meant.”

The captain walked to the door.

“Get back here,” Carter shouted. “I haven’t finished with you.”

Maddox opened the door and whispered.

“I hesitate to repeat myself,” he said. “But once again: I don’t care. You sent me to north Finland with an inappropriate team and planted a mole among us. You intended me either to fail or incriminate myself somehow or, most probably, to die. None of those things happened. Now that I’m back, if I were you, I would remember that both my men and I take a very dim view of that.”

“Get back here and answer my questions,” Carter said menacingly. “You’ll stay until I’m satisfied I’ve got to the bottom of what happened.

“No, thank you, sir,” Maddox said. “Oh—you can put all of that in your report too, if you like.”

He flashed the brigadier a smile and closed the door behind himself.

As he walked away he heard a small crash and the sound of shattering glass. Carter had thrown the ashtray at the wall. There would be fallout from his insubordination—but almost certainly it would come from Carter and not the higher ups in the SOE. The Brigadier wouldn't want a light shone on his actions. And, if he tried to make a fuss about the diamonds, he had no proof that Maddox's account wasn't exactly what had transpired.

Maddox took a few turns along the corridors and headed up a flight of steps to the dormitory section of the building. It was here squads sent out on missions were housed for a brief period prior to their departure and immediately upon return. Ostensibly, it was so that everyone could attend briefings on time. In reality, as with most practices in the division, the real reason was security.

Carter's only hope of proving Maddox hadn't taken the diamonds would be to get a confession from one of the men on the mission.

That would be difficult.

He went into his room. The familiar smell of tobacco and whisky hit him, even though the window was open.

Fallon, Patterson and Marlowe—his regular crew—were all there, waiting for his return. Sledge had already been reassigned for other missions.

"All good?" Fallon asked as Maddox stepped inside.

"All good," Maddox said. "Carter's nose was bent out of shape about the missing diamonds but that was about it."

Fallon sat on the windowsill blowing smoke rings out into the night. Windows inside the building were normally sealed shut. The men must have jimmied this one while Maddox was in his briefing.

"He suspects?" Patterson asked.

"Of course he does," Maddox replied. "But he can't prove. Frankly, it was the crooked bastard's only real concern."

"That and the fact that his real motives for the mission might have been uncovered," Marlowe said, pouring Maddox a tumbler of whisky and passing it across.

"Same difference," Maddox chuckled. "There was no real reason for him not to send the Norwegians other than he wanted direct control of the proceeds when they came back. Had another group gone, the blue diamonds would have been received by the bosses of that team. They wouldn't have been able to mysteriously disappear from the SOE's stores, the same way that counterfeit currency did."

"And the art that was captured," Marlowe sniggered. "It's amazing Carter has got away with so much petty theft for so long and no one has taken notice."

"He's got to pay for his big country estate somehow," Fallon said, blowing more smoke rings out of the window.

"And the wife twenty years his junior," Patterson laughed. "So, how much is our haul worth?"

Maddox was an East End boy, born and bred. He knew who to pass the gems onto and get a fair price.

"Once they're cut and polished?" Maddox replied. "We get a diminished cut, as you know. Everyone involved in the chain has to get their slice."

"But what will come to us?" Patterson asked.

"I estimate about £300,000," Maddox said. "In total. And that will be split eight ways."

A sigh from Fallon and Marlowe.

"Really?" Marlowe said. "Eight ways?"

Maddox gave him a look.

"You know my rules," he said coldly.

Where the team member was still alive, they were given an equal share of the money—on the condition that it was stored safely until after the war.

Where the team member was dead, the money was passed on to a lawyer, to be given to the immediate family of the man, via a charity Maddox had set up to, ostensibly, provide solace for grieving widows and orphans.

The families would never know its true origins.

That included the family of Conley.

Maddox insisted on it.

If you fought alongside him, you were part of his team.

No exceptions.

"Eight ways, it is," Patterson agreed.

Marlowe and Fallon nodded slowly in unison.

"Just one thing," Patterson asked. "How did you know it was Conley who was the mole?"

Maddox inhaled strongly through his nose and held it for a few seconds.

"He didn't stack up," he replied. "He was supposed to be fresh to us out of training. He was supposed to be raw—but had been made a sergeant already. During our fire-side chat, he opened up that he'd been on several missions in South East Asia. The callowness of youth; he couldn't keep his story straight."

A searing spasm flashed along the length of Maddox's arm.

He yelped.

The fingers of his left hand locked like a bear's claw, their tips twitching with every agonising flicker as it burned through his nerves.

Maddox's jaw clenched.

His vision began to blur.

He leaned against the wall to steady himself. Patterson leapt forward and gripped his shoulders in support.

"It's getting worse, isn't it?" his friend said.

The pain subsided and Maddox gasped for breath. Fallon and Marlowe looked on with concerned faces. It was not the first time they'd seen their commander ravaged by an attack.

Maddox's muscles released, gradually returning to their natural state. He stood upright, blinking as the pain dulled.

"Is there nothing we can do?" Fallon asked. "Medicine has leapt on because of the war."

Maddox rubbed his forearm to bring circulation back.

"I've been through the usual treatments," he replied. "Went up and down Harley Street, as you know. One doctor used antimony. That calmed it briefly—then it flared back. Another tried a historic remedy made from Myrrh."

"Very biblical," Marlowe said. "It didn't take?"

Maddox shook his head.

“There’s got to be someone,” Patterson said.

“There’s a possibility,” Maddox sighed. “There is one doctor who may have a treatment.”

“Then let’s seek him out,” Patterson replied. “I can drive you there. We can arrange an appointment right away. It’s not like paying for it is going to be a problem.”

“It’s an excellent plan,” Maddox said. “It has just one small flaw.”

“What?” Fallon asked.

Maddox looked at his friends. In unison, they said:

“He’s German.”

All four men went silent, introspectively focusing on the difficulty of the task in front of them.

“Well,” Patterson said, after a long pause. “I think I speak for everyone present when I say that each of us owes our lives to you, in some cases more than once.”

“Agreed,” Marlowe said. “We find out where he is and we formulate a strategy.”

“And damn the consequences?” Maddox replied. “No. That’s one thing I’m not prepared to do.”

“I don’t think you have a choice,” Patterson said. “We’re going to work on this and we can include you in the operational planning or you can choose to opt out. Either way—you’ll be coming with us and we’ll just factor in your compliance or take you into account as a complicating factor.”

Maddox smirked.

They were good men.

He said nothing for a few seconds while he considered his words.

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank God I met three such strong friends.”

He refilled his tumbler with drink.

“To our mutual good fortune,” he said.

They clanked their glasses together.

“And you making it through this sodding war alive,” Patterson added.

